

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Experiential learning challenges are magnified when service learning is applied to study abroad courses or an international audience. In these settings, students have to deal with cultural differences, academic nuances and distance learning. Despite these challenges, Michigan State University is one of the top US universities when it comes to commitment and participation in international programs. This paper is a reflection on international cooperation programs that are focused on experiential learning and service based activities, designed to enhance students' theoretical understanding of planning. This paper discusses study abroad as a strategy for fostering partnerships, linking scholarship with practice, linking teaching, research, and outreach through active learning.

Keywords: community service learning, partnership, practicum, experiential learning.



1. Introduction

Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
(Kolb, 1984)

Throughout history, most university-level scholarship was reserved for a few, aristocratic individuals and set in educational hubs, such as Athens. Would-be scholars would travel to Athens to hear the various arguments from various schools of thought. Eventually, the scholars would reach the level of orator and would begin teaching themselves, before returning to their native land to share what they had learned.

In the Renaissance Period, universities in the European mainland continued the Greek traditions of higher education, while adding new traditions of their own at schools like Le Sorbonne, Oxford, and Cambridge, to name a few. Colonization brought the university to North America with Harvard and William and Mary being early institutions. Universities proliferated in the early US, however, scholarship remained a dream of the wealthy, land-owning class, not usually available to the common person, until the late 19th century. According to Ernest Boyer (1990), scholarship in American higher education may be traced through three distinct yet overlapping phases.

The first phase was in the 17th century, when colleges were focused on individual character development and teaching civic and religious leadership skills. In this phase faculty were often valued more for their religious commitment rather than scholarly abilities.

In the mid-19th century, an important paradigm shift in US university-level education was taking place. The focus of many new universities became less about religious studies and character development, and focused more on the sciences. Specifically, the 1862 Land Grant College Act provided land and funding to states to develop their own 'state university'. The Land Grant College Act did two important things. First, it meant that state universities' missions would be teaching skills for practical applications of the sciences. Secondly, it meant that a university-level education was open to individuals from all socioeconomic levels, as well as even the most rural of communities. No longer did an individual have to travel far from their home to one of the US educational centers of the time (e.g., Boston, NYC, Philadelphia) to receive a university education. This resulted in universities that had previously been devoted to moral and intellectual development of the aristocratic elite, being able to focus on service in their mission. By the late 1800s, the focus of higher education in the US was practical utility. This shift in focus was indicative of universities taking on the practical needs of a growing nation.

A third phase was a return to basic research. Once established, new universities quickly began to focus on performing research, publication in scholarly journals, and graduate education. Professor's promotion and tenure now depended on conducting research and publishing results, while emphasis on teaching undergraduates and service decreased. This important shift in university-level education spread to all institutions in the US and became their research mission. The shift from teaching professor to research professor was further advanced by the development of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950. The creation of NSF gave research grants to professors and

allowed universities to require that their professors secure their own funding, through such grants. This is still the dominant perspective today.

Many feel that the intense focus on gaining grants, conducting research, and securing publications has disconnected the academy from real world problems, ironically at a time when societal concerns are more complex than ever before. Harland (1998) discusses problem-based learning as an approach to group learning where the practitioner acts as a tutor who guides the groups to establish ends (p. 219). In problem-based learning, the set of problems need to be worked out within a group of students to meet desired ends. Donald Schon's seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) highlights the nature of reflective practice and its constraints. According to Schon, the divergence of research and practice exacerbates the practitioner's dilemma and tempts the practitioner to force practice situations into a mold derived from research (p. 308).

Technical Rationality, the dominant model of professional knowledge, is the 'Positivist Epistemology of Practice' (Schon, 1983) aimed at applying the achievements of science and technology to the well-being of mankind. From the perspective of Technical Rationality, professional practice is a process of applied problem solving. Schon (1983) notes that problems of choice or decision are solved through the selection from available means best suited to establish ends (pp. 39-40). But with this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore *problem setting* – the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means that may be chosen. In the real world problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as a given – they must be constructed. Often public policy and community planning problems are 'messy' with confused and conflicting ends that cannot be resolved by the use of any particular technique derived from applied research. Practitioners are in a dilemma of 'rigor or relevance'.

Wiewel and Lieber (1998) illustrate the dichotomy of scholarship and practice through their assessment of theories about the community planning process. They state that planning theorists fall within two camps. The first group advocates planning as a rational, structured process and that knowledge of specific urban regimes lead to action (technical rationality) (Feldman, 1995). The second group sees community planning as a pragmatic, incrementalist or communicative model where situations are confusing and it is impossible to start out with a fixed goal and plan the intermediate strategies to reach the goal (Innes, 1995).

In the education of community planners, however, the rational planning model still dominates despite the growing recognition that professional practice rarely reflects that model (Baum, 1996). Alternative theories such as 'disjointed incrementalism' (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1970) seem more appropriate to professional practice in urban and regional planning. Theories such as disjointed incrementalism lead to the notion the planning process is oriented toward building relationships, taking advantage of strategic opportunities and should remain fluid (Wiewel and Lieber, 1998).

One can then assume that service based learning is considered a worthwhile pedagogical strategy that involves students working in communities with the goal

of integrating theoretical or textbook learning. It exposes students to the complexities and uncertainties in practice situations that cannot be duplicated in traditional lecture courses and it enhances academic learning by involving students in community service activities (Roakes and Norris-Tirrell, 2000).

The ability to work with community members in developing a plan that suits the needs of a community requires the 'meshing' of academic knowledge and social skills. Experiential learning teaches students at a higher integrative and creative level and can be a humbling experience (Guth, 1995). Nothing is as illustrative of this point as when the community members reject the findings of a team of untested students. Moreover, given the diversity of student skills and knowledge base, these courses can be difficult to structure. Students can get confused when reality does not mirror theoretical constructs and have a difficult time dealing with real people with diverse backgrounds with different, often conflicting, needs. For example, most urban faculty promotes the idea of residential clusters as a means of saving land. As a result of the theoretical focus on residential clusters, most students tend to embrace the idea as having great merit. However, the selling of the idea of cluster to most American communities is no easy task and is frequently turned down at the town council meetings for reasons, such as the citizens did not like residential clusters. For the instructor, it is challenging to accept a different role, one of coach or guide with less control or power, and to teach the power of perception or attitude formation in a classroom setting. The challenges and frustrations are experienced by both faculty and students alike.

2. Urban and regional planning profession

The urban and regional planning profession demands the training of practical planners who have some experience with community development, citizen participation modules, and conflict resolution skills. Community outreach in curricula provides needed exposure to practical applications of textbook lessons and exposure to group dynamics, community clients, and complex problems. The recognized need for practical training in any planning curriculum is most often addressed through community outreach-based courses such as studios, practicums, study abroad programs, and in lectures interwoven into seminar courses. The basic structure of all of these classes typically supports teams of students working with a particular community on a specific activity. These outreach courses, however, pose some of the greatest teaching and learning challenges in the entire curriculum (Wiewel and Lieber, 1998; Dalton, 1986; Vakil, Marans and Feldt, 1990). Even though the need for experiential learning is accepted and understood, these practice-based courses often lack the same distinction in academia as theory-based courses and need constant justification.

3. International cooperative framework

One way to reconnect scholars and professors to the real world is through study abroad. Study abroad provides opportunities for active and experiential learning. This paper discusses study abroad as a strategy for fostering partnerships, linking scholarship with practice, linking teaching, research, and outreach through active

learning. In addition to these important phases in university education, inexpensive air travel has had an enormous impact on global higher education. Prior to the 1940s, study abroad still largely had to be done by ship, often requiring weeks of travel. International air travel has enhanced education by allowing individuals to immerse themselves in different cultures and ways of thinking simultaneously. It would not be all that uncommon for an individual to speak at a conference in Europe one day and in the US the next day. Also, students who would normally not have had the socioeconomic background to afford to study abroad now can do so with relative ease.

4. Different forms of international exchange

Conferences, workshops and seminars

Attending an international conference or workshop is a great way to do an international exchange. While conference stays are often short, they still offer a chance for interaction with a diverse group of professionals, and for a short-term immersion in a different culture. Conferences can lead to a sharing of ideas. Thoughts from other practicing professionals on a particular topic can be a huge resource of new ideas to put into practice when the individual returns home. In some cases there will be great differences among the practices of professionals due to differing governmental systems, social norms and educational structures, however, smaller aspects may be able to be utilized in practice.

Research collection and writing

In addition to conferences and workshops, professionals conducting international research are often required to travel to one or more countries to gather data. These trips should also include making scholarly contacts in other countries. Depending on the research area, it might be necessary to travel and form strong international contacts within a discipline.

Professional exchanges and short tours

Professional exchanges are beneficial to individuals who are visiting a foreign country, as well as for the host university. Professional exchanges and short tours are usually semester long endeavors, or for multiple weeks. A well-planned short tour to a foreign country might involve working alongside a foreign professional, site visits, or meetings with representatives from government, business, or other industries. These international exchanges provide the individual with more immersion into the country and culture than a conference would. One might begin to get a sense of what living in that country would be like. Short tours allow for seeing a different view of a country than an attendee of a workshop or conference would. Short tours can be a more in-depth study of the country and its practices, due to their nature being more focused and specific. They can also be tailored to the specific needs of the visiting professional or small group. Often, small groups are ideal for visiting seminars and short tours. Participants in small group short tours get to know one another, can work in teams,

and are more mobile than a large group (Clark and Wareham, 1998). Extended trips are usually more successful when a common language is shared, but this is an obstacle that can be overcome by using an interpreter who is fluent in both languages.

Faculty exchanges: three types

Short courses can be beneficial to students and professionals who might want the perspective of studying in a foreign country, but may have time or financial constraints that do not allow a semester or year-long study abroad experience. Short courses can also be more intensive than semester long course, offering individuals an in-depth learning experience in select topics. Often, short courses offer individuals opportunities for field studies, case studies and other examples of interest.

Fellowships are unique in that they are often funded by governments, foundations, and other private organizations, as well as by universities. The range of organizations that offer fellowships relates to the vast range of topics that can be studied both nationally and internationally. The Fulbright program is probably the most recognized distributor of fellowships. Senator J. William Fulbright, the program's founder, said, 'international education exchange is the most significant current project designed to continue the process of humanizing mankind to the point, we would hope, that nations can learn to live in peace.' The U.S. Fulbright Scholar Program is administered by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Since the program's inception in 1946, more than 250,000 professionals have studied, taught or conducted research abroad. Each year, more than 800 grants are awarded to individuals who will study or conduct research in 140 countries.

Invited presentations are another way for professionals to experience a country, while engaging in educational discourse with a host university. Visiting professionals may give lectures, presentations, or may meet casually with small groups to discuss their area of expertise. Through this short-term discourse, the host university and the visiting scholar may share a number of new ideas with each other. Overall, the experience can be beneficial for both parties.

Student Exchanges

Students may see international degrees as a way to get ahead in today's workforce. Today's employers often look for international experience when seeking applicants and employees. A foreign language is also a huge asset to anyone seeking a job. Universities also often look favorably on foreign students studying, as foreign tuition is often assessed at a higher rate than in-state or in-county tuition. Committing to a two- or four-year curriculum at a foreign university can sometimes be a difficult undertaking for students. As such, certificate programs are a good way to gain some international experience and education without such a long time commitment. Certificate programs are offered by many universities in many areas, ranging from a film studies program at Cambridge University in the UK, to a certificate in health science at the University of

Sydney in Australia. A wide range of options exist for those students seeking certificates in their field of study.

While student exchanges are most common in secondary schools, they are becoming increasingly common at colleges and universities as well. Exchanges are a great way to truly get a glimpse of the world in which others live. Students typically live with a host family, allowing for total immersion in the culture. Exchanges can last for an academic semester, a year, or for just a summer. They can also work both ways, allowing the students to literally swap families, or a student can choose to live with a host family without hosting their own student.

As studying abroad is becoming increasingly affordable, and more colleges and universities are building international experiences into their curriculums, more students are choosing to complete semesters, school breaks, or summers abroad, learning with other students from their home university. Home university faculty generally teach study abroad courses with guest lectures from faculty at universities in the host country. It is thought that students who choose to study abroad will gain enhanced academic, personal, professional and cultural skills. Students planning to study abroad are urged to prepare for their trip by learning as much as they can about their host country before they leave, so they are as prepared as they can be when they arrive in a different country with different cultures and customs.

5. Experiential learning in an international cooperative framework

Experiential learning challenges are magnified when service learning is applied to study abroad courses or an international audience. In these settings, students have to deal with cultural differences, academic nuances and distance learning. In these situations participants benefit from 'multi-actor orientation'. Multi-actor orientation is 'a participatory approach to learning, which emphasizes a wide range of backgrounds in the learning community' (Livingstone and Lynch, 2000). Despite these challenges, Michigan State University is one of the top US universities when it comes to commitment and participation in international programs. This article focuses on experiential learning and service-based activities, designed to enhance students' theoretical understanding of community planning and development.

Choosing partners and building a successful program

Implementing and maintaining an international program means choosing interested partners and very motivated colleagues carefully. Due to the combination of structured long-term planning and the need for short-term flexibility, the communication between the involved people must be very efficient. Faith and trust in each other's capabilities are also important requirements. But the more 'unofficial' relation is also a relevant aspect. Going along with each other easily, short paths of communication and fast clarification, all this only works if a good relation between the partners exists.

Beside the demand of social skills, different professional backgrounds are necessary. Spatial planning and urban development are interdisciplinary tasks and therefore

demand varied experiences in different fields as urban design, landscape planning and urban economic development. On the basis of these different professions, interesting topics for research and teaching could be developed including an on-going exchange of ideas.

6. Recommendations based on challenges and opportunities

Based on experiences gained from teaching the course for several years, and from the experience of others teaching similar courses, we would like to share some recommendations for improving and strengthening the practicum course experience.

Understand and articulate the importance of the experiential learning and the study abroad program clearly. Although a majority of community planning and development educators strive to create good *practicing* planners, few of us articulate the purpose of our courses in our syllabi. Urban and regional planning affects all aspects of a society – economic, social, political, and cultural – yet in many educational institutions, the focus is on the importance of theoretical work over practical experience. Students realize that, too often, greater emphasis is given to theory and not practice. In fact, some professional programs de-emphasize the importance of practice by offering additional academic courses in lieu of fieldwork. In contrast, forty years ago the core of community planning was practice. The curriculum allowed the student to gain perspective from the eyes of various direct, active players in urban and regional development (Vakil, Marans and Feldt, 1990) and workshop (as it was frequently called) was the fundamental part of planning curricula. Practice oriented courses enhanced planning theory, communication, and mediation skills which were better taught in an applied sense than by conventional lecture and seminar formats (Dalton, 1986).

Study Abroad programs can be an exercise in self-confidence, team building, conflict resolution, understanding of multicultural concepts in planning and development and, above all, a forum for the practical application of planning theory. Study abroad programs can give students hands-on experience in the field of planning and development. Furthermore, interaction with those community organizations, serving as the client, facilitates the integration of public service into the classroom (Alonso, 1986). Ideally, this form of cooperative learning serves as a learning tool by building communication skills and connecting theory with practice. The importance of these learned skills for an effective practitioner are outlined in the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) requirement for accredited professional programs, for example.

Furthermore, students entering a university program educating community planning and development professionals come from a wide variety of disciplines such as geography, public administration, anthropology, economics, architecture, civil engineering, natural sciences, and sociology. Students may not necessarily have any training or practice in dealing with urban planning problems. Moreover, those that are from the arts, social sciences and even natural sciences are typically more familiar with ‘description’ than ‘prescription’. They have had few opportunities to collect information, analyze the data, and make recommendations for a specific action.

Students need to know that one never has all the information required, that local values are important, and that 'all politics are local'. Experiential learning is intended to help students build on their past experiences, apply new knowledge, and gain confidence to make meaningful decisions.

Structure the course and its relationship to the entire curriculum such that it reflects its unique characteristics. Courses should 'set clear learning objectives and carefully plan and select the experiences they intend students to have' (Loneragan and Andresen, 1988). Some university programs do longer study abroad programs that last an entire semester. Some professional programs require all students to engage in some international experience and have endowments to support the students that take part in these experiences. The international program is clearly defined and articulated in the curriculum, such that every student understands that they will be expected to participate. The urban and regional planning program at MSU does not mandate that every student participate in an international experience, however, opportunities to participate in one or two study abroad opportunities are always available and strongly encouraged and financially supported. This makes a huge difference in the participation rate for the programs.

Foster good client relationships to ensure good community projects and effective working partnerships. In addition to the organizational partnerships important for international exchanges, it is also critical to find projects that lend themselves to short-term brainstorming of ideas and presentation of themes and design alternatives. In this way, the students are engaging directly with people in the community who are in need of some specific project for their city. Engaging directly with community members allows the projects to be more practical and useful to the actors involved. The client receives a tangible product produced by the students with guidance, and the students gain working knowledge of the subject, working with international teammates, presenting ideas and concepts using graphic arts, and working directly in their community.

Encourage healthy group dynamics and foster transferable skills. Advantages of small-group learning include teamwork, analysis and synthesis, interpretation and problem solving, and the development of transferrable skills (Brown, 1999). One of the cornerstones of experiential learning is the ideal of cooperative, peer learning in a small-group setting. The potential for teamwork, deep learning through closer interaction between students and teachers (Gibbs, 1992; Higgitt, 1997), and greater student responsibility and accountability for constructing knowledge (Yabes, 1996; Black, 1994) are seen as critical elements of active learning.

Furthermore, opportunities to combine discipline specific subject skills with practical, transferable skills are seen as an integral part of experiential learning. Subject skills are not necessarily the same ones used in a variety of career-oriented situations such as, skills in teamwork, communication, self-management, self-motivation, leadership, social interaction and personal development. 'These skills are just not taught by conventional note-taking and reading. Instead, they must be developed through experiential learning: guidance and demonstration reinforced by practice' (Haigh and Kilmartin, 1999, p. 205).

Given the potential and opportunities presented by small-group learning, it is imperative that groups be structured with care. Learning will only occur when the group functions in a cohesive and efficient manner. When the positive interdependence needed to link group members is absent, the team will falter and the learning experience, as well as the project, will be compromised.

Managing group dynamics poses many challenges ranging from the size and composition of the group to expectations and grading. Devoting time to teaching communications skills and the importance of teamwork is critical. Students often have difficulty working in groups, managing and scheduling time, and taking responsibility or being accountable to peers. Effective groups are based on five basic principles. These are interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, teamwork and social skills, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson and Smith, 1991).

Encourage greater faculty involvement to seamlessly link theoretical and practical instruction. Often, professors do not see involvement in practice-based courses as providing tangible reward in terms of merit salary and promotions. More weight is given to research publications than outreach activities in merit considerations. As such, in several programs, fieldwork is delegated to a practicing planner who may not hold a university appointment.

The rationale for hiring professional planners for these courses is typically quite sound. The professionals know how to plan in a realistic way. Unfortunately, however, there are several potential secondary impacts. First, a course taught by a *guest* not a *professor* could alter the perceptions and expectations of the importance of the course in the minds of the students. Secondly, it unnecessarily separates theoretical knowledge (that taught by professors) from the practical training (taught by practitioners). This is particularly worrisome for those of us who believe the link between theory and practice is essential. One way to overcome this is to team-teach the course. Complementary skills of faculty and practitioners could create a good dynamic in class.

Nonetheless, it is essential that regular faculty become involved in the practicum experience. By doing so, they are able to stay in touch with professional practice, are able to test their ideas and are able to demonstrate the importance of the course in the curriculum. They need not be the instructors of record or the 'studio masters'. They can offer learning modules, provide pinpointed practical lectures or even serve as guest critics. Students often have a difficult time linking theory and coursework to practical problems encountered in the field. They are not experienced researchers and need guidance in fieldwork objectives, social interaction, and dealing with multiple publics (Fuller, Rawlinson and Bevan, 2000). Lectures by different faculty members that focus on various aspects students might encounter in the field, such as ethical dilemmas and dealing with disadvantaged groups, along with subject specific content and study of analytical techniques can be advantageous (May, 1999). In all cases, it is important to insure that there are seamless connections between non-studio and studio instructors and courses.

7. Conclusions

It is evident that service-based learning, that involves students working in communities with the goal of integrating theoretical or textbook learning, is a worthwhile pedagogical strategy. Bridges (1993) says 'students should not merely be able to make choices intellectually but be able additionally to pursue them practically by acting in and upon a competitive social world' (p. 43). Service-based learning exposes students to the complexities and uncertainties in practice situations that cannot be duplicated in traditional lecture courses and it enhances academic learning by involving students in community service activities (Kent, Gilbertson and Hunt, 1997).

The ability to work with community members in developing a plan that suits the needs of a community requires the meshing of academic knowledge with social skills during practicum. Practicum fosters a higher level of integration and creativity. However, given the diversity of student skills and knowledge base, these courses can be difficult to structure. Students can get confused when reality does not mirror theoretical constructs and have a difficult time dealing with real people with diverse backgrounds with different, often conflicting, needs.

Experiential learning is an essential part of community planning and development education and should remain in the curriculum of degree-granting programs. Practicum courses and practice oriented study abroad programs can be valuable teaching vehicles that help students increase their knowledge and confidence through the provision of a needed service to communities. Experience shows that these courses provide a mechanism for substantive learning and the integration of techniques with theory. The result is graduates who are better planners. Students learn valuable lessons through cooperative learning and assist community organizations in the process. Experience gained and skills learned in practice-oriented work provide students with valuable tools when dealing with actual community problems. If we understand the present and historic perceptions of practice-based courses in our curriculum and consciously work to educate our peers and students on the importance of these courses, its structure and its implications, we could promote their status and need in professional programs. Furthermore, if we understand theories of cooperative learning, service-based learning and group dynamics, we can better teach the courses and insure that they are valuable teaching and learning experiences and that we are helping our students become reflective practitioners as they move forward with their careers.

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