

2010

The Experience of Liberal Education

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Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "The Experience of Liberal Education," *Liberal Education*, 96:3 (2010), 6-11.

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The Experience of Liberal Education

EDWARD L. AYERS

SOME WORDS have kept coming up in the conversations we've had over the last several days at this meeting.¹ We have talked of outcomes, competencies, and partnerships, developed through undergraduate research, service learning, and global citizenship, bringing about community-based, student-centered, and high-impact learning, fostering the values of engagement, responsibility, leadership, and accountability. It's certainly clear what we've been up to here: building the structures for constructive and forward-looking higher education.

There is one word I did not mention in that list, though we have perhaps used it more than any other and in more ways. That word appears in the descriptions of twenty-nine of our sessions. It appears in eight of the ten "high-impact educational practices" (Kuh 2008). And it is a fundamental building block for the National Survey of Student Engagement, which has proved so valuable in thinking about our work in broader ways.

What is that word? "Experience." That is another healthy-sounding word, but what do we mean when we invoke experience in so many descriptions of what we're doing and what we want to do? A dictionary tells us that experience means "practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity." Our students, and many of their parents, like the sound of that: direct participation, involvement, practicality. Equally appealing is another variant of the definition: "something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through."² "Personally"—that's very appealing, since our students value the personal so highly.

Some favorite American phrases, around for generations, embody just this sort of pragmatic, hands-on sense: Learn by doing. Don't just read about it, experience it. Gain valuable experience (and, for some reason, "valuable" is the adjective that always seems to go with "experience," and "gain" is the verb). Don't take someone else's word for it: experience it yourself, personally. Lately, we say, get out of the classroom and into the field, city, office, jungle, hospital, or wherever else real experience lives.

Despite education's active promotion of the language of practical experience, we have to admit that these are probably not the first associations most people have with higher education. In general understanding, school is what you do *before* you experience the so-called real world, or even what you do *instead of* gaining valuable hands-on experience. Classrooms seem built precisely to suppress experience, to deprive students of as many stimuli as possible. The chairs are hard, the walls are bare, the windows are scarce. The only two senses allowed are hearing and looking.

So how do educators persuade people that we love experience, that we foster it, that it's an integral part of any vital liberal learning? We might begin by getting

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clearer in our own minds just what we mean by the word. After all, we use “experience” in a rather promiscuous way. Our colleagues in admissions and advancement (and the president’s office) talk with energy and conviction of the unique experience you can have at our university—and only at our university. Our athletics programs offer a thrilling game-day experience, and our libraries offer a good research experience. Our multicultural offices demonstrate that people best understand diversity by experiencing it. Chaplaincies sustain a rich spiritual experience, while our residence halls provide an experience of community or personal freedom or comfort or group learning.

We have spent large amounts of money to enrich that experience. If we look across the expanse of higher education, at all kinds of schools, facilities and organizations that foster a fuller student experience account for much of our investment over recent decades. Student centers, dining centers, fitness centers, recreation centers, career development centers, multicultural centers, and centers for civic engagement have become, well, the centers of student life. I have worked to raise money for such spaces myself—spaces for a better student

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experience—and I believe in the work these centers do.

Our students certainly think the investments are worthwhile. They come to college, they tell us, for a rich experience. Rebekah Nathan, the pseudonym of the anthropologist who lived among freshmen in a dorm, under cover at “Any U,” has written an em-

pathetic, if not always encouraging, account of what the world of college looks like from a first-year student’s point of view. She asked students what percentage of their college learning comes from “classes, or from the readings, films, group work, and papers related to classes,” and they told her that 65 percent of learning occurs outside of classes and class-related activities. So, Nathan asked them, “if college is not primarily about either intellectual ideas and issues or classes, then what is college for?” By now you know the answer: “By far the most compelling reason given for staying in college was ‘the college experience’—the joys and benefits of living within the college culture rather than in the real world” (Nathan 2005, 101–2).

College students, Nathan tells us, value what they call “fun” over everything else. And “fun” for them is unregulated experience, immoderate experience, often transgressive



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experience. Despite every warning, a considerable number feel they have to experience, for themselves, the risks of unprotected sex and binge drinking and new drugs. They dare each other to try something new, to take it to the limit—and then tell and show everyone about it with pictures and words and abbreviations on Facebook and Twitter. Students seek out those experiences using the same rationale of hands-on, multisensory experience we use for better purposes. Colleges fight back by combating the youthful thirst for experience with the antibodies of other, healthier experiences. We counter episodes of tragic, stupid, or mean experience with countervailing experiences—group discussions or teach-ins—that give students personified, embodied, experiential ways to understand complex issues.

We need to remember that the same students who are experimenting with “fun” are also experimenting with every other facet of their lives as well—spirituality, profession, taste, friendship, love, art, music, intellectual perspective. By investing a greater amount of the university in experience as experiment, we make the most of it. We align it with what our young people are actually in college for. This strategy of modulated experience and counterexperience may do just what we hope. A detailed study by the College Board revealed that “higher levels of education are correlated with higher levels of civic participation, including volunteer work, voting, and blood donation, as well as with greater levels of openness to the opinions of others” (Baum and Ma 2007, 2). The same study also found that college graduates are less likely to smoke and more likely to exercise daily. A separate study by the Pew Research Center found that college graduates are more likely to be happy—42 percent, as compared with 30 percent of others with lower levels of educational attainment (2006, 31). We believe, and see, that our students are broader in outlook and more empathetic in understanding after being with us. Seniors, in many ways, are better people than first-year students.

So, it seems, we are on to something. These experiences do teach valuable things, essential things. And families understand that. They seek colleges out for the overall experience they offer. There is a reason we have such a wonderful diversity of colleges and universities—small and large, public and private, religious and secular. Though each of these

institutions has its own kind of advantages and disadvantages, each prides itself on offering a particular kind of experience. Each school intentionally sustains, fosters, and continually recreates what it truly believes to be its own unique experience.

Critiques of experience

As academics, we know we should be skeptical of everything, especially things we ourselves are doing. Why do we, rather suddenly, like the word and practice of “experience” so much? We can easily imagine the critiques from various political positions. Should we worry that a cult of experience plays into a narcissistic culture in which college is simply one more experience to be consumed, like an exotic vacation? Does it indulge students too much, at the expense of well-earned authority? Does it shift the focus too much away from the classroom and into every other space on campus? Is it simply jargon, a fad, a sales pitch, an evasion?

We have to acknowledge that many faculty members in many fields do not buy into the emphasis on experience. From their point of view, catering to experience can tempt us to neglect and trivialize the foundations of learning, whether liberal or professional. Moreover, many excellent teachers may feel disenfranchised by the growing assumption of students, and the implied point in our experiential focus, that traditional teaching is somehow inadequate. And there is something to this critique. “Experiential learning” implies that what goes on in the classroom—reading a book or having a discussion—is not an experience. Yet I imagine that we’ve all read novels—and books in our field—that are vivid and enduring experiences. More senses don’t necessarily make it better; I remember a Faulkner novel more deeply than I do virtually any movie I’ve ever seen. And recorded music is often more powerful than a video or even a concert. More senses are not necessarily better. Moreover, faculty and students who pride themselves on learning for its own sake, as the saying goes, are experiencing very real pleasures from that work: a sense of mastery, of connection with a tradition, of a broad vision. They are learning for the joy of learning, which is the opposite of a disembodied exercise. The brain, no less than the skin or the tongue or the eyes, feels pleasure, seeks experience. We must not lose sight of the utility of the pure passion of learning.

By connecting the various kinds of experience within our colleges and universities, we can amplify them all

In teaching, too, traditional means can provide a profound experience. Education comes between the lines of a lecture, in an ineffable tone and sense of purpose. A lecturer, a “sage on the stage,” can be an experience all by herself. She can offer a coherent and intentional embodiment of the reason behind the subject, a projection of why this subject matters. A student can be just as stimulated in a large lecture class as in smaller settings, as bored in a class of twelve in an oak-paneled seminar room as in front of a computer screen—and vice versa. Good teaching cannot be typecast, cannot be forced into a new box of experience. Gifted teachers will use every means they can imagine to touch students, and sometimes words alone are enough.

In my own time in college, in a large public Southern university with virtually open enrollment, I discovered many things through experience. I learned that some young people actually read a newspaper, that the library was something more than a warehouse, that having dinner at an actual professor’s house with actual wine drunk in actual moderation could actually be fun. But the professor who changed my life, by embodying what a professor could be, spoke with me just once outside of class. His teaching and writing inspired me by example, and that was enough.

I raise these critiques not to devalue experience but to broaden our understanding of it so that we can better represent, and promote, all that higher education is. Now, if we are going to do that, there are things we can do inside our own institutions that will make a difference.

Imagination, institutional determination, and funding

Most calls for efficiency—greater class size, greater reliance on adjuncts, and greater reliance on technology—rather obviously degrade the educational experience. In contrast, by connecting the various kinds of experience within our colleges and universities, we can amplify them all. We can take advantage of all our institutional resources in a time of scarcity and be smarter about our work, even as we protect liberal education. We can do so by getting rid of some of the dead air space in our institutions, the places where air does not circulate, light does not penetrate, and heat

does not conduct. Some of those spaces divide liberal arts education and professional training, some separate the structures we have built to foster richer experiences for our students, some separate us from audiences all around us.

Every college and university has built new capacity to deliver new experiences for students through study abroad, community service, career development, health and fitness, cultural understanding, or spiritual growth. These capacities have arisen, though, without much attempt to coordinate them with one another or to connect them to the traditional learning that remains the reason colleges exist. One way to gain efficiency during hard times, therefore, is to make sure we are getting the most from these substantial investments and that new investments enhance rather than merely compete with the classroom and the laboratory.

For example, at my own institution, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we have developed what we call Tocqueville Seminars. As you may imagine from the title, the goal is to take advantage of the greatly increased amount of study abroad experience and students from other countries on our campus. Students tell us that studying abroad is transformational, and we know it is. But we have not done much to capture that transformation for others or for the curriculum. In Tocqueville Seminars, students who have studied abroad come together in classes across the university to explore what they have learned about the United States from their experiences, how they see their own culture and nation and power differently. The faculty members who teach these seminars, in everything from economics and politics to literature and history, come together in their own seminars to imagine a new kind of transnational American studies. We are, in short, channeling experience back into the curriculum, into the classroom, helping students see themselves more broadly and more deeply, translating experience into education and vice versa—and taking advantage of considerable investment in, and accomplishments of, our office of international studies. And, with the encouragement of the Mellon Foundation, we are serving as a hub in a consortium established to spread and develop those innovations.

The issues foregrounded by the title of this meeting, “The Wit, the Will . . . and the Wallet,” are issues of imagination, institutional determination, and funding. We need to combine these elements with a clear sense of purpose to protect and create—which are often the same thing—educational experiences of depth, breadth, intensity, and lasting meaning. We need an integrated vision, a broader understanding of how experiences either connect and strengthen or undercut one another.

Students are not as cynical as we worry they are and as they often imagine themselves to be. They want useful and marketable skills, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But they also want a purpose for those skills. They come to college to broaden their experience, and colleges and universities are the only places where people of all backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, classes, and politics come together to explore who they are and who they might become. Going to college is a defining time in their lives, and there is much more we can do to make it a liberating and transformative, you guessed it, experience. □

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NOTES

- 1 This article was adapted from the closing plenary address at the 2010 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- 2 Merriam-Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “Experience.”

K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Awards

The K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award recognizes graduate students who show exemplary promise as future leaders of higher education; who demonstrate a commitment to developing academic and civic responsibility in themselves and others; and whose work reflects a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. The awards honor the work of K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita of higher education at the University of California–Berkeley, and are administered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Following are the recipients of the 2010 awards:

Netta Avineri, applied linguistics, University of California–Los Angeles

Sauna K. Carlisle, social welfare, University of Washington

Judith Flores Carmona, sociology of education, University of Utah

Elizabeth Hoover, anthropology, Brown University

Ilana Kramer, clinical psychology, Long Island University

Jonathan P. Rossing, rhetoric and public culture, Indiana University

Jentery Sayers, English, University of Washington

Wendy Wagner, college student personnel administration, University of Maryland

Holly R. West, higher and postsecondary education, New York University

Nominations for the 2011 awards are due October 4, 2010. (For more information, see www.aacu.org.) The recipients will be introduced at the 2011 annual meeting, where they will deliver a presentation on “Faculty of the Future: Voices of the Next Generation.”



K. Patricia Cross (center) with the recipients of the 2010 awards

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