# Features of Engaging and Empowering Experiential Learning Programs for College Students

Jeffrey Perrin
*Lesley University*, jperrin@lesley.edu

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This study describes three collegiate programs that have a high interest in creating engaging learning environments outside of the classroom. The three settings in this study are a three-year degree granting college focusing on internship-based learning, a nationally recognized service-learning program at a private university, and a small private college emphasizing work and service. Research was guided by two exploratory questions: (1) How can students, faculty, administrators, and community partners' work together to create engaging learning experiences? (2) How can students feel empowered through experiential learning programs? Three themes emerged as important aspects of experiential programs that foster engagement and empowerment: learner autonomy, accountability, and peer support. These features are discussed and presented as important components to experiential learning programs.

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## Abstract

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## Keywords

# Introduction

There are hundreds of experiential programs within colleges and universities.  Whether in the form of service learning, internships or cooperative education, most of the programs are built around the philosophical ideology of Dewey (1938) that experience is important.  Student learning can be enhanced when abstract concepts discussed in the classroom connect with individuals' concrete experiences outside of the classroom.  Programs attempt to achieve engagement through direct experience with the subject matter of investigation; whether explicitly stated or implicitly asserted, experiential programming aims to empower students to gain confidence and a sense of self-efficacy.  However, achieving the learning outcomes of experiential programs depends on effective program design and classroom facilitation. .  It is important to consider the framework surrounding the experience,  as well as the programmatic parameters of student action and the processes used to facilitate meaningful reflection.

 In presenting research from three mini case studies of collegiate programs that emphasize student learning through experiential programming, this paper explores the roles of students, instructors, program administrators and community partners in generating engaging learning experiences outside the classroom. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to see what techniques help these programs create engaging and empowering student-learning experiences.

# Literature Review

Experiential-learning programs are designed to link theory and practice. According to Kayes (2002), learning is most powerful when knowledge develops within a context of personal and environmental demands. Although demands can be manufactured in the classroom, they are more authentic within  the framework of an outside organisation. These demands have greater significance when the achievement of organisational objectives  depends on students' contributions. Within this context, Kolb (1984) believes that the theory-practice connection is achieved as the learner progresses through a cycle of experience, concept, reflection and action. This cycle is most effective when students are brought into contact with concepts and issues they have addressed in class discussions and readings (Sweitzer & King 2004). When the connections are salient, experiential learning guides students to comprehend their concrete personal experiences within a more abstract theoretical framework; this can result in increased motivation and personal development (Jarvis 1987; Kolb 1984).

Student empowerment –  the belief that one has the ability to act effectively and control one's own learning experience – is crucial to the educational, intellectual and personal development of students (Duhon-Haynes 1996). Empowerment is increased as students learn how to affect their own lives and create positive change in the world around them (Hyde-Hills 1998). By setting their goals and tracking their progress in achieving  them, students begin to believe in themselves (Duhon-Haynes 1996). Experiential learning is an ideal approach to achieving the tenets of empowering education, because the results of direct experience are often concrete, easily identifiable and applicable. Students can often identify the change they have created, which often leads to an increased sense of engagement and motivation.

For the purpose of this paper I will focus on two types of experiential-learning programs: internships and service learning. Internship is the most general term to designate experience-based learning programs (Moore 2010). The objectives of internship programs generally focus on connection between theory and practice, professional development and personal development (Sweitzer & King 2004; Fedoroko 2006; Inkster & Ross 1995). Several programs also claim to

develop students' critical thinking, ethical professional behavior and ability to work with diverse groups of people (Moore 2010).

Service learning generally entails out-of-classroom community-service activity linked with academic concepts and theories. Service learning can be distinguished from other experiential programs by their dual focus of, on the one hand, addressing social needs and promoting social change, and on the other, increasing student learning and development (Butin 2005; Moore 2010). Both objectives are of equal importance in service-learning programs. Teaching students to work with community members to improve their communities is vital in achieving these objectives (Davidson, Jimenez, Onifade & Hankins 2010; Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2000). Through proper facilitation, service learning can help participants gain a sense of course content, a thorough understanding of civic engagement, an increased sense of self-worth and improved social skills (Bringle & Hatcher 1996; Howard 2003).

## Guiding Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research:
  (1) How can students, instructors, administrators and community partners work together to create engaging learning experiences?
  (2) How can students feel empowered through experiential-learning programs?

## Methodology

This study uses a case-study research methodology to examine the design of experiential-learning programs. This type of purposive research is useful because it provides insight into a specific phenomenon that can direct future research and practice (Patton 1980). As with all nonrandom sampling procedures, purposive sampling is prone to the question of whether the findings can be generalised (Bogdan & Biklen 1998). The findings of this research are definitely not applicable to all settings and subjects. The goal of qualitative research is to focus on the "process or the meanings individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006, p. 70). This research documents selected cases (in this case regarding student engagement) and allows researchers and practitioners to determine how these cases relate and map to other programs in colleges and universities.

Extensive research was conducted to purposively select three collegiate programs that espouse experiential learning as an integral part of their school's curriculum. These programs were chosen as key cases that have been recognised in various ways as being innovative and effective experiential-learning programs. Site #1 is an accredited member of the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), and has been recognised by AEE for innovative and outstanding experiential programming. Site #2 has been recognised several times by the U.S. News and World Report rankings of Best Colleges as one of the premier service-learning programs in the country. Site #3 has received an award for innovative programming by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA).

There were two types of data: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. A number of documents were collected and analysed before and after the interviews, including program descriptions, course syllabi, evaluation rubrics and information retrieved from school websites. Program administrators sent emails to instructors, students and community partners asking them to participate. A semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow the interview to progress more like a conversation, and to permit the interviewer to identify new topics as they came up. An interview guide with topics and question ordering was designed in advance. All questions were

open-ended, and generally followed up with probes and clarifying questions. Question ordering was modified between participants depending upon interviewee responses. A total of 16 participants were interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The author conducted all interviews.

An interpretational-analysis approach was used to dissect the data. Interpretational analysis is used to examine case-study data to find constructs and themes that explain specific experiences (Gall, Gall & Borg 2003). In this research interview transcripts and documents were dissected and analysed to identify trends and common experiences associated with engaging learning experiences.

# Results

### *Site #1*

Site #1 is a small, private college in the United States. The internship program goals are to: develop an understanding of organisational decision-making structures and strategies, craft individual learning objectives, gain professional writing skills, create a career portfolio, successfully conduct a job search, improve public-speaking skills and develop a sense of professionalism. Internship program goals are met through three separate courses over three semesters. The first course is scheduled during the spring semester of the student's first year. The second course, which is the actual internship, takes place in the summer or fall of the student's second year. Since the internship is time-intensive (40 hours a week for 10 weeks), the student does not attend a formal, on-campus class during this time period. The third course concludes the program when the student returns to the campus during the fall semester of the student's second year (or during the spring of the second year if their internship was in the fall).

After the student spends some initial time at the internship site, they work with the community partner to identify an organisational need for change. Supervisors and students work together to design a program or intervention that addresses organisational needs. This is a core component of the internship. Students then create individual learning goals that can be explicitly addressed through their program design. The community partner supports the student in addressing their organisational need and achieving their individual learning goal.

During the internship phase, students write daily in their journals. Journal entries discuss daily observations, questions, experiences and general reflections. Throughout all three phases of the internship program, students complete weekly written assignments assigned by instructors. Students also meet weekly with their on-site supervisor. Students are assessed in a multitude of ways. Written papers summarise the problem-solving project and the completion of learning objectives. Students also write an internship narrative and give an oral presentation to the community summarising their internship experience. Interns receive community, peer and instructor feedback on their oral presentations. Community feedback is provided in the form of a questionnaire. Peer feedback is provided in a questionnaire and a debriefing session, wherein students identify the presentation's strengths and weaknesses and discuss specific ways to improve it. Instructor feedback occurs in a one-on-one meeting.

The community-partner mentors are an integral component of the internship program. Community-partner mentors allow the students to identify something that needs change and provide the opportunity for them to change it as they work to benefit their host. The mentors visit with faculty members to review student progress. In addition, they teach the participating

students about the organisation's history, budgetary process, mission, decision-making processes and organisational structure. At the conclusion of the internship, supervisors provide a written evaluation of the student and the program.

### Site #2

Site #2 is a mid-sized private university in the United States. The service-learning program goals are to: address a real community need; develop students' awareness of outside communities; build relationships with the communities served; learn and develop through active participation that provides students with the opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community; and foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

Program goals are met through an optional 14-week service-learning program that advances at least one learning objective of the course of which it's a part.  To complete the service-learning program requirements, students must enroll in three one-credit option courses over three different 14-week semesters.  Students are required to perform a minimum of 20 hours at their site over the entire semester. There is a list of assigned university courses that accept the one-credit option. The university's service-learning office identifies community partner agencies based on what they consider to be important community needs. Students choose one of the community partner agencies and work to identify an appropriate role in the  organisation. Each student works with a faculty member to connect the class content to their service work.

Students and course professors meet twice during the semester to discuss the service-learning experience. Interns and student project managers have weekly informal discussions about their experience. Weekly journals connect the internship to course material. In a written paper students summarise their experiences and connect them to course content.

This program is unique  in its use of student project managers: upper-level students who have themselves completed the service-learning program. Each partner site has at least one student project manager facilitating logistics between the community partner and the student (e.g., travel). However, the student project manager role goes beyond logistics. Project managers also provide on-site peer assessment of job performance.  In addition they attend meetings with community partners and instructors to discuss intern progress, supervision duties and learning objectives.

### Site #3

Site #3 is a small, private college in the United States.  Students create a personalised curriculum that connects academic work with internships. This program is design to foster students' passion within a structure of academic rigor. The goals of this program are to: increase student engagement, discipline and dedication, develop student immersion in learning and build working knowledge and work skills.

Each student identifies an internship site. Together the student, project mentor and instructor create individual learning goals and objectives that also address individual and organisational goals. Project mentors are an integral part of the internship process. They meet with lead instructors bi-weekly to address any questions and discuss the student's work and project progress. Since there is  no formal class associated with the internship project, mentors make reading recommendations to facilitate student knowledge in the field.  Supervisors evaluate students against agreed learning goals and deliverables, and assess student performance through a written

narrative and exhibitions at the semester's end. Project mentors participate in ongoing training and program evaluation.

Reflection occurs through weekly discussions with the project mentor and faculty member. Students summarise their experience in a presentation to instructors, peers, community members and the partner agency. Instructors, peers and community members provide written feedback. Students are also given a simulation group scenario that lets them apply the skills developed in their internship to solving a hypothetical problem. Finally, the student meets one-on-one with the instructor to discuss identified strengths and weaknesses, future goals and plans.

Project mentors invest a lot of time in this partnership. Since students select their own internship sites, often there is not an established precedent in place at these sites for working with interns. Also, there is no formal class that coexists with the internship program; therefore community project mentors are instrumental in providing the theoretical background to their work, through both assigning readings and participating in the assessment of students' work. Through meetings with the school's faculty members, project mentors track the progress of their interns. Students work at their internship sites between 20 and 30 hours a week.

## Discussion

Three themes became apparent as important components of programs that aim to engage and empower students. The first theme is related to the issue of learner autonomy. The second theme concerns accountability. This was evident in the responses of students, instructors, administrators and community partners to questions about real-world learning. The third theme is peer support.

### 1). Learner Autonomy

The conversations with student participants, instructors and program coordinators revealed the importance of students' involvement in selecting internship sites and project assignments and designing learning objectives. Although students and administrators cited the difficulty of identifying a specific project that addressed students' learning goals and organisational demands, they also reported an increased sense of independence in directing their educational process.

> *Most internship programs include specific learning objectives. I think where ours are a little bit more unique is that students don't create those objectives until the second week on the job. Because I want them to get out there and see the resources and get a feel for it, but not only do they create objectives, they then create learning activities.*
>
> *–Program Coordinator (Site #1) discussing the creation of learning objectives*

Learner autonomy occurs when students demonstrate persistence in finding resources and opportunities for learning (Ponton, Carr & Confessore 2000). Learner autonomy can be achieved in several ways in experiential educational programming: student selection of internship sites, student construction of learning objectives and outcomes, student selection of projects to achieve outcomes and student-designed assessment strategies. At Site #1, students' selection of internship sites, learning objectives and projects to accomplish learning goals all demonstrate learner autonomy.

Embedded within this approach is an emphasis on the importance for students of identifying and solving problems rather than relying on a teacher or supervisor. If autonomy is endorsed, individuals will have an easier time pursuing their interests and reflecting on the importance and

relevance of this experience for themselves and the organisation (Deci & Ryan 2000). By asking students to construct the problem, supervisors are encouraging students to develop the ability to become self-directed right from the  start of the process.  This skill is developed through a guided practice that lets students question, analyse and synthesise information by challenging their understanding of concepts and organisational structures.

Allegiance, commitment and passion are fostered through deep involvement with the educational process. When students are responsible for choosing their project or strategy for change within an organisation, their ownership over the process increases. They are no longer simply learning how to successfully complete a task in a timely manner; they are also learning about mechanisms to identify areas and strategies for change.  This process can seem overwhelming, but it ultimately leads to a richer and deeper experience that prompts students to address their role as interns in a more active manner. Environments where people have choices are often associated with higher levels of self-determination and, consequently, better learning outcomes (Black & Deci 2000; Deci & Ryan 2000). Autonomous-supportive learning environments are also associated with a deeper engagement in learning activities and better conceptual learning (Grolnick & Ryan 1987; Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci 2006). In a series of field experiments with high-school and college students, Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon and Deci (2004) found that autonomous-supporting learning environments improved student persistence, depth of processing and test performance.

In addition to being advantageous to students, this autonomous process is beneficial to organisations as well.  Organisations can prefer transactional partnerships focused around a specific project (Bushouse 2005). These project-driven partnerships often have direct and tangible results. The cost-benefit usually works in the organisations' favor because students are completing a project that otherwise might not be completed.

## 2). Accountability

Student participants in all three programs reported accountability and real-world implications as major advantages of their programs. Students reported being held accountable by their community partners to produce work that matters. Below is a detailed quote from a student discussing the construction of an architectural model for a client meeting:

> *They (site supervisors) were using the physical model for a client meeting that they were having, and it wasn't together yet.  So my supervisor charged me with the whole thing, and showed me how to do it.  He told me that it needs to be done by Thursday night because they're using it the Friday morning, and it needs to be in this condition and he showed me how to do it.  And so while I talked to my friends at College X course, he'd come to me and he'd be exhausted.  I'd say, you know, what's your problem?  He's looks completely beat and he'd say, 'I had to throw this project together last night because it's due today.'  And you know, it was a good-looking structure, but it was definitely – well, you could tell that it wasn't going to be used for a client meeting.  My project had to be completely done and great looking..... If I threw something together the night before that didn't look great, it would reflect on them poorly, and it would ultimately result in them not getting a job, which is how they make a living. The stakes are high, and it's a lot more real.  And I feel that in the lab environment at College X, if a student can get away with throwing something together, then it's really going to hinder them when they go to a job and they kind of throw something together the first time.  I mean they'll learn as they go, but I think I have a leg up in that I've already had that client-meeting piece, and I know how important it is, and I know how to do it, professionally.*

*– Student (Site #3)*

Simply placing a student in a real-world setting does not imply that real-world learning will take place; rather, it is contingent upon real-world implications. At Site #3, learner autonomy occurs when students select their internship site and create their own learning outcomes. Their community partner and their faculty member then hold them accountable for the completion of their learning outcomes.  In the same way a business entrepreneur develops a new business opportunity and then is accountable to investors funding the new enterprise, these students create specific learning goals and then are held accountable for the completion of those goals.

When students see that they are being relied upon to produce professional-level work, the learning reaches a new level. Accountability to others is considered to be a core component of learning (Parsons 2000). Their work is evaluated and critiqued in an applied work environment.  Being given responsibility – and accepting it – is associated with empowerment, a sense of personal agency, increased levels of self-confidence and perceptions of capability (Clouder 2009). Students have the opportunity to learn from their successes and failures through discussions with their supervisor and instructor. After the presentations, students and supervisors meet to discuss each student's work. While addressing positives and negatives, supervisors highlight specific areas for professional growth based upon the student's professional presentation.

### 3). Peer Support
Peer support is an important part of the learning process.  This process emphasises peer-to-peer dialogue related to performance and the achievement of standards. At Site #1, peers provide valuable feedback to their classmates on their community presentations.  Peers are not assigning grades to formally assess their classmates' performance. Rather, they are questioning, commenting and challenging one another in an informal dialogue.  This process is extremely important because it allows students to strengthen their  ability to self-assess through assessing others (Boud 1995). They become highly aware of gaps and potential weaknesses in their own presentations by commenting on other presentations. The peer-to-peer feedback process is also important because it allows students to work on their communication skills, as they must effectively articulate what they comprehended and what remained unclear (Liu & Carless 2006).  As students start to hear consistent renditions of the same feedback, the validity of the comments increases (as opposed to just receiving feedback from one instructor).

The importance of peer support has been identified in mentoring studies.  In a biographical interview study, Kram and Isabella (1985) reported that peer relationships can support career and psychosocial (e.g., emotional support, personal feedback) development across several stages of career development.  Similarly, Campbell, Angelique, Bootsmiller and Davidson (2000) found that peer mentoring promotes psychosocial wellbeing and career enhancement.  In addition, peer mentoring promotes information-sharing and career planning (Angelique, Kyle & Taylor 2002). Organisations that facilitate connections between peers within an educational context can build strong communities of mentorship and support.

At Site #2, the student leaders are in charge of contacting community partners, performing peer supervision and managing logistics. Two committees on campus are charged with training student managers. The training committee arranges organisational meetings, training sessions and reflection sessions for all student leaders. In addition, a mentorship network pairs veteran student leaders with new student leaders. This formal program allows newer leaders to shadow experienced leaders and develop supportive relationships with peers. As project managers and project manager supervisors, students increase their confidence with coordinating, leading and

supervising. Increased student responsibility is often associated with a strengthened sense of agency associated with empowerment (Clouder 2009). Students are confronted with real-world managerial predicaments that foster interpersonal communication skills, organisational skills and overall management skills. If student leaders are not effectively fulfilling their responsibilities, they will meet first with their mentor and/or other service-learning staff members to identify action plans to improve their performance. Rarely are student project managers asked to leave their position.

> *The student project managers aren't there just to take care of the logistics. They're there to enhance the learning of students, to participate in the facilitation of discussion and reflection, to help organise and enhance the learning through the project or the services that they do. And that's another way that we're working towards enhancing our students' learning.*
> *– Program Coordinator (Site #2)*

Peer assessment is an important tool for empowering students (Stanier 1997). When students within such a program are put into a leadership role, they participate in a formal student-mentor training process. Yet those who learn the most from this situation will be the ones who have learned their skills directly from the experience – for example, from learning to cope with a contentious peer evaluation or a non-responsive community-partner supervisor – during a prolonged exploration well beyond the boundaries of a standard intern role.

Peer interactions, either in the classroom or in co-curricular settings, are excellent opportunities for students to develop leadership skills (Astin 1993; Dugan & Komives 2007). The quote below demonstrates this student's uncanny ability develop and work through a progression of tactics to motivate others, an important aspect of effective leadership. Although theoretical models of motivation may have facilitated her tactical approaches to managing others, she can now identify the contextual and personal factors predicating her methods.

> *Motivating others is the toughest part of this position. Because of the 120 project managers that we have, I would say it's one-third, one-third and one-third that some people are just going to go, they're going to do what they have to do, they're going to fulfill all of their requirements. Some of them go above and beyond, creating lesson plans and doing that and scheduling, like, way out in advance. And then there are some people that just don't care. So depending on which program, sometimes there will be multiple project managers. For example, if there were 20 students, you probably wouldn't just have one overseeing it; you'd at least have an assistant, or two project managers, three. So trying to work with other people who may not be as motivated and as passionate as I am. With the people that are super-motivated, that's awesome. Be super-motivated. I like that. The people that aren't, I'll try to reason with them first, try to see what are their motivations. Are they more focused on classes, and because they have a test, they don't want to go to service? Is it because they live kind of close to campus, and because service is on Friday, they just go home on Thursday and just blow it off? Like, try to figure out why they're so [uninterested] or don't show up? But then if they're not going to respond to me on a more peer-to-peer emotional level, then I'll try to go into a more objective, reasonable – so you're aware this...your attendance and performance [are] being reported to your professor, and I don't determine your grade, but your professor does get monthly progress reports and a final evaluation. And they're determining a grade for you. I would say that at the very beginning, the argument about "oh, the people that are there that you're providing the service for depend on you, and*

*they really want you there" doesn't really mean anything to them.  But then at the end of going there 10 times and really developing a relationship, if someone says to me, like, "oh, yeah, I'm going home for Thanksgiving," it's like, "Well, you've met these people – or you've been with them for 16 hours now...like, you know them, they count on you."  And because the relationships are a little more established, that argument is a little bit stronger at the end of this semester.*

*– Peer Supervisor (Site #2)*

Indeed, among many of the student roles and responsibilities, an individual can only gain the insight necessary to enter the responsibility of the workplace by confronting the most contentious of situations, rendering oneself vulnerable to the uncertainty of an unscripted situation.  The student project leader role  requires students to turn towards the real responsibilities of communication, organisation, crisis management, negotiation and relationship-building that foster and sustain a valuable learning experience.

## Conclusion

Three themes emerged from this research as important components experiential-learning programs that are engaging and empowering. Programs that allow students to select internship sites, design learning objectives and select projects can foster learner autonomy. Student confidence and efficacy can increase by working on projects with real-world implications. Increased accountability may also increase student leaders' ability to motivate others to higher levels of engagement. Finally, peer support allows students to gain strong leadership, management and assessment skills. These are important factors to consider in the design of engaging and empowering experiential-learning programs.

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