

AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL: COLLABORATIVE STUDENT CREATIONS OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Lorelei Boschman*, Colleen Whidden, and Jason McLester

Medicine Hat College

The creation of a community classroom, grounded in the philosophy of experiential learning, was the challenge for our education students and ourselves as instructors. Goals for our students became twofold: goals as a current post-secondary student and goals as a future educator. To activate this experience, groups of students engaged both collaboratively and individually with exploratory learning at a local community classroom site. Student reflections showed deep value and learning through this experience and of this experience. There were challenges, including navigating collaborative group work and the necessity of becoming vulnerable, alongside the successes of connecting exploratory learning to the real world and witnessing authentic interdisciplinary work. Further questions arising from this research center on authentic assessment practices and the idea of giving back to the community are explored through these real world experiences.

Three education instructors, with three different subject specialties, undertook an experiential learning opportunity with 33 students through an interdisciplinary community classroom framework. We had many questions about how to focus the overarching philosophy, framework, and praxis of such a project on our students' learning and experiencing as 21st century educators. Before starting on this path, we pondered many questions such as what is the crux of experiential learning, could our proposed community classroom live up to its essence, and what objectives we wanted to fulfill through this experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The crux of experiential learning within a progressive education system lies with an individual actively participating in the development of what is being taught and learned (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938). As we began to unpack this overarching philosophy, the essence of experiential education took shape as a cycle, with no beginning or ending point, and included the concepts of experiencing, reflecting, making meaning/conceptualizing, and acting/experimenting (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999; First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Laurillard, 2012). All aspects of the cycle are important, and the experience may suffer if all concepts fail to be included at some point in the experiential education (Lindsey & Berger, 2009; Roberts, 2005). There is also the stipulation that the experience itself must engage the students "intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically" (Itin, 1999, p. 93). In order to engage our students, we needed this

*Corresponding author - lboschman@mhc.ab.ca

community-classroom to be a fully integrated interdisciplinary learning project carefully situated in the community with community leaders who were supportive of this type of experiencing and reflecting (Fenton & Gallant, 2016). As well, to create a truly beneficial learning opportunity, we also needed to consider Kolb's (2014) preeminent ideas that learning is a process, not an outcome, driven by experience, which is required in order for the individual to fully interact with his/her environment, and crucial in creating knowledge. We found that Fenwick's (2001) work, which placed the learner at the center of the reflective practice, enabled us to think of ourselves as mentors, guiding the students through the cycle, but leaving the ultimate learning and experiencing with the student. Roberts (2005) had misgivings about experiential vignettes becoming commodified and co-opted where the experience takes on the attributes of efficiency, calculability, and predictability and control were considered in order for this experience go beyond trivialization. Roberts had misgivings about experiential vignettes becoming commodified and co-opted where the experience takes on the attributes of efficiency, calculability, and predictability, ultimately resulting in the trivialization of the learning. Along with wanting an experience of depth, we also wanted to create and be part of a close examination of our own pedagogies. We began to understand the reflective practice to be vitally important both for our students and for us as instructors (Fenton & Gallant, 2016; Glazier, Bolick, & Stutts, 2017; Lindsey & Berger, 2009). We looked forward to challenging our own views on experiential learning along with how we talk and walk progressive educational ideals. We did not want to "fail to walk beside our students in authentic ways", by "privileging theory over practice" (Glazier, Bolick & Stutts, 2017, p. 232). This venture was going to lead us to the unknown and uncomfortable, ultimately leaving us in a vulnerable state (Glazier, Bolick, & Stutts, 2017; Ritter, 2007; Russell, 1997; Sivia & MacMath, 2016). We undertook this unknown in hopes that through our own vulnerability and transparency, our students would allow the complexity, messiness, and challenge of such learning to penetrate their idea of a teacher (Percy & Troyan, 2017; Sivia & MacMath, 2016).

FRAMING THE EXPERIENCE: WHY AN EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE?

Upon deciding on an experiential learning opportunity for our students, we began to look more closely at particular avenues through which to facilitate this experience. The concept of a community classroom experience intrigued us, and we saw this experience as a multi-faceted opportunity for our students and ourselves. We looked to ground this experience in High-Impact Educational Practices as created by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Kuh, 2008) with elements of community classroom as the framework (Barnum, 2017; Kydd, 2005). The elements of community classroom experience that became our pillars were interdisciplinary planning and activity, meaningful connections to the real world, and inquiry-based, exploratory learning (Barnum, 2017; Kydd, 2005).

In an effort to create a relevant and meaningful project for our students, we knew we did not want to lecture about the benefits of a community classroom, the need for course integration, or the overall impact of place-based hands on learning. For maximum impact and deeper learning, we committed to an opportunity by which our students had to go beyond being passive recipients of crucial information. We wanted them to feel the learning as a student while also creating opportunities for them as potential teachers to view learning in a new way. We hoped that the process would challenge their educational paradigms and allow them to see interdisciplinary connections rather than stand-alone outcomes (Burns & Danyluk, 2017). From

an assessment point of view, we implemented the shift away from traditional standardized practices towards more authentic forms of assessment that allow students voice and choice in demonstrating their exploratory learning (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2015; Edmunds, Nickel, & Badley, 2015). As instructors, we constantly strive to stay relevant for our students as learning becomes more interdisciplinary and conceptual, instead of compartmentalized by subject. Through thoughtful discussion, we recognized the need to examine the idea of meaningful connection to the real world that is pragmatically possible to execute and supported by the community (Fenton & Gallant, 2016).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

Our beginning collaboration as instructors included recognizing the potentially numerous and broad goals and objectives of our community classroom pillars. The goals for our students became twofold: goals as a current post-secondary student and goals as a future educator. Our objectives as current post-secondary students were to have a first-hand experience in an applied community setting, recognize integration and connections within curricular subjects, and experience the pragmatics of working collaboratively with peers. Our goals for our students as developing teacher practitioners were to provide opportunities for them to practice pedagogical skills, present knowledge and information effectively, become conscious of aspects of learning outside the traditional classroom, consider the pragmatic reality of creating this type of experience, and develop confidence and self-efficacy. These goals and objectives guided the experience and assessment.

SITUATING THE COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

In fall semester of their third year in a four-year education degree, our students enroll in three, concurrent curricular courses. As a collaborative venture between these courses, we took our students off-campus on two different occasions to experience two local community classroom settings where they looked at the experience as both a student and a teacher. After these two experiences, we tasked our students with finding their own local community classroom location and creating experiential unit and lesson plans centered on their location. Students worked in four to six person groupings based on their upcoming practicum grade levels. The groups were heterogeneous with positive interdependence within each group. In our assessment of this assignment, we deemed group and individual work as crucial as both are integral to experiential learning. Thus, our rubric reflected this mindset. The group work portion of the assignment was worth 25% and the individual portion was worth 75%. This individual accountability served to ensure that all group members needed to contribute to the overall group assignment. The assignment consisted of three parts: (a) Group work which involved choosing a community classroom location and drawing cross-curricular objectives and learning activities for location (15%); (b) Individual work which consisted of creating an integrated activity using the cross-curricular objectives (75%); and (c) A group presentation and reflection using a Pecha Kucha format (20 slides shown for 20 seconds each for total of 6 minutes and 40 seconds) to present their community classroom experience to educational stakeholders and community members (10%).

REFLECTING ON COMMUNITY-CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

At the completion of the assignment, we asked the students to partake in a quality improvement study with the potential of sharing the anonymous results. We engaged them in this written manner to ascertain whether our twofold goals for them (as post-secondary students and future educators) were fulfilled. As education instructors, we were curious to analyze the impact and effectiveness of this first-hand experience on our students' understanding and perception of a community classroom. The usage of the survey results resides within normal educational practices at the post-secondary institutional level. Twenty-seven of our thirty-three students completed this in-class, online evaluation. It consisted of seven written response questions of which we will focus on three.

Our students were asked to share what they believed was the value of experiential learning outside of the classroom using the course opportunities as a foundation. Overall, comments from the survey focused on the validity of these experiences from a student and teacher point of view. As students, they appreciated the opportunity to connect with a learning environment that was different than what they themselves had experienced in school. For example, one student wrote, "It gave me new input on what to expect in different learning environments than what I have typically been used to." From the point of view as future teachers, our students valued the opportunity to look at educational experiences through a teacher lens where they became privy to all aspects of creating and planning a rich educational experience. Numerous comments centered on the value of engaging in this teacher-focused activity in that they gained confidence to implement such an experience as a pre-service teacher. Finally, the most common response to our question was an appreciation of the real-world experience. Through this community classroom experience, they immersed themselves in interdisciplinary planning and exploratory learning through a meaningful connection to the real world. The learning taken away was impactful, authentic and perceived as important in their journey in becoming a teacher. One student wrote, "I felt that not only was it awesome, it was influential and crucial to connecting context from what we learnt in class to real life experiences. It impacted me 10 times more than being told about what would have happened in these experiences!"

We were also curious as to the single most valuable educational aspect learned through the community classroom. One aspect that resonated through the responses was the idea that any location outside of school can serve as a community classroom as long as it is linked to curriculum outcomes. "Learning can happen anywhere," summarized many of the responses. Our students also discovered that experiences outside of the classroom are vital for student learning. They concluded that sparse connection to the real world denigrates the schooling experience and results in potentially shallow understanding. One future teacher emphasized "how crucial it is for the students to be outside the classroom and out in the community learning in a new environment." From the teacher point of view, our students' world expanded in that they saw the importance of creativity and ingenuity when incorporating real world experiences. They were challenged to think of a broader classroom concept not limited by physical walls.

Lastly, we inquired about the changes that occurred in their understanding of the constitution of a community classroom through this experience. The responses showed a paradox in their thinking; some students expressed that creating this experience was a daunting task while others expressed a pleasant surprise at the ease of its creation. Despite these differing views, our students alluded to the reality that a community classroom requires detailed planning on the part of the teacher. Through the creation of these detailed plans, students came to understand that

cross-curricular outcomes can and need to be included. Seeing this educational format as an opportunity to include numerous subjects within a concept-based philosophy is portrayed in the following student quote: “I understand why a community classroom can be so useful for the students. It allows me to think and bring in more outcomes into lessons to tie all of the subjects together.” Finally, our students delved into the concept that experiential learning is vital for their future students in that it provides real world connections, memorable experiences, and engagement for students.

ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

As reflection is a vital component of the cycle of experiential learning, it was imperative for us to analyze the challenges and successes of this community classroom experience as they related to our objectives. We reflected on challenges and successes from the point of view of the student and instructor.

Student Successes and Challenges

Students used their experiences and reflections in order to make meaning of and act upon the curricular objectives of this experience (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). Our objective for them was to engage in the experience as a student and teacher and to create a grade-level community classroom plan usable by professional teachers in the field. They were successful in reaching this objective as illustrated through the presentation of their community classroom outcomes and activities to a panel of college administrators, instructors, community members, and professional teachers. By engaging with this panel, the students saw their exploratory learning as valid, relevant, and connected to the real world. Through the entire process, the challenge of collaborative group work became a reality. It became messy at times and they felt what it was like to have to resolve time issues, team discrepancies, and ideological conflict. Nevertheless, this messiness is now a success because it became a lens to situate future collaborative ventures with grade colleagues.

Instructor Successes and Challenges

We became windows and mirrors for our students, revealing and reflecting the good, bad, and ugly of experiential learning (Sivia & MacMath, 2016). Challenges and successes became interwoven, dependent on our outlook on the experience. On a pragmatic level, this community classroom experience demanded extra instructor time in order to create, implement, and assess. Assessment was particularly problematic, as students perceived the marking standards as different between instructors, thus creating the impression of an un-level playing field. It would have been easier to make assessment decisions in isolation and within the confines of our own courses, but the student benefit and the opportunity for personal interaction served as a foil to the pragmatic issues (Fenton & Gallant, 2016). There were also times where it was uncomfortable not being the expert in the class. This new relationship with students where we did not always know the answer caused some unease. Nevertheless, our commitment to transparency allowed us to continue down this road and not pull back to the safety of past teaching pedagogy.

During each class and at the community site, our students saw us modeling how to collaboratively engage with and implement a community classroom. For example, we attended each other’s classrooms regularly. We witnessed how students interpreted a variety of subjects,

topics and ideas through the choices they made about their group assignment. We challenged ourselves to look at our own subject curriculum for even more future integration. A growth mindset evolved as we debriefed the strengths and limitations of the experience, all the while showing that we did not always have the answers but did embrace the journey of exploration and collaboration (Dweck, 2007). We were all on the community classroom site to walk alongside the students as equal learners. Vulnerability became a success as we wanted them to realize alternate possibilities for teaching and to feel confident in designing learning in a unique setting (Burns & Danyluk, 2017). Overall, as validated by the student comments, it appears that they were aware of the limitations of this experience, but found them favorably counter-balanced with growth both as a students and teachers. For us as instructors, we also concluded that the inclusion of a community classroom experience was a meaningful direction to take in our future planning. The extra time we spent to make this a reality paled in comparison to the level of learning and excitement it created.

FUTURE QUESTIONS OF COMMUNITY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

As we stand at the end of this particular classroom experience, we come away with more questions than answers, with the queries being of philosophical and pragmatic nature. One of our questions now is how we can continue to center our community classroom in the realm of experiential learning without it becoming commodified and predictable (Roberts, 2005). As we gain implementation skills, we have to resist the temptation to micro-manage the experience until it becomes “robbed of substance or meaning” (Sakofs, 2001, p. 5).

In future experiences, we also need to ponder the authenticity of reflection and assessment. How can students authentically reflect without it becoming entangled with assessment? What are the issues that will inevitably erode the reflective portion of the cycle if reflective observation and summative grades are linked? How can we inspire busy students to go deep with their pondering, questioning, and learning if they are not linked? Is it possible to assess authentically such an experience within the confines of a post-secondary institution, and what does that look like (Openo, 2018)? Should there even be a formal assessment of such experiences? What would this look like in light of the essence of this pedagogy? In thinking about connecting to the real world of schools, how can we give back to that community in a truly authentic manner? In the quest for making connections to the real world, should there be a usable and valid culminating product to share? From a pedagogical point of view, does exposure to experiential learning in education training transfer to the elementary or secondary classroom? Will these young teachers utilize experiential learning in their classrooms because of their community classroom experience with us? Finally, an overarching question is, where do the lines blur between upholding the experiential learning cycle and our responsibilities to a quantitative educational system?

We continue to ponder successes, challenges, and questions around experiential learning, all the while dreaming of future opportunities for our students to connect interdisciplinary knowledge and the real world.

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