

# Innovations in Experiential Learning for Adult Learners

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*While there is no single profile of the adult learner in the 21st century, there exists a common desire to obtain a degree in higher education. Adult learners as a group are comprised of a large number of women and individuals from various racial/ethnic groups. In addition, they often possess varied learning styles and maintain multiple roles and responsibilities. Many learners may be interested in gaining entrance to the workforce for the first time, may be seeking a career change, or may be looking to advance one's current career status. Thus, as students learn, it becomes important for them to gain valuable experiential learning opportunities, apply prior knowledge, gain new knowledge, and increase career opportunities upon graduation. One valuable vehicle to achieve these goals is participation in internships. This article will discuss a case study and will describe a pilot program designed to provide adult learners with an experiential learning opportunity in the community for college credit. Issues involved in creating such opportunities for adult learners will be addressed, as will successes and barriers to success. Use of theory related to the scholarship of teaching and adult development, in particular the work of Mezirow, Brookfield, and Boyer, will be used to connect adult education to the need for experiential learning, as distinguished from prior life experience. Recommendations for internship development for adult learners will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** adult learners, experiential learning, internships, adult learning theory

As they learn, students should not only gain knowledge, but also the ability to apply said knowledge. Experiential learning, through internships is a popular way to provide students with the opportunity to learn how to apply knowledge gained in the classroom. Experiential learning, in different formats also provides students the chance to learn acceptable professional behaviors. Students begin to develop professional identities in their fields. Internships are typically offered to and accepted by traditional students, with fewer life experiences, rather than the non-traditional, adult learner. The literature tells us that adult learners come to the table with significant life experience and are very committed to the “process” of learning, for the purpose of self-discovery and application, rather than merely to obtain knowledge (Brookfield, 2013; Knowles, 1980). It would thus seem that an experiential learning opportunity would be a good fit for adult learners. However, the challenges of being an adult learner, including raising a family, employment, and financial worries often prevent adult learners from engaging in experiential learning opportunities. Therefore, it follows that creating experiential learning opportunities for adult learners must involve innovative pedagogy.

This paper is a case study and will describe a pilot program designed to provide adult learners with an experiential learning opportunity in the community for college credit. In addition, it will describe the development process of a larger experiential-learning program for adult learners. Issues involved in creating such opportunities for adult learners will be addressed, as will successes and barriers to success. Use of theory related to the scholarship of teaching and adult development, in particular the work of Mezirow, Brookfield, and Boyer, will be used to connect adult education to the need for experiential learning, as distinguished from prior life experience.

## APPLICATION OF THEORY

Ernest Boyer (1990, 2000) believed that teaching must not only provide students with knowledge but also must transform their lives in some way. Instructors are charged with studying teaching, as a form of scholarship, in order to improve the learning experiences of their students. Adult learners have a wealth of life experiences to share, and with these life experiences come expectations about the products of their learning. Most adults enjoy learning for the sake of learning, but most have specific objectives, such as promotions at work or job-related requirements in the area of education. Thus, developing learning activities and objectives to meet the complex needs of adult learners is difficult.

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Boyer (1996) also reminded us that higher education and academia have a responsibility in sharing knowledge not only through the classroom, but also through application. Jack Mezirow (1997) takes these ideas a step further and discusses the importance of becoming autonomous thinkers, not only taking in knowledge but applying it in the context of a broader society. Mezirow talks specifically about workforce issues, stating that in order for adults to be productive, working citizens in the workforce of a technologically advancing future, they would need to learn to become more autonomous and self-directed. Although this was written in 1997, it stands true today, as technology continues to change job functions and workplace needs. Mezirow (1997) rightly states that workers need to be able to “understand and manipulate information rather than merely acquire it” (p. 8).

Mezirow et al. (2000) suggest that instructors use learning activities designed to promote active engagement with new concepts and provide the example of participation in social action. Active engagement inside and outside of the classroom helps learners to develop their own ideas about the material and to engage in a discourse or conversation. Learners must be able to critically reflect on material and to apply it in a real-life workplace situation. Thus, learning activities that offer students the opportunity to practice this type of application in a real work setting are invaluable.

Mezirow, Brookfield, and Boyer all build upon the work of Knowles (1980), who developed the theory of andragogy, which specifically addresses adult learning. Cercone (2008) makes an important connection between experiential learning and adult learning theory. Specifically related to internships, experiential learning theories posit that applied learning is important to growth, especially for adult learners, as it connects concepts to current experience or events, making them more immediately relevant (Cercone, 2008).

Similarly, Zigmont, Kappus, and Sudikoff (2011) discuss simulation-based education as a way for adults to obtain hands-on experience, again providing immediate relevance. It forces the learner to apply what they already know, as well as new concepts to new situations. The authors call for “skilled mentors to provide effective feedback and support change for life-long learning” (Zigmont et al., 2011, p. 50). Zigmont et al., (2011) also calls for the mentor to work with the learner on reflection of experience, rather than purely presentation of material.

Studies suggest that experiential learning techniques can facilitate learning transfer. Various techniques such as cooperative learning, project-based learning, and reflective learning offer venues for adult learners to integrate and classroom learning and transfer that learning to real-world settings (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013). The authors suggest that in contrast to didactic teaching formats, experiential learning practices facilitate a complexity of learning and cognitive recall needed for transfer (Furman & Sibthorp, 2013).

The present case study will describe how experiential techniques as embedded in an internship site can foster learning for adult students. This study will incorporate evaluations that will underscore best practices as well as the effectiveness of internships and experiential learning with adults.

## **CASE STUDY: AN EXPERIENTIAL COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR ADULT LEARNERS**

Social workers, human service professionals, psychologists, and teachers in training are frequently mandated to complete a certain amount of hours in the field through a graduate level field or internship experience. Graduate programs in these disciplines, as well as jobs in these areas generally require or strongly suggest some field experience in order to qualify for the position or admission into a program. Undergraduate internships are often held by younger, more traditional students, with fewer barriers to completion. Traditional internships are also generally unpaid or provide a very small financial stipend. Adult, non-traditional learners with full time jobs, families, and financial commitments, may be hard pressed to take on this type of additional learning experience and make it work in the context of their busy lives. It might be challenging to help students understand the benefits of this type of learning opportunity.

Despite these barriers, as discussed above, theory and research demonstrate that adult learners would benefit greatly from the experience. The task then becomes to understand how one might provide an experiential learning opportunity that works for adults. As scholars and educators at an institution that works mainly with adult, non-traditional learners, it is our responsibility to assist students in maximizing their potential. This is the epitome of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In order to begin to understand how to facilitate this type of opportunity for adult learners, a small pilot was conducted and adjusted over time, which has eventually led to the need for a more formal program. Using Brookfield's (2013) suggestion of small groups for effective learning, 8 students were enrolled and 6 class sessions (every other week) were scheduled, with expectations of 10 to 15 hours of experiential learning taking place during the alternating weeks. The class was titled, Community Based Organizations: A Hands on Learning Experience. The specific goal was to provide students with an actual experience in the field that was flexible enough to fit into their current schedules, which most times included work and caring for family. Students reported that it was difficult to make a transition into a new field of work without ever having an experience in the new field. Thus, the authors wanted to provide an experience for students, which would allow them to evaluate goodness of fit, as well as provide some level of professional experience. In this pilot pilot, all students worked within the same organization. The authors worked with the director to develop a list of potential opportunities for students with different

interests. For example, there were some opportunities or tasks that involved administrative work and others that included direct work with clients that were served by the organization.

Evaluation of the learning opportunity was conducted as a quality improvement measure, using qualitative group discussion and interview meetings with students. Content analysis was used to develop themes and understand student experience. All students agreed to provide feedback for quality improvement purposes. Demographics for the very first group ranged in age, from early 20's through to mid 50's, and most students identified as Caucasian, with one student of Russian descent. The students were all enrolled in undergraduate degree programs and their areas of study, or academic areas of interest varied, although most were interested in community and human services, psychology, or education. One student in particular was focused on getting a degree in business, management, and economics, but interested in non-profit organizations and community based agencies.

Students were introduced to the executive director of a grassroots community based organization within the first couple of class sessions and learning assignments were developed. Students were given a list of possible projects to choose from, based on needs of the organization. Written assignments were open ended, to account for the different experiences of each student. Readings consisted of a book and several peer-reviewed journal articles, all on working within a grassroots community based organization. Each hands-on assignment focused on some area of interest that the student had that matched one of the organization's needs. For example, the student who was interested in a business degree was able to help the agency organize records using an excel database. Another student interested in working with people, was able to work under the task supervision of an Master of Social Work (MSW) intern, helping a participant of one of the organization's life skills programs to complete paperwork for a referral for a social service. The students all learned about engagement with organization staff and clients, as well as different functions of a community based organization. Students were able to identify strengths and weaknesses, and apply the material learned in their readings to the actual interactions that they had in the field.

Following this initial pilot, detailed feedback was obtained in the form of a discussion group at the end of the class-term, as well as written feedback in student evaluations. The students also participated in short individual discussions to review their experiences. There were several salient themes, which assisted the authors in further developing pedagogy for adult students in experiential learning. The following questions were asked to elicit feedback: 1. How was your experience in the field? 2. What were some of the most helpful things about doing this hands on learning? 3. What were some of the biggest challenges? 4. How could we improve this for future students?

The first theme centered around the timing of the class meetings. Students felt that the group meetings were not as helpful as individual time spent with the instructor. Group meetings required consistent time

from their hectic schedules, whereas individualized meetings were more easily scheduled around their work and family commitments. One student said, "I really enjoyed the time I spent individually talking with AS (the instructor) about my experience downtown and felt that this was more helpful than the group. It was interesting to hear about the other students' experiences, but it was hard to make time for this extra meeting 6 times in the semester, in addition to the hours I spent downtown. Fewer larger group meetings would have been better for me and my schedule."

The second major theme reflected that students would have preferred more time in the field at the organization, rather than spending 6 sessions in the classroom. For example, one student said, "I greatly enjoyed my time in the city at [organization] and learned so much about what people go through when they need services for different things. I would have liked to spend more time there and learned more about helping people directly instead of meeting so many times in the classroom." Another student reflected, "There was so much to be done down at [organization] and I have never had the opportunity to volunteer or do an internship before this, so I just wanted to keep working and learning about what else they do there. I feel my time could have been better spent doing more there, spending more hours there, and maybe less class sessions. The hands on part was the best part of the learning for me."

Third, students also felt that the written assignments were too open-ended, and that further structure would have been helpful in organizing their thoughts. The instructors chose initially to leave the assignments open for students to reflect on their experiences, as they would all be different. Students were asked to identify specific things that they learned and how this changed their thoughts about the field or amplified what they already thought. There were few structured questions and the assignment allowed each student to write and form the paper as they wished. This was anxiety producing for students, and they would have preferred to have more specific questions to respond to. One student said, "The assignments, especially the final paper, were very hard for me to figure out. I struggled with knowing what to write about and how to write it. I knew I learned a lot but needed some more direction in terms of how to spell it out."

The fourth theme reflected that students learned a great deal from the experience and felt that it was more beneficial in some ways than their typical classroom experience. One student said, "It is hard to understand what the work is all about when you read about it in a book or hear about it from a speaker. Actually being down at [organization] gave me a true understanding about what this kind of work is about. It feels more meaningful than I originally imagined." Another student said, "After being in the corporate world for so long, I was very nervous to get involved and actually do something in this new field. I read about and heard about it, but that was not really helpful in figuring out what it was like in the real world. Once I was there, I saw that this

is really something I am interested in, and it is not just something to think about and read about. There is real potential for me to do this work.”

Taking all of this feedback seriously into consideration, the learning opportunity was modified. Rather than offering small group class learning sessions, an independent study was developed. Students now work independently with the instructor and the organization to build their learning experience. Students meet regularly with the instructor and are connected with one another in the field in order to share ideas or meaningful knowledge gained through their learning experiences. Students meet with the instructor(s) both at school, in the instructor(s) office and in the field. This peer-related feedback and conversational discourse is essential to the adult learner's development (Brookfield, 2013; Mezirow, 1997). Written assignments were also altered to provide some more structure and direction. A certain amount of flexibility remains, to encourage critical thinking and individualized responses to the reading, as applied to their experiences. The assignments were also broken down into 3 smaller assignments, allowing students to reflect on the literature and what they would like to get out of the experience and then to reflect on the actual experience. This arrangement has been more effective in engaging students in the learning process, so much so that there have been more students interested and enrolling than the partnering organization can handle. Ongoing evaluation through student and organization discussion has led to consistent revision of learning opportunities. The increased interest led to the development of another community based experience, through a second grassroots organization, using the same independent study framework.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM FOR ADULT LEARNERS**

The number of students interested in and registering for this type of learning experience has multiplied, indicating a great need in this area. The increased interest and need also demonstrates that the experience has been beneficial to the students who have participated, as they have shared their experiences with others, generating additional interest and registration. This pilot experiential learning opportunity has grown into the development a larger internship program, designed specifically for adult learners. An internship program for adult, non-traditional students may look different than those at traditional institutions, working with more traditional learners. To this end, the following has been taken into consideration, during the development process: 1. Finding organizations and internship sites that are flexible with internship hours, 2. Creating opportunities outside of the traditional classroom environment for social learning through peer interaction (Brookfield, 2013), and 3. Developing semi-structured assignments and learning activities, providing the student with the opportunity to become a more autonomous thinker (Mezirow, 1997).

Finding organization and internship sites with flexible hours can be difficult. Working with grass-roots, community based organizations has proven to be successful, as these organizations often have fluid hours and flexible projects. Projects can often be completed partially in the office, partially at home or online, and partially in the field or community, leaving the student with many options. Hospitals and other similar organizations with large existing volunteer departments and needs during off-hours are also good options. Although developing connections and completing paperwork in a bureaucratic environment, such as a hospital may prove challenging, it is worth the time and effort. Hospitals are equipped to work with large numbers of “volunteers” and various types of students in different capacities and they run 24 hours/7 days a week, leaving many options available for the adult learner.

Community centers with broad ranges of programming options have also yielded opportunities for adult students who need flexible options. These centers offer programs from early morning into the late evening, as well as on weekends. There are available opportunities for work with young children in early childhood programs, children and families in sports and afterschool programs, as well as programs designed to help senior citizens. Adult learners are welcomed in these environments, as they typically have a level of responsibility and awareness for general workplace ethics and behavior. Many of these centers, as well as larger hospital organizations, screen students for internships through their volunteer departments and procedures.

Creating opportunities for discourse and peer feedback are essential to the adult learner’s development (Brookfield, 2013; Mezirow, 1996). In order to facilitate this, a two weekend seminar is suggested, providing the opportunity to share experiences and knowledge, while learning about professional issues in the field. The seminar, offered over two weekends, rather than in traditional class format, accommodates the schedules of adult learners, taking the reality of their time limits and commitments into consideration. The trust developed between student and faculty, which includes faculty effort to find flexible opportunities, is invaluable as students work to find compromises in their schedule to fit in the internship. Although developing research demonstrates that trust is essential in the learning the notion of direct connection between this trust and student willingness to find compromises in their schedules warrants further research (Goh, 2002). This practice will be instituted going forward, as it required coordination of space and staffing for the building, as well as scheduling sessions around another weekend learning program.

The development of assignments and learning activities related to the internship experience has been a challenge, although students respond well to readings that are very relevant to the work they are doing within the community based organization. Reading assignments are tailored to the type of organization and population that the student is working with. This requires some common readings for all students, to encourage discussion from a common perspective, in addition to in-



dividualized readings based on their own work. Students are invited to seek out readings that apply to the work they are doing in the community and to specifically discuss why those readings were chosen. This type of application of material and self-directed learning activity will encourage autonomous, critical thinking and help students to become more engaged, responsible learners, taking more initiative as they process information. Thus it is recommended to blend common readings with individualized readings which are sought out by the students.

Use of case studies is also recommended, although students might be asked to develop their own case study based upon their experiences in the field/community. For example, students might write a case study based upon an experience or situation within the field and share this case study with the larger peer group during one of the weekend seminars, inviting discussion and sharing of ideas. Students may learn different strategies for working with the situation described. This is an alternative to Brookfield's (2013) scenario analysis suggestion, in which a fictional vignette is used to spark discussion.

As the larger internship program is developed and more hours in the field are required for student learning, it would behoove instructors to develop activities that ask students to reflect on their experiences including awareness of value conflicts. Scenario analysis will be critical to students learning how to interact professionally and modify responses in client interactions. Finding ways to use blended learning modalities to further provide flexibility for students already stretching their time to accommodate internship hours will also be important. Utilizing online learning platforms and chat spaces could allow students to watch practice examples through video clips, as well as practice responses to client interactions through online role play. Using synchronous chat boxes would allow students to come up with real time responses to possible practice situations, whereas asynchronous activities would provide students with time to reflect upon and offer reasoning for their responses (Graham, Woodfield & Harrison, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, developing experiential learning opportunities specifically for adult, non-traditional students in an undergraduate setting is not easy, but is well worth the time and effort. It is also a responsibility as academics, to provide these opportunities, despite the challenges and barriers. It is essential to assist our students in finding ways to stay relevant in our communities as the economy and job functions shift. Adult students must learn new skills in order to start new careers. As teachers and scholars, it is important to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate our pedagogy, especially as it relates to current student needs (Boyer, 1990). Teaching and learning should be a parallel process, academics learning from teaching experiences, making appropriate shifts in pedagogical methods and techniques, as students learn and provide feedback on their own learning experiences.

It is seems through preliminary piloting that a great need for these learning opportunities and experiences exists. As students learned about the possibilities and the experiences of other students, registration grew and the initial program began to outgrow itself rapidly. This suggests a greater need in this area, although more data should be gathered from a larger group of adult learners to understand more about these needs. Although new pedagogical strategies are being developed, it is still important to ground new learning opportunities and associated activities in existing theory and literature. As the larger internship program is in its first stages, more formal evaluation will take place, which will aid in continuous development. As well, more research on a larger scale is necessary to learn more about the inner workings of experiential learning and internships for adult, non-traditional learners, as this is new and innovative work.