

Creating Community Connections to Enhance Student Experience: The Beer and Spirits Story

“Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand” Confucius (in Greenway, R. 2002)

Introduction to Experiential Learning Theory

From the ancient influence of Confucius, and early 20th century educational theory of John Dewey, we have learned as educators that students that have the opportunity to learn through experience and construct new learning based on reflections of what was previously known or unknown, Dewey (1938/1997). Furthermore, the influence of David Kolb has provided a body of literature focused on experiential learning where students continually reflect on their experiences, which allows them to construct knowledge in a learning cycle, serving as, activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists, (Joplin, 1981; Juch, 1983; Kelly, 1997; Kolb, 1984).

Additional research on experiential learning has demonstrated that learning through experience can involve more than mastering new skills or concepts; the experience itself can be transformative in nature and can provide intrinsic rewards related to individual understanding of oneself, Dirkx, (2000). Critics however challenge some of the theories related to experiential learning and argue that learning in stages or cycles may not be as neat and simplistic, Greenway, (2002).

As educators, we may discount other means of learning that may not be experiential and make assumptions that experiential education fits all learners in all situations and cultures, (Fenwick, 2001). When institutions consider their learning environments, student culture, and resource requirements of experiential, hands-on types of activities, the experiential cycle of learning might not be possible for all settings.

The bulk of the literature on experiential learning is more supportive than critical. The research centers on ways in which learners advance in a cyclical patten from experience through reflection, concept and action...and back to new experiences. The model of experiential learning describes the process as a very active means of conversion of new knowledge through experience (Atherton, 2002; Dirkx, & Lavin, 1991; Fenwick, 2001; Gass, 2002).

Experiential Learning in Personal Practice

In my personal setting as a teacher of restaurant management in an urban, western, four year college, the departmental vision is based upon learning through theory

and experience. Some classes provide theoretical scaffolding from which students construct awareness of theories and skills in their subject matter. The practice of such theories occurs through experience that students gain in hands-on skill practice, such as culinary or hotel laboratories. As the students reflect on their experiences they often improve their learning through debates and discussions on both theory and their practical experience.

Method

This study represents personal reflections of lessons learned from process of creating a college course that involves experiential learning theory. A phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2000) was used for this study. Since the reflections are from the viewpoint of the author, there was no attempt to gain additional data from observation or student viewpoint. The reflection statements were analyzed for trends and themes similar to constant-comparative analysis technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To strengthen validity, the author reviewed the themes with a peer that had awareness of the course design and had observed class activities. Additionally, the author reviewed the results with a group of doctoral students and their program advisor, a tenured faculty member, who were all part of a research lab at a western university. Reviewers were asked to confirm the clarity of the themes and lessons learned from the author's reflection statement.

Reflections on Creating a Partnership with Industry

The central phenomenon investigated in this study was a faculty member's reflections of lessons learned through the process of developing a course that fostered experiential learning. Five lessons emerged from the reflection statements. The first lesson centered upon involving the industry in the course development process.

First Lesson: Involve Industry in Curriculum Development

The idea of the course was presented to the industry advisory council and asked their advice on how to create a course around student interest in beer. Was it feasible? Was the subject academic in nature? Were these desired industry skills? Their response was surprising; they confirmed that micro-brew restaurants were a growing trend and that college students are under prepared in their understanding of beer styles, pairing beer with food, and cooking with beer. Additionally, some representatives commented that if the topic of the course related to alcohol, that students should understand responsible service. Other comments centered on adding more components to the course related to mixology and greater understanding of classic spirits, such as scotch, gin, and whisky.

By involving the industry advisory council a great lesson was learned. Reflection statements demonstrated that creating a curriculum in a vacuum does not allow for multiple perspectives and fails to recognize that as hospitality educators we are training students for the workplace. The course developer valued the council's feedback and proposed back to the group that the course name would be changed to Beer and Spirits;

where students first take a responsible alcohol certification course learn how to brew beer, and practice mixology of classic spirits. The changes in course design reflected current industry needs and provided for more topics covered and gave students a measurable job skill as certified responsible alcohol service managers.

Second Lesson: Ask Industry for Resource Support

Faculty reflection statements identified that it was extremely worthwhile to ask for resource support. The industry advisory council stepped forward to provide resources to help create the course. The initial plan was to buy some home brew equipment and a few bottles of beer and spirits to conduct tasting sessions. The course designer underestimated the value of creating a connection with the community. It was fortunate however, that on the advisory council were a President of a Brewery, and a General Manager of a liquor distributorship. They stepped forward and offered their brewmasters time to instruct the brewing part of the course, and to supply a wide range of spirits and mixology equipment.

The additional resources provided by the industry did not come without a price. The department would have to raise funds to pay for the instructional time at the brewery and have a steady flow of supplies to the mixology lab. Once again, the developer went back to the advisory council for financial support and also went through the administrative process to increase student laboratory fees to support the course. The curriculum approval process and resource development took a full semester of development time, but with a persistent front and support from the department, dean, students, and industry, the new class started in the Fall of 2002.

When the first class was offered, all it took was a general broadcast email to hospitality students, and the course quickly reached its maximum of 16 students. On the first day, students were asked what their interest was in the course...the response was a resounding "beer." It was apparent to teacher that the course was centered on a topic that sparked their interest, but doubt remained if the course design had significant academic rigor and value to graduates.

Third Lesson: Experiential Course Design

Much of the author's reflection on the course design process centered on the benefits of creating experiential activities for the students. The course design had several very experiential...and to be honest, fun aspects to it. The students first participated in role playing, situational videos, discussions, and power point presentations, provided by the National Restaurant Association in their Serv-Safe Alcohol course. Following successful completion of the exam, students progressed to the spirits phase of the course, where they participated in lectures on the historical aspects, distillation techniques, and taste differences of vodka, gin, whisky, bourbon, and brandy. They complimented their lecture with skill practice time where they got to work with real liquor...unlike other mixology classes that practice with colored water. The thought was that 'mixing' the

martini was just as important as ‘tasting’ the martini. Both of these activities contribute to the experience of understanding the components of vodka and gin.

To further enhance student learning, games and simulations were used to measure students understanding of course material. In the Serv-Safe portion, students were placed in role-playing simulations where they had problems such as an intoxicated guest or underage drinking. They would debate solutions while the instructor provided conceptual connections to the course objectives. To prepare them for their certification exam, the students played a game similar to Jeopardy, where teams competed for points by answering responsible alcohol awareness questions. The mixology phase concluded with a game called “Bar Baseball” where students were put in teams and asked questions for singles, doubles, and even home-run questions, such as, compare and contrast ingredients and finished styles of single malt whisky versus blended scotch whisky. The earned runs of the game contributed toward their exam score. The students loved the games and were very enthusiastic. There was less support however from the classes nearby that had to listen to student cheers, shouts, “Woo-Hoo’s” and “Hey Batter Batter...aaaa...Shwing!” cheers that were resounding through the halls.

Students next entered the brewing phase of the course. The brewing phase was purposely placed at the end of the course, so that student motivation would remain high. The thought was to treat the beer laboratory as a “carrot at the end of the stick” approach. During six class periods, they worked with the brewmasters in their brewery. The brewmasters provided the students with a brewing manual and guided them through the brewing process. Activities were divided into, mashing, brew styles, brewing, fermentation, aging, bottling, and virtual beer brewing. The brewmasters were excellent at engaging students in the brewing process. Students were connecting hoses, pitching spent grains in buckets, filtering finished brews, adjusting temperature, filling kegs, and of course...tasting the finished product. Faculty reflections described that the most memorable part for the students appeared to be the beer styles activity, where they examined the color, aromas, and taste of lagers, porters, ales, and more. Students would often leave class and brag to others around campus regarding the beers they tasted that day. There was quite a buzz around campus regarding the course and how much fun it was for the students.

The combined course assessment included the Serv-Safe certification exam, an exam on mixology and spirits, exam on beer brewing, and evaluation of their participation in experiential activities. To further the experiential nature of the course, the course concluded with a mini-graduation of sorts, where the students got to take home their own personal brew in a litter sized beer bottle, with their diploma written as a label. Some of the persons involved in the course design were invited to the graduation resulting in a large turnout of media, college administration, students, and industry advisors.

Fourth Lesson: All Participants Have Value in Experiential Learning

At the first graduation, faculty reflections described that there was value gained by not excluding anyone from the experiential process. A fourth lesson learned emerged that detailed the importance of fostering an inclusive environment for students, administration, and industry advisors. Initially, the teacher was very nervous about exposing the components of the course design and student reflections to the assembled media and college administration. As a second year tenure track faculty member, creating a course where students taste and evaluate an alcoholic beverage and participate in off campus activities with guest speakers taking up a majority of the instruction placed him in a position of scrutiny. He was worried about how the academic rigor of the course would be perceived, and that he could be perceived as just making learning fun, and not valuable or academically rigorous.

To help support the value factor of the course, the instructor asked some of the industry partners to say a few words about their involvement in the course. Initial fears were set aside when participants said they were and happy to have identified a need for students and assisted in the course development. Their comments reflected a great sense of ownership in the education process. Students in the course were also asked to comment on what value they received from the course. The students were anxious to volunteer their comments, but with the presence of the college administration at graduation the instructor was worried about what they might say.

On the day of the graduation instructor tension and worry subsided when the students and guests arrived in their Sunday best and the cheerful students were mostly dressed well and appeared eager to talk about their experience in the course. One student went to the podium and started explaining how she signed up for the course because she thought it would be fun, and she'd get to drink some beer. As soon as she began to speak, the instructor almost swallowed his tongue and stepped to the back of the classroom. She continued to explain that through the course she was able to apply previous courses in science and biology in understanding fermentation and distillation. She also became more aware of the importance of responsible alcohol service, and more importantly, she felt that she transformed from beer drinker to beer geek. After a pause to clear the lump in his throat, the instructor moved forward in the classroom, thanked her for her comments and continued to pass out the student diplomas with industry and administrative representatives on hand.

Fifth Lesson: Continue to Build Community Connections

Following the buzz and excitement of the first semester, teacher reflections identified the fifth lesson learned. In the second semester, the student excitement from the course resulted in attention from the local media. A major newspaper food editor called to do a story on the beer phase of the course. The instructor complied and allowed him to interview students, take pictures, and observe the brewing laboratory. The very next morning, it must have been a slow news day, because on the front page there was a picture of one of the students drinking a beer, with the sub-line, "students drink beer for college credit." I gasped. Despite the initial catchy phrase, the article continued to report

how much value students had in the course and the intense amount of learning in the class.

What happened after the initial was amazing. Over 490 media hits across the country picked upon the story. The associated press sent the story out to media across the country. Online blogs had it as a topic, even the Paul Harvey Show talked about students drinking beer for college credit. Within weeks the instructor got a call from CNN Headline News. They sent down a regional media team and did a 90 second special segment that played nationally. There was such a buzz from the feature, that the instructor did a follow-up telephone interview with the Newscasters from Atlanta. The story was seen by colleagues and friends that saw the story posted in Times Square on the jumbo-tron for Fox News. Over the next five years, stories continued in local media, NBC National News did another special feature on the course, and the teacher, received a “Best Practice Award” from the faculty development office.

The interest in the course continued over the next several years. So, when it came time for our brewery to develop recipes with beer, they thought of the students in the hospitality program. Building on the first relationship, students and fellow Chef Instructors were consulted to develop and test recipes for their line of beers. It was a win-win and payback on multiple levels. Not only did the students get to have a real industry problem to work on, but they had great pride in their developing recipes that would be advertised nationally.

Over a three year period, more than 60 recipes were developed. The faculty and students were able to present the recipes at several national invited presentations in Atlanta, Miami, Houston, and Las Vegas. Faculty reflections described a phenomenon that community connections not only serves the interest of students, but can foster relationships that give back to the industry. It became prudent to continue the relationship and build upon it to create stronger connections between the college and the industry. New opportunities for experiential learning can evolve out of these connections. At each step of the process one has to think of what the student value is in terms of experiential learning, and how the industry and faculty might benefit from the connection. These win-win relationships tend to build upon one another.

Implications and Limitations of Connecting Experiential Theory to Practice

Faculty reflections on the Beer and Spirits course design and implementation reminded the author of experiential learning theory. Whether by accident, intent or plain luck, the team of faculty, administrators, students, and industry created a connection that has contributed much to student learning and value. Indeed Confucius had it right, when he said “Involve me, and I will understand.” (*In Greenway, R. 2002*) What occurred in this phenomenon was a course design that “involved” not just the student, but faculty and industry in creating an environment that connected with the student on multiple levels.

As Kolb (1984) described, experiential learning has four cycles; activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. The learners enter the experiential activity, first as

activists that express their interest in a topic and seek out ways to learn. In the course described in this study, that topic of interest happened to be beer. Once interested, they began reflecting on things they previously knew, such as beers they tasted, science and law classes, and realized that there are relationships between what they knew about biology and fermentation and hospitality law and the legal implication of serving alcohol improperly. From their interest in beer and these new experiences, the learners began constructing new theories or impressions they have on the practice of making beer, and distilling spirits. By doing so, they enter the final cycles of experiential learning and become theorists and pragmatists of their own.

Although in theory, Kolb may be correct, but it is also likely, that the critics are correct in saying that all learners and all cultures, might not fit into a set experiential structure, Fenwick, (2001). As educators, we can reflect upon the Beer and Spirits Story and plan experiential activities that utilize the lessons learned in this case. The lessons derived from faculty reflections demonstrated that to foster both student and industry value in the curriculum that you should start with topics that are of interest to the student. Next, involve the industry that students will be working in and query them for the desirable outcomes and ways that they might provide resources to support the curriculum. These resources may be more than funds or equipment; they are more often in the form of expertise, guest speakers, and access to property and equipment resources.

When it becomes time to turn the student interest and industry expertise into a formalized curriculum, it is apparent that experiential activities is a strong means of enhancing student learning and value. In the course in this study, activities extended beyond lecture. Planned events included discussions, debates, sensory analysis, (tasting) games, problems, and hands-on laboratories. In each activity, the more accurately the setting reflected a working business, the more value students seemed to express in their learning.

Finally, the Beer and Spirits story demonstrated how an industry/community connection can foster continued relationships that blossom into more fruitful activities. From the initial idea of creating an opportunity for students to brew beer, the course evolved to become a nationally heralded innovation in course design that provided an experiential way for students to learn. Further experiential activities were created that allowed students to develop recipes and present their research at national presentations. Such combined industry connections foster the type of relationships that can create fantastic opportunities for students to continue to learn through experience.

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