Building Experiential Learning Into External Degree Programs

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Learning about the actual world is not possible apart from experience of it. The earliest learning in human history resulted from direct encounter with realities, as does the earliest learning for every child. Experiential learning — the learner directly encounters what he learns about — is thus nothing new. What is more recent, in both human events and in the individual's education, is substitution of symbolic transmissions of outcomes of earlier encounters with reality for a portion of experiential encounters. Such substitution costs less and consumes less time to tell someone about other lands and other peoples than to enable the learner to go to those lands and peoples and to know them firsthand. The "telling about" kind of education without experience of what "telling about" points to often is misleading and incomplete, easy to forget, less stimulating and motivating, and less useful for development of skill and understanding than education with an appropriate experiential component. At the same time, a person can avoid serious mistakes and misunderstandings if before "going abroad" he benefits from being told by those with previous experience and longer reflection about the culture, area, and people he will encounter.

Educators commonly understand the themes of the preceding paragraph. Those themes, however, are not applied commonly to the task of capitalizing upon the "external" nature of external degree programs to enhance their educational effectiveness. Some external degree programs are empty of appropriate experiential content. This essay addresses the need for systematic effort to build experiential learning into those programs. First, we examine a framework of theory which identifies the functions of experiential elements in a program. Then we elaborate the point that merely being off campus does not guarantee that a program will fulfill these functions. Next, we define some better forms of external degree programs, and adduce example programs as to what we can accomplish by appropriate uses of experience. Finally, we offer concluding remarks about implications of these ideas regarding individualization of programs and forms they should take.

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A Framework of Theory

A good educational program seeks to meet both high priority societal needs and learner needs. In its content, an educational program also should provide ways to meet both theoretical functions and experiential functions of curriculum.

1. The theoretic component of an educational program includes five functions:
   a. It provides an organizing framework essential to data's having meaning;
   b. It facilitates storing and retrieval of information;
   c. It makes possible prediction and projection;
   d. It thereby facilitates testing of ideas to check their experiential implications; and
   e. It extends human control of events in pursuit of human purposes.
2. The experiential components of an educational program complement the theoretic through five additional functions:
   a. They directly acquaint the learner with realities referred to by the words and ideas in theory, thus assuring that learners apprehend their meaning;
   b. They evoke greater interest, more sustained motivation of the learner than can words and ideas alone;
   c. They facilitate memory;
   d. They provide unmatched means for practice and for development of skill; and
   e. They provide the means for testing the truth of concepts and for testing the adequacy of concepts for applications to intended realities.

While the convenience of learner and institution of higher education and the affordability of a program to each remain important practical concerns, such concerns should never be pushed to the point of serious impairment of the educational functions just listed, and ideally should be so pursued as to enhance the educational benefit. The following examples illustrate these possibilities.

"External" Is Not Necessarily "Experiential"

Many persons often assume that an external degree program is necessarily rich in experiential learning. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although external settings frequently provide better opportunities for sophisticated use of experiential learning than does an exclusively campus-based option, effective management of experiential learning in an external degree program may present greater difficulties.

Some programs called external degree programs are not actually educational programs but mechanisms for examination and certification of previous learning. With regard to such programs, I do not think it appropriate to talk about planning how to build experiential learning into them. It either has occurred or lies beyond provision at the point that the individual registers for the process of examination for such an external degree. What becomes important in that situation is that if the certificate or degree to be awarded requires competences one can acquire only in practice or can be demonstrated reliably only through simulation, actual products,

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or performances, then a method of assessment valid and reliable for the measurement of such outcomes is essential. For example, the external degree program in nursing offered by the New York Board of Regents provides an opportunity for testing out to earn the degree without further training. The examination procedure contains both a knowledge test and a performance test. The former is available through paper and pencil examination, but the latter requires participation of the examinee in a three-day clinical experience in which the candidate demonstrated some seventy-five competences on the ward. This arrangement permits an appropriate match between assessment task and assessment mechanisms.[1]

A second type of nonexperiential external degree programs simply offers (away from campuses) the same lectures, reading, discussion, and reflection likely provided on campus except for considerations of convenience and cost to intended students. Correspondence courses as well as classrooms away from campus may fit this program type. Both correspondence courses and classroom-based courses also can contain elements of simulation or of hands-on experience with materials, phenomena, and actors of the subject area of study; but educators often play down or omit these experiential elements. Why? Authorities offer numerous reasons, each for a different situation. In some cases, as in some classrooms, the instructor is not concerned to achieve practical competence or to test theory through application, or to illuminate theory through the learner's exposure to its embodiment in actuality. More often, practical considerations prevent use of first-hand experience. The expense of providing field trips, laboratory facilities, or simulations may prohibit firsthand opportunities. In other cases, inconvenience of providing a properly supervised field experience for scattered external degree students may prove a barrier. By increasing expense, we could reduce inconvenience; or by tolerating greater inconvenience, we could reduce expense. In still other cases, the provision of appropriate apprenticeship, internship, or clinical opportunities may be inordinately difficult to arrange. As examples presented here will illustrate, an institution or other group of persons could postpone or cancel an external degree program if advance explorations show that expense, convenience, or lack of opportunity will not permit appropriate provision of experiential elements in the program.

A third type of external degree program which does not contain experiential elements within it is like the second type just described except that it seeks to *build upon* the accumulated relevant experience of the learner by formally assessing outcomes and building an individualized degree program upon that verified competence and knowledge. A survey of external degree programs reported in 1978 found that credit for learning based on work or life experiences was limited to 25 percent of all credits for associate programs and to 44 percent for bachelor's

[1]Carrie B. Lenburg, "The External Degree in Nursing: The Promise Fulfilled," *Nursing Outlook*, 24 (July 1976).

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programs in the programs studied.[2] Apparently, however, not all programs then individualized degree plans to allow consideration of the learners' backgrounds except to waive some requirements.

Better Models of External Degree Programs

The ideal external degree program would (1) assess what the learner already knows and can do, either as a result of earlier formal education or through life and work experience, (2) clarify to both learner and teacher the outcomes in competence and knowledge the program means to achieve (if the learner chooses these objectives or helps do so, then he should understand this aim), (3) design the ensuing program to provide an optimal mix of theoretic and experiential components for that learner's achievement of those intended outcomes. In practice, of course, no program meets this ideal for all of its students. It is helpful, then, to know what models approximately realize this ideal.

Regarding the first step in this modeling process, I consider it important to realize that assessing and recognizing what learners know and can do at the outset does not require awarding credit for this earlier achievement. Such recognition may take the form of advanced standing, of re-designed choice of program elements or assignments, of more advanced forms of the same kinds of curricular work or assignments, or simply of waiver of some requirements. What is essential is individualization of plans, as distinct from mere dropping of requirements or awarding of numbers of credits.

The following examples achieve a particularly powerful match of social purpose and learner aspirations. Also, the instituion of higher education in each case has done an imaginative and often an energetic job of capitalizing upon the community as both laboratory for learning and resources for financing its program. The ten functions of a good curriculum, moreover—theoretic and experiential—are also thoughtfully served. Also noteworthy, the site of theoretic work does not occur always on campus or in classroom but may occur in the community and on the job; the site of experiential encounters is not always away from campus or outside the classroom. These facts suggest that whether a program is external or internal to campus and classroom probably will become less and less crucial as educators become clearer about what *is* crucial (e.g., the functions here emphasized) and more and more effective in providing for those crucial matters. Though the examples cited begin with programs of professional education, the educational outcomes emphasized (ethical concern, critical thinking, problem solving, self-awareness, competence in applying ideas to actual events) are often central to the content of liberal education.

Example 1. In a recent year students of Antioch School of Law served as the paraprofessional staff of the Urban Law Institute, which handled some 1500 litigations on behalf of low-income clients. The federal government provided

[2] American Council on Education, *The External Degree as a Credential* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1978).

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financial support for this legal services program, which could not have operated without the manpower represented by the 375 students and 25 professors of the School of Law. At the same time, some second and third year students served as Supreme Court clerks, federal court assistants in various capacities, or aides to legislative task groups of local or national agencies. Key objectives included ability to sense and define a basis for legal action, to muster and apply evidence, and to cope with opposing evidence and claims. Overall, competence in advocacy was the goal. These students were completing their legal education in the usual number of years, achieved a better-than-average rate of passing bar examinations, contained among them a higher than usual proportion of women and ethnic minority law students, and shared a much more realistic and thorough exposure to the work of legal advocates than provided by typical legal education.

This particular form of legal education is by no means ideal. We can devise many different forms to obtain a different mix of theoretical study, simulation of legal practices, exposure to actual legal services, and integration of insights derivable from these different kinds of activity. Once upon a time, a young lawyer learned his trade by doing it, and he typically possessed weaker grounding in legal theory and research than ideal. More recently, the young law student has waited for any experience of legal practice until he had graduated from law school. Neither of these forms well suits our times. Law institutions should become resources for teaching law, and they should design education to realize a new level of effectiveness by virture of this enlargement of resources and improvement in educational design.

Example 2. During 1975-1976 over 200 people with bilingual, bicultural capabilities in Spanish and English were enrolled concurrently for a master's degree in Juarez Lincoln University and were working in either a school system (as teacher, principal, librarian, or the like) or in a public agency (governmental or nongovernmental) with an educating function — all paying jobs unlike the law students just mentioned. Their studies occurred at nights and on weekends and during vacation periods to enable them to conduct their studies and their work concurrently. These students were scattered geographically in clusters and served by core faculty members and other resource people. The core faculty member served as mentor, organizer of resources, and evaluator of progress as well as an expert able to provide specialized theory and information. This institution embodies a special mission to help reform education available to Spanish-speaking people in ways that empower them and respect their culture in an environment in which they are a national minority, though sometimes a local majority.

Again I do not hold out the example as ideal. It illustrates rather that if leaders and institutions and communities within which the university works are seen as full of usable resources for the students, people can devise practical, inexpensive, and resource-rich educational programs combining theory and experience. The practical and moral importance of learning also heightened the morale and productivity of both faculty and students.

Example 3. In 1960 less than 100 institutions of higher education in the United

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States provided opportunity for undergraduate students to alternate periods of work with periods of study in pursuit of their education. Today more than 1000 institutions of higher education in the United States provide one or more such degree programs. Thousands of employers function as field faculty for these students. Thousands of work situations become sources of experiential influence on the learning of those students, as do the community settings in which they live. Where universities demand that students write, think, and discuss these experiences in the context of their classrooms back on campus, the classrooms themselves are enriched with a higher level of data than could occur otherwise.

Museums, libraries of civic and other institutions, newspapers, radio, and television stations are becoming aware of their potential functions as institutions of postsecondary education.

Clearly no university could afford to own all of these diverse resources for learning. How the universities can gain access to these other resources and can exploit them efficiently and effectively and in ways congenial to the other purposes of those institutions constitutes a more complex problem. That it is a soluble problem is attested by experiences thus far in which individuals and groups have found mutually beneficial ways to combine efforts of universities with those of the other agencies and institutions.

Time, money, vision, ideas, and talent remain essential to the best designs in educational program; and all are in short supply. How do these restrictions bear upon the new forms that postsecondary education should take? In some cases necessity (that is, scarcity) is the mother of invention. Money, for example, is never adequate to our vision of the possible good we could do. This fact may help to break the mold of old forms. In my experience, programs of the same or greater benefit to the students can be mounted at 20 to 30 percent less cost to the institutions of higher education if they utilize appropriately extra-university resources, sites, and personnel and if they tailor schedules, the roles of teaching personnel, and other learning arrangements to the learning tasks. In the United States, post-secondary education is paid for by a combination of payments by the student or his family on one hand and the state and federal governments and other sources (e.g., foundations, contributors) on the other hand. Both taxpayers and tuition payers currently but modestly rebel against the rising burden of the higher education cost. Thus, the restriction upon financing for postsecondary education is serious. That we can provide better education at significant cost savings challenges designers and managers of educational systems to create forms capitalizing on that difficult situation.

Example 4. An additional example of adverse effect of restrictions and of possible creative response to their challenge will illustrate a different aspect of the work of designing new forms of education. Few learners have all the time available for learning which their teachers might desire. Either the amount of time each will allot out of the day is sharply limited, or the number of years available before the learner enters the work force is limited, or the period of the day or week or year or lifetime when the student can study is restricted by life circumstances. A

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second limitation has gained increasing notice only recently: in a field such as interpersonal interactions and vocations demanding high skill in such interactions, people of limited experience or maturity are ill-equipped to learn what they should learn. If we consider together these two restrictions—when the student can study and when the student has the necessary background to study—and if we examine that combination in turn in the context of the need of many agencies for manpower to supplement their work forces and to provide in-service training for upgrading their already employed staffs, we can see that we can create educational programs for older adults wishing to pursue education concurrently with work and already employed or ready for internships. Such programs accommodate to the time demands of the clientele and the employer and elicit from the employer the contribution of learning sites and facilities and adjunct faculty on terms helpful to all parties. The University of Massachusetts at Boston, in its College of Public and Community Service, for example, has worked out such agreements in community health services and in other fields of work in public and community service.

While none of us wants to go out of the way to find unwelcome restrictions in order to be able to demonstrate our ingenuity in coping with adversity, clearly in our future we will have to cope with such restrictions. If we address them as opportunities, we may reduce, at least, their adverse impact; and in a rare case we may find a breakthrough benefiting postsecondary education.

Diversity of Learners and Forms of Education

The ideal of individualizing education to meet the needs of each student has long been a source of our recognition that learners are of many kinds, often presenting unique problems for the educator, one by one. This awareness of the diversity of learners has been accentuated recently in the United States by the movement to extend access to postsecondary education to all deprived of that access in the past by race, sex, economic condition, or other causes have been. Now several years into the movement to assure access to postsecondary education for all who can use it and want to do so, we are aware, interestingly, that access is not enough. Access has no point unless success at that education is also a high probability.

A difficulty with the aspiration that all entering postsecondary education should succeed is that its fulfillment would require the tailoring of postsecondary education to the needs of all these different learners. This fact implies what I call "a right to reasonable support" in performing the learning tasks. Such reasonable support would include not only help with concepts and content of learning once underway, but also designing learning systems and the learning task so that we reasonably can expect the student to perform well and with high motivation. Furthermore, objectives of this education should be appropriate to these students' potential.

From experience to date, it seems clear that the forms of postsecondary education most suited to most older adults differ from most younger students: (1) Residential education seems less feasible. (2) Their maturity level is higher and calls for playing down the "growing-up" aspects of schooling and for increasing

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the attention to drawing upon their experience for data and insights usable in instruction. (3) They must combine learning with working, earning, and caring for family in a much different way than for younger students. (4) It is, nevertheless, important to continue providing new types of experience as part of their curricula so they develop as deeply and rapidly as they can. (5) The idea that older adults enter university only for incidental embellishments to their recreation or for vocational training seriously underestimates their interest in, and potential for, their full development as persons.

The case of the older adults exemplifies the importance of studying the distinctive needs of different groups of learners to gain light upon forms postsecondary education might best take. If we direct attention to our national society or our cultural community as a client of postsecondary education, important additional perspectives emerge concerning the design of new educational forms. In such an endeavor, collaboration of national or of regional or local cultural leaders is essential if the resources for the effort, the cooperation of other institutions, and the help needed in conceiving programs are to become available.

Diverse Objectives for Diverse Learners

From the preceding discussion, obviously many factors and forces affect the objectives of postsecondary education programs; too, objectives governing any such undertaking in turn affect the forms of such education. If a law school prepares legal scholars, the form of education well may differ from the form mandated by objectives to prepare legal advocates. If the baccalaureate program prepares astute, globally sensitive, active citizens, its form will differ from the program of a school focused purely upon providing specific occupational skills for work such as data processing for computer-assisted operations.

A dilemma pervades the effort to answer the question: What should be the objectives of learning in postsecondary education? To resolve the dilemma, one must begin with challengeable assumptions. Any answer to this question rests upon assumptions regarding how we evaluate the authoritativeness of each answer, how we can judge what is best, as to the inadequacy of our understanding of both the evolution of societies and the ways of educating, and as to the feasibility of doing what seems best even if our judgments on that matter should be sound.

With reference to the last of these sources of challenge, clearly, major change is under way in the world. Historically, education represented a privilege of elites of different societies. This situation is changing rapidly. Historically, postsecondary educational institutions also have been controlled by a relatively limited number of administrators and educator specialists, whose interests and perspectives have dominated institution choice of objectives. This condition also is changing as students, governments, employers, and others have realized their stake in what postsecondary education institutions do. Historically, too, the world for which people educated themselves was a smaller, more local world than we will ever

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know again. There exists a more urgent need for multinationally educated people, with experiential as well as theoretical learning about this larger world. Thus, we need to question priorities of postsecondary education in each national community and in each cultural community. Each community must ask itself whether the learning in that community meets that community's upcoming needs, both of its internal life and of its desired role in the world community. Surely, the probing of that question will produce the most fundamental changes likely to occur in future postsecondary education. These new forms should include a rich array of external degree programs designed to utilize the best of both experience and theory.

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