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Experiential Education in the Writing Classroom:
Developing Habits for Citizenship

Anika Shumway

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Experiential Education in the Writing Classroom: Developing Habits for Citizenship

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As political polarity and social divisiveness increase in the United States, more organizations and scholars are calling on institutions of higher education to rise to the occasion and incorporate into their objectives the development of competent citizenship (The National Task Force). Writing classrooms are particularly suited to these kinds of objectives as writing already proposes relationships between rhetor and audience that have ethical dimensions and require mutual honesty, accountability, and respect (Duffy, “The Good Writer”). Additionally, the Framework for Success, a document that has become central to shaping the goals of writing classrooms, articulates habits of mind, like openness and engagement, that lend themselves to healthy, productive citizenship and civic interactions. However, the inherence of these qualities and potential in writing classrooms is not always recognized or actualized. Instructors need a reliable pedagogical framework to guide their objectives and choices so that students develop citizenship competencies through their writing experiences. The theory of experiential learning (EL) is one promising avenue for such a pedagogical method. This thesis explains keys to understanding EL theory and implementing them in traditional classrooms and details lived examples from two classrooms that illustrate how EL in practice can help students develop habits of mind that in turn contribute to citizenship competencies.

Keywords: experiential education, experiential learning, writing, habits of mind, citizenship, openness, engagement, experience, reflection, pedagogy, learning cycle, communities

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Additional thanks go to John Bennion who set me on the path of experiential learning. Participating in his class as a student and later as a co-instructor have fundamentally shaped my ideas about what truly matters in an education and about how to help students not only learn course concepts but to ultimately become better people because of the time they spend in our classrooms.

Finally, thanks are due to Sam, whose faith in my ability to make worthwhile contributions has buoyed me up many times during the process of creating this thesis, and who has not only spent many hours listening to me brainstorm my way through drafts but managed to do so while keeping pace with more than his fair share of dishwashing.

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Introduction

In reflecting on the recent turmoil that marked the period between Election Day and Inauguration Day, opinion editor Boyd Matheson wrote, “We...would be wise to remember that no one who plants thistles in the spring expects to harvest fruit in the fall...Thistles planted in the past have grown as noxious weeds naturally do. Today, the country is reaping the whirlwind of contempt” (Matheson). Recent events have unmasked an alarming reality: political and public discourse in America have frayed to the point of being threadbare. Civic interactions and relationships are anything but civil. Disagreements are no longer an issue of differing opinions but perceived as evidence of irreconcilable perspectives and incompatible goals. As in other critical moments of the past, America finds itself in need of citizens prepared to respect, to cooperate, and to rebuild bridges.

Higher education has the potential to be one of the sites that produces such citizenship. Citizenship and democracy itself are inextricably tied to education. As John Dewey puts it, a “government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated” (*Democracy*). The need for that education is evident when we think of democracy as not only a person’s ability to vote but as a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, *Democracy*). This more comprehensive definition of democracy highlights its necessary and conducive relationship to education. P.A. van der Ploeg’s analysis of Dewey’s work asserts that education offers democracy two important qualities: communality (everyone is involved and has access to opportunities) and renewal (citizens have learned to show initiative and adaptability). Cultivated together in individuals, these qualities promote the continued success of societies rooted in democracy (4). And

institutions of higher education can play a major role in preparing students for this kind of democratic participation.

Writing classrooms inherently lend themselves to cultivating the capacity for the kind of democracy and citizenship in students that Dewey articulates. Writing courses are by nature oriented towards the development of habits of mind such as curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition—habits, in short, that cultivate global citizenship (Barnett et al. 59). Such citizenship is key to addressing the problems encountered by interlocking webs of communities—problems that require collaboration and equitable solutions (“Global”). So while writing instructors and their students may think they are only learning how to write, in reality, they are participating in writing experiences that have the potential to cultivate the habits of mind that shape competent citizens. Thus, the development of these habits of mind should factor explicitly into course objectives as well as pedagogical technique so that instructors and students are working together to do more than check boxes for graduation and instead working to develop habits that will serve students throughout their lives.

Writing studies has sought to bridge the gap between students’ participation in a classroom and their contributions to communities outside of and beyond it through programs like internships, service-learning, and community-based or place-based learning (Jacoby; Waterman; Julier). These are examples of experiential education, a tradition rooted in providing students with concrete experiences in order to help them understand and practice abstract concepts in tangible ways. These types of programs are important links that help students discover connections between abstract ideas about writing and real-world applications (Soria and Weiner). Service-learning or community-based learning in particular have been posited as effective ways

to provide students with transformational learning experiences and development toward civic engagement (Brizee et. al; Kendrick and Suarez).

But if writing instructors believe that experiential learning resides only in sites outside of a classroom setting, the full potential of experiential education is lost. Experiential education expert Jay Roberts counters the common belief that experiential learning is limited only to certain contexts or fields:

To ‘do’ experiential education, one does not need to leave the classroom and the campus. One doesn’t even need to have students learning ‘actively’—if by actively we simply mean physically active . . . Another [misconception] I often hear [is] that experiential learning only really works with so-called applied fields . . . like environmental studies, engineering, theater, sociology, education, etc. . . . My only response here is to suggest that it is, in fact, quite possible to incorporate experiential education into any field or discipline. (*Experiential* 37)

Experiential learning theory is not tied to any specific site or context but rather lends itself to every site and every context. While the field of writing studies has a long history with programs like service learning, it has yet to thoroughly explore the potential of using the theory of experiential education as a pedagogical methodology that will facilitate achieving writing class outcomes. Understanding the theory and how to apply it in the writing classroom can empower writing instructors to know how to leverage this pedagogical approach in order to promote citizenship development in their students.

While writing classrooms lend themselves well to cultivating citizenship competencies and those correlating habits of mind, they do not automatically ensure students are developing towards those outcomes. Achieving those objectives for students requires attentive pedagogical

design in every aspect of the course. Understanding and applying experiential education can provide that replicable framework to help instructors teach for those habits of mind and citizenship outcomes. Experiential education shares parallel goals when it comes to learning. It moves beyond development of marketable skills to “the development of a just and thriving democracy...It is about the whole person and their personal development in their many roles as family member [and] citizen” (Kolb). Experiential educators, teaching and working in many different contexts, see that development toward lifelong learning and personal transformation when their students engage in experiential learning (Coker et al.; Coyer et al.; Painter and Howell). This overlap in objectives and potential outcomes between experiential education and writing classrooms makes the theory of experiential learning a viable source of pedagogical theory for writing instructors to engage with so that they can actualize the inherent potentiality of their classrooms.

In this project, I turn first to explorations of theory and then to the examples of two classes I designed and taught in order to answer the following questions: Why are writing classrooms particularly suited to helping students develop habits of mind that facilitate citizenship? And how can the theory of experiential education help writing instructors craft assignments and activities that develop those citizenship competencies? Dewey’s theories of education and democracy as well as the habits of mind underpinning writing instruction hinge on the experiences students have, now and throughout their lives. For writing instructors to meet the objective of cultivating habits of mind and citizenship competencies in their students, they must understand the theory and principles of experiential education and know how to apply both in their classrooms. The result will be writing instructors who play a vital role in helping students develop habits of mind that ensure that their time spent in a classroom becomes the kind of

transformative learning experience that empowers them in their personal and civic lives long after the bell rings.

Writing Classrooms as Sites of Civic Education

Writing classrooms are poised to help nurture individuals who are prepared to shoulder the responsibility of citizenship. Rhetorical awareness is paramount to the kind of context-reading required to participate in myriad global system settings (Barnett 63). Teachers of rhetoric, according to John Duffy, are inherently teaching students to consider carefully choices they make when engaging in relationships with their readers and to learn to be “a good person” through writing that is guided by “honesty, accountability, generosity . . . and mutual respect” (“The Good Writer,” 235, 238). Under that lens, writing instruction becomes much more than teaching students to analyze, organize, and revise, and instead takes on the even more compelling role of helping students develop traits that coincide with many of the aims of civic engagement.

Developing habits of mind that equip students for citizenship is essential to repairing and maintaining key relationships that undergird communities—relationships that have been sorely tested over the last few years. As Duffy points out, “One of the challenges facing teachers of writing in the twenty-first century United States is how best to teach practices of reasoned, fair-minded argument when contemporary public discourse is so polarized, strident, and deeply dishonest” (“Ethical Rhetoric”). That need for higher education to cultivate citizens who can collaborate and contribute positively to their communities has also been highlighted in a report developed by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement: “Today’s education for democracy needs to be informed by deep engagement with the values of liberty, equality, individual worth, open mindedness, and the willingness to collaborate with people of

differing views and backgrounds toward common solutions for the public good” (3). The divisions and polarity that have characterized recent years give rise to questions of solutions and change, and many like Duffy and the National Task Force on Civic Learning have centered their focus on the potential to create such change through higher education. Good citizenship does not spring up spontaneously; public discourse and functioning communities trace their roots back to education (The National Task Force 2). In this case, there is much writing instructors can do to encourage their students in the habits of mind that contribute positively to community development that have, in many ways, deteriorated.

Developing those habits of mind is at the core of a collaborative project written by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP). This project, “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” has become a foundational document for writing programs and writing instructors as both work to equip students with the skills and mindsets that will benefit them not only in college courses but also in diverse contexts beyond their formal education. The Framework argues that writing courses and writing experiences are meant to help students develop “habits of mind” that are critical to their “success in college and beyond” (2). These habits of mind described in the Framework overlap with those that characterize citizenship competencies, thus making writing classrooms natural sites of that development toward functioning democratic societies while simultaneously achieving the outcomes of an education in composition. Two of those habits of mind—openness and engagement—are of particular relevance to this project.

The Framework describes openness as “the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.” Students demonstrate openness when they not only examine and

understand their own perspectives but seek to connect them to those of others. Students who engage in openness are willing to listen to others, both to their ideas and to their feedback. Additionally, the habit of engagement refers to a student's "sense of investment and involvement in learning." Students that practice engagement again make connections between their own ideas and those of others; they find new meanings in those connections; and they put into action the new ideas and perspectives they have found (4). Openness and engagement describe two dispositions that writing classrooms are poised to develop in students which also correlate with the traits of productive, contributing citizenship that have lapsed in our current society.

Understanding Experiential Learning Theory

If we hope that our writing instruction will create the habits of mind that will benefit our students beyond the classroom, then it is vital to consider effective ways to teach for that development within the writing classroom. Because of its overlapping objectives with the Framework, the theory behind experiential education may have much to offer to writing instructors as they work towards the goal of instilling in students the habits of mind that will later characterize their capacity for citizenship. And while some programs rooted in experiential learning are well known to writing instructors, there is more to be said about applying the theory within the average writing classroom, particularly in order to develop citizenship competencies.

The roots of the theory of experiential learning trace back to the learning cycle developed by educational theorists in the 19th and 20th centuries. The combined work of Lewin, Dewey, Piaget, and Kolb articulates experiential learning as an upward spiral. Experiential learning begins with a concrete experience, or as Keeton and Tate put it, direct contact with the phenomena being studied, in contrast "with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of

the learning process” (2). The cycle guides the student from that concrete contact through other essential steps to learning from it: reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Each of these steps, connected to each other, is key to the learning process. As David Kolb writes,

Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities—concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualization abilities (AC), and active experimentation (AE) abilities. That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE). (Kolb)

Just as experiential learning cannot be divided from the concrete experience, it also requires that the learner continue to engage with that experience through reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Learning from an experience is a complex, multi-faceted process in which these steps engender, reinforce, and echo back to each other. To be clear, Kolb’s straightforward, step-by-step description of learning has been debated by scholars in education—learning is rarely so clearcut and segmented as to lend itself well to a four-step cycle (Seaman). Nevertheless, the four elements Kolb describes have, in large part, remained foundational to the theory of experiential learning, despite renaming, clarification, and qualification. Regardless of the particular model, selecting only one or two of these elements undercuts the full potential of experiential learning and limits the learner to only a fraction of the learning that could be had otherwise. And yet that can often be what happens in so-called experiential learning. Teachers

might plan a field trip or bring in a hands-on activity for one particular lesson and pass it off as experiential learning. Or study abroad programs might take students to a new place and culture, hold class in the morning that mimics what it might look like back on campus, and give them free reign to explore wherever they are. Heinrich and Green push back against this kind of “experiential learning,” arguing that “[experiential learning] approaches applied in classrooms are often disconnected from theory Without intentional integration, such loosely connected designs could result in student confusion and suboptimal learning outcomes” (207). Experiential learning by definition must be a full process and intentionally implemented by instructors who understand the theory.

Some instructors might argue that their students are having experiences already. Writing classes already require reading, writing, peer reviewing, revising. As such, adopting a new pedagogical approach is both unnecessary and cumbersome. But having an experience and engaging in experiential learning are a bit like squares and rectangles—experiential learning will always pivot on having an experience, but having an experience does not always mean learning is occurring. Experiential learning hinges on a specific definition of experience: direct contact with the phenomenon being studied. It also requires more than just having that contact, since having an experience alone does not equate to learning from it (Dewey 247; Keeton and Tate). And when instructors intentionally plan and create moments of experiential learning for their students, they engage in experiential education, which is a systematic pedagogical process (Roberts, *Experiential* 24-5). The intentional framework that gives meaning to an experience and facilitates learning from it is essential to the integrity of experiential education. Experiential education begins with an experience, but it ultimately encompasses a larger systematic process of learning that encourages students to develop habits of mind that endure beyond the classroom.

The objectives of experiential education align with many of those outlined in the Framework, including openness and engagement, as well as those in a liberal arts education generally, and the theory of experiential learning provides a clear rationale and principles to guide pedagogical choices that help instructors achieve those objectives. Students, given the opportunity of experiential learning, prepare not just for the workplace but also develop critical thinking as well as the capacity for lifelong learning (Eyler 24-26). Through meaningful experiences, they accrue citizenship competencies. They develop openness as they become more self-aware and as they listen to and step into the perspectives of others. They develop the habit of engagement as they make connections to those diverse perspectives and act on their new perspectives (“Global”). Experiential learning theory, working in tandem with writing instruction, helps instructors facilitate this growth in their students in such a way that extends beyond the duration of one class.

Implementing Experiential Education in Writing Classrooms

The capacity for lifelong learning that experiential education can facilitate can only actualize when instructors are intentional in applying the theory of experiential learning. Instructors need to recognize opportunities for direct contact with the phenomena being studied that Keeton and Tate define as central to experiential learning. They also need to understand how to guide students through the experiential learning cycle so that, as Roberts argues, those experiences are intentionally designed and integrated into the overall class rather than occurring incidentally or without proper framing.

To facilitate students’ successful learning, instructors must provide that framing for their outcomes, activities, and assignments. Dewey points out that every classroom provides students with experiences, but simply having an experience does not mean learning from it—indeed, they

can potentially be “mis-educative” (247). Classroom experiences need coherent framing that help students see how they build upon each other and prepare the student for future experiences.

Dewey warns of the dangers of failing to provide such a framework:

[Experiences] may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. . . . Each experience may be lively, vivid, and ‘interesting,’ and yet their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits. The consequence of formation of such habits is inability to control future experiences. (*Experience* 247)

Intentionally drawing on the elements of the experiential learning cycle helps instructors to create that framework that connects one experience to the next. Training students to engage in the experiential learning process from experience to experience is key to their development of lifelong habits. Rather than seeing classroom activities or individual assignments as disparate, unrelated parts, they discern connections and patterns and learn to anticipate them in the future; they also learn how to internalize and engage with them.

Experiential Education in English 306: Travel Writing

So what do these ideas and principles of experiential learning look like in writing classrooms? For lived examples, I will draw on two classes I taught and co-taught. The first was a travel writing class that focused on nonfiction essay writing that I co-taught with a faculty member at Brigham Young University, a private religious university. This class was paired with a rock climbing class for the first half of Fall 2020; instructors and students met once weekly in person to learn how to rock climb. The writing side of the class took place via Zoom one day each week and then combined writing instruction and time for individual writing with the rock climbing class. The second class I taught was an advanced writing course that fulfilled General

Education credit; it focused on teaching students genres and strategies for persuasive writing. It too took place via Zoom twice each week.

The travel writing class is an example of what is classically perceived as experiential learning. Students left the classroom, were physically active, and combined reflective writing with that out-of-classroom experience to grapple with new or complex experiences and ideas. I share this class as an example of experiential education operating in writing classrooms for two reasons. First, as writing instructors explore opportunities to provide students with direct contact to the phenomena they are studying, there may be great potential for interdisciplinary collaboration between professors and the classes they teach. The theory of experiential learning itself is not tied to any particular physical location nor to physical activity—thus the proposition to explore opportunities to implement it in writing classrooms—but both physical location and physical activity can be productive avenues of experiential education if instructors have done the work of intentional design and framing. This leads to the second reason to include this example: it exemplifies the outcomes students can experience as intentional pedagogical choices guide them through not only the concrete experience but the accompanying reflection and conceptualization.

Developing Openness through Experience and Reflection. The travel writing class illustrates how experiential learning combined with writing instruction changed students' perspectives and beliefs, or in the language of the Framework, how it helped them develop habits of mind like openness. Again, in many ways, this class embodied many traditional traits of an experiential education environment. Unlike other nonfiction essay workshops taught on campus, this section, designed by my co-instructor to be an experiential education course, rooted the writing process in physical experiences in the outdoors. Writing instruction, discussions about

writing, and practice of different writing techniques correlated with hiking and climbing, as did conversations about students' experiences with and connections to nature, which then fueled further writing. Combining these experiential elements with writing instruction facilitated students' development towards greater openness—namely, they grew in their capacity to explore and understand their own perspectives as well as those of their peers.

Openness undergirded the purpose and success of the class. One of the keys to success in personal essaying is honesty and transparency from the author, meaning that they take a deep dive into vulnerability as they write about experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that are deeply personal. As instructors, we invited this practice of openness by providing model essays along with reflective prompts both for entire essays as well as in-class free writes.¹ Additionally, we asked students to share their writing vocally with the rest of the class, though always on a volunteer basis. Being vulnerable in a class of strangers is, for most students, uncomfortable at best and paralyzing at worst. This is most obvious at the beginning of a semester, when students are most hesitant to write and share their writing openly with instructors and peers they do not know well.

Pairing that conflict of emotional vulnerability with a more physical vulnerability can help students overcome their hesitancy, hence the collaboration between our writing class and the rock climbing class. As Taniguchi et al. found, students increase in their essay risk-taking when they are willing to also take risks in new physical challenges (433). Rock climbing provided this new physical challenge to our students, most of whom had little to no experience

¹ Example free write prompts: Describe a place heavy with memory. Describe a person who influenced you. Describe a sticky relationship. Tell the story of a difficult decision. Tell the story of a rite of passage. Speculate on what bothers you in society.
Prompt for final synthesis essay: What did you learn about essaying and yourself this semester? What did you learn about your relationship to others, human culture, the non-human other, and/or God during this semester?

climbing. Part of engaging in experiential education came as students worked through emotional vulnerability in their essays in large part by physically leaving the ground and entrusting their physical safety to almost complete strangers. The abstract concepts of trust and vulnerability became concrete realities fifty feet off the ground with just a few ropes, a harness, and the hands of a classmate keeping individuals aloft.

The trust students developed during climbing evidenced itself in their subsequent emotional vulnerability and openness. Through written responses on climbing sites as well as longer essays written over the course of the semester, students shared more and more of their personal experiences and stories with each other, inviting and giving feedback to each other and encouraging each other in their essaying. Though long silences accompanied our requests for students to share their writing at the beginning of the semester, the more time students spent climbing and then writing together, the more they were comfortable opening up and sharing. In written reflections read aloud or in responses to questions in class, students shared their stories of mental illness, grief at the unexpected death of family members, regrets about past friendships or experiences, and more. They became more open as they delved into their own experiences in order to understand their perspectives and as they read, listened to, and discussed those of their peers. Practicing openness this way promoted trusting relationships in the class, creating a tight-knit community, despite individual differences in opinion or experience. In his final essay, parodying the scientific genre typical of his major courses, Ethan wrote in his results section, “Students . . . forged new friendships. . . . [They] became closer to one another: vulnerability and a safe space in class allowed for a connectedness not experienced in other courses experienced by this author.” Like Ethan, other students commented in their final essays or final presentations—both of which had general prompts in which we simply asked students to write a

synthesis of their experience and growth in the class and neither of which specifically asked for comments on community—that they had never experienced such genuine friendships or sense of community in their other college courses. That feeling of trust and community stood out in the minds of several of our students as the trait that allowed them to grow the most in terms of articulating and sharing their most vulnerable experiences and finding meaning in them.

While the rock climbing class had a hand in the development of students' essaying abilities, as described above, experiential education was at play just as much when we met as a class over Zoom. We intentionally designed activities in class to not only provide students with essaying and writing experience but with opportunities to reflect, in writing and in conversation, and to integrate new knowledge and perspectives into their framework. These reflections often started on a climbing site and then carried over into our Zoom discussions. For example, during a climb early on in the semester, I led a class discussion that focused on experiences students had had or were having in the outdoors during the pandemic. Most had experienced increased littering, noise and sound pollution, and other detrimental behavior that had made them frustrated with other people who, unable to participate in their regular pre-pandemic hobbies, had turned to hiking and other outdoor activities, unaware of expectations for participating in those spaces. In a series of free writes and conversations in our Zoom class, I asked follow up reflection questions: "How can you be a responsible steward of the outdoors? What role can you play in educating others to be responsible as well? How can we help provide both access and education?"

These discussions acted in a few ways to reinforce experiential learning. First, they created a bridge between what we experienced while we were in the outdoors and our virtual classroom where we reflected on those experiences and connected them to abstract ideas. Second, they gave students opportunities to compare and contrast their personal experience and

perspective with a range of different ones articulated by their peers; they moved from reflecting on shared and disparate experiences to conceptualizing the values and beliefs revealed in those experiences and reflections. Some of the students had extensive outdoor experience and cared passionately about many of these issues; other students had spent relatively little time in nature and brought with them a different set of perspectives and values about the questions we asked them to think over and discuss. And third, the combination of concrete experiences with reflective free writes and class discussions acted as a catalyst for essay writing. Students had the opportunity to actively experiment or to integrate and articulate their perspectives—some new, some just better understood because of the reflective work the student had done—into their frame of reference as they wrote full-length personal essays and created meaning out of their experiences. For many of our students, essays became a space in which to grapple with their uncertainties, to examine their beliefs or assumptions that were being challenged, and to come to terms with themselves and others around them.

Developing Engagement through Reflection and Active Experimentation. Shifts in attitude and perspective, however, take time. Practicing openness is key to establishing trust and communality with others, but engagement—the ability to integrate the perspectives of others into one’s own as well as the willingness to invest in one’s learning—is also fundamental in revising an outdated or narrow viewpoint to a broader one that can interact collaboratively and positively with others. While it requires time and effort to shift from a narrow to a broader view of the world, the resulting ability to collaborate and work towards the shared public good is fundamental to functioning democracy and full-fledged citizenship (National 3). Structuring a course’s curriculum through experiential education allows instructors to build in many

opportunities to invest in the learning cycle, giving students the time and practice they need to develop the habit of engagement and consequently experience substantive change.

At the end of a semester filled with interactions with each other, written and verbal reflection, and class discussions and activities oriented around concepts about writing and rock climbing, most of our students expressed these changes in their final synthesis essays. Stephen was one of those students. In the first part of his essay, he described how un-excited he was about the class. To him, it was just an easy (he hoped) way to fulfill a GE writing credit and move on with his college education. The personal nature of the class, particularly the requisite sharing of personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, was off putting to him. But at the end of the semester, he wrote:

I'm not sure when my mindset changed, but there was one day where I was excited to come to class. I was excited to talk to my classmates, who each had their own unique personality that I wanted to get to know better. They became what I call my quarantine friends. This class forced me to explore new ways of thinking about the world. My more open mindset along with many other factors helped me to have a complete mental breakdown this semester. In retrospect this was a good thing. I came out the other side with a new personality. I suddenly wanted to try to get to know my roommates better. I wanted to care about everyone I knew, even those I didn't like. I wanted to improve myself as a person. The most shocking change for me was that I wanted a testimony of God. Something I had given up on years ago.

For Stephen, there was not one shining experiential moment. Rather, many moments worked together to shift his perception of his community and his place in it to this perspective of openness, an openness simultaneously coupled with engagement. He embodied the

transformation possible through risk-taking both in essaying and associating with peers. He initially resisted the experience of opening up and being vulnerable with other classmates, but once he did, he let that experience shape not only the rest of his time in the class but also his personal life and relationships outside of the classroom. He went from focusing on the boxes he was originally so intent on checking off to being invested in his personal development and his personal relationships with people around him. He both became more engaged in the experience as he made connections and changed his behavior because of them.

The capacity for engagement, and ultimately lifelong learning, results from the fundamental structure of experiential education, which places students, like Stephen, at the center of the learning experience. It is the student who engages in an experience, the student who reflects on the experience and draws on other experiences and knowledge to frame and understand it abstractly, the student who then actively experiments and seeks further understanding. Through that process of personal engagement and learning, it is the student who is transformed time and again as they work through and come to terms with their world. Learning becomes less about ticking boxes of acquired knowledge and more about learning how to learn throughout life. As L.D. Fink puts it,

We need to have a critical mass of people who know the value of, and know how to self-consciously engage in, deliberate and intentional learning. Unless we learn how to promote this kind of learning, we will continue to have people who graduate from our schools knowing how to pass our courses but who continue on in life as second-rate learners. (242-3)

Experiential education can be particularly effective in helping students become different people—people oriented towards habits of mind that make them competent global citizens—

because it demands that the student be actively engaged and to a degree self-directed in their education. Asking them to shoulder more responsibility for their own learning is an invitation that they invest in the experience, in the class, and in their own learning (Ely). The more instructors invite and allow students to invest in their learning, the greater the return students will gain.

Openness and Engagement in Communities. Stephen's development into openness and engagement centered around relationships, which are at the core of the objectives of the Framework and of citizenship competencies. Learning to care about, respect, and interact with other people is key both to the Framework and to citizenship, and experiential learning theory combined with writing instruction can guide students in that community-oriented development. Experiential learning theory is evolving away from the original model of the independent, solo learner towards a model centered in community (Seaman). Consequently, experiential learning-oriented classrooms are primed for students to learn how to interact with, respect, and care about communities. Writing classrooms already lend themselves to this model. They rely on students working together in many ways, such as when they share work with each other, listen to different ideas their peers have, and give and receive feedback on their own ideas and writing. Sharing in experiences, learning about and from peers, and reflecting on those interactions can be a powerful tool for creating trust in a classroom, and that trust can transform a learning experience. That trust can only grow out of a community both willing to risk self and accept the other, since "reflection can involve embarrassment, discomfort, or feelings of insecurity" (Coyer 158). Working together to create an environment where that kind of reflection and sharing of thoughts, ideas, and beliefs can happen openly requires guidance and framing from the instructor as well as

investment on the part of the students. But putting in that effort yields results. Jamie, reflecting on the highly vulnerable experience of writing and sharing personal essays, wrote:

I need human connection. I have loved the community that I have felt in this class. . . .

My classmates here in this class, they are welcome to read anything I write. I trust them.

We have built that trust together. We respect each other and we care about each other.

We want to help each other and we are constantly cheering each other on. That is what it means to be a community.

For Jamie, openness was both the process that created the community as well as the outcome. As peers, the students in this class built trust by essaying through their own experiences and beliefs, going out on a limb to share those essays, and then meeting with openness what their peers shared with them. That degree of personal revelation in essaying brought out a host of perspectives on life, on relationships, on beliefs that covered the spectrum. But it was the trust they built by being open with each other in their writing and their verbal feedback that allowed them to practice engagement, accepting and integrating those viewpoints into their understanding of the world and how they subsequently perceived and acted in it. By acting with openness and extending it to others in turn and engaging in the shared experience and learning, they built a community marked by respect and by care—an essential trait of healthy citizenship and functioning societies.

The learning experiences and transformations in the students of the travel writing class are exciting and yet may seem potentially irrelevant since most writing instructors do not find themselves teaching in a similar interdisciplinary mode. The arrangement to teach classes jointly and to spend significant time outside of the classroom is uncommon and may be unfeasible for most writing instructors and their classes. Another advantage of this class not always available in

other settings was the focus on the genre of the personal essay, a genre that inherently demands the vulnerability that invites and engenders trust and community. It might seem that the potential outcomes of experiential education are limited to courses that can provide a similar structure to what I have described. However, that is precisely why understanding the theory of experiential learning is key for implementing it across contexts. The power of experiential learning does not reside in unique or unusual academic experiences like learning how to rock climb. Rather, any instructor can tap into that potential by intentionally framing the class around the learning cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Indeed, seeing experiential learning this way increases access, meaning that more students can benefit from it (Coyer 156).

Experiential Education in Writing 312: Persuasive Writing

My persuasive writing class provided just such an opportunity to implement experiential education and to facilitate my students' development towards habits of mind like openness and engagement. This particular course centers around public discourse and the strategies students can use to engage with those with whom they disagree. Students, often accustomed to thesis-driven approaches and the battering ram of logic used to unravel the opponent, stand to gain much from this course that prioritizes understanding and appealing to audience values as well as working to find middle ground. It is a course "designed to enlighten students to rhetorical strategies, improve interpersonal communication, and create productive spaces for argumentation" (Goldberg). Implementing experiential education further enhances students' development of citizenship competencies, including openness and engagement, as they learn to listen genuinely, to respond respectfully, and to contribute to the wellbeing of all members of their communities—not just those who agree with them.

Developing Openness through Experience and Reflection. One of the first opportunities to implement experiential education in my persuasive writing class comes in the first major assignment: the Values Essay. For this assignment, I ask that students interview someone they know well with whom they have disagreed over a major life decision (the topics range everywhere from political ideology to religious affiliation to seemingly obsessive food storage planning). My objective in assigning the Values Essay is to help students better understand the rhetorical nature of audiences they write to. After students complete the interview and analyze its patterns, I ask them to write a synthesis essay that articulates and explains what underlying values and/or fears motivated the choice.

This assignment is foundational to my persuasive writing course because it presents students with a concrete experience, or in other words, direct contact with the phenomena being studied—in the case of a persuasive writing class, an audience with opposing ideals or opinions. The assignment gives students a guiding framework: interview, listen, analyze, and synthesize in order to articulate what values motivated the decision made by the individual the student interviewed. After the interview, the synthesis essay provides students with the space to articulate the motivating value, support their claim with evidence from the interview, and reflect on what they learned. I also ask them to complete a separate reflection assignment a couple of weeks after the Values Essay and the first argument paper; this reflection provides an opportunity for them to articulate their personal experience and insights while writing through the first two major assignments.

Openness, that ability to consider new or different ways of being and thinking, is foregrounded for many students in surprising ways in this assignment. Most choose to interview a parent, sibling, or close friend with whom they get along well. They ask parents or in-laws

about parenting styles or family; they ask siblings about leaving the faith they were raised in; they ask friends about political beliefs and why they support certain candidates. Many students register the surprise of learning more deeply about an audience they thought they knew well through the Values Essay and the new perspective they hear that they had never before considered. Take, for example, part of Alexa's reflection:

I have seen things in a different light and learned to value [others'] opinions. One of the assignments where I learned this was the Value Essay. I racked my brain for who I could interview, finally settling on my mom, who I had only a slight disagreement with but was someone I felt comfortable with. Little did I know that interviewing her on her values would actually help me grow much closer to her and heal seen and unseen disagreements in our relationship . . . The biggest takeaway . . . was seeing how easily, normally, and understandably my mom's decisions stemmed from her experience. I soon found myself seeing my classmates' opinions in the same way.

Alexa's response highlights her experience with openness. She entered the interview with her own set of beliefs about her mother's choices and opinions, but because she was willing to listen and consider a different perspective, she found surprising resolution in her relationship with her mom. Asking students not only to complete the interview but to reflect on it in writing afterwards is key to actualizing experiential learning for them. It is in the reflection that students articulate growth like the openness Alexa stepped into. Recognizing and practicing that openness allowed her to understand more deeply not only that particular relationship but to extend to her willingness then to listen and be open to the viewpoints of others as well.

Helping students develop these habits of mind through experiential education has to be a consistent, overarching method and design. The Values Essay in and of itself presented one

opportunity to learn experientially, but experiential education happened as that one instance tied into a larger framework of assignments and discussions. Dewey writes that the problem in classrooms often is not that students are not having experiences in the classroom but rather that those experiences are often "wrong or defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience" (*Experience* 8). Dewey's theory of education centers on the linking of experience and conceptualization of that experience from one to the next to the next. Education fails inasmuch as it fails to help students recognize connections and practice reactions to and evaluations of new scenarios. In the case of my persuasive writing class, many students come into the classroom with the attitude that making an argument is about winning. As an instructor, one of my responsibilities is to help them dismantle that thinking in order to be truly persuasive. My students cannot successfully persuade others to change their beliefs or behaviors if, as rhetors, they refuse to see or acknowledge the legitimacy or validity of their "opponent." Students have to recognize that their opposing audience has a legitimate point of view that often shares many of their own values. So the Values Essay in and of itself is experiential in that they interact face-to-face with someone who disagrees with them and reflect on that interaction. But it is more importantly experiential in how it prepares students to practice the next assignment—a Rogerian argument addressed to a disagreeing classmate—and primes them to engage in similar processes in the future when they interact with people who disagree with them.

Developing Engagement through Active Experimentation. Practicing experiential education in this class meant that I designed subsequent discussions and activities that provided students with the opportunities to reflect, conceptualize, and apply what they were learning. In the same time frame that students were working on interviews, the Value Essay, and their reflections, we discussed the rhetorical concept of audience and how appeals to an audience's

values and fears underpin persuasive writing. We talked about different ways of crafting those appeals while always keeping in our sights those audience values and fears. Interviewing someone they had disagreed with had provided direct contact with what we were abstractly working through in class, and further reflections and discussions reinforced what they had started to learn and recognize in that initial encounter.

Students then began to implement or actively experiment with this concept as they tested out Rogerian arguments, a genre that is often new to them and one that is completely audience-oriented. For one of those Rogerian arguments, I required students to interview a classmate who held an opposing opinion and then craft the actual argument around that peer's values and concerns so as to appeal to and persuade them specifically. Pairs worked together over the course of the assignment, interviewing each other and exchanging drafts and feedback.

The shift into working on the Rogerian argument afforded students an opportunity to practice engagement alongside openness. Listening to and believing the validity of their peer's experiences and values was a requisite start, but students had to then invest in and act on those interactions in order to successfully practice the genre. Their engagement in the experience of listening to opposing viewpoints changed their approach to crafting an argument altogether because it fundamentally altered how they approached the rhetorical situation of the assignment. Another reflection after this Rogerian argument assignment highlighted what students learned from interacting with a live, rather than contrived, opposing audience. Madison wrote:

I realized how important my audience is when I am trying to be persuasive. Instead of focusing on my audience's beliefs that I didn't agree with, I now think about my audience as people I want to connect with. This is a key change in understanding because now my

audience is made up of real people instead of a list of “wrong beliefs.” I’m no longer just checking off a list of rebuttals, but seeking to understand my audience.

Like Alexa, Madison made the effort to listen to and connect with the perspectives of others with whom she disagreed. In turn, she acted as a different kind of author than she might have otherwise. She practiced engagement as she let go of seeing the audience as “a list of wrong beliefs” that she had to refute and instead saw them as complex people with valid viewpoints and with whom she wanted to connect. Marie too expressed how she had changed as a rhetor in her end-of-semester reflection when she wrote,

I used to be someone who would love to just pick a fight! When I was offended over something, my knee jerk reaction was to attack! I look at people differently after learning about the Rogerian argument. I’ve learned that it’s okay for people to have opposing opinions . . . [and] that it’s healthy for me to hear different opinions. My new goal is to listen and validate . . . where they’re coming from.

Like Madison and Marie, several students used their reflection space to articulate how they saw and acted differently as rhetors after the experience of writing to a classmate who disagreed with them. While they did not necessarily change their opinions on the topic, they did come to appreciate other valid ways of thinking and acting and consequently adjusted their own approach to speaking with and writing to those diverse audiences. Not all of my students experienced or expressed this change, though. A couple arrived at the end of the semester more convinced than ever that people are un-persuadable and that it is not worth a rhetor’s valuable time and energy to try to change the audience’s minds or behaviors. Perhaps this was because they were limited to an assignment that required them and their peer to stick to and articulate their opposing arguments, rather than facilitating an open and ongoing discussion that allowed for one or both

parties to change their minds through their exchange of ideas, which might be a more accurate reflection of real life.

For most students, however, change happened as they tied abstract concepts from class to real, personal contexts. In working with someone who contradicted their own perspective, students opened the potential for transformation: “Through engaging in activities that fundamentally challenge the learner’s frames of reference and assumptions, the learner can begin to adopt newer, broader perspectives” (Coyer 156). Their assumptions about their own worldview and what they perceived as right or best needed revision as they ventured beyond their own perspective. They recognized what they had not before—the good intentions of someone they had misunderstood, the viability of choices and values they thought they disagreed with—and instead of dismissing it, chose to integrate it into a new perception of their relationships and communities. This willingness to be challenged and to adopt broader perspectives of the world around us and to then invest in and act on those new perspectives is key to developing citizenship competencies.

Conclusion

As writing instructors use principles of experiential education to shape their objectives and their coursework, students stand to gain a learning experience that is not only meaningful during their time in class but throughout their lives. Experiential education can actualize the potential of a student’s time spent in higher education:

Experiential learning leads us to question the assumptions and conventions underlying many of our practices. It turns us away from credit hours and calendar time toward . . . family relationships, community responsibilities, and broad social concerns. It reminds us that higher education can . . . contribute to more complex kinds of intellectual

development and to more pervasive dimensions of human development required for effective citizenship. (Chickering)

Experiential education offers instructors an opportunity to maximize their investment in their students as it shifts the focus of classes and students from checking boxes to transformative experiences that lead to more productive, more open, and more collaborative perspectives and actions. Founding their instruction on principles of experiential education will allow writing instructors to simultaneously meet the objectives of the Framework—which places habits of mind, like openness and engagement, at the center of writing instruction—and in doing so, facilitate the development of effective citizenship in their students.

By their nature, writing classrooms are optimal sites for citizenship development. They propose ethical relationships between individuals, rely on collaborative peer interaction, and invite perspective sharing and taking. Layering writing pedagogy with experiential education offers a structured method of teaching that helps students make the most of those writing experiences. As students experience, reflect, conceptualize, and experiment, they work towards the development of citizenship competencies, the benefits of which extend beyond the duration of one class into lifetimes and beyond one individual into whole communities.

That impact is essential to the health of democracy. As Dewey argued, successful democratic government and successful democratic societies function only when built on the shoulders of well-educated individuals—individuals who can communicate and disagree and still respect and want to understand perspectives other than their own; individuals who share openly, listen sincerely and then incorporate those new viewpoints and ideas into their own framework. That quality of education does not just happen because a teacher and their students show up in a classroom. It happens through intentional, well-designed pedagogical choices that facilitate the

learner's growth towards those habits of citizenship. For writing instructors who want to design training grounds for citizenship and opportunities for students to transform and contribute to communities and contexts beyond their classroom, the untapped potential of experiential education provides a strong candidate for achieving such outcomes.

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