Learning by doing: Departmental-wide reflection on incorporating experiential-learning across the curriculum

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Abstract

Experiential-learning (EL), which captures a broad range of pedagogies, is a process where students learn by connecting experience to curriculum. More simply, EL provides students opportunities to learn by doing. Guided reflection, in conjunction with the experience, bridges the activity with course learning outcomes. Faculty teaching in the Department of Criminal Justice at FHSU made EL and the process of reflection a priority, incorporating pedagogies that include, but not limited to, service-learning, problem-based learning, and community-based research. This study demonstrates three innovative approaches to experiential-learning, including reflection, facilitated in criminal justice courses.

Literature Review

David Kolb (1984) argues that learning is best understood as a process. Results from a meta-analysis reviewing 40 years of research (Burch et al., 2016) indicate that experiential-learning activities do increase student learning. Specifically, students who participate in experiential activities achieve course learning outcomes at a higher level than control groups that do not participate in such activities.

Participation in service-learning positively impacts the development of skills necessary for success in today's workforce (Mellon et al., 2017).

Participating in research projects is more effective for teaching students methods, skills, and an appreciation for research than course readings and assignments (DeLyser et al., 2013).

Interviewing professionals in the field is important for helping students to internalize concepts introduced in class lecture (Cornell, Johnson, & Schwartz, 2013).

Problem-based learning empowers students to apply knowledge and skills while solving real-world problems (Kim, 2014).

Reflection is a skill that makes course content relevant to one's career and personal life (Scheidegger, 2020).

Reflection is valuable for reducing stereotypes, gaining career insight, and applying academic theory to real-life experiences (Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2007).

Experiential Learning Strategies

SERVICE-LEARNING:

Students enrolled in the on-campus and online sections of CRJ/IDS 360 Social Justice partnered with FHSU’s American Democracy Project, Center for Civic Leadership, and Student Government Association to facilitate Finding Common Ground. This event, open to campus and the local community, prepared students to guide discussion about topics of race and inequality.

Project was completed in five phases: 1) collect ten empirical sources about race and inequality; 2) prepare a discussion from selected sources; 4) lead discussions; and 5) write a reflection paper following the event.

COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH:

Students enrolled in the honors sections of CRJ 380 Community & Crime conducted quantitative and qualitative research to understand crime patterns in Hays, Kansas.

Project was completed in phases: 1) reviewing literature to understand variations in crime; 2) learning concepts of geospatial analysis and computer modeling; 3) collecting data in the community through observations of activity in high-crime areas; 4) analyzing arrest records to identify crime patterns in the community; 5) compiling results for presentation to community stakeholders; and 6) presenting research to stakeholders and professional audiences.

Each phase of the project included guided reflection.

Research findings presented to UPD & HPD agencies.

Experiential Learning Strategies (Cont.)

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING:

Students enrolled in JUS 225 Justice in the Information Age and JUS 200 Criminology engaged in a multi-semester project to respond to a lack of juvenile programming in the 23rd Judicial District.

Fall, JUS 225: Students researched delinquency programming in four judicial districts, similar in size and demographics to the 23rd district.

Spring, JUS 200: This phase of the project was completed as follows: 1) reviewing literature about teen courts; 2) incorporating research methods to develop a semi-structured interview and observation checklist; 3) interviewing Teen Court coordinator; 4) observing teen court in session; and 6) presenting findings to juvenile justice professionals from the 23rd Judicial District. Each phase included guided oral and written reflection.

Student reflection following JUS 200 project:

➢ “Gaining real life application skills as I researched, attended, and reflected on teen court was something I would not be able to fully grasp or understand if I had not been allowed this out-of-the-classroom experience.”

➢ “This project allowed us to evaluate and recommend a program that has the potential to positively affect society as a whole.”

➢ “The greatest impact this project has had is on my future as a criminal justice professional.”

Discussion

Experiential-learning, including opportunities for guided reflection (Scheidegger, 2020), is a valuable pedagogical approach to make education meaningful (Kolb, 1984), relevant to a student’s future career goals (Mellon et al., 2017), and a tool for changing society and communities (Kim, 2014).

The innovative projects discussed here, including service-learning, problem-based learning, and community-based research, can be facilitated individually or in partnership with departmental or interdisciplinary faculty. Most importantly, experiential-learning projects increased student engagement, retention, and learning. Moving forward, the department will implement objective measures to support this anecdotal evidence as faculty advance a culture of “learning by doing.”