

# Teaching Philosophy

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Experiential learning matters because learning is among the most human of all activities, performed on a continuous basis both outside and inside of formal educational institutions. The core of learning is the acquisition of capacities to act on the world through a wide variety of processes. People learn from their experiences, reflect on the world, and establish a variety of learning relationships with others, including peers, superiors and subordinates. Learning brings its own rewards, as people gain abilities to make sense, to express themselves, to inquire more deeply and/or to use their bodies in new ways.

Unfortunately, in formal educational institutions we often forget about the humanness of learning. We too often seek to use extrinsic rewards and compulsion to teach people what we think they need to know, casting aside their own interests and motivations. This may be compounded in the liberal arts, where there is a strong tendency to focus almost exclusively on text-mediated learning, suggesting that students shut set experience aside and focus on acquiring information through reading.

Over years of teaching sociology in post-secondary institutions, it has become very clear to me that many of our students are shut down rather than stimulated by the learning they are offered. Certainly, some thrive in these settings, as they align their own learning activities with those of the institution and develop new capacities. Many others never fully integrate into the ways of learning that dominate these institutions, finding themselves immersed in settings that inspire fear and offer little stimulation in return.

Experiential learning is an invitation to return to the ways people learn outside of these situations structured by power and authority. It begins by honouring what people already know and the questions they bring to the learning relationship, but does not end there. The teacher in an experiential learning situation must both support and challenge students, providing a situation in which they seek to move beyond what they already know.

In this sense, then, experiential learning is not simply about adding a placement or a co-op within a post-secondary setting, but rather is a different pedagogical approach that begins with the person and their own experiences and locations. It focuses not on the acquisition of knowledge, but on the development of the agency of the learner, which necessarily involves mental, physical, affective and ethical dimensions.

One of the crucial forms of experiential learning in a post-secondary context is mapping the power relations in the room, which are often obscure as they are presented in terms of expertise rather than compulsion. The critical awareness of the setting in which we are learning helps students map their own trajectory through the institution, weighing off deliberately the costs and benefits of various options.

I therefore increasingly focus my courses on giving students a first-hand experience of inquiry beginning where they are located. Too often, we in the liberal arts and sciences expect students to learn by digesting experiences of inquiry second-hand, reading about other people's research. I design activities in which students begin to inquire into their own situation, for example applying sociological theories to events in their own realm of experience. In doing this, it is my goal to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, to encourage learners to view the world around them as if for the first time, while gaining access to realms that are far from their own experience.

I am now 20 years into my career in post-secondary education, and in retrospect it is clear to me that I have had the greatest effect on student learning when we have been able to form relationships of shared inquiry in which we all learn together and from each other. That is difficult in large classes, something I find myself contending with all the time. It is increasingly clear to me over time how much my students know, and how little we prize that knowledge in these settings. Experiential learning is, for me, the opportunity to construct opportunities for shared inquiry built on the foundation of what we already know, yet rising above that into the unexpected and the unknown.