

Changing schools through experiential education

The challenge of designing a curriculum that young people find significant and stimulating

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IN ITS EFFORTS TO RESTRUCTURE schools, the education community has begun to address the challenge of designing a curriculum that young people find significant. This article describes how experiential education can help provide such a curriculum and the impact it can have on students, teachers, administrators, and school organisational structures. It also describes ways experiential education can help educators make the transition from a traditional program to an activity-based program requiring the collaboration of teachers and students.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Experiential education is the process of actively engaging students in an experience that will have real consequences. Students make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. Stu-

dents also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, new attitudes, and new theories or ways of thinking. This type of learning differs from much traditional education in that teachers first immerse students in action and then ask them to reflect on the experience. In traditional classrooms, teachers begin by setting knowledge (including analysis and synthesis) before students. They hope students will later find ways to apply the knowledge in action. Despite the efforts of many would-be reformers, recent reports by researchers suggest that most teaching, particularly at the high school level, still involves the teacher as purveyor of knowledge and the student as passive recipient of it.

EXAMPLES OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Examples of experiential education abound in all disciplines. If we asked our students for the highlight of their school careers,

most would choose a time when they dedicated themselves to an endeavour of great importance...I am thinking of youngsters who launched a save-the-tree campaign to prevent the trees outside their school from being cut down. I am thinking of children who write the school newspaper, act in the school play, organise the playground building committee.... On projects such as these, youngsters will work before school, after school, during lunch. Our youngsters want to work hard on endeavours they deem significant.

In carrying out their activities and in the reflection component afterward, they come to new insights and integrate diverse knowledge from fields such as English, political science, mathematics, and sociology.

CHANGES IN ROLES AND STRUCTURES

Whether teachers employ experiential education in cultural journalism, service



learning, environmental education, or more traditional school subjects, its key idea involves students taking on new active roles. Students participate in a real activity with real consequences.

Besides changing student roles, experiential education requires a change in the role of teachers. When students are active learners, their endeavours often take them outside the classroom walls. Because action precedes attempts to synthesize knowledge, teachers generally cannot plan a curriculum unit as a neat, predictable package. Teachers become active learners, too, experimenting together with their students, reflecting upon the learning activities they have designed, and responding to their students' reactions to the activities.

In this way, teachers themselves become more active. As students and teachers take on new roles, the traditional organisational structures of the school also may meet challenges. Such non-traditional activities require teachers and administrators to look at traditional practices in new ways. For instance, they may consider reorganising time blocks. In some cases this has led to adopting an all-day time block as an alternative to the traditional 45-minute periods. We now organise the curriculum by project instead of by separate disciplines.

HELPING WITH THE TRANSITION

At first, these new roles and structures may seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable to both students and adults in the school. Traditionally, students have most often been rewarded

for competing rather than cooperating with one another. Teachers are not often called upon for collaborative work either. Teaching has traditionally been an activity carried out in isolation from one's peers, behind closed doors.

Principals, used to the traditional hierarchical structure of schools, often do not know how to help their teachers constitute self-managed work teams or how to help teachers coach students to work in cooperative teams. The techniques of experiential education can help students and staff adjust to teamwork, an important part of the process of reforming schools.

Adventure is one form of experiential education that is highly effective in developing team and group skills in both students and adults. Initially, groups work to solve problems that are unrelated to the problems in their actual school environment. For example, in an adventure course designed to build the skills required by teamwork, a student team might work together to get the entire group over a 3 metre wall or through an intricate web of rope. After each challenge in a series of this kind, the group looks at how it functioned as a team. Who took the leadership roles? Did the planning process help or hinder progress? Did people listen to one another in the group and use the strengths of all group members? Did everyone feel that the group was a supportive environment in which they felt comfortable making a contribution and taking risks?

The wall or web of rope becomes a meta-

phor for the classroom or school environment. While the problems and challenges of the classroom or school are different from the physical challenges of the adventure activity, many skills needed to respond successfully as a team are the same in both settings.

These skills — listening, recognising each other's strengths, and supporting each other through difficulties — can apply equally well to academic problem-solving or to school-wide improvement efforts.

In closing experiential education can change schools because it requires new roles of students, teachers, and administrators. It can provide a different, more engaging way of treating academic content through the combination of action and reflection. Experiential education can also provide a process for helping all those involved in schooling become more comfortable with the unfamiliar roles commonly proposed for restructured schools.

Synergy Schooling in Noordhoek, Cape Town provides your children with such a learning environment. The emergent curriculum is founded on the understanding that knowledge and skills are best learnt through experience and social interactions.

Synergy Schooling is committed to transforming our educational system to one of authentic living and learning. ☺

For more information, please visit their website: www.synergyschooling.co.za or email contacting@synergyschooling.co.za or phone 021 785 5500

