Experience as the Foundation for Authentic Learning Online

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The use of new media has enabled broad access to educational environments creating innovative opportunities for learning and teaching. Experiential learning provides a particularly important educational framework when facilitated through the use of the Internet to engage geographically dispersed students as they participate in career education. This approach to facilitating learning has become increasingly popular in the United States (“US”), spanning academic disciplines from the liberal arts and sciences to the professional studies, and including students and instructors from around the globe. The use of a hybrid instructional delivery method combines technologies with innovative teaching approaches to enable participants to impact their local communities while concurrently collaborating to explore new areas of learning, self identity, skill development, and cognitive growth. In the following article the authors reflect on a teaching practice that combines a range of critical pedagogies as applied to an experiential instructional framework made increasingly richer and accessible through the use of new media.

Researchers for the United States-based Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Klein-Collins, Sherman, and Soares1, explain that “nontraditional is the new normal” related to predominant demographics describing increasing numbers of post-secondary students. As an example, they refer to National Center for Educational Statistics2 data which indicates approximately seventy-three percent of students attending college in 2008 had at least one characteristic indicating they were not entering higher education as the typical residential student aged eighteen to twenty-two, therefore, by definition, “nontraditional”3. An increasing number of students currently pursuing advanced degrees are typically employed and balance competing priorities ranging from caretaking to earning responsibilities. Although they may not have completed academic degrees, they are not without

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2 Ibidem.
3 The United States-based National Center for Education Statistics identifies nontraditional students as: having delayed enrollment in postsecondary education beyond the first year after high school graduation; attending classes on a part time basis; being financially independent from their parents; working full time; having dependents other than a spouse; being single parents; and/or, possessing no high school diploma or GED.
college credit, and, additionally have accumulated experiences that include participation in professional training and other non credit educational programming leading to the attainment of extended skills, abilities, and areas of knowledge; they have demonstrated that they are, in fact, lifelong learners⁴.

To meet the needs of this growing student population, post-secondary education is tasked with re-conceptualizing curricula in ways that capitalize on students’ previous experiences to provide challenging, engaging, and motivating learning environments that recognize and build upon their existing expertise. It is challenging for traditional, discipline-specific curricula to accommodate such learning styles and goals, and students frequently are unable to transfer academic credit between institutions to capitalize on previous experiential learning. To further the use of previous experience in order to facilitate the development of new areas of knowledge as well as remedy institutional variance and inequity, colleges and universities increasingly organize academic programming to meet the needs of this expanding nontraditional student group. Because this population is heterogeneous in composition, such programming is made more inclusive of its representative diversity through the use of critical pedagogies that combine online coursework and on site work-based placements with the goal of furthering knowledge acquisition coupled with new media to advance skills and abilities.

Defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience,” learning through experience is subsequently acquired by students’ reflection upon and internalization of the results of a sequence of both deliberate and non-intentional events⁵. Creating a theoretical framework for the discussion of experiential learning is complex in that it requires an interdisciplinary instructional approach to permeate the academic curriculum. This complexity is further reinforced by instructors’ needs for mastering a wide range of critical pedagogies in order to successfully implement a curricular design that prioritizes experiential learning; while there exists overlap in such methods, they do require an orientation to teaching that may be unfamiliar to many educators. As evidence of the expansive application of such an approach, Kolb and Kolb⁶ identified over 1,000 research studies conducted over three decades focusing on outcomes related to experiential learning as implemented throughout the academic curriculum. Noting the mass appeal of this framework as facilitating the process of “learning to learn”, Kolb and Kolb conclude that

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instructional methods promoting an experiential framework are instrumental in assisting students to internalize “the capacity for reflecting, thinking, and action”\(^7\) critical to college-level learning.

**A Context for Learning from Experience**

Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler write, “the learner’s basis of meaning is found in his or her direct experience with a dynamic and responsive world”\(^8\): it is within this theoretical context that experiential learning exists as an important instructional approach that is capable of promoting deep and meaningful learning. Just as there exists a wide range of research studies focusing on experiential learning outcomes, there are many and diverse approaches to casting a theoretical framework to address the scope of this teaching and learning method. Kolb\(^9\) builds on, among others, the earlier work of philosopher-educators James\(^{10}\), Lewin\(^{11}\), Dewey\(^{12}\), and Rogers\(^{13}\) to construct a theoretical relationship between experience and the interpretation of learning. The teachings of activist-educator Friere\(^{14}\), of course, continue to be an important influence regarding the impact of experiential learning, his theories of critical consciousness and praxis providing important analyses related to problem-based learning centered in action. Fenwick\(^{15}\) discusses the problem inherent in singularly defining this learning model, proposing alternative constructs; her research synthesizes five distinct perspectives on experiential learning (constructivist, psychoanalytic, situative, critical cultural, and enactivist) leading to the conclusion that defining this approach is highly interpretive based on instructional environment, educator training, learner awareness, and the “relationship between the theory of learning and the practice of teaching”\(^{16}\). Kolb and Kolb conclude that despite the theoretical framework, it is learners themselves who make meaning from that which they experience.

Constructing opportunities for meaningful learning based in experience requires the combination of a range of pedagogies to be framed within a multi-disciplinary context. Such instructional environments demand the creative blending of specific teaching approaches, course design characteristics, and technologies to shape particularly relevant and meaningful experiences for

\(^{7}\) Ibidem.
\(^{8}\) B. Davis, D. Sumara, Learning Communities: Understanding the Workplace as a Complex System, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*’ 2011, 92, p. 85-95.
\(^{10}\) W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longmans, Green, New York 1912.
\(^{13}\) C.R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn for the 80’s*, Merrill, Columbus1983.
all members of the service triad (i.e., instructors, students, and placement coordinators, and associated personnel located on site). Methods utilized effectively through the use of multiple media promote authenticity in teaching, encouraging the development of autonomy through critical reflection, fostering collaborative inquiry through community dialogue, facilitating an awareness of cultural competence, and integrating learning situated in physical placements. By combining synchronous participation in experientially based learning opportunities with asynchronous online coursework, a problem-based instructional approach results that promotes active, collaborative opportunities essential to the exploration of both individual and collective learning processes. This combination when implemented in conjunction with reflective pedagogies holds the potential to effectively promote both self-directedness and collaboration, as well as facilitate complex decision-making.

Just as experiential learning spans broad theoretical and pedagogical landscapes, so does its application within a wide range of placement settings; experiential learning of focus in this article is situated in paraprofessional and professional placements to create realistic and challenging opportunities that span the academic disciplines. Within this context, four types of applied learning models are examined: service-learning experiences, focused on the outcomes of civic engagement and social change; career education (e.g., internships, practica, and fieldwork), centered around building professional knowledge and skills; leadership development opportunities, which may be integrated throughout all forms of workplace and academic learning; and, the process of prior learning assessment, by which participants reflect upon and document previous experiences that have resulted in significant workplace-based learning with the goal of obtaining equivalent course credit when compared with academic curricular requirements. The use of technology, then, is relevant in two ways: not only is technology logistically important to linking communications and interactions among geographically dispersed students, instructors, and placement personnel, but it also becomes the means by which to promote the development of a range of skills, abilities, and knowledge areas essential to the successful integration of experiential learning into students’ consciousness.

The Role of Technology in Supporting Experiential Learning

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Designing and implementing methods to promote meaningful experiential learning within a virtual classroom environment does not require instructional approaches to be conceptually different from those implemented in physical classrooms. However, the media by which the methods are delivered significantly alter the means by which students participate and interact and, therefore, ultimately impact both teaching and learning experiences. The research of King, King and Durham, and Kitchenham substantiates the importance of integrating new media in curricula as critical to constructing transformative opportunities for both learning and teaching; such connections arguably are made stronger in virtual environments in so far as they have the potential to extend beyond individual students to impact the organizations and larger communities that provide the physical settings for learning. When used in conjunction with instructional methods that promote individual and collaborative inquiry (such as asynchronous guided discussions), technological solutions become important components to facilitating important learning.

Instructional approaches that enable technology-based delivery with on site placements may be particularly effective when introduced into applied workplace settings. Such approaches structured within “real world” settings enable a level of interaction and communication that further critical analysis and inquiry processes essential to making meaning from experience. For example, by combining synchronous participation in experientially based learning opportunities with asynchronous online coursework, a problem-based instructional approach results that promotes active, collaborative opportunities by which to explore both individual and collective consciousness.

The use of technologies is critical to constructing positive student-teacher partnerships that effectively facilitate the collaboration required to deepen the impact of critical inquiry and reflection so essential to learning from experience. As such, it is essential that instructors think beyond merely using popular technologies to revision the ways in which applications can transform instructional

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27 A.P. Rovai, H.M. Jordan, Blended Learning and Sense of Community: A Comparative Analysis with Traditional and Fully Online Graduate Courses, op. cit.
goals and learning outcomes. Such goals may include cultivating and facilitating productive and collaborative learning communities as well as promoting ongoing individual and collective inquiry through structured activities and events that result in reflection and engagement. While the technologies typically utilized in the instruction of courses that accompany on-site placements are commonly used in educational settings, their application within an experiential learning context uniquely compounds individual outcomes as well as impacts related to both classroom and on-site communities. For example, the use of a range of media enables a heightened sense of presence, of “being there” and “being together”, essential to the process of constructing both individual and collective knowledge. This process is enabled through the use of technologies to reinforce significant learning and strengthen relationships between members of the service triad, as well as facilitate individual, personal, and academic development.

On a pragmatic level, the effects of participation in experiential learning opportunities appear to compound when facilitated through the use of educational technologies, in as much as the media provide extended access not only to the course and placements, but also to instructional elements that further learning and awareness, such as goal-directed interaction in diverse learning communities. The use of a combination of technologies may be particularly important to adult and nontraditional students, established in and committed to remaining in their local communities while continuing their educations. Such use enables participation in credit-generating experiences for students who may not otherwise access them due to care taking, health, earning, or geographic barriers as well as competing lifestyle priorities. Because participation in online coursework often enables students to become more deeply integrated in their local communities, opportunities evolve for interaction and communication with others similarly located throughout the United States and beyond. This dynamic alone creates a potential for the creative development of cultural, political, and environmental analyses that impact students as both individual learners as well as members of larger communities, professions, and networks. Such analyses can be interpreted within a range of contexts, related to, for

example, discipline-specific frameworks, cultures, or socio-economic trends and realities. Research completed by Guthrie and McCracken\(^{35}\) (2010) indicates further secondary benefits of such outreach extends to significant others, as students report that because many placement activities are locally based they often are able to successfully engender the participation of friends and family members as adjuncts to their experiential learning process. As illustrated by this example, such approaches enable the further impact of learning outcomes, as they are extended throughout localities.

In order to explore the development and facilitation of experiential learning in combination with web-based coursework, educators must consider implementation in relation to multiple instructional models. Blending a range of media-based delivery methods requires educators to select both technological methods and pedagogical approaches that capitalize on strengths and minimize challenges to further a cohesive and systematic approach to learning\(^{36}\). When effectively integrated, blended programming holds the potential for increased interaction and engagement among peers, decreased student attrition, and a distinctly learner-centered focus that ultimately strengthens the overall quality of educational experiences\(^ {37}\). Educational technologies are selected based on their capacities to facilitate interaction, communication, and collaboration in order to generate shared learning goals, solve common problems, and address the needs, concerns, and competencies of all stakeholders. At the same time, media are included which are reliable, as well as accessible to and functional for the majority of students. A secure web-based environment afforded by a stable learning management system enables the integration of a range of augmentative technologies to support collaborative learning\(^ {38}\). Continuous communications, then, are facilitated in conjunction with the integration of such formats as asynchronous discussion boards, blogs, and email as well as synchronous chat, and audio and video conferencing applications, or facilitated through peer-to-peer and cloud computing platforms that enable continuous interactions. Depending upon the nature and focus of the students’ learning objectives and placement goals, various online social networking services may also be integrated into their experiences. Through continuous interaction, students and educators can collaborate to incorporate innovation and creativity into each instructional transaction.

**Facilitating Engaged Experiential Learning through the Use of Critical Pedagogies**


Constructivist theory informs the development of teaching approaches that enable educators to assist students to shape their impressions of the world, and to apply insights as they explore evolving beliefs and behaviors through the experiences of reflective practice, critical inquiry, and collaboration. Constructivism when combined within a social constructionist framework, then, acknowledges the potential impact created by extending the individual experience through collaboration, interaction, and communication with others; as noted, within an experiential learning context such “others” include on site mentors, service recipients, peers, instructors, and a range of community-based experts. The effects of such approaches are reinforced when blended with web-based instruction and on site placements; this unique combination enables instructors to capitalize on the strengths of each component of the learning experience. Curricula incorporating multiple and combined pedagogies are naturally action-based; that is, they are intentionally designed to promote effective change in the quality and substance of students’ individual consciousness, classroom communities, and organizations in which learning is situated. By consciously merging teaching methods, goal-based technologies, and instructional strategies, teachers, students, and placement personnel are able to form meaningful partnerships that facilitate ongoing dialogue, foster developing insight, generate collective learning outcomes, and contribute to strengthening active and collaborative communities. Such partnerships between the host organizations and post-secondary institutions as well as between the placement sites and students may be sustained over time, extending the potential for community impact through engagement with future students to enable important continuity and capacity building.

There are obviously numerous philosophical and pedagogical points at which critical pedagogies overlap; many characteristics of these methods are complementary, potentiating their effectiveness when reinforced through connectedness; while diverse in nature, they combine to promote learner-centeredness, critical inquiry, and cognitive development. Such pedagogies include promoting authentic learning and teaching; sustaining multi-dimensional “presence”; implementing reflective techniques; facilitating interactive and collaborative learning; emphasizing learner-
centeredness and self-directedness; framing teaching and learning within a transformative context; experimenting with problem-based focuses; and, cultivating cultural competence.

**Promoting Authentic Learning and Teaching.** Authenticity in the classroom refers both to the construction of the instructional environment and curricula as well as to the manner in which a course is facilitated, and is actualized in a variety of ways. A focus on current problems as the foundation of instruction ensures that both content and methods are relevant to student learning needs and goals; as such, an authentic teaching approach is well suited to experiential learning, particularly related to the integration of technology. Cranton and King define authenticity as the “expression of the genuine self in the community”. An authentic teaching approach allows teachers to encourage challenging questions and difficult dialogues, promote conflict resolution and negotiation, and advance consensus building to foster intellectual, as well as cognitive and affective growth. Through the development of an open environment that focuses on both process and content educators relinquish traditional classroom management in favor of a facilitative instructional style. Instructors, then, are able to support inquiry, exploration, and information seeking on both individual and collective levels, ideally enabling students to assume responsibility for their own learning processes and outcomes. To maximize the effectiveness of instruction the skills, abilities, and experiences of the individual students are consistently valued and recognized, all the while drawing on the interests and competencies of the collective learning community. All members of the service triad share responsibilities for the completion of assessment activities; this process enables a comprehensive evaluation of the learning that occurred both in the virtual class and at the placement site.

In a virtual classroom authenticity includes attention to the ways in which technology is utilized; the use of media is purposeful and goal directed, closely related to the generation of learning outcomes and strengthening the learning environment. Because the use of technologies requires students to master secondary skills, such as utilization of specific navigations or applications, these tools have the potential to form barriers to educational access and overall learning. When linked directly to instructional approaches, teachers must ensure that technologies are carefully integrated into curricular goals in ways that are relevant and related to curricular goals, as well as functional, accessible, and manageable.

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Sustaining a Sense of Presence. The use of media-based applications facilitates participation beyond one-dimensional information sharing, enabling communication that is so critical to the development of multi-dimensional presence; such presence has been found to correlate positively to both student motivation and achievement in virtual learning environments\textsuperscript{46} \textsuperscript{47}. When geographic barriers to interaction and communication are removed, instructors and students alike can focus on educational transactions with positive results. Educators Garrison, Anderson, and Archer\textsuperscript{48} and Garrison and Hanuka\textsuperscript{49} address the critical nature of presence by suggesting a community of inquiry model as a framework for realizing reflective, experientially based pedagogies as implemented in virtual learning environments. Attention to combined teaching, social, and cognitive elements enables an instructional presence that reinforces high level learning, essential to achievement within an experiential environment in which students and instructors never meet face-to-face. Through the use of teaching methods such as written journals and reflection papers, text-, audio- or video-based exchanges, peer-to-peer collaboration, and team or small group presentations, connections are made between related theory, individual learning goals, and curricular outcomes that can, then, be applied in placement settings\textsuperscript{50} \textsuperscript{51} \textsuperscript{52} \textsuperscript{53} \textsuperscript{54}. These types of learning approaches ensure that instructors, students, and placement personnel are consistently present, engaged, and interactive in the learning environment\textsuperscript{55}

Implementing Critically Reflective Pedagogies. Schön\textsuperscript{56} describes reflection as an active process that is experimental in nature, requiring the interpretation of experience within the context of developing personal, academic, and professional awareness. As such the capacity for reflection-in-action is best cultivated through participation in structured opportunities for authentic and purposeful

\textsuperscript{52} P. Ginns, R. Ellis, Quality in Blended Learning: Exploring the Relationships Between Online and Face-to-Face Teaching and Learning. \textit{Internet and Higher Education}” 2007 10:1, p. 53-64.
\textsuperscript{54} R.M. Lehman, S.C.O. Conceição, Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{55} K. Swan, J. Richardson, P. Ice, D. Garrison, M. Cleveland-Innes, J Arbaugh, Validating a Measurement Tool of Presence in Online Communities of Inquiry, op. cit.
learning\textsuperscript{57} that are both cyclical and progressive\textsuperscript{58}. Although technologies afford the means by which to promote ongoing communication and interaction, the actual opportunities that generate participation and collaboration are facilitated through the implementation of a critically reflective pedagogy at the center of which is a focus on building a learning community, inclusive of the instructor, students, and associates working in service placements\textsuperscript{59}. While there is a potential for experiential learning to be negatively internalized in such a way that obsolete attitudes, values, and biases are reinforced, by facilitating an environment that fosters critical reflection, instructors assist students to develop self-knowledge resulting from experiences that span an affective and intellectual continuum\textsuperscript{60} \textsuperscript{61} \textsuperscript{62}.

Geographically distributed students studying online typically note a strong sense of learning through community in online classes in which instructors facilitate open environments for the discussion, mediation, and resolution of difficult dialogues that ultimately reinforce complex understanding\textsuperscript{63}. The virtual environment offers a wealth of options by which to further continuous dialogue, for example, through the use of such tools as asynchronous email or threaded discussion forums, real time conferencing platforms, or basic chat and instant messaging functions\textsuperscript{64} \textsuperscript{65}. Such approaches used in facilitating interaction and analyses enable engaging learning environments for the experimentations with and interpretation of personally meaningful and academically relevant applied experiences\textsuperscript{66} \textsuperscript{67} \textsuperscript{68}.

\textbf{Facilitating Interactive and Collaborative Learning.} Collaborative learning occurs as the result of active community participation by all stakeholders, the outcome of which is two-fold: the generation of new areas of knowledge and skill areas, and the acquisition of interpersonal abilities particularly

\textsuperscript{57} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{58} M. Fiddler, C. Marienau, Developing Habits of Reflection for Meaningful Learning, „New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education” 2008, 118, p. 75-85 [10.1002/ace.297].
\textsuperscript{60} S.D. Brookfield, Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1997.
\textsuperscript{61} D.R. Garrison, Self-Directed Learning: Toward a Comprehensive Model, „Adult Education Quarterly” 1997, 48:1, p. 18-34.
\textsuperscript{62} N. Zepke, L. Leach, Contextualised Meaning Making: One Way of Rethinking Experiential Learning and Self-Directed Learning, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{63} P. Shea, A Study of Students’ Sense of Learning Community in Online Environments, „The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks” 2006, 10:1, p. 35-44.
\textsuperscript{64} S. Barab, M. Thomas, H. Merrill, Online Learning: From Information Dissemination to Fostering Collaboration, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{65} S. Meyers, Using Transformative Pedagogy when Teaching Online, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{66} P. Cranton, Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2006.
\textsuperscript{67} S. Meyers, Using Transformative Pedagogy when Teaching Online, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{68} S. Scott, The Social Construction of Transformation, „Journal of Transformative Education” 2003, 1:3, http://jtd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/1/3/264
relevant to effective participation in career settings\textsuperscript{69}. Experiential learning pursuits and instructional goals merge within the context of collaboration that enables the actualization of logical connections between academic theory and practical application\textsuperscript{70}. Extensive research identifies the importance of interaction and collaboration to intellectual growth, social development, and academic learning\textsuperscript{71, 72, 73, 74}. In many senses the virtual classroom environment is naturally conducive to building collaboration through community building activities based in the learning environment as well as at on site placements\textsuperscript{75}. When learning is situated in an instructional framework that promotes the exploration of personal awareness, processes of critical reflection and inquiry often take flight in the form of developing relationships, commitments to social and civic interests, community and political engagement, and creative and intellectual pursuits. The goal of collaboration, as opposed to that of cooperation, is the evolution of a self-directedness and autonomy that enables students’ capacity for interpreting experiences and applying them to areas of new learning\textsuperscript{76}.

Certainly, the integration of technologies in the facilitation of the most basic communications and interactions contributes to the success of collaboration in a blended learning environment. Not only do media enable interpersonal connections, but also they are instrumental to the accomplishment of many tasks centered in placements, thus further facilitating the distribution of information and the organization of shared responsibilities. The use of technologies in this manner, then, is critical to the accomplishment of both individual learning goals and work-based responsibilities, as well as to the collaboration that enables the realization of such outcomes.

**Emphasizing Learner Centeredness and Self-Directedness.** An important approach to facilitating an environment centered on student learning is the promotion of self-directedness within the context of experience, emphasizing participants’ control of and responsibility to learning and meaning making that is situated in action\textsuperscript{77}. Learner-centered teaching approaches are emphasized in literature related to workplace and experiential learning as well as online education insofar as these

\textsuperscript{70} H. McCracken, *Virtual Learning Communities: Facilitating Connected Knowing*, *The Encyclopedia of Distance Learning*, (2nd Ed.), IGI Global, Hershey, PA 2005.
\textsuperscript{75} H. McCracken, *Furthering Connected Teaching and Learning Through the Use of Virtual Learning Communities*, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{77} N. Zepke, L. Leach, *Contextualised Meaning Making: One Way of Rethinking Experiential Learning and Self-Directed Learning*, op. cit.
environments recognize and foster the development of self-directedness and autonomy key to achieving individual learning goals. The promotion of autonomy does not mean that students learn in isolation, as the generation of self-knowledge cannot occur in the absence of a social environment. Such settings require a degree of negotiation and accountability related to task accomplishment, collaboration, self-regulation, and overall participation. In an experiential context, self-directed learning holds the potential to be politicized and emancipatory, as learners explore both individual and collective capacities to impact change centered on, for example, civic engagement and social action.

The use of teaching methods that facilitate critical inquiry and reflection, as well as self-assessment, assists students to develop a sense of independence that serves as a catalyst for a growing awareness of both self and community; such understanding, then, can be actively applied within a context of problem solving and engagement with members of the service triad. Necessity dictates that the virtual classroom environment is decidedly learner-centered as compared with its more traditional face-to-face counterpart as a degree of self-directedness is inherent in the very navigation of media-based learning management systems which requires the mastery of a range of secondary skills in order to participate in a consistent and goal-directed manner. However, to ensure a climate of learner centeredness that reinforces self-direction, students must be allowed opportunities to adapt their use of technology within the context of their interests, skill levels, and learning environments; by enabling choice, teachers ensure a shared pedagogical approach with their students that reinforces the self-directedness required for the selection and use of specific applications.

**Framing Teaching and Learning in a Transformative Context.** Certainly introducing students into unfamiliar experiential placements speaks to the central importance of facilitating what Mezirow refers to as “disorienting dilemmas” that hold the potential to ignite new skills and areas of

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knowledge. In the process of establishing relationships in placement environments, with both personnel and service recipients, students are tasked with the process of continuous critical inquiry into and reflection upon long-held assumptions and values as well as newfound perceptions; this process challenges them to explore and test new beliefs as catalysts for the evolution of new perspectives. This combination of dynamics has the potential to create an environment in which cognitive transformation can be experienced, interpreted, and applied; the resulting learning can be life changing, impacting students’ growth long after the conclusion of specific placement experiences.

In an online classroom continuous and substantial dialogues in which transformative qualities are inherent depend upon consistent teacher presence and comfort with process-based instruction in a virtual learning environment. Equally important are the instructor’s competencies in participating in continuous communication, providing immediate responsiveness and feedback, presenting topics that challenge, facilitating insightful collaboration, and establishing a climate of trust and support. By integrating these approaches with practiced facilitation, targeted discussions and assignments conducted in virtual classrooms ensure meaningful learning, and advance relational, skill, and knowledge levels, as demonstrated through shared goals, mutual feedback, and the achievement of both individual and collective learning outcomes.

**Experimenting with a Problem-Based Focus.** The direct experience of and participation in considering and solving problems enables students to learn in ways that are personally, professionally, and academically relevant when occurring in environments that promote critical inquiry and reflection; in this context students are able to learn from experiences as opposed to learning about them. In addition to the impact of interactions between members of the service triad, it is important to note that a range of variables, such as workplace cultural norms (and associated economic and political dynamics inherent within such environments), also indirectly affects learning outcomes as well as the integration and eventual application of skills and abilities.

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acquired at the placement and transferred to future professional settings. This combination of dynamics contributes to what Davis and Sumara refer to as a comprehensive “learning system” that results from a “holistic process of adaptation to the world”, and has implications for the development of students’ skills and abilities, as well as the quality of learning achieved in classrooms and workplaces. While specific activities may be conducted and discussions moderated within the virtual classroom, there is no guarantee that unique interpretations and applications experienced by students at their placements will be purposefully integrated and positively applied. In spite of their relevance to professional practice within the framework of experiential learning, these types of opportunities have been criticized as narrow related to the potentially negative outcomes possible.

In order to cultivate this combination of activities into what Beckett refers to as opportunities for “organic growth”, instructors must continuously initiate instruction that has the potential to be personally meaningful, intellectually challenging, and individually engaging as a means to assist students to integrate critical experiences that generate from addressing problems occurring both in the classroom and at placement sites in order that they constructively develop new areas of knowledge. Additionally, educators, placement personnel, and students share responsibility for directing learning in such a way as to open to a range of possibilities in exploring difference as well as commonality. Although complex, these concepts may be furthered through combining creative methods and technologies in response to evolving dynamics, contexts, skills, and meaning.

Cultivating Cultural Competence. Because students enrolled in web-based learning can ostensibly participate from any location that offers requisite access, software, and hardware, it is possible for students geographically originating from colleges and universities in the United States to engage in applied experiences beyond this country’s borders while continuing coursework through their institutions-of-origin. This process enables opportunities for rich dialogue and introspection, as students communicate and interact together to explore experiences occurring in local and regional settings, as well as from locations beyond the United States. When guided using skilled facilitation, this level of interaction enables reflection about one’s lived experiences related to culture, prejudices,
and “worldmindedness” as well as those shared by the larger human community. Such reflection is critical to the exploration of self and others, and essential to optimizing applied learning. For example, Solomon notes that while academic learning seeks to integrate cultural competence into the instructional environment, the impact of such intent may vary once students are working in placement settings; the tension resulting from managing one’s participation in divergent environments may provide learning opportunities, but also sources of discomfort and disorientation. These types of critical events and the subsequent process of self-examination may be required in order for transformative and substantial learning to occur.

Merryfield found participation in virtual classrooms to diffuse potential “triggers of difference” (for example, clothing, accents, or body language) that may cause reactions generating from previous experiences or biases when encountered in physical classrooms, therefore removing the potential for stereotyping that typically creates barriers to learning. Under such conditions, therefore, it is logical that the exploration of difference becomes an intellectual and experiential process that deepens and furthers knowledge generation about both one’s self as well as connections to a range of peers and colleagues.

**Academic Program Models Emphasizing Experiential Learning**

Unlike previous generations who typically attended college during their late teens and early twenties, today’s students seeking higher education are increasingly adults who, impacted by economic realities as well as professional, socio-political, and cultural needs, have extensive experience in the workforce and seek to build on such to obtain academic credentials. Researchers from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the Innovation Network for Communities emphasize that it is incumbent upon higher education to meet the needs of this growing student population in a systematic and cohesive manner that promotes the use of experience to facilitate both intellectual and professional learning. Post-secondary priorities must be placed on developing a functional system leading to the transformation of learning within the context of both career education and academic development. The use of technology to accomplish this creates both a need and a solution, leading to

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103 N. Solomon, Workplace Learning as Cultural Technology, op. cit.
105 M. Merryfield, Like a Veil: Cross-Cultural Experiential Learning Online, op. cit.
107 Ibidem.
broader access to learning environments and as well as new efficiencies that enable inventive responses by universities and businesses based on collaboration and shared resources\textsuperscript{108}. Specifically, the use of multiple media are relevant to learning and achievement across professional specializations as well as academic disciplines; as such it is logical that a positive step toward shared functionality in transformative workforce and academic learning environments is to provide opportunities for students to participate in work-based experiences that reinforce the use of technologies.

Increasingly colleges and businesses consider collaborations as a means to enable employability and skills training as well as the development of abilities such as critical thinking, reflective inquiry, and independent decision-making; such programming may include curricular components focusing on leadership development, service-learning, career education, and prior learning assessment. Many institutions include one or more of such components in their academic programming; these curricular approaches share common instructional methods as well as structures for implementation. For example, the four types of programs previously noted employ similar aspects of critical pedagogies as well as placement structures; they are, however, differentiated on the basis of their goals for learning outcomes.

**Leading as Critical to Participation in Experiential Learning.** In defining leadership within the context of learning, Brookfield and Preskill\textsuperscript{109} observe that one of the most important aspects of leaders lies in their commitment to teach and to be taught; it is in this framework that they are most able to enact change, particularly related to cultural, social, and political transformation. Historically, student voices have been among the most powerful in effecting change; channeling such commitment and enthusiasm has been viewed as critical to their ongoing engagement in both higher education and their larger communities\textsuperscript{110}. Whether promoting voter turnout, organizing to support literacy, or leading peers within a university’s governance structure, student leadership and activism assumes an important role both on campuses and in localities related to furthering awareness, assisting in decision-making, motivating action, and building capacity. Although typically considered in terms of civic engagement, researchers Dempster and Lizzio\textsuperscript{111} acknowledge important changes occurring related to actualizing student leadership; the use of technology has impacted change in a variety of ways. For example, the ubiquitous integration of social networking and entertainment media has

\textsuperscript{108} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibidem.
become the means to reach broader constituencies to enable new approaches to information distribution, organizing, volunteering, and civic involvement. As an example, using web presences (for instance, via virtual organizations such as Change.org\textsuperscript{112}) to mobilize social change can have striking impacts. To facilitate learning through the use of such new approaches, Brookfield and Preskill\textsuperscript{113} emphasize that opportunities for collaboration, shared power, and commitment be explored within relational and collective learning experiences structured within instructional environments.

Opportunities to experiment with leadership principles are presented in many venues. For example, initiatives such as the US-based non-profit organization “Leadershape\textsuperscript{114}” provide training for students interested in exploring their leadership potential. Focusing on such issues as leading with integrity and ethics, inclusive leadership, and sustaining and managing transformative change, student leaders engage in discussions to promote both their personal development as well as to impact social change. Informed by such broad content, experientially based curricula are designed for the express purpose of enabling students to participate in the development of their own unique capabilities related to identifying problems and interests, setting goals, achieving measureable outcomes, and, ultimately, finding their sense of “voice” related to personal power and change. For example, student volunteers work with members of state legislatures to draft and introduce policy on a range of issues to their constituents. As a second example, those desiring careers in education are tapped to co-teach courses enabling class management experiences. Finally, students initiate active campaigns via social networking websites to fund building schools in a developing country. As such, leadership development is an integral component of all experientially based learning environments.

**Serving Communities: Service-Learning in Virtual Environments.** Educators commonly agree that students are inadequately prepared for their roles as citizens and that post secondary institutions have a responsibility in such preparation, particularly related to global citizenry\textsuperscript{115 116}. Andrzejewski and Alessio\textsuperscript{117} emphasize that “…education for global citizenship should be grounded in the personal experiences of the student and his or her community”, and Braskamp\textsuperscript{118} reminds that such

\textsuperscript{112} The website “http://www.change.org” facilitates an open forum by which to express ideas and organize around specific cultural, political, and social issues with the express goal of enacting change.

\textsuperscript{113} S. Brookfield, S. Preskill, Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{114} Leadershape is an organization that uses an immersion training approach to assist colleges and universities to develop student leaders. Visit the website at: http://www.leadershape.org


\textsuperscript{117} J. Andrzejewski, J. Alessio, Education for Global Citizenship and Social Responsibility, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{118} L.A. Braskamp, Developing Global Citizens, op. cit.
engagement must be expanded to include a meaningful synthesis based on such experiences. Service-learning curricula join two complex concepts of knowledge and community action to create experiential learning opportunities specifically designed around the provision of local and/or global service such that they result in the generation of academic credit\textsuperscript{119, 120}. In this curricular approach students participate in community-based service placements and complete associated course work online, resulting in the use of technologies to augment and extend both classroom and service experiences. Placements include service opportunities that may be completed at physical service sites in students’ local communities (for example, shelters serving abused women and children, child advocacy organizations, or hospices). Similar to instruction generally implemented in experientially based learning programs, associated web-based coursework focuses on assisting students to develop an awareness of themselves in relation to their world through the use of approaches that further collaboration and inquiry (such as asynchronous guided discussions, localized group projects, or synchronous panels and debates), as well as critical reflection and self-assessment (for example, through the use of learning journals and contracts or targeted readings and associated position papers). However, a unique characteristic of the service-learning curriculum is its attention to the process of learning as well as the nature of the experience, often focusing on aspects related to social justice through community action. Experiences occurring at on site placements frequently act as catalysts for introspection related to culture, status and privilege, values, and goals; the result of such comprehensive learning-living experiences are often reported as transformative by participating students who embrace such opportunities as a means to further self awareness and commitment.

Most recently “e-service” programs have been popularized as a means to promote significant learning as well as to facilitate collaborative partnerships between coordinating post secondary institutions, course participants, instructors, and personnel located at on site placements; through a sole reliance upon educational technologies students are enabled to creatively develop “once in a lifetime” experiences by which to learn about and impact their world.\textsuperscript{121, 122, 123, 124} In addition to participating in on site placements, such experiences may be conducted exclusively in virtual

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{124} L. Waldner, S. McGorry, M. Widener, Extreme E-Service Learning (XE-SL): E-Service Learning in the 100% Online Course, op. cit.
\end{thebibliography}
environments (for example, through the coordination of specific issue-based groups such as those focused around hunger or sustainability), referred to as “extreme e-service learning” by authors Waldner, McGorry and Widener. The online service-learning curriculum promotes the exploration of the means by which sustainable change can be enacted within local organizations and neighborhoods, as well as with diverse constituencies. To effect these goals requires the recognition of various historical models of service leading to transformative change; the identification and development of core personal values within an ethical framework as actively applied to civic engagement and social change; and, the identification of strategies that promote positive influence in relationship to both the individual and larger society.

**Extending Meaning through Career Education: Internships, Practica, and Field Work.** Work-based experiences offer students opportunities to advance skills and abilities within the context of both academic and career development. However, perhaps more importantly, participation in professional contexts enables students to experience unpredictable and unique dilemmas that demand immediate problem solving and decision-making; these types of learning opportunities reinforce the development of independent judgment and critical thinking skills that occur through unplanned and spontaneous events and interactions. In such contexts participants not only perform required duties, but also receive guided instruction from both placement coordinators and supervisors tempered with indirect influences generated from interactions with peers, colleagues, and service recipients. Moreover, participants are exposed to and must navigate a range of environmental contradictions centered on power, influence, and politics and their relationship to personal, professional, and academic learning. As an example, upon considering the criminal justice major placed in a state drug enforcement agency, the biology student placed in a cancer research laboratory, or the teacher education learner placed in an inner city high school, the educator realizes that such settings have the potential to create an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance between the students’ lived experiences, values, ethics, and academic and professional goals. The challenges inherent in participating in day-to-day activities of such demanding placements may be viewed as opportunities for growth; however, they most probably will also be experienced as conflicting, unsettling, and incongruous.

125 Ibidem.
126 S. Billett, Co-Participation: Affordance and Engagement at Work, op. cit.
Although the quality of these experiences may be highly variable, the types of analyses and interpretations required in order to consistently participate in the environment so that optimal learning is enabled provide a rich context for further critical exploration. Because such experiences are not solely sufficient to guarantee positive learning outcomes, they should be used as a compliment to formal instruction. In this way instructors can assist students to identify and evaluate the development of specific skills, abilities, and attitudes that are potentially transferrable to future professional and academic settings. Consequently, understanding acquired through the combination of skills training and knowledge acquisition enables an evolving confidence reflective of the integration of learning within the context of both replication and reaction\textsuperscript{129}.

**Integrating Personal History with Current Learning Goals: Prior Learning Assessment.** Many educators have identified the importance of developing instructional environments that value experience, actively incorporating opportunities for learning with the evolving development of individual and collective knowledge\textsuperscript{130} 131 132 133. However, many students, particularly those returning to formal education after accumulating years of professional and paraprofessional experiences, enter traditional learning environments with substantial knowledge and skills. For these students a process of prior learning assessment that focuses on the methodical evaluation of past experiences (such as employment, military, or non-credit learning occurring, for example, as a result of volunteer/civic activities or professional training) both serves as a gateway into higher education, as well as offers a means by which previous experiences can translate into equivalent academic credit. In this context students actively apply skills and abilities learned in practical settings to formulate new learning goals and opportunities. This is accomplished through the systematic assessment and documentation of prior experiences, complimented by participation in collective dialogues that challenge existing perspectives to inform perceptual change\textsuperscript{134} 135 136 137 138 139.

\textsuperscript{130} C. Brigham, R. Klein-Collins, Going Online to Make Learning Count, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 2011, 12:1, p. 111-115.
\textsuperscript{132} J.L. McBrien, The World at America’s Doorstep: Service Learning in Preparation to Teach Global Students, *Journal of Transformative Education* 2008, 6, http://jtd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/4/270
\textsuperscript{133} E.W. Taylor, Transformative Learning Theory, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{135} A.W. Chickering, Strengthening Democracy and Personal Development through Community Engagement, *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* 2008, 118, p. 87-95.
\textsuperscript{136} M. Fiddler, C. Marienau, Developing Habits of Reflection for Meaningful Learning, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{137} J.L. McBrien, The World at America’s Doorstep: Service Learning in Preparation to Teach Global Students, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{138} S. Merriam, Adult Learning Theory for the Twenty-First Century, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{139} E.W. Taylor, Transformative Learning Theory, op. cit.
To maximize the effectiveness of instruction individual students’ interests, competencies, and questions are recognized within a context of referencing skills, abilities, and experiences of the larger learning community membership. Opportunities to experiment with developing concepts and original areas of knowledge are integrated within a framework of prior experiences that have resulted in substantial learning. While sometimes discredited within traditional post-secondary environments as unconventional, this type of systematic evaluation of experiential learning has proven to result in stronger overall learning outcomes related to both graduation and persistence rates\textsuperscript{140}. The benefits of participation in prior learning assessment processes has been well documented. For example, in a recent study conducted by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, data from 48 postsecondary institutions illustrates that students participating in such processes have better academic outcomes related to graduation rates and persistence than do their peers who did not take part in such learning and assessment activities\textsuperscript{141}. The possible increased intrinsic motivation of nontraditional learners to accomplish long-held academic goals as well as the structure of the prior learning assessment process itself is attributed to students’ successful participation in such programming\textsuperscript{142}.

Techniques associated with the assessment of prior learning outcomes vary widely as does the process of providing documentation to substantiate learning claims. For example, Gordon, Ireland and Wong\textsuperscript{143} utilize a participant self-assessment instrument to assist in the identification of existing career strengths and goals; this tool is used in conjunction with a virtual curriculum that both reinforces participant findings and extends such results to indicate valuable outcomes of prior learning. Web-based portfolios which include various forms of documentation (for example, descriptive essays) frequently are used to provide narrative descriptions that document prior learning experiences, as well as identify competencies for continued learning in order to provide a comprehensive plan that is, then, transferrable to new learning contexts\textsuperscript{144}. Taylor\textsuperscript{145} remarks that explorations of prior learning appear particularly relevant in online classrooms that uniquely draw the participation of nontraditional students who typically have a wealth of experience relevant to academic settings.

\textsuperscript{140} C. Brigham, R. Klein-Collins, Going Online to Make Learning Count, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{143} M. Gordon, M. Ireland, M. Wong, A Dynamic Community of Discovery: Planning, Learning and Change, \textit{International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning} \textsuperscript{\textcopyright} 2011, 12:1, p. 96-99.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{145} E.W. Taylor, Transformative Learning Theory, op. cit.
Possibilities, Implications, and Conclusions Related to Experiential Learning

Teaching courses within an experiential learning framework has important implications for post-secondary education as well as workplace learning, particularly when instruction includes an approach that blends virtual classroom environments with on-site placement experiences. This approach enables instruction to be extended to diverse student populations; this has the potential to result in meaningful learning that affects individual participants, as well as their peers, colleagues, and communities. An increased sense of social responsibility, a developed ability to apply theory to practical situations, and the acknowledgement of empowerment through values clarification impact both learning and teaching processes. Exchanges centered on learning achieved through such means have the potential to effectively localize as well as globalize the influences of student experiences to enact and sustain broad-based change. The rich dialogue that occurs as the result of a highly diverse participant group has the potential for impact beyond a single academic term as ideas and insights generated in the classroom extend beyond single localities to a range of communities throughout the country and larger world. When combined with pedagogies that foster the development of critical dialogue, personal insight, and active engagement, educational technologies have an important role in extending learning beyond geographic regions to empower individual, academic, and cognitive development.

The use of instructional approaches that blend technology with applied learning enable students to explore and personalize issues that may be inaccessible to them through participation in locally based homogeneous classrooms. Utilized technologies enable broad-based access to online courses that results in the participation of a diverse student population; such diversity enables the further examination of values, bias, and insight inherent in meaningful college-level learning. Moreover, because students may be more connected to localities in which they are living rather than to temporary campus environments such participatory academic experiences result in highly relevant learning as well as active contributions to communities. The benefits of such educational opportunities are substantial, then, within personal, communal, professional, and institutional contexts. Students may strengthen their sense of self and place in their local communities so as to enable future employment experiences or further career development against a curricular backdrop that facilitates self-awareness and cultural competency. Pedagogies that combine instructional

methods to encourage reflection and critical inquiry facilitate a gradually expanded consciousness that is not typically characteristic of academic learning.

However, the design and delivery of such potentially rich learning environments is not without challenges. Currently in the United States experiential learning is not broadly integrated throughout universities or business communities; this alone impacts both the capacity of post-secondary institutions to offer such experiences, as well as the potential for the acceptance of such learning for formal academic credit between institutions\textsuperscript{147}. While discipline-specific programming provides increasing options for students to obtain career education, such practices are generally not institutionalized beyond departmental or institutional boundaries. There exists a reoccurring need for experientially focused curricula to be prioritized throughout academia; because the value of such experiences as well as the student populations who are most likely to utilize such programming are received with varying importance, a wide variance related to both policy and procedures continues. In the absence of an agreed upon level of standardization of key policies and procedures an unmet need for career-based education to be integrated within the context of academic learning persists throughout higher education.

Creating credible experiential placements may be challenging for both educators and students in so far as identifying appropriate on site experiences that complement outcome-directed academic learning must be responsive to the ever changing needs and demands of communities in which such learning occurs. Learning in experiential settings occurs through highly facilitative and collaborative efforts in order to connect the development that emerges as a result of the placement experience with both existing and new areas of knowledge. Such pedagogies are typically instructed using combined methods including structured curricula and field-based seminars to provide opportunities in which valuable critical reflection and inquiry can occur. The coordination of such complex academic curricula demands ongoing focus and attention, which becomes increasingly difficult to manage within the context of increasing enrollments. Additionally, outreach efforts with community-based organizations must be nurtured and sustained in order to ensure relevant and current placement opportunities are available during every academic term; maintaining continuous relationships with geographically distributed placement partners is complicated to both initiate and manage.

Beyond the benefits and challenges of experiential learning contemporary higher education has a responsibility to prepare students to solve social problems on both local and global levels; to

\textsuperscript{147} F.L. Lesht, D. Windes, Online Education in Higher Education, What Factors Facilitate and Inhibit It? op. cit.
this end, teachers are challenged to construct learning opportunities that enable as diverse a context for learning and living as possible\textsuperscript{148}. Given the dramatic increase in nontraditional students in post-secondary education, the process of combining web-based coursework with on site experiential placements holds a vast potential to merge skills training and academic goals in the creation of relevant and meaningful learning opportunities. However, to ensure such curricula are implemented in a consistent, coherent, and sustained manner requires the management of programming that includes the mastery of technology integration, critical pedagogies, and outreach approaches. While demanding, the result of such ambitious programs promise increased engagement by students and teachers as well as communities, having the potential to enrich both individual and collective learning, and ultimately resulting in meaningful awareness and sustained change.

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