

Experiential Education: Building Bridges Through Practical Work Experiences

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING HAS ACHIEVED new prominence in higher education over the last decade. It is now being employed successfully in such diverse fields as agricultural education and social work. As the learning needs of our students expand and become more diversified, we must be willing to utilize every methodology at our disposal to satisfy these needs.

One method which certainly qualifies for many disciplines is experiential education, the process whereby students, through direct experiences, may formulate and assimilate knowledge, skills, and values. In the past, volunteer experiences as well as practicums, internships and field studies have been employed with varying degrees of success. What is advocated by this author, however, is the use of an experiential learning technique which I have labeled the practical work experience component. Therefore, into the professional recreation curriculum at North Georgia College & State University, I have incorporated practical, subject-related work experience as a course requirement.

This hands-on work experience provides unique learning opportunities for the student. This instructional technique also adds new dimensions to the standard, classroom environment. Students, for example, are able to return to the classroom where they can share what they have learned during practical work experience sessions. Simply put, each student is placed, after prior consultation, into an out-of-the-classroom work setting under the professional supervision of the director or manager of that agency or organization. Examples of such agencies or organizations in our geographical area include community/municipal recreation departments, state parks, youth-serving agencies, therapeutic recreation organizations, and commercial recreation agencies. Once placed, the student is required to work up to five hours per week, gaining experiences in as many components of the Recreation and Leisure Services field as possible. Special emphasis is placed on the components of organization, personnel management, programming, public relations, and maintenance.

Specifically, the objectives of this approach are to provide my students with:

- the opportunity to determine their abilities in the areas of recreational leadership, programming and administration.
- the environment in which they might field-test principles, theories, and philosophies learned through classroom experiences.
- the opportunity to assess their own ability to estab-

lish positive social relationships and to achieve personal growth and fulfillment.

Once each student has completed their practical work experience, which may constitute up to twenty-five percent of their course requirements, they must submit an evaluation to me. This brief reflection includes a summary of the types of activities participated in as well as a statement of what the experiences have meant to the student. In addition, the student's field supervisor is also required to submit their assessment of the student's performance. In terms of feedback, the results have been very positive and encouraging. Students, though reluctant at first, often remark that it is from this portion of the course that they learn and grow the most. Perhaps a major reason for this positive feedback is that the average student feels that he/she is beginning to make a successful transition to the career world.

Field supervisors not only welcome their addition to the agency work force, but also their fresh ideas and approaches to everyday tasks. Such students, unhampered by entrenched, bureaucratic thought processes, often offer novel and insightful solutions to common problems in the workplace. In addition to the many ways in which student learning is aided, the community at-large also benefits from this learning approach. In the first place, a communication link is established between our curriculum and the staffs as well as participants at various recreation and leisure service agencies. By means of such a program, these agencies can enlarge their offerings to the average citizen. Some of the new offerings may include outdoor adventure activities, arts and crafts, and new programs for senior citizens. New ideas generated by our students can be translated into new activities, which are then implemented as resources permit.

Not to be overlooked as a vital outcome of this educational technique is the genuine good will that is fostered between college and community. Opportunities are clearly presented in which citizens from both college and community can work side by side to encourage the wise use of leisure by all. College personnel as well as community leaders and citizens are given many chances to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their relationships. This technique truly offers a chance to build bridges of understanding and opportunity between vital public agencies and institutions.