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Experiential Learning in Higher Education

Getting outside the classroom can be the best lesson

By Nichole Bernier

When Zack McCabe applied to college four years ago, he was looking to become the next Steven Spielberg or Spike Lee. The high school senior from North Andover, Massachusetts liked sports and social media, and had a knack for shooting videos and spinning a story.

But he had trouble imagining that sort of career coming out of the traditional college route. His mother, an executive at Monster.com, was a huge believer in the value of accruing hands-on job experience on a resume before leaving college. So McCabe began rethinking his skill set in terms of more career-friendly goals—and visualizing a different way of going about college.

Fast-forward to fall 2018, and McCabe's fourth year at Northeastern University, a school known internationally as a leader in cooperative work programs and experiential education. He has completed most of his coursework requirements toward a major in Media and Screen Studies and minor in Graphic Information Design. And thanks to the school's co-op program, he also spent six months employed as part of the marketing team at New Balance, helping with content curation and executing the right voice for the company's social channels.

In early 2019 he'll start his next co-op, digital sports marketing with a smaller lifestyle brand. When he graduates in 2020 and goes on job interviews, he'll show up with more than the hungry hopefulness of an earnest grad. He'll be able to articulate what he wants to do beyond college in realistic detail. And he'll have the resume of someone who has already been there for several years.

"My dream job at this point is to be able to execute a brand's storytelling through all kinds of media, creating content [for] people's affinity [for] sports and lifestyle. It's really about finding their empathy, and engaging it. I don't feel like I'm working in sports—I feel like I'm working in people, and that's where I want to be," says McCabe. "At New Balance, I sit across the table from the kind of people I hope to work with in the future. There really is no replication of that educational experience aside from doing it."

This is the heart and soul of experiential education—learning by doing, incorporating the student's own action and reflection as an integral part of the process. There are many ways to create experience, from independent fieldwork to collaborative projects, service learning, and vocational apprenticeships.

And statistics bear out the effectiveness of the philosophy. Experiential learning, along

with faculty support, are the leading contributors to student preparedness after graduation, according to a 2014 Gallup-Purdue poll of 30,000 students across the country.

Graduates who've taken part in this kind of approach during college, according to the poll, are twice as likely to be engaged at work in their future jobs. A subsequent poll in 2017 found that only one third of students believe they will graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful in the job market and workplace.

The missing scaffolding, educators and scientists say, is in the hands-on experience. It's no wonder experiential learning is gaining traction.

The philosophy itself isn't new: In 1938, John Dewey wrote about the need for student experience to be central in the education process—not just rote discipline and passive absorption. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has been around since 1978, and in 1984, David Kolb developed his four-stage theory of experiential learning, which consists of having an experience, reflecting on it, making conclusions, and trying out what was learned. But in recent years, the ideology has jumped from philosophy circles to become a buzzword in a rapidly spreading circle of colleges and universities, as well as in corporate training, therapeutic settings, and adult learning.

Rob Smariga, CEO of the AEE, attributes its growing popularity to two factors: The growth of scientific discoveries illustrating the wiring of the brain, and the coming of age of a generation influenced by experiential programs.

"Neuroscience has sort of validated what we've seen in practice for decades, going back to the Outward Bound movement: Our brains retain information and build memory better if there's a social component to the learning process, if there's novelty in the learning, and challenge in the learning. All of those are central to the experiential approach," says Smariga. "The approach has been in use for five decades, and has now affected enough individuals who have reached adulthood."

Those early beneficiaries are now in positions of responsibility and authority in different educational settings, and can see the potential in a wide range of applications.

"From service learning to environmental education and gap-year programs, from internships to co-ops, there's a whole segment of experiential learning happening in

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higher education connecting students with opportunities and exposure to different paths in life."

Northeastern's co-op program was a pioneer of the field before it was a field. Soon after the university was founded in 1898, the practice of connecting students to work in their area of study was a practical one: earn while you learn. Students were quite literally working to earn money to pay tuition. The perception and practice has evolved significantly since then.

"Over time, not surprisingly, it turned out the co-op experience would lead to employment—say, a student working at Raytheon while getting an engineering degree might get hired there after graduation. It really became about job placement," said Michael Armini, senior vice president of external affairs for Northeastern. "More recently there's been a focus on cognition, because clearly people retain knowledge by doing things rather than studying academically. We position experiential learning as the most powerful way to learn. The issue of job placement hasn't gone away, and it's still a big selling point for us. But we don't think that's the whole purpose."

Northeastern has gone both broader and deeper in its commitment to learning by doing. It has taken a more intentional approach with the employers it goes after and opportunities it seeks to develop, and the way student co-ops—each student can take up to three—build upon the sequential acquisition of skills, knowledge, and direction. There are currently 3,000 companies participating, with 100 Northeastern co-op coordinators matching students with jobs and being a support network while they're out in the field.

"We invest heavily, because we have to keep a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the world of work. Student experience changes in the work force, and you see new job categories evolving on the spot," said Maria Stein, associate vice president of employer engagement and career design.

"Students were working in marketing co-ops when social media really started to grow as a job type, and as a result they were doing these job roles before they actually existed."

The school's dedication to experiential learning continues to evolve, expanding its master's degree co-op program with options for participating full-time, part-time, online, and in an online hybrid. And this fall, it further clinched its position as a thought leader in the area of experiential learning with the launch of the new magazine, EXPERIENCE.

"We're a magazine that shares stories about the power of experience to open minds, change lives, and transform culture. It's about lived experience, things people have chosen to do and the experience they've had as a result of it," explains editor-in-chief Joanna Weiss, a former reporter at the Boston Globe. "We're very explicitly not about

Northeastern. But we're promoting the same values, the same ideas that experience is the key to education, and that education is something that continues through your entire life, and is shared.

"The students have the experience, they bring it back to the campus setting, process and reapply it. They don't get self-contained in a cloistered college environment; It's a continual feedback loop."

A feedback loop is an apt way of looking at the experiential learning process, because more often than not, the benefits go in more than one direction, and circle back.

At Williams College, the Center of Learning in Action was founded five years ago to centralize the school's various interactive forms of curricular and extracurricular education. Some majors now have an experiential course requirement, and the center helps students find a course to satisfy it.

The center's director Paula Consolini teaches a popular one, herself: a taxation class

Northeastern students benefit from experiential learning that goes beyond the school's Boston campus.

about earned income tax credits and poverty policies. The course culminates in actual tax prep certification for the students, who then volunteer their services with low-income members of the surrounding community.

"They learn there isn't a standard person in poverty out there—it's complicated, with many factors contributing to people sitting in situations that are suboptimal. When people find themselves facing a bunch of bad options, how do they choose? Students get to see people's stories through their numbers, how they got where they are," said Consolini.

It's an empowering experience for students who might feel helpless about elements of their own lives.

"It puts in perspective being in a school environment so competitive, to see how the knowledge is usable and [to] be gratified to do something meaningful, particularly if they're feeling angst about their place at the school and in the world," she said.

Another class Consolini teaches with a strong hands-on component is "Power to the People," an entry-level political science course about popular sovereignty.

Our brains retain information and build memory better if there's a social component to the learning process.

The class travels with her for a long weekend to Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the University of North Carolina to research democracy in action. They observe how, and to what extent, the will of the people is carried out.

The students interview politicians, staffers, NGOs, and lobbyists, as well as people affected by policies and decisions that limit their autonomy—say, citizens whose polling places had changed at the last minute, creating an obstacle to voting.

"The students were able to pose all kinds of questions to representatives and their staff. Why was this decision made? What are the best ways for our representative democracy to function? Can we get rid of the filibuster?" said Consolini.

"In public they have to be diplomatic, but are far more candid with students with things they'd never say on the record. First person experience like this is in short supply. There was the excitement of getting the answers and the knowledge, then bringing it back to campus to build that wellspring of understanding."

Many classes at Williams have experiential components built into the courses, often in

the form of civic engagement and service learning that benefits the community.

For example, there is an environmental planning course that gathers students in teams to investigate land use issues and grant-writing related to community gardens or bike trails. And a course investigating the science of sleep, with students working alongside a neuroscientist doing cutting-edge research that they are tasked with sharing with the community. And an extra-curricular group aimed at getting local high-risk teens excited about research as a way to keep them on track and out of the juvenile justice system.

Each of these courses involves sharing what they know, while collecting vital bits they don't along the way: In a Habitat for Humanity program, advisors sometimes realize their first job is teaching students how to use a tape measure.

"The basics of building things—we've lost some of that in education. You might hire someone else to do it, but you still have to know enough baseline knowledge to help make decisions," said Consolini. "This is real life. Participatory action research—partnering in work with people you're studying with—is one of the variants of experiential learning.

"This stuff is not new, and we have to respect places that have been doing this for a long time. But now we seem to be at a time that's coming around to appreciating that."

But with the rising profile of any trend comes contrarians, stalwarts guarding the ivory tower, concerned that studying theory will be devalued if traditional classroom lectures and tests are deemphasized.

If students are learning to use a tape measure to build a Habitat for Humanity project, are they spending enough time learning the classical history of engineering that led to contemporary building design?

"The ivory tower, some people say that's where our learning should be," says Consolini. "But in any major, any field, there should be experiential opportunities all throughout life. It's about incorporating them both."

At Northeastern, there's a balance of "book" learning and practical active learning, consciously and by design.

In a traditional four-year undergraduate program, students can do two six-month co-ops; with a five-year option, students can do up to three. That leaves students with at least three years of classroom time, depending upon how summers are used.

That—combined with the fact that 95 percent of students come to Northeastern expressly because of the co-op program—makes for little debate about whether traditional learning is getting short shrift.

"Our focus on co-op is not in place of academic learning, it's about both, and the integration of the two," says Armini. "If you were taking engineering, there are lots of accreditation requirements. You can't shortchange classroom instruction. Co-op is supplemental, a mix we see as most powerful."

Students at Northeastern recognize the two distinct aspects of their education.

While they might prefer one over the other, most do see the value of both, says Paula Crea, a fifth-year undergraduate who is currently in Sweden for her third co-op. A double major studying both the music industry and communications, Crea has loved her time spent working on marketing campaigns at Island Records and Universal Music Group.

But she fully appreciates her classroom time and the perspective it brings to her co-op work.

"You're not having meetings in the real world about what kinds of communications theories people are exhibiting, and how to best interact with them in certain situations," says Crea. "But knowing topics like that from classes influences how I see the world, and benefits me when I'm communicating with others at work."

At Kalamazoo College in Michigan, tactile life experience is woven into the fabric of classwork. Students step in and out of the campus gates routinely as part of their courses to test and apply what they learn, so the question of practical versus theoretical is closer to moot.

"We are very interested in the experiential learning opportunities as part of the academic experience, not as something parallel to it," said Laura Furge, interim provost. In developmental psychology class, for example, students partner with a local elementary school to write a book with third graders, underscoring the importance of scaffolding in a community where 85 percent of elementary school kids are on a free or reduced lunch, according to Furge.

In the sociology/anthropology department, a professor known for work in immigration designed a project enabling students to help Kalamazoo-area immigrants clinch vital government identification cards.

"Classroom work ties students into who they want to be as learners and professionals. Life enhances work," Furge says, "and work enhances life."

Hendrix College students learned about kidney transplants and disease in Nicaragua on the Hendrix Odyssey Program.

Hendrix College in Arkansas was named one of the nation's most innovative schools in the 2019 rankings by U.S. News and World Report, and has had an interesting and very conscious route to get there.

In 2004, the small school of 1,400 undergraduates was looking for a way to distinguish itself in the liberal arts landscape.

The college felt hands-on learning had long been its forte, and that if there were a way to formalize that in a program, it would be a striking differentiator, explained Jay Barth, director of the Odyssey program and a professor of American politics. Students who matriculated the following year were the first to experience the Odyssey program: a requirement to complete three significant learning engagements across six categories.

The sky is very nearly the limit, with students conceiving projects ranging from independent laboratory research with artistic expression to participation in a group project with ramifications on and off campus.

One recent project focused on wellness at Hendrix: under the guidance of a member of the psychology department, the group studied the stressors students face on campus, and examined ways to help students think more critically about techniques to reduce anxiety and promote health through nutrition, sleep, and a reduction of alcohol and smoking.

Projects can also be pursued

off campus or abroad, and pull together a range of interests and skills.

This is what junior Rachel Lance did earlier this year, when she went to Haiti for a week to shadow a physician in the village of Cheridент, a remote and underserved community in the mountains outside of Port Au Prince.

Though she is a biochem and molecular biology major, she also loves playing the violin, and during her downtime gave lessons to local students. She's planning to present her project in multimedia form, mostly using photography—another favorite interest.

"The Odyssey has been a huge addition to my college experience, and a way to incorporate a lot of things I'm interested in into a cohesive project," she said. "The trip got me really excited about pursuing a career in global medicine, working on researching accessibility to medical treatments in global crisis areas."

Lance has also done an Odyssey project in laboratory research over the summer, and hopes to do her third project in Puerto Rico or Ghana.

Projects that elaborate could be cost-prohibitive to some. But students whose Odyssey work involves travel and other expenses can apply Hendrix for funding. Barth estimates that the program has awarded $4 million to students since the program's inception in 2005, not including the $25,000 a year Hendrix spends underwriting the faculty members supporting the students. The investment goes well beyond creating that differentiator the administration was looking for in 2004. It creates an indelible addition to each student's profile as an individual.

"Often if the students are doing an Odyssey in an area that lends itself to future employment—say, public policy work, clinical work, campaign work — it morphs right into a job in the marketplace," says Barth. "Their projects are laid out on their official academic transcript, with a 150-word description of each one. So potential employers or graduate schools see an additional dimension of who the students are beyond their GPA."

But educators and students alike stress that experiential education isn't just about landing a job, per se —it's about the learning.

And the payoff of hands-on learning, and self-driven learning, isn't just measured in grades and job offers. Because what's really gained lasts beyond those barometers of achievement — it's the intangibles of confidence and inspiration.

"I've learned that you have to make your own opportunities. That you have to take initiative, and if you use critical thinking and work hard, you're going to be rewarded," said Northwestern's McCabe. "You can listen to lectures and ideate all you want, but in the end, you have to provide proof of your competence, and what you can come up with on your own. I feel like I can take the confidence Northeastern has given me and apply it to the stratosphere."