Achieving goals in higher education
An experiential approach to sustainability studies

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this paper is to provide a concrete example of how experiential learning approaches (from internships in global policy institutes to visiting communities in rural Amazonia to meeting with officials from inter-governmental organizations) can be implemented in order to most effectively meet specific educational goals in international sustainability studies.

Design/methodology/approach – Using four key educational goals as the framework for discussion, the author presents a multi-dimensional international experiential program at American University as an example of how non-traditional educational approaches can be used to supplement the traditional lecture-based format.

Findings – The case illustrates how experiential learning offers an educational experience that most effectively: connects the academic with the practice, fosters an effective interdisciplinary curriculum, links students to work experience and job opportunities, and engages and empowers students.

Research limitations/implications – This paper contributes to the literature on experiential learning and sustainability studies and argues that experiential learning approaches deserve greater attention in theory and practice.

Practical implications – The unique institutional and course structure presented in this case is unlikely to be replicated in most higher education settings, but select elements of this model can be incorporated into traditional institutional settings to enhance lecture-centric curricula.

Originality/value – The paper takes on the difficult task of simultaneously addressing traditional goals (e.g. connecting theory with practice; preparing students for the job market) with less traditional goals (e.g. engaging and empowering students) in higher education. This paper illustrates how these goals are often mutually reinforcing.

Keywords Curriculum development, Experiential learning, Higher education, Sustainable development, Teaching, United States of America

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Those who teach or serve as academic administrators in higher education institutions face a wide variety of challenges in their efforts to deliver the best educational experience to their students. How institutions and instructors define and evaluate the educational experiences they offer is one of the core determinants in deciding what types of educational experiences are offered. Some educators emphasize emancipatory, democratic, and pluralistic goals of sustainability education (Wals and Jickling, 2002; Hempel, 2002; Alvarez and Rogers, 2006), while others emphasize the more practical goals of skills building, practical applications, integrating disciplines, and job placement (Wille, 1997; Foster, 1999; Jucker, 2001; DiConti, 2005; Stelmack et al., 2005).
Regardless of the specific educational goals sought, one of the most time-efficient and cost-efficient ways of delivering higher education is through the traditional lecture-centric curriculum (Karayan and Gathercoal, 2005). However, the lecture-centric approach alone is limited in its ability to meet some of the key goals identified commonly pursued by higher education institutions (Boyer, 1987). These limitations are particularly pronounced in the field of international sustainability studies (Maniates, 2002).

This paper focuses specifically on the following educational goals, which are particularly important to the field of international sustainability studies[1]:

1. connecting the academic with the practice;
2. fostering an effective interdisciplinary curriculum;
3. linking students to work experience and job opportunities; and
4. engaging and empowering students.

While the four goals above may be a high priority for students and educators alike, each of these four goals is more difficult to assess than other educational goals typically evaluated by higher education institutions (such as GPA, writing skills, aptitude tests, etc.) and thus are less likely to be measured by administrators and researchers. Unfortunately, goals that are not easily assessed in the real-world setting typically move down the list of criteria by which success is measured. Measuring the extent to which students are engaged and empowered can be particularly problematic, but as is argued later in this paper and by others (Wals and de Jong, 1997), engaging and empowering students is often a prerequisite for advancing other educational goals.

This paper does not aim to quantify the goals above but does attempt to illustrate how – using the example of a semester program offered at American University in Washington, DC – the incorporation of certain non-traditional approaches can be particularly effective in helping to achieve these goals. The paper begins with a discussion of what is meant by the concept of “experiential learning” and how it is used by educators (Kolb, 1984; Cantor, 1995; Wingfield and Black, 2005). Experiential learning – including elements such as field-based coursework, internships, service learning, guest speakers, site visits, and the like – are growing in popularity among some instructors, but assessing the contributions of such approaches to educational goals is difficult and quantitative assessments are hard to come by in the academic literature (Lowenthal and Sosland, 2007; Wingfield and Black, 2005; Gosen and Washbush, 2004). This paper attempts to fill in gaps in the literature on how experiential learning can be used to complement a lecture-centric approach to most effectively reach the four educational goals listed above.

This essay uses the example of an experiential course on “International Environment and Development” within the Washington Semester Program (WSP) at American University in Washington, DC. This course, along with the larger WSP, is structured to complement a lecture-centric approach with a multi-dimensional experiential learning approach. A final question addressed in this essay is that of why experiential learning approaches are not more commonly used by instructors and institutions, given that such approaches can provide profoundly more enriching experiences than the purely lecture-based approach.
Experiential learning

Over the past several decades, experiential learning has become an increasingly popular non-traditional approach to higher education and has even become a fairly popular area of research for scholars (Kolb, 1984; Cantor, 1995; Fenwick, 2000; Marlin-Bennett, 2002; Kolb and Kolb, 2003; Gosen and Washbush, 2004; Alvarez and Rogers, 2006). There are no doubts many varieties and definitions of experiential learning. According to Kolb (1984, p. 38), probably the most cited scholar in this area, experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Cantor (1995, p. 1) defines experiential education more simply as “learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied”.

In the simplest definition, experiential learning is learning by doing. From here, one must address what is meant by the word doing? In a more strict definition, doing implies that the student is actually doing work in the field that he or she is studying. In other words, doing implies that a student is participating in an internship of one kind or another. However, the concept of experiential learning also generally includes the following types of activities: interning, conducting field work, participating in overseas travel courses, service learning, participating in in-class simulations, partnering with outside organizations, etc. All of these activities “engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied” (as defined by Cantor).

If one were to take an even looser definition of experiential learning, one could argue that all learning is experiential to some degree because when students are in class, reading texts, and writing papers, etc. they are actually doing something, even though that something is not directly a part of the practitioner’s world. Fenwick (2000, p. 245) among others embraces a broader definition of experiential learning by arguing that “experience flows across arbitrary denominations of formal and informal education, private and public sites of learning … ” A broader definition of experiential learning would thus include the activities shown in Figure 1, all of which in reality do involve learning by doing.

Obviously, including all of the activities in Figure 1 blurs the line between experiential learning and the traditional lecture-centric approach. The more inclusive definition of experiential learning would allow one to see all learning as experiential learning, though to varying degrees. As such, one could identify different degrees of experiential learning across a spectrum instead of simply categorizing educational experiences as experiential or not.

Figure 1.
Sample spectrum of experiential learning
The figure above is not intended to represent all forms of experiential learning, but it does represent how a good number of the more common forms might fit across a spectrum of experiential education. The case study below presents a program that is structured specifically to combine multiple forms of experiential learning and incorporate nearly all of the elements shown in Figure 1. The course examined – international environment and development (IED) – focuses specifically on sustainability issues in the international context.

The Washington Semester Program and International Environment and Development
For the past six years, the author of this article has overseen and taught a one-semester experiential program on “International Environment and Development” which is part of American University’s WSP. American University is a private university located in Washington, DC with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 5,800 students and an overall enrollment (including graduate and abroad programs) of approximately 11,000 students. The university was founded in 1893 by an Act of Congress and currently has students from over 140 different countries. The WSP was established in 1947 as an intensive one semester program for undergraduate students visiting Washington, DC from universities across the USA and around the world. Currently, the WSP includes about 11 course offerings (such as American Politics, Foreign Policy, International Business, etc.). The WSP generally enrolls around 500 students each semester in the different course concentrations, with around 25 students per class. Almost of the students are upper level undergraduate students.

Overview of the Washington Semester Program
All courses in the WSP are structured in a similar way: a three-day per week seminar component (worth 8 credits); a two-day per week internship component (4 credits); and an optional semi-independent research project (4 credits). Collectively, these three components constitute a full 16-credit course load for students. The IED course track uses the basic WSP approach described above, but it also includes a three-week overseas component to Brazil or South Africa (other destinations include Costa Rica, Mozambique, and Sri Lanka), depending on the semester. Each group of students will typically only have one professor who oversees the seminar as well as the research project. An additional adjunct faculty member will usually teach the internship classes.

The core idea of the program is to combine multiple forms of educational approaches, all of which are experiential in one form or another, and to directly expose students to the practitioners in their respective fields through the seminar, internship, and research project components as well as to provide students with real world working experiences through their internships. The seminar component itself is structured so that in addition to the usual lecture and discussion sessions, the weekly schedules also involve three to five guest speakers each week, many of which involve off-campus site visits. Each of these components is discussed in further detail below.

Seminar component and guest speakers
Lectures are not abandoned in the WSP program and, indeed, lectures are critical to shaping the overarching themes of the course, ensuring that core material is covered, elaborating on concepts introduced in the readings, and fielding students’ questions...
among other things. The WSP retains the lecture and discussion components of traditional classrooms, but also structures each week in a way that students are also meeting with several guest speakers per week. Thus, a weekly schedule for the seminar component is likely to include:

- one lecture by the professor to introduce the week’s topics in broad terms and to address the themes to be discussed by the guest speakers and organizations to be visited;
- three to five guest speakers per week; and
- one class session for debriefing on the speakers and discussion of issues.

A sample weekly schedule is shown in Figure 2. Over the course of a semester (approximately 16 weeks), the students end up meeting with over 50 practitioners in the field – ranging from representatives of multi-lateral organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) leaders, elected officials, staff from government agencies, and beyond.

The speakers either visit the American University campus in Washington, DC, or the class takes the public transportation to wherever the speaker’s office happens to be.

### Sample Weekly Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td><strong>Lecture:</strong> 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. in Dunblane Bldg. #101&lt;br&gt;Introduction to Global Environmental Problems, Actors, and Treaties&lt;br&gt;11:45 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Presidential Lecture Series at the World Bank (reservations required)&lt;br&gt;Featured Speakers include James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, and Michael Moore, Former Director-General of the World Trade Organization&lt;br&gt;<strong>Speakers:</strong>&lt;br&gt;9:00 - 10:30 a.m. in Dunblane Bldg. #101&lt;br&gt;Introduction to Global Environmental Problems, Actors, and Treaties</td>
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<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Internship Day&lt;br&gt;Wednesday Internship Day</td>
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<td>Thursday</td>
<td><strong>Speakers:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Lori Brutten, U.S. State Department, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs&lt;br&gt;U.S. State Department and Sustainable Development Partnerships&lt;br&gt;1:00 – 3:30 p.m. at the World Wildlife Fund – 1250 24th St. NW&lt;br&gt;Tony Mokombo, Senior Program Officer, Africa Region, WWF Western Congo Conservation Initiatives and Challenges&lt;br&gt;<strong>Topic:</strong>&lt;br&gt;U.S. State Department and Sustainable Development Partnerships&lt;br&gt;Western Congo Conservation Initiatives and Challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td><strong>Speaker:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Dr. Robert Watson, Chief Scientist and Director, Former Chairman of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change&lt;br&gt;<strong>Topic:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Climate Change Science, Policy, and Politics&lt;br&gt;<strong>Discussion:</strong>&lt;br&gt;2:30-4:00 p.m. in Dunblane #104&lt;br&gt;Organizational Priorities and Strategies</td>
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to be located. Thus, the format not only emphasizes linking students with specific practitioners and experts but also links students directly with organizations more broadly by giving students physical access to the office of the organization visited. Through such an approach, students gain direct access to some of the world’s most influential policymakers, leading NGOs in the field, multilateral development banks, other inter-governmental organizations, research institutes, think tanks, and similar organizations.

**Overseas practicum component**

In the IED course, all students participate in a three-week overseas practicum as part of the eight-credit seminar component of the program. For the past several years, the fall semester destination has been Brazil and the spring semester destination has been South Africa. During these three weeks, the class travels to different parts of these countries to meet with national and local level NGOs and governmental agencies as well as with community organizations, families and individuals.

The travel itineraries generally include one week in an urban setting and two weeks in a rural setting. While in South Africa, the class spends one week in Cape Town, where the focus is on urban, community-level sustainability challenges. The other two weeks are spent in the rural northern part of the country where the students participate in homestays, visit ecotourism projects, health clinics, micro-enterprise initiatives, national parks, and more. While in Brazil, the class spends one week in Rio de Janeiro, where much of the focus is again on urban social and development challenges in the city’s favelas. The remaining two weeks of the trip are spent in the Amazon region in the state of Amazonas, where the class travels primarily by boat through the jungle, meets with fishing communities, spends a few nights with scientists at a biological research station, and stays for nearly a week with what some have acknowledged as the only truly community-run ecotourism initiative in the heart of Brazil’s Amazon region (just outside the town of Silves). These travel components are conducted in a similar fashion to those offered by others teaching sustainability in the field context (Kuzmic, 2000; Alvarez and Rogers, 2006).

The travel component not only directly engages students with individuals and communities on the ground, but it also helps them to experience the local level issues and eventually to examine and reflect on how the local connects back to the global institutions, actors, and trends that the earlier part of the semester emphasized. Sustainability takes on new dimensions for the students in conceptual terms, intellectual terms, and in physical and emotional terms. The theory and practice begin to inter-connect and the global-local dimensions link together in first-hand, real-world experiences for the students. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the latter sections of this essay.

**Internship and research project components**

The internship component of the WSP involves a two-day per week working internship in any number of Washington, DC’s organizations or agencies working on international environmental or development issues. The students are required to secure their own internships, but are assisted in this process by faculty members. The experience of securing an internship position is part of the learning process itself and helps students better understand the steps they will need to take in job searching in the near future (Lowenthal and Sosland, 2007).
As stipulated by a contract signed by the student and his or her internship supervisor, at least 60 per cent of the work carried out by the intern should be entry level professional work (and not simply clerical or administrative work). In addition to the two days per week of actually working at the internship (approximately 200 h per semester), students are all required to participate in an academic component where they meet several times per semester in a class devoted to reflecting on the internship experience and sharing with each other information about the places they work, what the organizations do, how the office works, and what the organizations do particularly effectively or not.

The research project component is an optional component of the IED program. Students electing to take this course component participate in approximately six class sessions per semester where they are given guidance on how to choose a research topic, narrow down the focus, develop a research question, gather data, develop a methodology, conduct personal interviews with officials, and write a series of short papers which ultimately culminate into a full-length research paper. The experiential aspects of the research project include the usual researching, writing, and presentation activities, but more importantly students are also required to arrange and conduct interviews with at least four policymakers, experts in the field, or other stakeholders involved in the issue under study. Such stakeholders often include local level community leaders in remote rural regions of the Brazilian Amazon or isolated parts of northern South Africa.

All four components of the IED semester program (seminar in DC, overseas trip, internship, and research project) include significant experiential learning elements. In looking back at Figure 1 – the spectrum of experiential learning – it is apparent that the combination of course components and activities within the IED track offers students the full spectrum of experiential learning[2]. As discussed in the following section, this multi-dimensional experiential learning approach and these particular course modules can be an extremely effective way to meet the four key challenges presented at the outset of this essay.

Revisiting the goals: from practical to empowering
While there are a number of major goals that educators seek to achieve in the classroom, the goals addressed in the first part of the paper are particularly difficult to achieve through a purely lecture-centric approach. As a reminder to the reader, these goals include:

- connecting the academic the with practice;
- fostering an effective interdisciplinary curriculum;
- linking students to work experience and job opportunities; and
- engaging and empowering students.

Without giving students direct access to practitioners and stakeholders and without fully engaging students personally in the issues that they are studying, there will always be certain limitations to the educational experience. The sections below take a second look at the four key goals above and how experiential approaches help achieve these goals.
Connecting students with practitioners and stakeholders

A purely lecture-based approach to teaching undergraduates is unable to bring the students directly into real world environments, institutions, and communities, and thus is unable to provide students with as deep of an understanding that is possible through the addition of experiential approaches. Through the use of site visits, guest speakers, and overseas travel, educational programs can create the environment in which students not only read about, hear about, and discuss certain issues, actors, and dynamics, but the students themselves can ground-truth what they have been reading about in the books or hearing about from the experts (Alvarez and Rogers, 2006).

The author’s experiences inside and outside the classroom help to illustrate this point. In the IED course, some of the lectures and readings are focused on the causes of deforestation in Brazil’s Amazon, the different international economic powers at play, the roles of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the roles of NGOs such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund in these dynamics. During the semester, students meet in person with representatives from all of these organizations and from government agencies such as US Agency for International Development and the US Trade Representative. Students read about these organizations and also physically visit the offices, speak to professionals in these organizations, and later have the opportunity to meet with some of the partner NGOs, government agencies, and communities in the Brazilian Amazon itself. Many students even have an internship with one of the organizations that are directly involved in the issues that we are studying. In many situations, the students themselves are in effect among the practitioners that we are studying in the sense that they are working as part of one of the organizations involved in the issues that we study in class.

In international sustainability courses in particular, the impacts of policy or of other international forces are felt at the local level. For this reason, many of those of who teach courses in these fields strive to connect the global with the local and try to connect the policies and practitioners to the local communities (Boyle et al., 1999; Kuzmic, 2000). While this can be done domestically through off campus visits, it is only through international travel that students can be exposed directly to the conditions and people thousands of miles away from the global powers but nonetheless feel the impacts of these larger dynamics.

While case studies can be useful in exposing students to the local stakeholders and global-local connections, the overseas travel components of courses or semesters abroad courses put the students inside the local communities themselves. While doing homestays or even while visiting with different community groups, in Brazil or South Africa, for example, students directly interact with regular people on the ground who might or might not be familiar with the global treaties, actors, and dynamics, but who live the daily struggles of survival under conditions where environmental resources are scarce or threatened. Students can directly ask questions and hear personal stories from people implementing policies, designing projects, or are impacted by the policies or projects of others.

Students not only ask questions of stakeholders, community members, and practitioners, but the students also receive and respond to questions by these other actors. For example, while in a notoriously troubled and violent community in the Cidade de Deus (City of God)[3] in Rio de Janeiro, students (mostly Americans, but with students from Indonesia, The Netherlands, France, and Mexico) were able to find out
firsthand that much of what they had read and seen about the City of God was one-sided and did not reflect the reality of a truly optimistic and self-empowered community. It is apparent from observations of other educators and from students’ reactions, in discussions, in course evaluations, and in follow-up communications with students years after they have gone through the IED semester, that these types of experiences are ones that the students never forget and that bring the course material out of the textbook and into their personal lives.

The students connect their readings and lectures with their personal experiences and interactions with at the IMF with the erudite economist, the impassioned Greenpeace advocate, and the spirited mother of eight whom they met in the favela in Rio de Janeiro. Only through fairly intense experiential approaches (those on the right end of the spectrum in Figure 1) can the academic literature truly come to life for the students, and only through these types of approaches can the bridge between student and practitioner (or other stakeholders) be best realized.

**Fostering interdisciplinary curricula**

Educational institutions value the importance of an interdisciplinary curriculum to different degrees. In the environmental or sustainability studies and international studies fields, interdisciplinary curricula are particularly important and are undoubtedly essential for equipping students with the knowledge and skills that they will need prior to entering the workforce (Foster, 1999; Rosow, 2003).

A lecture-centric approach has limits in terms of how truly interdisciplinary the academic program can be. Instructors themselves can only be experts in so many different areas or fields, and even entire university programs will have very real limitations on the areas of expertise that they can offer. Most educators and university programs struggle with how to integrate the diverse collection of disciplines and departments involved in subjects as complex as international sustainability studies, for example (Foster, 1999). Some educators partner up with their own colleagues to help meet this challenge and to create a uniquely integrated interdisciplinary course (Wilensky, 2003). However, through the use of guest speakers, site visits, internships, and similar approaches, the range of disciplines covered can be vastly expanded, yet coherently integrated, without requiring educators to teach outside of their respective fields of expertise. Educators in such approaches take on a more facilitatory role. As DiConti (2005, p. 177) describes it, in an experiential setting in the classroom:

The educator’s role is changed from that of lecturer to that of a professor/facilitator, whose task it is to help students make sense out of their educational experiences. As a result, the educator no longer has the sole responsibility for enlightening, educating and motivating students through a lecture. That responsibility is then shared with students as they become more actively involved in their learning.

Alvarez and Rogers (2006, p. 182), after years of taking students into the rural areas of Australia, make a similar observation:

After seven years of taking students into the field the authors now see themselves as facilitating a process where learners (both teachers and students) are exposed to different understandings of sustainability and are able to recognise the messy and complex reality of sustainability on the ground.
Through the use of guest speakers, off-campus visits, and overseas travel, instructors are forced to enter into areas of somewhat unfamiliar turf and thus become involved in discussions with the class about issues that the instructor sometimes knows rather little about. Being in such a situation can certainly be somewhat unsettling, but ultimately the rewards of bringing to light other dimensions and other disciplines pertinent to the problem or issue at hand far outweigh the risks (Wals and Jickling, 2002). As one scholar/educator comments on the rewards of such approaches:

In any event, it is only by relinquishing some academically safe turf – our cultivated zones of expertise – that we discover the promise of cross-disciplinary teaching and learning” (Hempel, 2002, p. 51).

While instructors should not attempt to teach subject areas beyond their expertise, instructors can still use guest speakers and site visits to help convey the knowledge of other subject areas and work constructively with students in follow-up sessions to better understand the material discussed by the guest speakers. Over time, instructors spend enough time with experts from other disciplines that the instructors themselves gain a much deeper interdisciplinary understanding of the issues under study and as a result build their own areas of expertise and teaching effectiveness. This is one of the many positive by-products of using the more active end of the experiential learning spectrum as part of the curriculum.

Linking students to work experience and job opportunities
While educators in the social sciences or – in the case of this author – in the field of international sustainability studies, tend to pursue their fields at least in part out of a personal commitment to helping to resolve real world problems facing society, most of us also have to make a living and help provide for our families. Thus, most of us need to find jobs and this is certainly true of students in our classes as well. In the field of sustainability studies, scholars see this same clearly:

For many, college has become less a wellspring of knowledge, power, or wisdom than a source of vocational insurance. Go to class, get decent grades, do not take chances and maybe, just maybe, there will be a job waiting at the end of the conveyor belt; this, arguably, is how higher education is increasingly perceived by those who consume it (Maniates, 2002, p. 11).

While not all professors need to be preoccupied with concerns about helping their students get jobs, all institutions and administrators should at least have these concerns in mind. A bachelor’s degree is certainly essential for getting students into most entry level jobs in their respective fields, but increasingly employers are looking for someone with at least some of the practical office skills, familiarity of office environments, and some interpersonal experiences that can be gained only through practical work experience. In other words, employers need someone who has more to offer than an understanding of the theoretical aspects in the field or the factual or technical aspects in the field.

In the WSP, students are assisted in their efforts to find an appropriate and rewarding internship. More importantly, the internship is accompanied by an academic component in which students are required to reflect on their internship experiences, write about challenges they see within the organization itself, the office environment, and discuss with their classmates and their professor how they or their organization were able to deal with some of the challenges they came across. As most
Experiential learning theorists argue, these reflection sessions are critical elements to the learning process (Kolb and Kolb, 2003; Fenwick, 2000).

Beyond providing students with work experience, getting their feet in the door to certain organizations, and increasing their knowledge of how organizations work and what types of environments they are most comfortable in, the academic component of the course also allows students to learn about a wide variety of other professional opportunities, organizations, and entire fields of work by hearing from their classmates about what it was like for them to work in different organizations. The guest speakers, site visits, and research project interviews of the WSP are also particularly instrumental for some students as they go about building networks of contacts, discovering new possibilities for future work, and learning more about the types of organizations that they might or might not want to work in after graduation.

Engaging and empowering students
In some respects, the most profound impact that these types of learning experiences have is that of engaging and empowering students. Creating a personal connection between students and the issues that they study can be one of the most powerful elements in improving a student’s level of engagement and performance in the classroom. However, professors in many disciplines face the dilemma of engaging students early on but eventually losing this level of engagement as students go through the semester facing so many seemingly overwhelming problems, particularly in the field of international environmental studies. Too often, students often come away with increased feelings of cynicism and disempowerment as their awareness about the problems and the difficulties in overcoming these problems grow.

It has become increasingly common for educators to realize that knowledge, though traditionally viewed as a means for empowerment, can work in a way that disempowers students (Wals and de Jong, 1997; Hempel, 2002; Maniates, 2002). As students learn more about the abundance of problems facing societies, the complexity of these problems, and difficulty in finding viable solutions, many students simply become discouraged, feel helpless and inconsequential, and eventually some even give up on continuing their pursuit of studying such issues (Hempel, 2002). Wals and de Jong (1997, p. 127) argue that “education should be geared towards substituting feelings of apathy and ‘powerlessness’ with the feelings that one . . . indeed can make a difference”.

This sense of powerlessness is an important issue that can penetrate students’ sentiments in a wide range of fields. In international sustainability studies, instructors should not downplay the seriousness and pervasiveness of problems, but they can open up space for the study of working solutions, innovative approaches, and small-level initiatives that can be found around the globe. In a lecture-based classroom, professors can engage, inspire, agitate, and empower students to varying degrees, but when students are taken out of the classroom and put face to face with individuals whose lives are devoted to creating new approaches to solving problems, then students can personally see the changes that individuals, small organizations, and communities can make. By meeting with such individuals and hearing their struggles and challenges, yet to see all that they have accomplished, students have a living example that indeed not all is doom and gloom and that individuals can make a difference – a difference that might be at the local level or national or international levels.
A former student from the IED program described how her perceptions and outlook had changed over the course of the semester in her final reflection essay:

This semester has been a continuous cycle of idealism, knowledge acquisition, disillusionment, confusion, recognition, acceptance, getting a better understanding of things, and regaining a better informed, more directed idealism. I have seen myself mature through it all. I am really excited to go back to my home school to tear it up for one more year, and show them everything I’ve gained while I’ve been away (Meade, 2005).

Another student wrote something similar at the end of his semester:

This semester has been invaluable in helping me to gain a better sense of environment and development issues not only from the first world policy arena, but from a first person perspective on the ground in a developing country. Every course I have taken in the past relied on the ability of the professor alone to lecture and share his or her experiences with the subject at hand. The WSP immersed me in an entirely new system. Along with the class professor, professionals from the policy community contributed their knowledge to our education and helped to create connections between what was learned in class and how policy-makers and NGOs work in the field (Ungar, 2005).

Assuming one was to accept that the four goals addressed in this essay are highly important, experiential approaches such as those described in this essay are powerful tools that can and should be used to complement the traditional lecture-centric approaches. Each of the different elements, or forms of experiential learning, described above offer unique opportunities for students in their efforts to connect to the course material and to the people and organizations involved in the material that they are studying. Furthermore, these forms of experiential learning have proven to be effective means for not only connecting students with job opportunities but also helping students bring about personal changes in their lives along with a new sense of empowerment.

Challenges and concluding remarks

With all of the benefits of experiential learning, why are higher education institutions not putting these types of approaches into practice more often and why are individual professors not taking the lead in incorporating these elements into their courses? There are a number of very clear and obvious reasons why experiential learning has not taken off as a common approach in undergraduate education, but there are some steps that we as educators and leaders in educational institutions can take to help foster a more welcoming environment for such approaches.

Some of the more obvious barriers to implementing some of these forms of experiential education include the built-in reward and penalty systems for schools and faculty. For professors, time is an extremely precious commodity and one that is safely guarded and essential for publishing. Taking time out to schedule guest speakers, to arrange off-site visits, or even to organize three weeks of overseas travel requires a great sacrifice of time. The amount of the administrative work, logistics, legal and bureaucratic requirements, and actual time spent on overseas travel in particular (24 h per day with the class) can consume an endless amount of time. Trying to incorporate these experiential approaches will thus detract from the amount of time an educator has for his or her own research and scholarship. As few would deny, scholarship and publishing are the prime determinants of tenure, career advancement,
prestige, and recognition as an expert in the field, and this is a very real and oftentimes frustrating dilemma faced by many experiential learning educators. Kezar and Rhoads (2001) discuss these dilemmas in detail, noting that most universities reward publishing, not teaching, and studies of salaries also reflect this reward system.

Beyond these real limitations and obstacles to implementing experiential learning, universities also struggle with assessing the impacts of experiential learning in terms of better grades, increased analytical abilities, improved graduate school test scores, and job marketability of students (Lowenthal and Sosland, 2007; Gosen and Washbush, 2004; Wingfield and Black, 2005). While the author’s impressions and personal observations — as well as what some of the preliminary research in this area have indicated — would lead one to believe that all of these outcomes are improved through experiential learning, there has been a dearth of research to effectively show statistical improvements in these areas directly resulting from experiential learning.

Unfortunately, most of those involved in implementing experiential learning simply do not have the time to devote to studying the impacts of experiential learning. As explained by Kezar and Rhoads (2001, p. 150), “the tripartite divisions of teaching, research, and service make it difficult for instructors to adequately communicate their efforts in the area of service learning”. The author of this article personally struggled greatly in finding the time to write this paper to share his experiences on experiential learning. Much of this paper was in fact written while on the rivers of the Amazon region in Brazil, in between hikes in the forests, meetings with community members, working out trip budgets and payments, helping students with translating menus at restaurants, and beginning to plan the upcoming trip to South Africa and Mozambique in the coming semester. The “dynamic tensions” — as Kezar and Rhoads call it — are real.

Given such time constraints on time and such heavy increases in workload that experiential learning can require of faculty members, the academic community cannot depend on individual professors to carry the entire burden of carrying out experiential learning without lending additional support from university administrative or support offices. Kezar and Rhoads, among others, argue that university programs should provide alternative sources of incentives for instructors pursuing experiential learning approaches since pursuing such approaches directly impact the amount of time that instructors have to put toward research or service. The university administration, assuming it supports the notion that experiential learning can provide the benefits described in this paper, need to find creative ways to reward efforts to design and implement experiential learning and to mitigate the penalties that faculty members incur when conducting experiential learning courses. This proposal, however, might be difficult to find acceptance among higher education administrators especially in light of the increasingly competitive markets that higher education institutions face (Wille, 1997; Paul, 2005). While the educational missions of each institution are fundamental to the types of educational programming, often times in these increasingly competitive environments, the financial mandates and performance indicators take precedent over the educational missions. Experiential learning, with all of its promises, faces a rather uncertain and tenuous future in higher education institutions.
Notes

1. These goals were partly shaped by the 2004 Berlin Conference on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change, December 3-4, Berlin, Germany – where the first draft of this paper was presented – and partly by the works advanced by Maniates and his colleagues in the book Encountering Global Environmental Politics (2002) and by Wals and Jickling (2002).

2. Admittedly, the structure of the WSP is unique in its design as well as in its location in Washington, DC, and this exact model probably would not work in most undergraduate programs. However, the different components of experiential learning used in the WSP can be incorporated in a variety of different ways within a variety of different institutional settings.

3. Cidade de Deus is the name of a favela (a poor neighborhood or shantytown) in Rio de Janeiro and was popularized by the movie, City of God (2003).

References


Further reading


About the author
Joseph J. Domask is an Assistant Professor at American University in the School of International Service and in the WSP. He directs and teaches the IED Seminar. As part of this course, he developed three-week field-based academic programs in South Africa, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Mozambique and has led student groups to these countries since the Fall 2000. Before coming to American University, Dr. Domask was a Research Program Officer in the Global Forest Program at the World Wildlife Fund in Washington, DC. In this post, he was responsible for conducting and coordinating research activities for the World Bank/WWF Forest Alliance and served on the Alliance’s core management team. Prior to coming to DC, Domask was as a graduate assistant and fellow at the North-South Center, a research and policy institute in Miami devoted to Western Hemisphere issues. While in Miami, Joseph earned his PhD (1997) and MA (1995) at the University of Miami in international affairs and Latin American studies, with emphases on development, environment, and US foreign policy. Joseph J. Domask can be contacted at: jdomask@american.edu

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