



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Experiential learning in communities: developing and testing a framework for evaluation.

Project type

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator : Andrew Cross

Schools/department : GeoSciences

Team members (including Schools and Departments) :

Simon Beames, Yula Hildmann, Margaret Petrie (Education), Rebecca Samaras (Law)

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?

- The experiential learning framework outlined in the initial proposal was further refined and elaborated on in preparation for the data collection.
- Two online surveys were designed and conducted with (a) current, and (b) past students to test the suggested framework.
- A total of nine (group) interviews were conducted with current students across the evaluated courses.
- A fourth cohort was recruited from the Outdoor Environmental Education Unit of Moray House School of Education, who conduct a placement comparable to the other three courses evaluated. This was intended to (and did) achieve a raise in participation numbers and response rate (n=91).
- The data generated was transcribed and analysed. For this, the project team discussed and defined codes and a coding process. All data sets were moderated by a second coder, and differences resolved through discussion within the team.

The findings were then used to evaluate and refine the framework (see below). The student responses also afforded valuable feedback for the course organisers, and ideas to further improve the student experience in these parts of their studies.



What did you find out?

- Overall, the data clearly showed that the suggested framework is generally valid. All factors of the initial framework have been frequently reported by the students as (a) present in this part of their studies, and - more importantly - (b) relevant to their learning experience and retention.
- The factor ranking most highly is *Authenticity* (e.g. the real-life application of the course content with real people, as opposed to theoretical classroom work or role play), and the significance of this in preparing students for their professional life after graduation.
- Some additional factors and mostly sub-factors have emerged as significant. This calls for a refinement of the original framework (e.g. to include *Emotional Engagement*).
- Equally, the findings offer more detailed insight into the individual factors of the framework that can and must now be refined. For example, *Continuity* actually has two dimensions:
 - *Past*. How do the current experience, situation, and/or challenge relate to previous experiences of an individual?
 - *Future*. What use can a student see or anticipate of the current experience for their future life?

Of these, the data suggest that the future relevance is the more important: No matter whether a student felt their experience related to anything they had previously learned or not, the insight that this experience is likely to be of value (e.g. offer practical preparation) for their later work life, was the deciding factor that made them rate it as relevant.

- In terms of the factor of *Support*, a considerable number of students indicate that for this to have a positive impact on learning and development, it is sufficient to *feel* like one can get support whenever and in whichever way one needs rather than having to actually receive support. Figuratively speaking, the students feel secure enough to go out on a tightrope just by knowing there is a safety net below them. They do not need to actually drop into it to feel safe. Based on implicit findings and student comments, it seems that for this feeling of potential support to develop, a positive relationship and trust between students and staff is necessary - which takes time to develop. This suggests that attention and effort should be addressed to developing positive student-staff relationships throughout the duration of their studies, as well as to implementing measures and strategies that nurture the feeling of being supported and having support readily available whenever needed.
- The project team had some doubts when assessing the framework in that it seemed of only low value to find out whether a course featured certain factors deemed to constitute 'experiential learning' without also evaluating which of these factors and to what degree they were considered by students to be relevant in supporting their learning and personal and professional development. Therefore, questions were added to the surveys and interview guideline to that effect. The results show clearly that not only did the assessed factors become evident in all four of the courses, they are also confirmed by a large part of students to indeed be of significance for their learning. This is of relevance for the further use and dissemination of the project findings.
- A large proportion of students expressed that these courses were one of, if not the most important part of their studies at the UoE. This strongly encourages the dissemination of the findings and the framework for application to courses across the university.



How did you disseminate your findings?

The findings have been disseminated through various means, these include:

- Living Labs workshops: a series of workshops organised in conjunction with the Edinburgh Living Lab (ELL) in summer 2018 on the theme of experiential learning. During the second workshop some of the project findings were presented and discussed.
Link to workshop details: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/experiential-learning-2-linking-student-projects-with-research-and-impact-tickets-45044117167#>
Outputs of these workshops are now being collated and produced (in conjunction with ELL, and being made into resources that will be made available through the Centre for Experiential Learning – CFEL- website (www.cfel.ed.ac.uk)).
- Practical strategies workshops: A recent practical strategies workshop (learning in the real world) gave advice on creative ways in which to incorporate experiential learning into the curriculum, with a special focus on adapting assessment and feedback methods. As part of this workshop we presented the PTAS project, and discussed ways in which the findings could be used to inform course design (and assessment and feedback). Feedback from the workshop was positive, and it will run again in March 2019.
- The project was reported on in the Teaching Matters Blog, which reaches a wide audience of students and staff, as well as the general public. <http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/experiential-education-defining-features-for-curriculum-and-pedagogy/>
- An academic journal article is currently being prepared for submission to either the Journal of Experiential Education or the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning.
- On acceptance of this paper it will be disseminated via the CFEL website, alongside a shorter briefing paper.
- Team member Rebecca Samaras has been invited to present at a law conference in Australia in November on the Free Legal Advice Clinic (FLAC), and she intends to present findings of this PTAS project to evidence its success.
- Simon Beames is course organiser for an annual course on 'Experiential Education' on the MSc Outdoor Environmental Education programmes (next in Jan 2019), in which he will incorporate some of the learning from this project.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

- Informal feedback from students gives evidence that participating in the surveys and group interviews has offered the students an opportunity and tool for self-reflection on their experience, and that focussing their attention on factors of success has a self-programming effect for their further studies (and hopefully work life).
- The results will be used to refine existing approaches (e.g. the courses evaluated) as well as other approaches across the university (e.g. courses initiated/ ran by workshop attendees), and to inform the design and evaluation of new courses (e.g. Data, Design and the City – the team is liaising with the course organisers to implement findings from this project into the course design and evaluation).

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?



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- The insights gained from the project are already being shared through the formal and informal networks of the project team members (e.g. Living Labs, CFEL, Edinburgh Futures Institute), and this will be continued and expanded as seems fit.
 - The project raised some new questions that would be worth exploring in future research. For example, *Authenticity* became evident as the strongest factor of positive influence on learning and the student experience. This means that the direct engagement with real clients and service users is a key factor of success. It would be highly valuable to explore the social and learning/experiential processes of this in more detail, and to seek ways to further increase the effectiveness and impact of this factor. In the current project, all data were collected from the student point of view. A follow-on project should also elicit the community partners' perspective on (a) what benefits they perceive from these experiential / community-based courses, and (b) what needs, wishes, and suggestions they have to improve this relationship and the effectiveness of the student-community projects. A third objective should be to (c) (trial and) evaluate specific engagement and evaluation tools/strategies students could actively apply to gain as much as possible from the projects. The combination of these three objectives would enhance the impact of this real life engagement (*Authenticity*) factor in terms of learning and overall student experience as well as the UoE's positive impact on the general public as an act of social responsibility. An application for such a (PTAS) project exploring these objectives will be submitted by Andy Cross and some colleagues.



Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

Either

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:

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