

Peter Gathje, Christian Brothers University

Two Characteristics of Experiential Education

Across the spectrum of forms of experiential education that I have used in my courses, I have found two essential characteristics. The first is that students, as part of their coursework, engage in some type of structured experience outside of the classroom that is connected with the subject being studied. The second is that students reflect upon their experience in dialogue with the particular courses issues, texts, and theories. These two characteristics, experience and theoretical, personal and ethical reflection informed by a course's content, basically define experience-based education.

For example, in my course "Race, Resistance, and Religion" our reading of slave narratives and abolitionist materials was enlivened by our visit to the Burkle Estate in Memphis, a purported "station" on the Underground Railroad. Students entered a small cellar where runaway slaves would stay for days. The guide closed the cellar door and plunged the group into the darkness that would have marked the days of waiting for those seeking freedom. This small taste of the efforts for freedom undertaken by African Americans held in slavery transformed classroom discussion and analysis. White student resistance to the very reality of racism began to give way and African American students gained a stronger sense of their heritage. At the same time, the class began to sense a common ground of resistance to racism in that the Burkle Estate was owned by a white man who risked his life hiding those running away, who were also risking their lives.

Service Learning

Although such brief site visits combined with textual study can be transformative, I have found that the most powerful form of experiential education, in terms of both generating student interest in academic material and forming students for continuing involvement with issues raised by a course, is service learning. In service learning, students commit to work with a particular agency or organization that is meeting the needs of people within a local community or addressing a larger social problem. The service provides engagement with the realities of the community and/or broader societal issues, while the classroom learning provides critical reflection upon those realities and the integration of the students' experiences in their service work with academic analysis.

It is essential that the work the students do with agencies or organizations give them first-hand experience of an issue (or issues) the course is addressing. Ensuring that this is the case means working with the students and the respective agencies so that all understand what is the purpose of the students being there, and what is expected of the students and the agencies.

There is a wealth of material on service learning, and much of it helpfully focuses on the important relationships between the service organization and the students doing the service, along with the faculty member. In some schools these relationships are developed and maintained through a service learning coordinator. Without such a coordinator much of this work can fall upon the faculty member. However, I believe it is important for each student to research and make his or her own first contact with the service organization. He or she then will negotiate goals and objectives for service and learning consistent with the overall goals or the particular course. I periodically check in with the students to make sure that they are meeting their obligations to the service organization and that the service they are doing is connecting with the class.

Courses in which I have used service learning are "Christian Morality," "Religion and Prejudice," "The Life and Thought of Gandhi and King," "Christianity and Peace," and "Peacemaking." In each of these courses the service learning was offered as an option students could select as part of the course. Typically, the service learning requirement included a specific commitment to 20-30 hours of service during the semester, keeping a journal of reflections on the service informed by class readings, and a final paper and class presentation in which the student integrated his/her service experiences with course material. Students who took the service learning option were excused from writing a research paper and from taking the final exam. A few stories from some of these classes will, I think, reveal how powerful this pedagogy can be for the students who engage in it, and how it can enrich courses.

In the "Christianity and Peace" course, two students engaged in a service learning project that focused on the death penalty. Both students worked with the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing, an anti-death penalty group. The students' helped to organize the Memphis leg of the Journey of Hope. In the Journey of Hope, family members of murder victims and family members of persons on death row come to a particular area of the country to speak against the death penalty. These two students, who had not been active in this issue prior to the class, arranged to have members of the Journey of Hope speak in our class and on campus, and brought to the classroom a wealth of information on the death penalty issue. Their own involvement sparked other students in the class to share their stories, including one student who revealed that a good friend of his is on death row in Arkansas, and how that has affected his thinking on the issue. The students' organizing efforts also provided an experientially-based analysis and discussion of what motivates and sustains people in activism for peace and justice. We examined how grass roots organizations deal with challenges such as raising money, attracting media coverage, gathering volunteers, and resolving organizational conflict.

Experiential Education as Critical Tool for the Study of Religion

In the "Religion and Prejudice" course, we address the intersections of religion with racism,

sexism, and classism. The major goal of the class is to critically examine the role of religion, in theory and practice, as either helping to sustain these forms of injustice, or as a resource for resistance to and transformation of injustice. Two students who took the service learning option decided to examine the connection between sexism and violence against women. They worked with battered women's shelter run by the YWCA. The two students went through a weekend training workshop, and then worked with children in the shelter. Their classroom presentation on domestic violence brought issues studied in class to life for the class. The statistics the students presented were now embodied in actual accounts of human suffering.

These narratives also revealed how religious training that emphasized the subservience of women to men played into patterns of abuse. Males in the class, who had endorsed "male headship," in relationships when discussing the Bible and sexism, were confronted with a reality they had sought to deny in previous classes. The two students were able to draw from their experiences in the shelter, and their research, strong evidence for the connection between certain religious understandings and violence against women. At the same time they were able to illustrate how people of faith could draw from religious traditions the strength to break patterns of abuse, or to help others break such patterns. The students' and class's understanding of feminist theological critiques and analyses and constructive responses when confronted with received and sexist religious traditions was significantly enriched.

In the "Gandhi and King" course part of our study was to consider how Gandhi's and King's methods of nonviolent resistance are continued in a variety of ways today. The service learning option thus asked students to learn about and to become engaged with the work of some type of organization that was seeking social transformation through active nonviolent resistance to an injustice. Students were presented with several examples of such organizations, but they were also encouraged to investigate other possibilities according to their interests. One student selected Voices in the Wilderness as the organization with which he would work.

For several years, [Voices in the Wilderness](#), based in Chicago, has sought to end the economic sanctions against Iraq. Contacting this organization, this student studied their materials and did further investigative work on the issues surrounding the sanctions. His interest led him to organize several activities around the issue of the sanctions. These included bringing speakers from Voices in the Wilderness to the campus and other venues in the community, organizing several demonstrations with other activists in the Memphis area interested in this issue, and finally, forming a local organization to continue bringing this issue into public awareness. As this student and others shared their experiences in various class sessions throughout the semester, the challenges Gandhi and King faced in their organizing became quite real. The students gained, among other things, a deeper appreciation of theoretical, practical, and personal strains in trying to engage in political activity. They discovered how nonviolence is approached by some organizations as a strategy, while others see it as a way of

life that should also permeate the organization. In all cases, they had the opportunity to interact with people whose lives have been influenced by the life and thought of Gandhi and/or King.

Intensive Short-Term Learning

In addition to these semester long projects, I have on occasion also involved students in more intensive short-term service learning. Typically these have been a week in length during either our Fall or Spring breaks. In the past few years, students from the "Christianity and Peace" or the "Peacemaking" course, have gone to live with alternative Christian communities. In both courses we study Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement as one example of religiously grounded nonviolence and how the Catholic Worker Movement seeks to address violence at different levels of society. By living in communities influenced by the Catholic Worker Movement, students were pushed beyond any romanticized ideas about such a life. They brought back and shared with the other members of the class specific experiences that helped to highlight the tensions inherent to such communities and their type of peace and justice activism. Likewise, a week-long project working with an organization that provides a variety of services to poor people in the Mississippi Delta helped students in the "Religion and Prejudice" class to see how race and social class powerfully shape life chances in one rural area of the United States. The students in turn were able to use that experience to tell stories which illuminated these points for others in the class who were unable to participate in the project.

Transformative Education

I hope these few stories give a sense of the potential Theory Practice Learning has for enriching the lives of students and classroom learning. Students become quite excited when they see for themselves connections between texts and their experiences working with organizations outside of the classroom. They bring that excitement into the classroom, and begin to realize the transformative power of theory integrated with practice in their lives, and in the lives of others. Understanding through practical experience how concepts bear on social issues, they also realize that ideas have consequences. They now have seen theoretical issues reflected in the struggles of real people, some of whom they have come to work with and know. In teaching courses that analyze religion in relation to social conflict and violence, I have found that offering students opportunities for experiences outside of the classroom continually serves to deepen their awareness and analysis of such issues.