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John S. Duley

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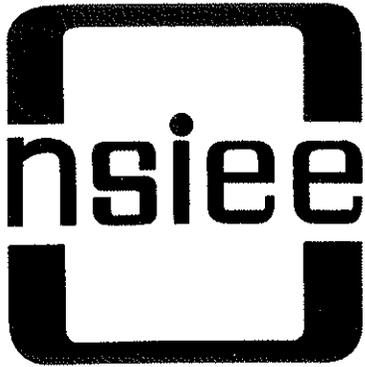
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# Occasional Papers

**A GLIMPSE OF  
A NEW EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY  
PARADIGM**

by John S. Duley, President  
Edgewood Village Non-Profit Housing Corporation  
Lansing, Michigan

**National Society for Internships and Experiential Education  
1735 Eye St., N.W. Suite 601, Washington, D.C. 20006**

**Editor: John S. Duley**

NSLC  
c/o ETR Associates  
4 Carbonero Way  
Scotts Valley, CA 95066

**A GLIMPSE OF  
A NEW EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY  
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A pseudo NSIEE Occasional Paper printed as memorabilia for the Wingspread Service Learning History Project Conference, December 2-4, 1995. This was first presented as the closing Keynote address at the 1980 NSIEE conference in San Francisco. It was reworked on the basis of correspondence with Bob Sigmon and conversations with other illuminaries. I reworked it in its present form in June 1988 and submitted it to the then editor of Occasional Papers. For probably several good reasons of which I am not aware, it was not published. So on this occasion I have taken the liberty as a former editor of the Occasional Papers, to publish it myself.

I have also included responses to the original address and a rough draft outline of the speech I was asked to give but never developed or delivered.

John Duley  
November 30, 1995

## A Glimpse of a New Experiential Learning Theory Paradigm\*

by John Duley

A number of years ago I began to be uneasy with David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory although I am much indebted to him and have been ever since I first came across the theory. My uneasiness stems from the feeling that, even though he writes about learning as a spiralling experience, it is not multi-dimensional enough to express the complex reality of most of our efforts to learn. I keep coming back to a marvelous little science fiction classic, Flatland written in the 1870s by Edwin A. Abbott, but published under the pseudonym A. Square.\*\* This is a fantasy about a two dimensional world in which the people of greatest status are those closest to being a circle. The scholars, statesmen, wisemen and judges of Flatland are all polygons: at least pentagons or hexagons. Squares are the artisans and businessmen and triangles are soldiers or peasants. All women in Flatland are straight lines.

Women were at the bottom of the society's status hierarchy and were viewed as very dangerous. In fact when they went out into the society they were required to carry a bell and a candle, and cry, "peace, peace," as they went about the streets. This was in order to forewarn people of their presence so they would be seen and heard as they approached. It was easy not to see them as they approached you since all that you were able to see was a point. Triangles, squares and polygons could be badly bent out of shape being jabbed by a woman. These kinds of sexual encounters had very serious consequences in Flatland. One could lose ones identity and status in an unfortunate encounter with a woman.

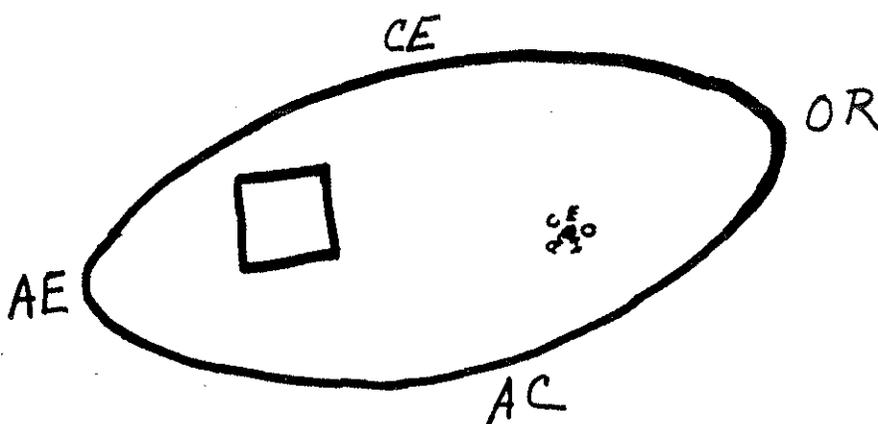
The book is an account of the experience of a highly respected member of the middle class of Flatland, a rather important manager by the name of A. Square. He was sitting quietly in his living room one night visiting with his very lovely wife--as fine a straight line as you'd every wish to see. They were reviewing the events of the day when a point suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the midst of the living room and as they watched, it changed from a point to a small perfect circle and grew larger and larger. Square, immediately sensing that he was in the presence of true greatness--having never seen such a perfect circle before, leapt to his feet to welcome his guest. He immediately sent his wife from the room in order not to endanger his guest. Square, despite his highly nervous and anxious state, sought to make his guest as comfortable as possible. He welcomed him and asked the occasion for the visit of such a dignitary to his humble home. The Sphere, for that is what he was, patiently explained that he had been sent to Flatland from the three dimensional world to convince A. Square and his fellow citizens of the existence of another dimension to life and to get them to live in tune with that reality. Sphere tried everything he could think of to convince A. Square of the existence of a third dimension. Since Square was limited by a two dimensional frame of reference: length and breadth, he could not even understand what Sphere was trying to communicate. Sphere tried reason and that failed. He tried various demonstrations and they failed. He finally told Square to observe very carefully what he was about to do. Sphere then left the living room and returned, passing completely through Square's living space. He then returned and asked Square what he had seen. Square respectfully reported his observations. "I saw a point which rapidly became an ever increasing circle and then reduced in size to a point and disappeared." "Fine, fine," said Sphere. "Now, put it all together and what do you have?" Square repeated his observations: "I saw a point which rapidly became an ever increasing circle and

then reduced in size to a point and disappeared." In exasperation, Sphere jerked Square up and out of his living room and held him above Flatland. Square saw it all laid out before him and marveled at the sight. It is reported that in his enthusiasm for this new discovery he wondered aloud if there might be a fourth or fifth or even x dimensions to reality. In disgust at such outlandish thoughts, Sphere dropped Square back into his living room and left him. Unfortunately for Square that was not the end of his adventure. He was so excited about his new insight he immediately set out to share it with his colleagues. The end result, as you have probably surmised, was that the authorities found it necessary to incarcerate Square in an institution for the criminally insane because he was upsetting so many people and was so fanatical in his views.

Now, you may have identified some parallels in this story between A. Square and students who have participated in your programs but that is not my purpose in recounting for you this romance. No, it is because I had a similar vision of my own. I was seated comfortably in the pleasant learning space of the David Kolb theory of Experiential Learning reflecting on how best to prepare students and give them the means to consciously work at and assess their developing abilities in reflecting, observing, conceptualizing and testing out new concepts, principles and theories. While engaged in this quiet scholarly work there appeared in my presence a point no larger than the head of a pin. Inscribed on that point were several letters. As I strained my eyes to read them, some familiar letters came into focus--C.E., which I could easily relate to as referring to Concrete Experience but also inscribed there were three other letters, O.I.R.. My initial response was to think there was some mistake. In the first place, Kolb's diagram only has R and O and they are always in that order. Also, they never occur at the same point on the

diagram as C.E.

Before I could figure that out there ~~erupted~~ in the midst of my learning space what looked like the beginning of a giant basketball or globe with great circles emanating from the point labeled C.E.O.I.R. and each of the circles was marked "DN." As this global shape moved in its disruptive way into and through my comfortable learning space I began to discern some other letters on it.



And there it stopped. Since I live in a different age than A. Square, I asked my wife, who is a whiz at crossword puzzles, to help me decipher this new Rosetta Stone and make sense out of its hieroglyphics. Suddenly as we discussed and brainstormed our way through the maze it all began to come clear. Learning experientially is multi-dimensional!!!!!! It not only involves abstract conceptualization--the central great circle--the need to Make Sense(MS) of things, but other needs as well--ah! ah!, Needs, the N in DN, Discover Needs. Of course, in order for people to undertake the hard work and emotionally risky business of learning, they must discover some unmet need that requires that they learn in order to satisfy that need. The CEOIR began to become a little clearer also. What the vision was telling me was that Concrete Experience by itself is not enough to assure learning. If learning is to

take place; observation, interpretation and reflection have to take place in connection with the Concrete Experience--not just after it is over but, at least, observation, attempts at interpretation and reflection need to go on while in the midst of the experience.

Let's see what some of the other great circles are about:

DT Do a Task

DS Develop a Skill

SP Solve a Problem

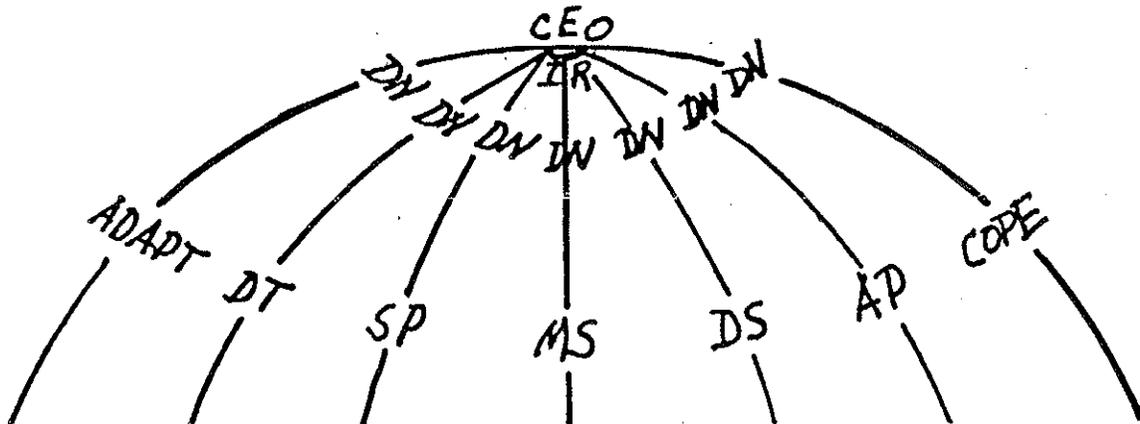
ADAPT just what it says

COPE Learn to make it in

AP Accomplish a Purpose

new places

Just as we deciphered these hieroglyphics, the globe gave a new lurch and moved further through our learning space, revealing across its equator a series of words: IMITATE; READ; WATCH; LISTEN; INQUIRE; TRIAL & ERROR; FORMAL STUDY; REMEMBER AND APPLY; INTEGRATE; SYNTHESIZE



These are obviously the various strategies we employ once we have discovered a need through our concrete experience, observation, interpretation and reflection. We don't do just one thing but many different things as we cast about for ways to do what has to be done. As Robert Sigmon reminded me when he first read this, Alan Tough's research reports that when we confront a new situation calling for a response we,

1. Look back in our memory and experience for a model

to guide the present response. If we find it, we proceed.

If we do not, we

2. Use Trial and error or take a chance based on a

guess. If that does not work, we

3. Go outside our own system via:

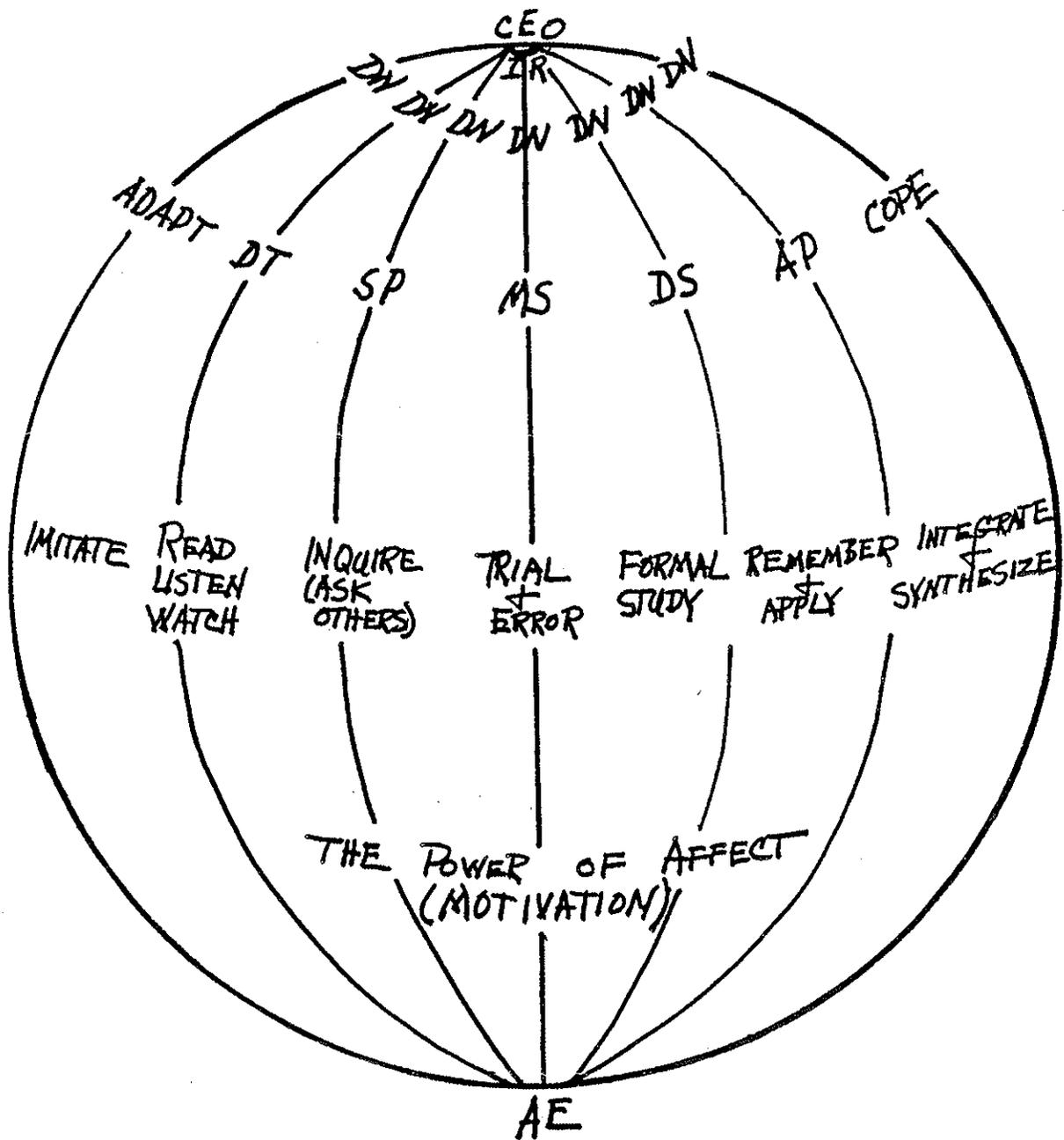
-getting a book

-asking someone else

-taking a course

-placing the issue in a latent status

A final lurch and there came into view, emblazoned across the southern hemisphere of the globe a strange phrase: "THE POWER OF AFFECT." Again we puzzled over the meaning of that and then it came clear. Affect is the dimension of learning we have never paid enough attention to in developing theories about learning, especially about experiential learning. The power of emotion to motivate in learning is exponential in nature. The greater the emotional involvement in the situation or the greater the risk you are running emotionally or physically, the more indelible the



learning will be. It is ingrained in your psyche, built into your very being when emotions are involved. If your life or reputation is on the line, the chances are you won't forget what you learn in that situation. In Field Experience Education we have the "power of affect" going for us. We ought to investigate its impact on learning.

The most important task before us in this critical age of neo-conservatism in Higher Education is to develop a sound theoretical base for what we are doing. The present pragmatic, career oriented defense for what we contribute won't provide us the rationale we need to demonstrate a sound basis for the continued inclusion of Experiential Education in the curriculum.

We need to know what kind of learning is going on out there, if it is worthy of college credit and how it articulates with the rest of the student's academic program. We have much to offer but at present we do not know enough about it to make a strong case for it. My fantasy is a surface manifestation of a deep need for serious theoretical work.

\*These thoughts were originally presented in a paper during the final session of the 1980 NSIEE conference in San Francisco.

\*\*FLATLAND, Edwin A. Abbott, Sixth Edition, Revised with Introduction by Banesh Hoffmann, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1982

DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS ANALYSIS?

IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MULTI-FACETED?--and therefore a rich and very confused picture?

DO YOU AGREE THAT:

In the midst of Concret Experiences(CE) we Observe, Interpret and Reflect?

Does learning depend on discovering a need?(DN)

Why else would people engage in the hard work involved in learning?

IT IS MY THESIS THAT IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS CONCRETE EXPERIENCE, OBSERVATION, INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTION WE DISCOVER SEVERAL DIFFERENT NEEDS.(DN)

We DISCOVER NEEDS--a lot of different needs that may be felt at the same time. Some of these needs are:

- M.S. To make sense out of what we are experiencing--try to discover the various possible meanings a set of experiences may have and pick the most appropriate one
- D.T. Learn to Do a specific Task, eg., to program a certain computer
- ADAPT To learn how to behave so we feel comfortable in a new environment, so people will accept us and not laugh at or attack us.
- COPE To find out where and how we can fit in to the environment we find ourselves in. What do you have to do to survive or make it?
- S.P. To solve a problem
- D.S. To Develop a Skill such as interviewing
- A.P. To Accomplish a Purpose--set reasonable goals and in a step by step process achieve our ends.

You can probably think of several more needs that your students discover in their field placements. When they discover a need, they learn. Their ways of learning are as diverse as their needs. They will not only learn by the method described by David Kolb; by observing, reflecting, generating hypotheses, principles, concepts and ideas and testing them out. My guess is that very few of us learn in this way. When we find we need to learn something we will either:

1. Ask others how to do it and follow their directions, ie., inquire, or
2. Imitate others, or
3. Go the the library and get a book, or
4. Remember something we read, heard or saw and apply it, or
5. Guess at the answer or process and try it out, or,
6. Take a course or attend a seminar, or
7. Put together odd bits and pieces from our past experience and integrate or synthesize our knowledge. We may do one or more of these things or all of them.

Appendix: Responses to the presentation:

Robert Sigmon, 13 November 1980

You should keep working with the romance--the multi-dimensional learning theory for experiential learning. Some random thoughts:

\*Look at holistic health literature and talk with those folk. The whole-connected picture is in some of this activity.

\*Have you looked at Alan Tough's self-directed learning studies and findings? Your last paragraph reminded me of a finding I believe he reports: that is--when we confront a new situation calling for a response we:

1. look back in our memory and experience  
for a model to guide the present response--If we  
find it, we proceed. If we do not, we
2. use trial and error or take a chance based on  
a guess. If that does not work, we
3. Go outside our own system via:
  - getting a book
  - asking someone else
  - taking a course
  - placing the issue in a latent state
  - etc.

This sequence is rooted in intent. What do we intend to do? Intent is the basis for discovering needs. Educators can look at language used, do an analysis of "intent" phrases and quite clearly predict what self-directed learning will be forthcoming in the future. (Some folks at the University of Tennessee are researching language used for "intent" themes right now and report some promising implications)

\*The ethical implications of the globe picture--"our common humanity"--are also worth more attention. For, I can see the connection in your fantasy to my service based learning fantasies: purpose, meaning, coherence, coping, caring all relate to whether learning has any worth for the learner and those he/she associates with. Who benefits from experiential learning in terms of growth and development?

\*You might also relook at differentiation-integration theory. Kolb differentiates, shows the styles of learning. You show how it and more can be integrated. Perhaps you can construct a symbiotic relationship among all these notions.

Professor Justino Balderrama, Social Work and Human Services, Eastern Washington University, Nov 13, 1981 at a conference on Three Dimensional Learning, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, organized by Michael Whitesage and Mitch Silver of Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington.

Professor Balderrama said that the paradigm glimpse sounded a lot like material related to the then current right brain/left brain New Age discussions triggered for him by THE AGE OF AQUARIUS, a book which I had not read but subsequently purchased. I agree, this is a first shot at a new paradigm that seeks to include intuition and right brain processes within it and therefore seeks to be more holistic(as Bob Sigmon suggested)

Further thoughts since presenting this as a  
"cutting-edge" piece at the FIPSE Consultants Conference, June 9  
- 13, 1988:

Jane Kendall remarked that as she reflected on the diagram and its implications it seemed to her that it does not contradict Kolb's theory but incorporates it in a more wholistic framework.

A couple of "Rube Goldberg" ideas occurred to me at that consultation:

1. Few of us are privileged to be concentrating on learning one thing at a time. A more accurate description of each person's situation is that several things are being learned at the same time so what you have is a galaxy of spheres of specific learnings, each in orbit around other events or learning experiences.

2. The Kolb learning circle may be functioning like a gyroscope top, spinning inside the sphere, keeping it going in a balanced fashion until the "discovered need" is met at which time the gyroscope top comes to rest.(and the sphere explodes, releasing new energy for learning. See 3 below.)

3. Thinking about education as a social phenomenon rather than an intracerebral, personal process as David Moore proposes(Chain Letter: On Learning Theory for Experiential Education, 24 March 1988) suggests the release of energy among learners on completion of a successful learning experience;--possibly symbolized in this spherical galaxy model by the sphere exploding when the "need" is met, releasing energy to the benefit of the learner and other learners--clearing the air so the

person can move on to other educational experiences, sharing his/her learning and interacting with other learners on the basis of that experience and energy release.

DRAFT

Outline: Key Curriculum Issues in the Future of Experiential Education

8/8/80

*J. Puley*

I. Recent Trends:

A. Pat Cross: EE has come of age

1. Co-op Ed 35 programs prior to '65 over 1000 now
2. State Government internship programs None before 1969-- now in 37 states by legislative act
3. Engineering: Many innovations on straight co op ed programs
4. Colleges of Agriculture
5. Colleges of Education
6. NSLC impact
7. Career exploration and development in LA programs
8. Student Personnel and Placement Office efforts

B. Neo-conservatism in Higher Education

1. Tight financial constraints show the priorities of academia:
  - a) Discipline based, subject matter, content oriented courses command top dollar
  - b) Departmental in-fighting for support of various programs.
2. Low status of programs and practitioners means we are vulnerable-- We are the mavericks who believe in learning, professional and personal growth and development.
3. The traditional reward system gets shored up and reinforced in times of retrenchment:
  - a) What counts is:
    - 1) Research
    - 2) Scholarly work(publication)
    - 3) Discipline related teaching
    - 4) High credit hour production per FTE. That translates into high value placed on large lecture classes and the devaluation or elimination of individualized instruction, independent study or research project options or individually sponsored field experiences or programs that take a lot of time and have small numbers and produce few credit hours.
  - b) What doesn't count is:
    - 1) Learning of an interdisciplinary nature
    - 2) Students taking charge of their own education
    - 3) Good faculty-student relationships with undergraduates
    - 4) Personal growth and development opportunities.

II. What is required of us in NSIEE:

A. Recognize that the demonstrated increase of interest in EE on the part of students and institutions is based on pragmatic employability and institutional survival motives. As a rationale, these motives will destroy or undercut our legitimacy in HE. We must help one another identify and "make a case" for a more justifiable, appropriate and academically sound rationale that legitimizes our presence in academia and makes the extra work and resources required to assure quality programs worthwhile.

1. Must identify who the practitioners are: We are hidden in the academic woodwork, isolated and cut off from one another and generally very low on the totem pole of academic rank and importance. Nobody, except the students, know who we are or how to find us.
2. NSIEE must aid practitioners in "making a case" for the learning acquired through quality programs. That case can be built upon the legitimate supplemental contribution of EE to:
  - a) Cognitive development at the highest levels
    - 1) Application
    - 2) Integration
    - 3) Synthesis
    - 4) Evaluation
  - b) Acquisition of specific cross-disciplinary skills needed in living an examined life and the fulfillment of ones professional responsibilities:
    - 1) observing and recording accurately
    - 2) reflection and interpretation
    - 3) problem solving and decision making
    - 4) communication--verbal, non-verbal & written
    - 5) interpersonal interaction
  - c) Development of personal and professional values
  - d) Learning to learn on ones own--to take charge of the lifelong education process
  - e) Career exploration and development skills
  - f) Action oriented skills needed by responsible citizens and consumers.

Conclusion: EE is much broader than its many forms. We must not fall into the trap the railroads in this country fell into--They say their business as that of running railroads instead of providing transportation. We must not see ourselves as running co-op ed programs, or Service/Learning Internships, or practicums, but as facilitating learning through the direct experience of that which is being studied.