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Assessment: an Integral Part of Experience and Learning

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Assessment—An Integral Part of Experience and Learning

FOR 20 YEARS, I HAVE BEEN FOCUSING ON THE ASSESSMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING. From the beginning, education leaders have asked, "How do we grade it?" After a decade of work establishing a format to connect the experienced-based community learning to academic credit and grades, the back-to-basics movement of the 1980s called our program into question. Much like a transplanted heart, the experienced-based learning model seemed always under threat of being rejected by the academic body. To avoid rejection, we had to "prove it."

BY MARILYNN CUNNINGHAM

To consider assessment alone promotes isolation instead of connection.

Academic validity of service-learning is critical for having this learning approach integrated into curriculum. I had tried to establish this validity working as Communications Coordinator of the Experience Based Career Education (EBCE) program in the Fayette County school system, which serves greater Lexington, Kentucky. Faced with this new attack in the 1980s, I felt we had to prove the tools we had developed. How can we validate experiential learning as it becomes more integrated into a school's curriculum?

I decided to try to answer these questions working directly with students. I asked to be moved from the central office to a high school teaching position. I was an add-on, working half-time at a school that already had a full-time experience-based learning coordinator. My students were juniors or seniors who showed up on the first day to register. One-third of them had dropped out the previous year. It was hard leaving the comfortable environment of meeting around conference tables and reflecting on process and procedures with colleagues. But I was also losing energy in that sterile environment. I knew I needed my own assessment of experiential learning with real students. And, I got it.

One by one, I saw lives transformed and empowered as these students came alive while serving and learning. The assessment was rigorous. We used a system of building student portfolios that contained assessments of their learning, covering content, process, and context. They were involved in the creation of their learning and wanted to share their portfolios, performing for anyone who would listen. Their other three traditional classrooms were often the audience. Because the teachers knew the history of the students, they were impressed, and so was I. This assessment system was contributing to the learning itself. But could it work with the serious challenges that some students presented, such as those of a student I'll call Scott?

"Mrs. Cunningham, I know I am failing," Scott said one day, near the end of the semester. He had dropped out the year before as a senior and only needed four semester hours to graduate. "I told my mother I would come to school and go through the motions to please her. But I

haven't turned in any work up to now, and I am not changing. You will have to flunk me."

Scott was reporting to his community placement and doing what he was told. On calls and visits to his community placements, his advisors usually complained about his sloppy dress and bad language. But they also said he was able to get along with others and most of the time followed through. "He does not cause any trouble," said one advisor. Could the assessment system we had developed work with a student like Scott?

ASSESSMENT AS A PART OF LEARNING To consider assessment alone promotes isolation instead of connection. Assessment needs to be viewed in a larger context of educational goals. This requires a vocabulary that is understood and accepted by both experiential educators and traditional classroom educators. The traditional education platform rests on three primary elements: the written curriculum, classroom instruction, and evaluation through student testing. In contrast, the three primary elements of experiential education are experience, learning, and assessment.

In traditional or experiential education, communication and connections among the three elements are needed. For either model, it is helpful to think of a three-legged stool, with the key elements supporting the educational goals. This stool requires that each "leg" have equal distribution for good balance. For an efficient and effective service-learning course, there needs to be equal distribution of experience (service), learning (reflection), and assessment (documentation).

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

written curriculum

evaluation through student testing

classroom instruction

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

experience

learning

assessment
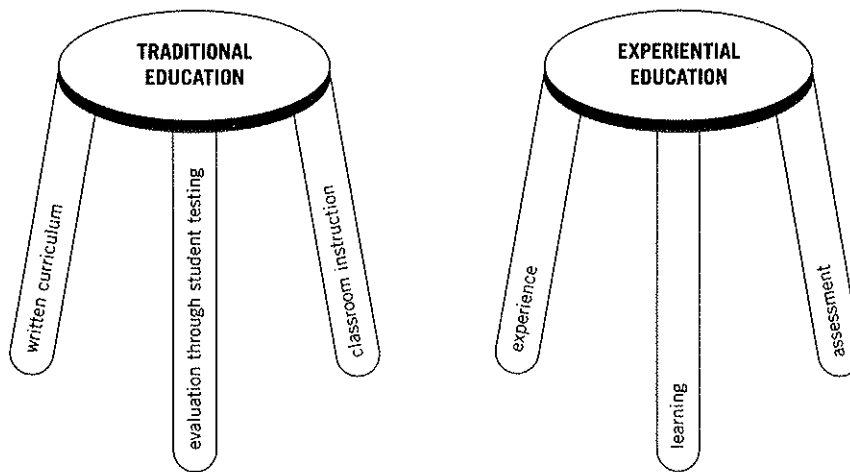
In traditional education, testing is done on subject material presented in the classroom, from texts and other resources, usually isolated to a specific subject area. In the model we developed in Fayette County, the setting for the learning is transferred from the classroom to the community. The textbooks or written curriculum become what we call the "activity sheet." Students develop their activity sheets by gathering the resource materials while engaged in the internship or service-learning project and reporting it to the learning coordinator.

Assessment is an integral part of the learning and encourages documentation of what students learn. This shows what students know rather than what they do not know. This is critical, since new information must be meaningfully connected to prior knowledge if it is to be learned.

THREE-PART ASSESSMENT Good assessment of service-learning hinges on a well developed system for placing students in the right community setting. In our model, students develop their own curriculum for the service-learning course using a grid system to match interests with course area concepts (English, social studies, etc.) and sub-concepts (research, writing, etc.). The method for presentation of learning to be assessed is mutually agreed upon between the student and coordinator. Through this activity sheet, the curriculum, activities, and assessment are developed at one time. The activity sheets are individualized to reflect each student's experience.

Four days a week, for two to four hours a day, students are placed with community resource people at community sites. They can rotate community experiences every four weeks, or they can extend one placement up to 14 weeks. With a longer placement, a mentorship relationship usually occurs. The learning coordinator meets weekly with each student, collecting the weekly activity sheets. These sheets are the reference points for assessments. The curriculum the students develop through the activity sheets and an overall "student program guide" are kept in each student's working portfolio.

At the weekly conference after Scott said he was resigned to failing, I opened his student program guide. His top match on the interest grid was "educational services." So far during the year, his placements had been the police department and recreational department. I looked at the community openings under the category of educational services and saw that a child abuse center was available. Bingo! It was a match that might work. Scott's courses were leadership and literature. No learning was documented thus far. "Scott, let's let your assessment grid drive your next placement and place you at the child abuse center," I said.

"No, Mrs. Cunningham," he said, "I don't want to work with kids and I don't want to work at all. Let me stay in-house [in school] for the rest of the semester, and then I will drop out."

There was a long silence. He had told me in previous conferences that he was tired, tired of trying to make it work. He had lost his dad in a car accident and had taken out his feelings of loss in delinquent activities. This had caused problems for his mother and brothers. He did not have the energy to do the work of school and was resigned to the path of least resistance, to quit caring. But I insisted he go through the motions of his last rotation and be placed at the preschool for abused children. He reluctantly agreed. His classmates chuckled when told of his next placement and ribbed him. Scott's face turned red with embarrassment, but he went.

With Scott, as with all the students, the assessment model involves a thorough set of tools looking at *content, process, and context.* These tools allow assessment of different learning styles, varied interests, multi-intelligence levels, and integrated knowledge. They focus on what

students can do with what they know. During the reflection process, the student addresses questions to uncover the significant learning occurring while serving in a community placement. How? Why? Where? What? For what? So what? Now what? These questions promote learning, as applied to the changes within the student and within the community setting.

CONTENT LEARNING To assess the content learned in service-learning, students select their favorite method of documentation, using written, verbal, or audiovisual approaches. Written formats can be reports, charts, graphs, logs, journals, research papers, essays, and others. Verbal approaches can include discussions, oral reports, speeches, seminars, speak outs, and town meetings. Audiovisuals can be slides, charts, pictures, photographs, posters, audio tapes, video tapes, and simulations. Other types of reports may also work.

We award points based on content, using criteria based on reasonable expectations for that particular student or on externally established proficiency levels. The scoring guide is mutually developed between the student and learning coordinator. Criteria include completeness of data, clarity of presentation, application of logic, clarity of organization, thoughtfulness of conclusions, accuracy of information, extent of detail, neatness, sentence structure, and many others.

Assessment is an integral part of the learning and encourages documentation of what students learn.

PROCESS LEARNING Process skills are also an essential part of assessment, involving five inquiry steps, shown below with the elements of a student's ability being assessed:

1. **state learning objective or problem**—identify a specific objective, problem, or outcome;
2. **gather data**—identify appropriate sources, utilize the sources, and assess their validity;
3. **analyze data**—organize data and evaluate its relevance to learning;
4. **generalize or infer**—understand meaning of data, determine trends, or draw conclusions; and
5. **communicate**—articulate conclusion clearly and produce specified product.

CONTEXT LEARNING Through descriptions, checklists, rating scales, and time sheets, this area of assessment measures the mutuality of the experience. It is designed to monitor the common good of the learning experience, for the student as well as the community site. Measures of context learning are objective as well as subjective. Objective measures include time sheets. Subjective measures include evaluation forms completed by site supervisors and self-evaluations completed by students. We ask students the questions: "Who am I?" "What is a need of the community site?" "How can I best meet the community's need and my need at the same time?"

CAN IT WORK? Scott came to the first conference after going to the child abuse center with a journal. "I am bored watching the class," he wrote, "so I thought I would write some things down." We looked at the journal and talked about the connection between observations and research. It was a beginning.

Later in the week, he began to talk more about his experiences. "I hold them up to the water fountain and wipe their noses. They like me." I overheard him talking to his classmates about the children. Scott was getting engaged. But I still wasn't prepared for the next weekly conference.

Scott presented a report based on his observations and some readings found in the library about child abuse—and a poem he had written. By anybody's standards, the poem and the report deserved an A. They were just the beginning of the work that Scott completed that semester. During the next two months, Scott read his own works to anybody who would listen. He read anything he could find about the subject of child abuse, and the center director mentored him for the rest of the year. Scott completed school and walked with his classmates at graduation. He pursued his studies in college, eventually becoming a child psychologist.

Meanwhile, I returned to the central office, re-energized by my own learning experience and the satisfaction that assessment is an integral and successful part of service-learning. I work now to assure community leaders and school leaders that student-centered learning works. Every year it is a little easier. Every year, there are more success stories like Scott in our Experience Based Career Education program.

Marilynn Cunningham is the Professional Development Specialist with the Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington, Kentucky. Previously, she was the district's Communications Coordinator of the Experience Based Career Education Program. Marilynn has been a Mentor in NSEE's Leadership Development Program and a Consultant with NSEE's National Initiative, funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

ACTIVITY SHEET

STUDENT _____

LEARNING COORDINATOR (LC) _____

EXPERIENCE SITE _____

START _____

ESTIMATED STOP _____

ACTUAL STOP _____

ACTUAL NUMBER OF DAYS TO COMPLETE ACTIVITY SHEET _____

AREAS	NATURAL SCIENCE	MATH	SOCIAL STUDIES	CAREER EDUCATION	ENGLISH	OTHER	OTHER
CONCEPTS	X		X		X		

SUB-CONCEPTS

ecology, research

SITE INFORMATION

State Department of Agriculture

CODE
1 define problem
2 gather data
3 analyze data
4 generalize
5 communicate

ASSESSMENT
5 excellent
4 commendable
3 satisfactory
2 improving
1 needs to improve

	code	assessment by others	self assessment

PROJECT

The student will be able to rationally and knowledgeably exemplify, document, and verbally present one aspect of man's impact on ecological balance through systematic research into the advantages and disadvantages of DDT as a control agent for insects harmful to one type of agricultural crop.

ACTIVITIES

	code
1. With your RP and appropriate research materials, identify the primary agricultural uses of DDT in the past, including: the insects used against, the crops affected, and the main geographic areas affected.	2
2. Research, document, and summarize the major evidence which establishes the harmful effects of a large scale use of DDT.	2 3 4 5
3. Select one crop and one insect as a "case study," and identify: the impact of the insect on the crop, the alternative forms of control and their outcomes, and the impact of DDT on the insect. Contrast, in writing, the advantages and disadvantages of each method, in terms both of ecology and of economics.	3 4 5
4. Determine which alternative control form is now most prevalent since the ban on DDT. Using your RP and his contacts, estimate the statewide agricultural impact of the ban on the case study crop and insect (e.g., increased crop losses, increased prevention costs, etc.).	4
5. Summarize the economic impact of the ban on DDT with the case study crop and the ecological impact of continued use of DDT.	4
6. State whether you think the ban was justified. Why or why not (be sure to cite your personal values, where appropriate)?	4
7. Prepare and give a seminar-type presentation to your RP and LC, using pictures, charts, tables, major point outlines, and other visual, and having all your research data, analyses, and conclusions as backup. Evaluation will be on: clarity, organization, and completeness of presentation; reasonableness of conclusions; quality and variety of visuals; extent of research; and thoroughness of documentation.	5

Assessment Comments (criteria determined by LC and student):

Distribution: copy to LC, site supervisor, and student

Adapted from the Fayette County Public Schools Experience Based Career Education program.

STUDENT EVALUATION FORM Completed by Site Supervisor

This form was developed because of the difficulty encountered in accurately assessing a student's performance using the traditional grading system. Therefore, we are asking you to fill out this form after the student finishes his/her assignments at your site. Please mail your form back to the Learning Coordinator as soon as possible. Thank you for your assistance and cooperation.

STUDENT   EMPLOYER SITE

Brief Description of Experiences

PERSONAL QUALITIES	EXCELLENT	ABOVE AVERAGE	AVERAGE	BELOW AVERAGE	POOR	NOT APPLICABLE
Accepts and understands the needs, feelings, and faults of others						
Accepts and fulfills responsibilities						
Exercises good judgement						
Is friendly and courteous						
Has a sense of humor						
Is accepted well by other employees						
Is dependable						
Is willing to accept suggestions						
Is conscientious in fulfilling assignments						
Follows directions						
Work is neat and accurate						
Is honest and sincere						
Asks appropriate questions						
Reports to site on time						
Is cooperative and industrious						

SPECIAL COMMENTS (student strengths, weaknesses, or unique projects)

Signature of Resource Person

This form is only used in conference between student and Learning Coordinator. It is not used in grading.

Adapted from the Fayette County Public Schools Experience Based Career Education program.