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Joyce K. Fletcher  
*Northeastern University*

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# FIELD EXPERIENCE AND COOPERATIVE EDUCATION: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

National Information Center  
for Service Learning  
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290  
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

JOYCE K. FLETCHER  
Assistant Professor and Coordinator  
Department of Cooperative Education  
Northeastern University  
Boston, Massachusetts

## Introduction

Of all the benefits associated with experiential education, those related to student development are of the most interest to educators. Those of us who work with students do not need to be convinced of the positive impact work experience has on participants. Anecdotally we share with one another our success stories — stories of individual students who have grown, matured, gained self-confidence or a new sense of direction and purpose because of exposure to what we like to call the *real world*. Yet, we recognize that these outcomes are not guaranteed, and that in fact, not all students achieve all the benefits identified. In making sense of our observations we suggest reasons that might account for the different effect experiential education has on individual students. We note that individual students differ, experiential settings differ, and of course the structure, design and implementation of supporting programs differ.

Given these differences it may seem ill-advised to generalize about the impact of experiential education on student development. Yet, there are important reasons to do so. As Rick Williams notes in "The Impact of Field Education on Student Development: Research Findings," there are some outcomes that are persistently related to experiential situations, despite individual, program or setting characteristics. The student development outcomes Williams' identifies cluster in three broad areas: personal and emotional development, career development and academic achievement. This clustering occurs even though the summarized studies include students ranging from middle school to college age and beyond, and the experiential situations range from traditional work settings to experiences such as peer advising, tutoring or Peace Corps involvement. A similar clustering of outcomes has been associated with another form of experiential education, cooperative education. (Fletcher, 1989a) For co-op, the outcomes can be grouped into personal development, career development and academic achievement. Again, these outcomes were observed despite wide variation in co-op participants, program characteristics and experiential settings. Recognizing

Feature

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and laying claim to this *common ground* among different forms of experiential education is important because it highlights what experience-based learning can add to the traditional academic curriculum. For those of us who see experiential education as one answer to the call for a more holistic approach to learning, this is good news, indeed. It appears that whatever we are doing, and however we choose to do it, in a significant number of students accrue some positive benefits from participation in experiential education programs. We have a right to feel reassured and gratified, and to use reviews of this nature to advocate for educational reform in the broader academic community.

However, as practitioners in experiential education it would be short-sighted to read reviews of student outcomes from this perspective alone and gloss over the real differences among programs, work sites and individual students. Examining the differential impact these factors might have on student outcomes would help us identify the key moderating variables in the experiential learning process and help us more clearly define the principles of good practice. Unfortunately, Williams' review does not address this issue of difference. There is, for example, no definition of the term *field education* and the variance in programs must be gleaned from looking at the titles of the studies he summarizes. Nonetheless, comparing this review to research findings in co-op does highlight what some of the critical differences affecting student outcomes might be. Thus, the following analysis is intended not only to identify areas of convergence between field education and cooperative education, but also to identify areas of divergence, with the hope of stimulating discussion, debate and, eventually, future research on issues of practical and theoretical importance to practitioners.

## Personal Development

As Williams notes, "the research on the effects of participation in field education programs on personal development is strong and positive — students appear to have higher self-respect, less anxiety and depression, and more emotional comfort and confidence in social interactions." A recent review of personal development outcomes related to participation in cooperative education (Fletcher, 1989a) reaches a similar conclusion: "[Studies show that] co-op experience contributes to increased self-confidence and enhanced self-concept . . . an increase in autonomy . . . and the development of social maturity and interpersonal skills." (p. 28) It would appear that experiences that break the traditional academic model of student as a passive receiver of knowledge and place students in situations in which they are active participants in their own development have a positive effect on personal growth and maturity, particularly in the area of self-esteem. Yet there are some important differences between field

experience and cooperative education that suggests that the process by which these similar outcomes are achieved may in fact be somewhat different.

Field experience is a term that encompasses many different kinds of experiential settings. However, a look at the studies included in Williams' review shows that a good many of them were service learning settings. That is, they were settings in which the developmental goal of the placement was primarily to encourage a sense of social responsibility in participants by placing them in situations that would give them the opportunity to empower others. This is rarely the primary developmental goal of a cooperative education placement. Rather, co-op placements tend to focus on influencing a participant's sense of competence or personal mastery. Thus, the emphasis is on self-assessment and matching an individual's skills, interest and abilities with the requirements of the (usual) work setting. Task success, not empowerment, is seen as the primary stimulus to personal development.

These two elements, empowerment and competence are actually two of the four conditions thought to enhance self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Fletcher, 1990b; Miller, 1984). Since self-esteem itself has often been cited as one of the key individual characteristics that moderate many developmental processes (Brockner, 1988) it is probable that experiential education affects personal development through the construct self-esteem. If this is the case, then field experience and cooperative education both of which have been shown to enhance self-esteem, might lead to slightly different personal development outcomes, because each develops different dimensions of the esteem construct. For example, it seems likely that placements that emphasize personal mastery might lead to developmental outcomes such as enhanced self-efficacy, or a willingness to set increasingly higher future goals, or the confidence to take on unfamiliar tasks or a potentially risky endeavor. On the other hand, placements that emphasize the empowerment dimension of self-esteem might lead to personal development outcomes that more likely are affective in nature, such as tolerance for diversity, empathy toward others, or an increased willingness to get emotionally involved with others.

Interestingly, comparing Williams' review with some of the research findings in cooperative education provides some support for this hypothesis. The most comprehensive study of the impact of cooperative education on personal growth and values was conducted in 1974 by Wilson. Few differences in personal values, societal values or attitudes toward people were found when co-ops were compared to non-co-ops. Findings which did reach significance tended to cluster in career-related attitudes and values. For example, results indicated that co-ops were more likely than non-co-ops to experience a shift in work values away from "helping others" toward less people oriented values. They also tended to be more

conservative in outlook, and more cautious in expressing their attitudes. In contrast, the studies of field education indicate attitudinal and personality changes that are not primarily career-oriented, but encompass more affective, relational aspects of developmental change. For example, Williams notes that after field experience, participants are more "outgoing, uninhibited, impulsive and sociable" and that males in particular exhibit evidence of increased emotional maturity, while this is clearly less than conclusive evidence, it suggests some real differences in developmental outcomes among programs that would be interesting to pursue. At the very least, it is safe to say that researchers in field education have focused on personality characteristics and affective development to a greater degree than have researchers in cooperative education. Since researchers tend to develop hypotheses based on their own experience and observations, it is probable that practitioners in field experience programs are either more sensitive to these types of outcomes or observe them more frequently than do co-op researchers.

In summary, it appears that the *common ground* between field experience and cooperative education in the area of personal development outcomes is that each has been shown to enhance self-esteem. However, differences between the two types of experiential programs suggest that each may influence a different *aspect* of self-esteem and that this may result in slightly different attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

### Career Development

Comparing the research findings in field education with those in cooperative education suggests that co-op has a greater impact on career development outcomes than does field experience. Results of studies comparing co-ops to non-co-ops have found that co-ops evidence greater career commitment (Weston, 1986), make more informed career decisions and have a greater perceived recognition of their own abilities, limitations and interests (Wilson, 1974). In addition, co-ops report more variety in their job search activities, report they feel more informed of career opportunities (Brown, 1976), and have a more realistic view of themselves and their occupational opportunities (Brown, 1985; Mann & Schlueter 1985) than do their non-co-op counterparts. Since these outcomes are similar to the commonly accepted definition of vocational maturity, it is generally agreed that cooperative education affects career development through this construct (Fletcher, 1990a). While the research on career development outcomes related to field experience is far less conclusive, it would appear that to the extent it does influence career development, it too does so through the construct of vocational maturity. For example, the two outcomes Williams identifies as having empirical support — a sense of vocational realism and an appropriate use of occupational information and planning — are also signs of vocational maturity.

There is additional supporting evidence that both programs influence career development through enhancing vocational maturity. Like one of the studies in Williams' review,<sup>1</sup> studies in cooperative education (Weston, 1986; Wilson & Lyons, 1961; Rowe, 1989) indicate that participants in experiential programs appear to be less certain of their career interest than do non-participants. While there could be many explanations for this phenomenon (including the possibility of pre-program differences in participants), it is likely that at least part of the effect is due to the potential of experiential placements to help move participants out of the early "certainty" stage of career choice and into the "testing" phase. Less certainty is interpreted as evidence of a more realistic view of the career search process that again is a sign of vocational maturity. The difference in *strength* of the career development outcomes associated with each program is probably due to the different goals and programmatic features of each. For example, the goal of most co-op programs is to enhance career development through *career-related employment*. Thus, there is a strong programmatic emphasis on self-assessment, values clarification and person-job congruence. The job-seeking process itself is an important source of reality checking for participants, as is the opportunity the work setting provides for testing self-perceptions with occupational reality. Naturally, the quality of the information generated by the experience will be determined by the relevance of the placement to career interests. Experiential placements with less preparatory emphasis on self-assessment and reality checking could not be expected to achieve the same results. As Williams notes: "The student placed in a work experience dissimilar to his expressed interest will not be exposed to the experience and information necessary to influence his career choice."

Another program feature that might account for the difference in career development outcomes is the time spent on assignment. Unlike field experience, co-op is often a long-term program including several work periods. The opportunity to experience repeatedly the "preparation-to-performance-to-debriefing" cycle probably accounts for the strength of the career development outcomes associated with cooperative education. As Williams points out in his recommendations: "Intensive, long-term field experiences would have more impact than shadowing type programs or short-term experiences."

In summary, it appears that the effect of both field experience and cooperative education on career development occurs through the construct of vocational maturity. The difference between the strength of career development outcomes associated with each type of program is probably related to the goals, program features and philosophical orientation of each.

### Academic Achievement

The clearest example of convergence between field experience and cooperative education research findings is in the area of academic achievement. Both types of programs appear to have the largely unintended consequence of enhancing academic performance and persistence to graduation. While several co-op researchers have noted and measured this phenomenon (Lindenmeyer, 1967; Smith, 1965; Wilson & Lyons, 1961; Yensco, 1970), few have hypothesized about the reasons why co-op might have this effect. Although recently some have suggested that the effect co-op has on academic achievement may stem from its ability to enact certain learning principles (Branton et al., 1990; Fletcher, 1989b; Fletcher et al., 1990) there is no empirical evidence to support this assertion. As a result, most of the co-op community continue to assume that the effect is probably related to the fact that work experience increases the relevance of coursework and the desire for degree completion in order to achieve future career goals (Wilson & Lyons, 1961).

Interestingly, nearly all the studies<sup>2</sup> in the Williams' review that measured the effect of field experience on academic achievement were those with career education as a goal. Thus, the positive results tend to support the Wilson and Lyons hypothesis that experiential placements affect academic achievement and retention through the construct of career relevance. However, a closer look at the Williams' review suggests that while career relevance may be a strong explanatory factor, it may not be the predominant one. For it appears that service learning placements, which are far less likely to be career-related than co-op placements, also enhance academic achievement and retention. This suggests that there is something other than career relevance that is influencing these outcomes. Although Williams does not remark on this discrepancy, it is interesting to note that in drawing his conclusions about the effect of experiential placements on academic achievement and retention, he relies on the observations of those who studied service learning as opposed to work placement settings.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he proposes that the positive effect of experiential placements on academic achievement and retention is an indirect one that occurs through the construct of enhanced self-esteem. This interpretation is supported by others who hypothesize that enhanced self-esteem may be inextricably linked to all other outcomes associated with participation in experiential education (Fletcher, 1990a).

In summary, it appears that although field experience and cooperative education each have been shown to affect academic achievement and retention, it is unclear why or by what process this effect is achieved. However, the findings

<sup>1</sup> Newton, M. *An Experimental Study of the Effects of an Alternative Work Experience Program in the Middle School*. Western Kentucky University, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> The exception is the study by Robert Urie et al., 1974, *Student Aides for Handicapped College Students: Final Report and Manual*. St. Andrews Presbyterian College.

<sup>3</sup> He draws on the Robert Urie study of aides for handicapped students and the Sophie Brown 1976 study, *Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring in the Schools*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

do suggest that the relationship between experiential education and these outcomes is probably a global one, not dependent on program or placement characteristics. Rather, it may occur indirectly through a general variable such as self-esteem. If so, then there may be many other intervening or moderating variables, such as career relevance, that affect the process differently for different programs. Clearly, additional research in this area is needed.

### Conclusion

This analysis suggests that differences in program goals and structure, as well as differences in students and placement settings might engage different processes toward similar ends. Thus, while both co-op and field experience enhance self-esteem, they may do it through influencing different dimensions of that construct, with slightly different results. Likewise, although both types of experiential programs affect career development by enhancing vocational maturity, program goals and features may influence how strong that effect is likely to be. And finally, although both programs appear to enhance academic achievement and retention, there is little agreement on how this occurs. Thus, it is plausible to conclude that this process is an indirect one, with many intervening and moderating variables that have not yet been identified.

This comparison of the similarities and differences between research findings in cooperative education and field experience suggests that future progress in understanding the impact of experiential education on participants will come from research that goes beyond comparing participants with non-participants. Although research of this type is helpful and reassuring to practitioners, it does little to further our understanding of the process by which the outcomes associated with experiential education are achieved. The challenge facing practitioners today is to enhance the effectiveness of our programs, to ensure that outcomes accrue to students in an intentional rather than an arbitrary fashion, to ensure that our particular program features foster our stated goals, and that our students are achieving the maximum benefit from their experiential placements. Future research that explicates the differences among and within programs can stimulate this kind of effectiveness by helping us understand the conditions, processes and key program elements that foster each of the many different outcomes associated with experiential education.

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