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Are We Experienced? Reflections on the SUNY Experiential Learning Mandate

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Abstract

Background: The State University of New York (SUNY), the nation's largest comprehensive public university system, recently proposed making experiential learning activities available to all students enrolled in an academic program. Each campus was tasked with examining the feasibility of including experiential learning activities as a degree requirement. The Plattsburgh campus faculty senate voted to reject this requirement. **Purpose:** In light of the Plattsburgh rejection of the SUNY mandate, this study seeks to examine the practice and perspectives of four Plattsburgh faculty through the lens of a single experiential learning assignment. **Methodology/Approach:** A case study approach was used to illuminate common and/or distinctive pedagogies of instructors across four disciplines. **Findings/Conclusions:** Common themes include the elements of choice, embodiment, relationships, and risk. Critical to each case study was the willingness and ability of the instructor to engage in the educational process as a participant and expert learner. **Implications:** If the state, university system, or campus seeks to mandate experiential/applied learning, the mandate should be focused on the pedagogical components of experiential education not on the types of activities that count.

Keywords

higher education, experiential education, experiential learning, pedagogy

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Pedagogy and political policy are strange bedfellows. Nevertheless, Governor Cuomo of New York, the state legislature, The State University of New York (SUNY) Chancellor, and board of trustees all recently agreed to pair the pedagogy of experiential learning with a policy directive to campuses within the SUNY system. The aim of this resolution is "to make experiential or applied learning activities available to students enrolled in an academic program" (Zimpher, 2015, p. 1). The policy is directed toward nearly 600,000 students in SUNY, America's largest comprehensive university system ("SUNY Fast Facts," 2017).

This resolution reflects the current popularity and perceived effectiveness of experiential learning. Recent research indicates that employers, students, and faculty all respond positively to the promise of experiential learning opportunities (Hezel Associates, 2015; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). Indeed, commercial business interests are enthusiastically partnering with the university to establish more than 100,000 new applied learning opportunities for SUNY students ("SUNY Board Calls for Expanded Applied Learning Opportunities for Students," 2015). Concurrently, students and faculty find that experiential learning opportunities increase student learning and enhance career opportunities (Hezel Associates, 2015; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017).

However, despite an apparent consensus in favor of experiential learning, faculty use of these methods appear to be unevenly applied and often misunderstood (Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012; Wurdinger & Allison, 2017). Confusing, as well, for faculty, students, and the public are the very terms "applied" and "experiential" learning. The SUNY Chancellor's initial proposal for an "Experiential/Applied Learning Plan" (Zimpher, 2015) became, simply, the SUNY "Applied Learning Plan" ("Applied Learning Resources," 2017), appearing to relegate experiential learning to a supporting role. Our focus on experiential learning (evident in the title of this article) is deliberate: We seek to challenge this erasure by exploring its implications for student learning, classroom practice, and educational policy.

The Chancellor's resolution includes a directive for each of the 64 campuses within the university system to "examine the feasibility of including such experiential or applied learning activities as a degree requirement" (Zimpher, 2015, p. 2). Although a policy on pedagogy may be issued from the Governor and Chancellor's offices, it is the teaching faculty who determine the teaching and learning approaches in the classroom. The semester-long discussion at SUNY's Plattsburgh campus culminated with our faculty senate voting to reject such a requirement. Presented with a two-page list of 17 approved "applied learning experiences," followed by a definition of applied learning which separated traditional classroom "academic learning" from "hands on and/or real world settings," faculty informally reported finding the directive at once overly broad and restrictive ("All About Applied Learning," n.d.). On one hand, inclusion of many learning experiences as part of the approved experiential learning activities seemed to render the mandate meaningless. On the other hand, the directive seemed to validate some currently existing activities while marginalizing others. For students in the sciences and professional schools, for example, applied learning opportunities are relatively common and, perhaps for faculty in those disciplines, relatively simple to organize. For faculty in the humanities, however, traditional

classroom-based learning may be more common. In this light, the rejection may very well affirm a foundational tenet of experiential education: "The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). Beyond disciplinary perspectives on the mandate, however, one point of consensus is clear: Rather than providing an impetus for improving and adapting teaching and learning practice, the policy proposal appeared to privilege activity over pedagogy.

Despite the rejection of the experiential learning mandate on our campus, the research is clear that the majority of faculty "recognize the value and benefits of experiential learning" (Wurdinger & Allison, p. 36). Indeed, although 49 of the 64 campuses chose not make applied learning a graduation requirement, those campuses all affirmed both the importance of the policy and their own recent efforts ("Applied Learning Resources," 2017). Not surprisingly, many of the institutions that adopted the measure already included such activities as part of professional training (e.g., SUNY Maritime College, SUNY College of Optometry, Upstate Medical University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry).

Of course, to a casual observer, this policy response shows off the well known, intractable tensions of higher education: between skills training and career readiness, on one hand, and education less specialized, on the other. This article attempts to move beyond such abstractions about the nation's largest comprehensive university system by going small: through an on the ground, in the class view of a typical comprehensive college—SUNY Plattsburgh—where professional programs and liberal arts offerings share common space. There, a different, more exciting view emerges when one asks a few simple questions: what experiential teaching and learning approaches are currently on our campus? And what might we, as teaching faculty, learn from experiential pedagogies in other disciplines? Finally, what implications might this focus on pedagogy hold for other campuses, and, by extension, for educational policy? Committed to the idea that experiential learning is "philosophically eclectic and diverse in realization," we set out to discover what that diversity looks like across disciplines, which a vote will perhaps never really measure and a list of activities never fully represent (Allison & Seaman, 2017, p. 5).

To ask whether SUNY Plattsburgh is "experienced" is to ask the most pressing question about the future of public higher education in America. At least that is how Robert Golden (2013) sees it, who recently played out dystopian fantasies of "SUNY Plattsburgh 2050" in his article "Northern Twilight: SUNY and the Decline of the Public Comprehensive College". Golden (2013) offers a cautionary tale of disturbing (and disturbingly familiar) trends already in place: specifically, the centralization of resources, control, and services for economic efficiency—think outsourced advising, Massive Open Online Courses produced by research centers—which will "leave small cities, where so many colleges (especially public comprehensive colleges) are located, as the big losers" (p. 53). Is an Applied Learning Plan one more step in what Golden (2013) calls "the stale homogenization of a system whose historic strength was its diversity?" (p. 52). No doubt many faculty opponents think so, whose expertise, input, and experience appear to matter very little in the Applied Learning Plan; its

focus on internships, support services, and technical problems—for example, transportation to job sites—makes Golden's predictions about faculty disempowerment sound all too accurate. And yet if Golden is right that we must replace efficiency and "accountability with a language and a perspective of community and responsibility," a similar argument should be made about this mandate: emphasizing experiential learning and classroom practice—pedagogy over activity—would go far in making it a call to rediscover "the individual purpose and complex reality" of each campus (pp. 52, 54). To that end, where Wurdinger and Allison's (2017) study sought to examine the perspectives and use of experiential learning from faculty across the country, this study seeks to examine the practice and perspectives of four faculty on one campus through the lens of a single experiential learning assignment. Such a lens, we hope, captures not a twilight but, in fact, the dawning of a new day in public higher education.

Method

Although my field of outdoor adventure education has long been associated with experiential education, more traditional fields of study have been slower to adopt experiential learning approaches and many "do not embrace the practice at all" (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012, p. 139). However, I knew of several colleagues on campus—my coauthors on this paper—who regularly apply experiential learning approaches in their courses. We represent a broad range of disciplines: English, Business, Environmental Science, and Adventure Education. This paper began as a conversation between the four of us, prompted by the SUNY system mandate for experiential learning, but ultimately focused on the role of experiential pedagogy in our own teaching practice.

We share a broadly constructivist approach to experiential learning, which is demonstrated in our case studies and reflection. In her seminal monograph on experiential learning, Tara Fenwick (2001) nevertheless reminds us that constructivism, the "dominant" theoretical framework, must also be alive to critiques, as we "keep puncturing the boundaries, refusing to accept too quickly a category of pedagogical practice called experiential learning" (p. 56). For Fenwick (2007), experiential learning must be "continually inventive" precisely because it is a practice "filled with conflict and contradiction" (p. 538). Contradictions indeed abound, especially when it comes to pedagogy and policy: most simply, can a state university system ever mandate a practice "intended to be radical, to challenge prevailing orthodoxy?" (p. 530) Furthermore, how to negotiate enthusiastic commercial business support for this initiative and what Fenwick (2001) cautions as the "reification and regulation of experiential learning as some sort of endless human capital project?" (p. 56) This study provided a way for us to engage with these questions. What emerges, we believe, will be a model of sorts: a cross-disciplinary glimpse of experiential learning that is constructivist and yet "continually inventive."

In our experience, it is rare for college faculty to observe colleagues in classroom settings and rarer still for these observations to cross disciplines. Yet a system-wide pedagogical mandate applies to all disciplines. To facilitate a multidiscipline observation,

each author explored experiential learning in their own practice through the lens of a single assignment. We collectively selected a four-point case study format based upon widely accepted experiential learning principles outlined by Northern Illinois University's Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (Gissen, 2011).

Each author prepared a case study that describes the following:

1. The experiential learning assignment;
2. The hoped-for experiences and how they relate to the particular discipline;
3. The post experience debriefing, reflecting, analyzing, generalizing, and application; and
4. How this assignment reflects their broader approach to experiential learning.

Upon completion of the initial drafts, we met again and reflected upon the four case studies. Our focus was limited to seeking common and/or distinctive elements, with an emphasis on pedagogical approaches which might inform future experiential teaching and learning. In keeping with the collaborative, multidisciplinary nature of this study, we chose to apply investigator triangulation (IT) to a cross-case analysis of the four case studies (Archibald, 2016; Cronin, 2014). Defined simply as "multiple observers/investigators in a single study," IT is frequently an interdisciplinary research strategy that generally reflects "some diversity of skills, training, or disciplinary backgrounds" among the investigators (Archibald, 2016, pp. 229, 232). The application of IT and cross-case analysis in this study is a deliberately generative strategy; an affirmation and demonstration of Archibald's (2016) statement that "knowledge production occurs through co-creative, negotiated processes, shaped in part by the experiences and biases of participating researchers" (p. 242).

Each case study is included here in the form that it was distributed among the authors for review. This transparency is intended to allow readers to "look through the eyes of the researcher" to encounter what Cronin (2014) calls "the subjective richness of individuals recounting their experiences in a particular context" (p. 20).

In each case study, the author's "voice" has been preserved to emphasize the distinctive elements of practice and discipline.

Case Studies

English, Common Problem Pedagogy Through Student Films

By way of preface, a historical fantasy in experiential learning: It's 1901. John Dewey is in a Chicago movie theater. *What Happened on 23rd Street, New York City* (Thomas A. Edison & Paper Print Collection, 1901)—a one shot, minute-and-a-half Edison film—opens the program. In vaudeville fashion, the exhibitor pauses the film's uneventful sidewalk scene halfway through, inviting the audience to wager on what will happen. Moviegoers study the screen, the street. Dewey—let us imagine—is impressed, noting the dramatic and emotional aspects of learning taking place all around him. Well-versed in the city's risks, the audience places bets, "A pickpocket!"

"A brawl!" "The horse! Watch that horse!" Finally, a woman emerges on screen, walks directly toward the camera, and over a subway vent hiding in plain sight. Marilyn Monroe would do the same 50 years later. The audience howls. The show is over.

For me, however, the semester begins: I screen (and pause) Edison's short to kick off a "Common Problem" class I coteach on urban cinema and environmental filmmaking. The first day students learn two big things: (a) they will complete an experiential learning project, a short film addressing a sustainability issue—a common problem—in Plattsburgh, NY; and (b) more importantly, experiential learning will require a new attitude, fresh eyes to see movies, their community, and their classroom all anew. They must be willing to shout at the screen, to be active, discerning spectators, like those moviegoers of old. Perhaps Dewey did take a cue from the vital pop culture bursting around him. As Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (1998) write about his work, "learning in its broadest, nonschool sense . . . happens when desire is frustrated, attention is aroused, and we investigate our surroundings with purpose . . ." (p. 19). Sounds like early moviegoing, the first steps of successful filmmaking, and, ideally, what I bring to a class dedicated to experiential learning.

The Edison film is one of many indirect challenges repeated in activities throughout the semester. Note that we do not start with a list of sustainability challenges for students to address. Rather, the students—many not local to the area—face another kind of challenge: Do they know what is happening on the streets of Plattsburgh? Do they care? Or is this town largely invisible to them—hiding in plain sight? Attention, in other words, takes on ethical weight once students see that they are passive 21st century moviegoers; moreover, they are passive citizens, disengaged, distracted by that other ubiquitous screen in their lives (the phone). How to make them see the dynamic field for inquiry screens and streets can offer?

The "Secret Spaces" photography exhibit is a scaffold to get students looking at both screens and streets in new ways. The instructions are simple: "Sustainability, like film, is about making the invisible visible. How can we help people notice the world they use/don't use/misuse in a new way?" Students hang a photo exhibit of brokenness and wholeness: abandoned civic spaces, scars around strip mall parking lots, as well as newly painted downtown murals and bike paths. Their phones become, in that moment, a kind of digital dowsing rod to recover place. Observe the apparently abandoned military barracks: "that's actually a brewery and bistro if you go inside," a student photographer explains while waving a phone with the Web site. The class lets out a collective "Cool!"—early cinema style.

With these early steps, from photography to filmed interviews to mini silent films of the cityscape, (a) students gain mastery of technical skills, from framing to editing; and (b) such investigations change their very sense of sustainability, from something "technical" in Dewey's terms to a lived reality for college students in a college town. As one student noted at the end of the semester, "Concepts like recycling, going green, pollution and using natural resources are what comes to mind, but sustainability encompasses so much more. It shows relationships with the environment and how people interact with the community they live in." To paraphrase, it encompasses *us*.

Not surprisingly, the final student films reflect this transitive, personal light—the sense that sustainability is something happening to students: *Ghost Bike*, for example, documents town planning efforts to alleviate dangerous conditions through the tragic story of a student's cycling death; *A Day in the Life* explores the hidden economic links between student waste and the impoverished who recycle it. Influenced by the film *Waste Land* about the artist Vic Muniz and his work with Brazilian garbage pickers, the student film is a testament to problem-solving at the narrative level, as evident in this reflection:

> Would local homeless people be willing to talk to us or possibly be in our film? What kind of narrative did we need to effectively show both sides? This led to our initial concept for *A Day in the Life*, which was to essentially show two parallel days—one a typical day in the life of a college student and the other in the shoes of a homeless person.

In every iteration of the class, a group has tackled the problem of poverty and homelessness and the problem of how to represent this voiceless population. The most recent and successful attempt is *Power*, a film of deep sensitivity and artistry (Brockway, Curran, Pennartz, Price, & Winans, 2017).

When authentic, student-generated questions proliferate, problem-solving follows: from the macro (what is it like to be poor in Plattsburgh?) to the micro (how to edit that story?). As an English professor, it is my job to make classroom conditions for what Sheridan Blau (2003) calls "performative literacy," "enabl[ing] students to perform as autonomous, engaged readers of difficult literary texts" (p. 210). Like that movie theater of old, my experiential classroom sees the street as a difficult and fascinating text. Reading it well builds better students and better citizens. And who is to say that, one day, these students will not build better streets and a better society? As a film from 1901 reminds us, anything can happen.

Business, Experiential Learning in the Entrepreneurship Classroom

A common activity in entrepreneurship classes is the development of a business plan for presentation at a business plan competition (Gottschall, 2017; Russell, Atchison, & Brooks, 2008). Students are tasked with generating a creative business idea and developing a comprehensive plan for its realization. The power of this experience lies in students' ownership of their creative idea and its potential for implementation. Invariably, students become invested in their projects to a degree that I do not see in other courses that I teach. Students wrestle with marketing, management, accounting, and finance issues, addressing many challenges along the way. They must then articulate their vision, demonstrating its market viability in front of their peers and a panel of judges selected from the business community. I forewarn students that their confidence in their own idea will wax and wane and that occasionally students will end up presenting an idea for which they have already lost enthusiasm.

The "aha moment" is a famous experience for inventors, innovators, and entrepreneurs (Napier et al., 2009). It is that moment when a person figures something out,

thereby overcoming an obstacle to a positive outcome. I want the students to experience "aha-moments" through hard work, dedication, exploration, and serendipity—not just serendipity alone. Inspiration is accompanied by hard work and setbacks; it is all a part of an entrepreneurial process (Bhave, 1994). A critical aspect of the entrepreneurial process is taking action to explore and exploit ideas. This is risky, but entrepreneurial action is also required to expose and/or mitigate risks (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Writing coherently about ideas, calculating costs and revenues, searching for market data on the Internet, and talking with potential suppliers or customers can be done skillfully and increases the odds of success. In guiding students through these activities, I hope that they experience and learn to cope with emotional highs and lows. Ultimately, it is a multifaceted set of activities and not a single moment that brings a successful new venture into existence or deters the entrepreneur from making costly mistakes. Because of the personal nature of the entrepreneurial process and journey, it is important for students to experience rather than simply read about developing entrepreneurial ideas.

After the competition, students often have a sense of completion coupled with feelings of accomplishment or disillusionment. All three sentiments are problematic because the next "aha" or "oh darn" moment is always right around the corner. Many students are disappointed that their efforts, often more than they thought would be required, were insufficient to generate a viable concept by the time of the competition. Although the students are aware that only 0.3% of the population are entrepreneurial at any given time (Fairlie, Morelix, Reedy, & Russell, 2015) and that approximately 50% of new businesses cease operations within 5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), these numbers are now more personally relevant. The few who fare well in the competition may gain a false confidence in their odds of success. There are two things important in this phase of the experience: that students reflect on the range of outcomes among their classmates and that they reconsider the significance of the competition experience in light of their entrepreneurial aspirations. I encourage them to think about moving forward, continue to develop their idea, or come up with a new one. I hope that they will think about the next action they will take, the ups and downs they will surely encounter, and the skills they now have at their disposal.

Environmental Sciences, Toxic Release Simulation/Game-Based Learning

Readings and lectures about the interconnections and dependencies among the biotic and abiotic components of the environment may be effective ways for introducing students to vocabulary words and fundamental scientific concepts, but they are no match for engaging with these processes in the field or with professionals. Yet several realities of the environmental sciences limit the effectiveness of field experiences. For example, biological, chemical, and physical earth processes often occur over longtime scales, and field experiences typically only provide students with snapshots of these dynamics. These same processes and events occur in specific locations and under specific circumstances which are not always visible or replicable in the field. Distance and travel expenses can also be factors. Yet creative educators from nonprofit, K-12, and institutions of higher education have been innovating in this space for decades,

and best practices for environmental science and ecologically focused field experiences exist.

For faculty endeavoring to explore the overlap and interrelationships of the *social and natural* science components of environmental challenges, obstacles to field experiences can grow even stronger. For example, the challenges associated with learning how residents of a neighborhood located near polluting industrial facilities understand the risks of inhaling airborne pollutants, or about the options available for communicating with the industrial site, are shaped by residents' values, frames, experiences, and narratives. These topics are extremely challenging for a class of 15+ students to discuss in detail and with sensitivity in the field. Furthermore, stakeholders embedded in these dilemmas are not always willing to share their experiences with students. Students are not always empathic listeners, attuned to the nuances of language and discourse. In addition, students can pose risks for local stakeholders. Students may be meddlesome, insensitive, and carry assumptions and expectations that are difficult for stakeholders to address. All in all, experiential learning is a necessity for nurturing environmental leaders within the *social–ecological systems* arena, yet it is extremely difficult to create effective learning opportunities. Instructors searching for experiential opportunities in the social–ecological systems space—including fields such as environmental planning and policy, environmental justice, environmental conflict management, and environmental problem-solving—may have fewer resources to guide curricular development.

In my experience, classroom-based simulations and games (e.g., Fishbanks, Toxic Release, Harvard Negotiation Project) offer experiential learning opportunities regarding social–ecological systems when true field experiences are difficult to attain. Toxic Release is an interactive environmental governance simulation in which three teams (eight-20 students) interact to manage an environmental conflict related to the release of toxic chemicals in a fictitious community (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2016). The simulation is based on events that occurred in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2012 (Shogren & Benincasa, 2013). Student teams represent public and environmental health advocates at the grassroots levels, industry executives concerned about revenue and brand reputation, and government regulators that value equal treatment under the law and transparency in decision making. Over the course of the 2-hr simulation, students receive data about public and ecological health in the community, make decisions about how to interact with other teams, carry out decisions and receive data feedback about their decisions, and plan future interactions in a series of consecutive rounds that represent annual cycles.

Although Toxic Release (and other similar simulations) is clearly a simplification of reality, learning outcomes for the module include the following:

1. Ability to recognize, illustrate, and elaborate on a social–ecological system;
2. Interpret guiding values and principle objectives for stakeholder groups engaged in environmental planning and conflict scenarios;
3. Build and demonstrate capacities for collaboration and conflict management;
4. Incorporate data analysis into decision making and logically communicate justifications for decisions based on data;

5. Critique the common strategies and tactics used by stakeholder groups engaged in environmental conflicts and adapt tactics for increased effectiveness in specific circumstances; and
6. Evaluation of collaborative processes and goal attainment.

Simulations often take on a life of their own during play. As a result, any single game session may not achieve all learning outcomes equally but may focus on some more than others given participants' decisions and actions. An astute instructor can adapt the direction of a simulation during play, as well as shift the focus of the debrief, to touch on intended learning outcomes as necessary.

Prior to playing, Toxic Release students are assigned with two activities. First, I invite students to complete a "stakeholder analysis" of the three stakeholder groups represented (Aaltonen, 2011). The framework I use asks students to map their assumptions about each group's potential agency for meeting individual and collaborative objectives as well as the stakeholder's legitimacy for involvement in the conflict at the heart of the simulation. Second, I invite students to explore the simulation's "special action cards" which provide insights into the specific tactics stakeholder groups often use when engaged in environmental planning and conflict. I invite students to consider each action described on the cards, elaborate on the objectives and intentions behind each action, and consider each card's relative strengths and weaknesses.

Following the simulation, I lead a debrief that includes four primary activities. First, I ask each team to illustrate the social–ecological system in which they were embedded throughout the game. I then lead a full-class discussion in which we explore the commonalities and differences among each team's map and construct a comprehensive map with input from all teams. This activity focuses on developing students' "systems thinking" skills, which are a foundational skill of the environmental sciences, and allows the teams to observe the different perspectives of each team. Second, we explore whether the assumptions students made in their original stakeholder analyses were borne out by game play. Third, using the systems maps and stakeholder analyses as touchstones, we explore the strategies of decision making, collaboration and conflict management used by each team, and the effectiveness of these approaches. Finally, we consider the effectiveness of the choices made throughout our simulation and what our session can teach us about environmental leadership. Occasionally, I craft writing assignments for these activities to serve as more formal assessments.

Adventure Education, Independent Student-Led Expeditions

Consider the following real-life scenario: The sea spray of the North Atlantic Ocean near Cape Wrath on Scotland's northwest coast becomes increasingly chaotic as swelling waves interact with wind and tide. Two sea kayakers (my students) are forging their way through the chop and swell. The small boats and paddlers are dwarfed by nearly 1,000 foot sea cliffs of Torridon sandstone to the south and by the expanse of open ocean to the north. If the waves continue to grow and the wind intensifies, my students will quickly need to find a safe place to get to shore, not a simple task on such

a rugged coastline. In a single critical moment, all their planning and training are rigorously assessed; ideas presented in writing become ideas in action, and comprehension of key concepts in our field is reinforced by engaging with a dynamic environment. Those students decided to continue on the water in an attempt to round the cape and reach the calmer water off the north coast. Their decision was based, in large part, on their planning and preparation, which included a thorough knowledge of local tides and weather patterns, available landing sites, and their advanced paddling skill. The students succeeded in safely passing Cape Wrath after correctly assessing the changing conditions and their ability to competently move through the environment.

Multiweek skiing, climbing, trekking, or paddling expeditions in remote environments are not typical capstone course experiences for undergraduate students. However, the Expeditionary Studies major, which trains students for professional roles in adventure tourism and outdoor recreation, is not a typical degree. All students in this major are required to plan and complete an independent expedition to complete the degree. The planning process for these expeditions includes a minimum of one-semester spent developing an expedition proposal in close collaboration with faculty mentors. These proposals, and the resulting expeditions, comprise the final experiential learning assignment for our students before graduation. Recent expeditions include a monthlong journey by sea kayak around the Scottish coast, a backcountry ski traverse above the Arctic Circle in Finland, canoe descents of remote rivers in eastern Canada, and alpine rock climbing in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The proposal assignment is deliberately structured to mirror more traditional undergraduate research projects. Before receiving departmental approval for their expeditions, students are required to produce a final paper that includes an introduction, literature review, discussion of design and methodology, and risk management plan specific to their proposed journey. After returning from the expedition, students complete the paper by adding findings, analysis and discussion, and a conclusion. In addition to completing the paper, students give a public oral presentation of their expedition where they are acknowledged for their accomplishments.

The traditional structure of the proposal assignment requires students to demonstrate the ability to synthesize ideas in writing and to clearly articulate key concepts of our field. Correspondingly, the highly applied nature of the expedition requires students to test their ideas in practice and to independently engage with key concepts of outdoor leadership.

Beginning the monthlong planning process for a multiweek expedition can be daunting for students. All student expeditions are expected to engage with relatively high levels of uncertainty, challenging participants' skills and experience in dynamic environments without a faculty member directing their choices. For these same reasons, the journey is also daunting for faculty. The primary challenge for faculty, however, is to guide the students toward an environmental context which appropriately matches the competence of the students. Together with our students, we collaboratively plan for the unexpected to require the application of previously acquired skills.

This final assignment represents our department's broader approach to experiential learning in two key ways: (a) we aim to develop autonomous learners through requiring

increasing independence within (b) carefully selected environments and experiences. In our view, judicious selection of specific terrain and place is the critical factor in developing rich experiential learning opportunities. By selectively matching the learner's competence with the environmental context, the instructor designs the "classroom" conditions in which learning takes place. This is challenging work requiring skill and effort as well as humility on the part of the instructor and a willingness to accept uncertainty in the learning process.

Discussion

Each of the above case studies includes essential elements of the experiential learning process: experiencing/exploring, sharing/reflecting, processing/analyzing, generalizing, and application (Gissen, 2011). Although the assignments meet the SUNY criteria for applied learning activities, our aim in writing and reflecting upon these case studies is not simply to demonstrate how we meet the university-approved criteria. Rather than a focus on activities, we want to identify the common and distinctive elements of our pedagogies to better inform future experiential learning approaches. These approaches may provide a syntax for what Golden (2013) calls a "language of community" grounded in the "individual purpose and complex reality" of each campus (pp. 54, 52).

Below we highlight four elements: *choice, embodiment, relationships*, and *risk*. Of these, risk—particularly in relation to the role of the instructor—generated the most discussion and requires more extended treatment. We decided upon these elements collectively, after review and extensive discussion of the cases. Although there are likely other common elements to these cases, these four were our consensus choice.

Each of the assignments reflects an emphasis on *choice* as the *sine qua non* of experiential learning. From marketing students living with and revising their business plans to filmmakers finding their passion through scaffolding that brings them to the street, experiential learning is a process which "require[s] the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results" (Itin, 1999). Along with the invitation to take initiative, students are encouraged to experience the assignments through *embodied*, affective learning. Present in each of the cases is "the body, with its desires, messiness, actions, culture, and politics" (Fenwick, 2007, p. 531). The highly physical and often viscerally affective adventure expeditions are an extreme example of the embodied nature of experiential learning, but each case study shows students engaging with problems as "subjects" rather than "objects" of the educational process (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Indeed, Maher (1987) contends that knowledge "always has, and indeed should have, an emotional component, a feeling component, that comes from the knower's sense of purpose, sense of connection to the material, and the particular context" (p. 96). For students, the sense of connection is also experienced through *relationships*—as collaborators (with other students), as investigators (with stakeholders), and as problem solvers (with their cultural and physical landscape). A focus on relationships and "*relations*" offers educators a way to respond to the threat of "commodification of experiential learning in the classroom and the workplace" (Fenwick, 2007, p. 538).

These three themes correspond to Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich's (2002) assertion that instructors "ought to set up the experiences and conditions for students to develop a community of learners in which they articulate their individual and collective learning goals" (p. 72). Critically, the learning goals are realized through "hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and each other" (Freire, 1970, p. 53).

Risk

Engagement with the world inevitably entails *risk* and uncertainty. In the case studies above, students are exposed to all kinds of risk: from dangerous seas and unknown streets to the loss of prestige that may come with failure. However, all four instructors agreed that students become motivated by and increasingly adept at measuring risk, in other words, if each class was urged to take risks head-on, it was with a level-head. Environmental studies students are asked to go on the record, knowing that future events will provide public feedback on their advocated positions, while Expeditionary Studies students are exposed to risk repeatedly, undergoing a thorough self and instructor assessment of their skills and attitudes before undertaking an inherently risky expedition.

Risk and the role of instructor. A distinctive element of our described experiential learning pedagogies is that the components of choice, embodiment, relationships, and risk apply to both students *and* instructors. Instructors too must engage with risk, though the risk they face is primarily encountered through the loss of control in a less instructor-centric classroom (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). During our discussion, each of the four instructors related numerous occasions when classes took an unanticipated turn. Indeed, the inclusion of authentic student choice requires an instructor to facilitate an inherently uncertain learning process in collaboration with students. In this process, instructors become participants in Freire's "hopeful inquiry" rather than observers of the process or mere transmitters of existing knowledge. The principle that the teacher and learner are engaged in different roles of the same process is illuminated by Higgins' (2009) description of the Welsh word *dysgu*:

> . . . dysgu *means both to teach and learn and must be placed in context to explain the different roles of the teacher and learner as both engage with the same (learn/teach) process but just in different roles. "Rydwr yn dysgu fel athro; Rydwr yn dysgu fel myfyrwyr" translates as "I am teaching/learning like a student; I am teaching/learning like a teacher*. (p. 60)

Experiential learning pedagogies rely on the willingness and ability of the instructor to risk embracing the dual role of *dysgu*. Similarly, Bain (2004) calls effective instructors "expert learners" and asserts that the role of the instructor is primarily to design a challenging learning environment where participants feel a sense of control over their education, work collaboratively with others, and receive quality feedback separate of any judgment of their efforts (pp. 108-109). In short, educators are part of the community of

learners and not limited solely to planning and assessment activities; they are consciously part of what Fenwick (2007) calls "experiential activity systems" (p. 538).

Conclusion

Pedagogy and political policy are likely to remain strange bedfellows, at least in the case of the SUNY mandate for experiential learning. On one hand, it is clear that any discussion of experiential learning must resist narrow categories of approved activities; on the other, broadly expanding categories risks making the initiative so inclusive as to render it almost meaningless. The four case studies included in this article come from disparate disciplines yet share closely aligned pedagogical approaches. As evident in this reflection, a focus on experiential learning represents an opportunity for teaching faculty to shift stakeholder focus away from activities and toward essential pedagogical components. A still greater opportunity exists to use such pedagogy to tell the campus story, since experiential learning reflects the contours and conditions of each campus. Although the SUNY Applied Learning Plan makes passing reference to this fact, perhaps a new emphasis on experiential learning will counter homogenizing forces, a policy that celebrates the diversity, "individual purpose and complex reality" of each campus (Golden, 2013, p. 52).

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