Making an Impact through Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT
This panel focuses on experiential learning as a foundation of information science education. We critically examine the underlying philosophies, pedagogical attitudes, and specific teaching methods needed to foster a new generation of information science professionals. Spanning the pedagogical spectrum from theory to practice, we analyze how the integration of humanistic and progressive pedagogies, principles of student-centered and facilitative learning, and problem-based projects can contribute to the holistic education of creative leaders and lifelong learners whose skills and knowledge are congruent with the fluid and complex character of our field. Drawing on a combined framework from several theoretical studies in adult education, we examine the potential impact of experiential learning on the conception and perception of learning in higher education, on the information science curriculum, and on the nature of the student-teacher relationship. In the spirit of the panel, we invite the session attendees to reflect on the introduced ideas in application to their own pedagogical practices, teaching styles, and courses through several interactive exercises and group discussions. These activities illustrate how experiential learning presents a basis for change in information science education.

Keywords
Experiential learning; information science curriculum; progressive pedagogies; student-centered education.

INTRODUCTION
The application of innovative technologies in the classroom can advance and modernize graduate education, especially in such a technology-saturated field as information science. What remains behind the scenes is the discussion of how traditional and largely unchanged pedagogical approaches, which privilege “the final product over the process of education,” do not allow us to take “full advantage of the tremendous educational potential offered by digital technologies” (Dali, Lau, & Risk, 2015). The prevalence of publications focusing on specific teaching techniques and case studies, which place an emphasis on the ‘how to’ rather than the ‘why’ of education, demonstrates that we more frequently reface our pedagogical practices rather than challenge their foundation. Lectures, conventional essays, and classroom-bound learning are still dominant, whereas information science students need much more in order to grow into holistic professionals who will influence our ever-changing field. Experiential learning comprises one important way to help students realize their “natural potential for learning” (Rogers, 1969, p. 114), and prepares information students for leadership and proactive community engagement. We define experiential learning as “learning that supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-world problems or situations where the instructor … facilitates learning” (Center for Teaching, n.d.). Although experiential learning may occur with no teacher participation, we will refer to experiential learning that takes place in formal educational settings (Thomas, 2014). With the premise of “the centrality of experience” (Jarvis, 2010, p. 76) in graduate education, our panel illustrates that it is a cardinal change in pedagogical philosophies and teaching attitudes (and not merely an application of isolated latest technologies) that will truly impact information science education. With the goal to critically examine existing educational shortcomings and to ponder solutions, the panel spans the entire pedagogical spectrum, including:

- Underlying philosophies, specifically humanistic thought and progressive education, as manifest in John Dewey’s and Paulo Freire’s work;
- Teaching styles, with an emphasis on student-centered pedagogy and facilitative learning, following Carl Rogers’ philosophy and the tenets of Critical Service Learning (CSL) and Community Engaged Learning (CEL); and
- Specific teaching methods and applications, such as problem-based learning, mentoring, engagement with information organizations in international settings, and capstone projects.
Combining frameworks suggested by Weil and McGill (1989) and Jarvis (2010), we conceptualize experiential learning as a foundation for:

1. achieving social change and raising social consciousness;
2. validating students’ previous life and professional experience in the process of education;
3. fostering personal development and growth;
4. changing the information science curriculum; and
5. incorporating practical experience (e.g., internships, practica, co-op placements) in graduate programs.

In so doing, we integrate three dimensions of the conference theme and demonstrate the impact of experiential learning on individuals—information science students and practitioners; social contexts—the structure, goals, and content of graduate education; and society at large, wherein information professionals will serve communities and spearhead information practices in a socially responsible, holistic, and creative fashion. In the spirit of the panel, we invite session attendees to reflect on the introduced ideas in application to their own pedagogical practices, teaching styles, and courses. This exercise will help us illustrate how experiential learning presents a basis for change in information science education.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL CHANGE: JOHN DEWEY AND EXPERIENTIAL ACTION (BY JOHN M. BUDD)

In one of his earlier writings, originally published in 1896, Dewey emphasized the importance of experience and the guidance of experiential action to pedagogy. For one thing, it is the connection to experience that arouses interest in students; without a connection to experience there is likely to be a gap between the subject matter to be learned and the interest in that subject matter (Dewey, 1973). In a related work, first published in 1897, Dewey explicitly stated, “I believe that—all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race” (Dewey, 1973, p. 443). Experience is couched in the social; even as it has a psychological component, it has an equally strong sociological one. The individual—the student—is part of society, and society is an organic whole. Schooling is a process of living, and not merely a preparation for living. In fact, for Dewey, the genuine matter for learning (and experience) is the individual’s own social activities. Ineluctably related to experience, as Dewey would have it, is the need for reflection (Rogers, 2002). Individuals live in more than one community, but all coalesce in the individuals’ lived lives and, in particular, in reflection upon experience (Dewey, 1954). In order to be most effective, the reflection upon experience is best when it is shared among students and teachers (Rogers, 2002). The “teachers’ role is to provide the right type of experience” which “facilitates the process of growth and development” (Jarvis, 2010, p. 186). Thus, “Dewey’s work on teaching may be regarded as facilitative learning and that many of his ideas” have been incorporated by other thinkers (Jarvis, 2010, p. 187), including Carl Rogers.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION OF PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: CARL ROGERS AND FACILITATIVE LEARNING (BY KEREN DALI)

Carl Rogers, a humanist and a clinical psychologist, drew on his insight and practice as a client-centered therapist. Rogers greatly contributed to the fields of education, especially graduate professional education, by developing his learner-centered approach. At its heart, the learner-centered approach underscores a teacher-student relationship based on (1) empathy, (2) unconditional positive regard, and (3) the realness of the teacher. This relationship and the teacher’s attitudes, according to Rogers, are more important than any specific knowledge or chosen teaching techniques. It is these attitudes, also termed “core conditions” that can facilitate learning to learn, “adapt and change” (Rogers, 1989, p. 304), instead of influencing students in the direction desired by teachers. It was Rogers’ ultimate goal “to release” “the incredible potential in the ordinary student,” not only in high-achieving students, (Rogers, 1989, p. 320) and transform him/her into a “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1995). Rogerian experiential learning starts with students facing a real-life problem relevant to their lives, and it is the experience of resolving the problem and “continuing openness to experience” that encourage learning habits beyond the classroom (Rogers, 1969, p. 114). Despite the teacher’s facilitative role, Rogerian experiential learning is largely self-directed and evaluated by learners in terms of its congruence with their needs. It is clear that these pedagogical attitudes could feed into other educational approaches, such as CSL and CEL. More specifically, they can provide a basis for reflection on the redistribution of power in the learning process and for solving dilemmas related to the outcome assessment of experience-based learning projects.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION OF TRANSFORMATION: ADDING THE ‘CRITICAL’ TO SERVICE LEARNING (BY CLARA M. CHU)

Philosophically and theoretically linked Dewey’s ideas on education as a foundation of democracy and the importance of reflective practices and to the Dewey-Rogers thesis on the centrality of teacher-student relationships, CSL receives another compelling backing from the work of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire, who viewed education as a road to empowerment and civic participation, is exemplified in Masucci and Renner’s (2000) articulation of the CSL approach. CSL becomes “an important opportunity to integrate and facilitate the ideals of a more radical democratic engagement with one’s society” (Masucci & Renner, 2000). CSL is defined as a four-step process of pre-reflection, theory, action and reflection. Implicit in the learning process are the forged relationships and the need for them to be egalitarian and bi-directional. These relationships lend themselves to particular forms of action,
such as community engagement, participatory learning, and reflection, which can be undertaken by individuals and communities of learners and bring about personal and professional transformation and, ultimately, social change. Several applications of these principles to teaching information science students will be examined: a core course on ethics, change, and diversity; practical work opportunities for students in archives outside of North America; and the inclusion of critical pedagogies in classroom teaching. It will be demonstrated how the dismantling of hierarchies, the critical understanding of inequity in information access and representation, the ethical response to dilemmas, the recognition of privileges and biases, the openness to inquiry and critique, and the collective approach to problem solving become a staple of CSL-guided pedagogies.

THE INTEGRATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN GRADUATE CURRICULA (BY HEATHER O’BRIEN)

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is a growing trend in higher education that combines “teaching, research, conventional service, and student participation” (Mehra, 2009, p. 143). At the University of British Columbia (UBC), CEL has been implemented as a capstone experience, “a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique, and apply the knowledge gained in the major” (Wagenaar, 1993). The UBC iSchool has partnered with non-profit community organizations to provide students with real-life learning experiences. The guiding vision was that students would be able to practice problem solving, project management, and critical thinking; apply and reflect upon skills and knowledge gained during their programs; and increase their exposure to technological, social, and ethical issues faced in community settings (Bishop, Bruce & Jeong, 2009; Brown & Benson, 2005). It was also hoped that community partners would benefit from dedicated students working to resolve challenging information management issues, and that interactions between information students and community groups would enhance and shift people’s perception of information professions.

Based on the course description and the nature of student projects, we explore how teaching a CEL-guided capstone course differed pedagogically from more traditional courses in terms of content and content delivery, student assignments, assessment practices, and the meaning of ‘success.’ We also examine how offering this course to students at the end of their professional programs and in partnership with community organizations has fostered greater reflection on LIS students’ graduating competencies and professional preparedness. Finally, we address how this course can be used to inform the iSchool’s curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The complexity, eclecticism, fluid boundaries, and fast-changing nature of the information field call for a creative and self-directed professional who is capable of continuous learning and comfortable with the ambiguity and unpredictability of our field. To grow this kind of professional, information science educators have to realize that the integration of innovative technologies in higher education does not suffice. We need to revisit, revise, and rethink our educational philosophies and teaching attitudes in order to take full advantage of the pedagogical potential enabled by technological innovations. While there are many ways to achieve substantial change in graduate information science education, implementing the principles of experiential learning is one of them. This panel focuses on the multiple facets of experiential learning, positing it as a means of making an impact on information science education and a difference in preparing a future generation of information professionals.

PANEL STRUCTURE

The panelists and panel goals will be briefly introduced by the moderator (Keren Dali), and the panel will then progress from general to specific and from expository to experiential. It will open with a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of experiential learning based on the work of John Dewey presented by John Budd, who will focus on the tenets of progressive education and humanistic pedagogies. Keren Dali will address the concomitant teaching attitudes and examine student-centered and facilitative teaching, drawing on Carl Rogers’ work. Connecting both theories and teaching attitudes to practical applications, Clara M. Chu will add the critical, multicultural, and international dimensions to the discussion and explore CSL-inspired learning. Similarly, with the fusion of theory and practice in mind, Heather O’Brien will analyze the capstone project as an illustration of experiential learning, using a unique frame of CEL. This portion will be wrapped within 45 min.

Following a brief Q&A period, for the remainder of the session, we will engage attendees in group-based activities. These interactive exercises will build on the topics and concerns relevant to each participant. Some groups will be asked to comment on matters such as interaction, social consciousness, and experience as they may have an impact on teaching and learning in information studies; others will be invited to explore the student-teacher relationships in their own classes and to reflect on the interplay between students’ self-direction and teachers’ instruction, noting positive experiences and challenges; yet other groups will be able to deal with more immediate concerns, such as evaluating ‘success’ and assessing student-, instructor-, program-, and community partner-related outcomes in the context of experiential learning in general and CEL in particular.

PANELISTS

John M. Budd is Professor at the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies of the University of Missouri. He has studied the philosophy of information, including the place of American Pragmatism in education.
Clara M. Chu is Director, Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, and Mortenson Distinguished Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She specializes in multicultural library and information services, information seeking behavior, and critical information studies. Her own pedagogical approaches are inspired by the educator Paulo Freire.

Keren Dali, Ph.D., is at Western University in Ontario where she researches multicultural communities, the reading experience, graduate education in the context of the corporate university, and the application of humanistic approaches to revamping pedagogical practices.

Heather O’Brien is Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia where she teaches and researches in human information interaction and user engagement. She has co-authored a paper on peer-to-peer community service learning in LIS education (O’Brien, Freund, Jantzi & Sinanan, 2014) and spearheaded a committee to examine capstone options at the iSchool, UBC.

REFERENCES


