Chapter 18
Experiential Learning in Postsecondary Education: Application of a Learner-Centered Online Internship Program Model

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the theories of experiential learning as applied to undergraduate education in the context of personal and career development of students through a learner-centered online internship program model. The chapter explores the need for experience and problem-based applied learning strategies that are transferrable to the world of work with value to students in arenas of their lives extending into their educational, professional and personal spheres. The chapter explores essential building blocks and best practices for faculty as teachers and mentors to implement in the online internship program experience to capitalize on traditional experiential learning practices. Furthermore, valuable assessment techniques, useful to experiential learning strategies to measure growth in student learning from application of experiential learning are included. The chapter concludes with challenges associated with deviating from traditional instructional teaching modes.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has many applications within higher education and is an effective high impact practice, providing students with valuable learning outcomes, particularly in the context areas of personal and career development. This is particularly true when experiential learning is presented through the lens of a learner-centered model. In the case of this chapter the focus of online internship program models. Experience and problem-based applied learning strategies that are transferrable to the world

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of work with value to students in arenas of their lives extending into their educational, professional and personal spheres allow students to capitalize on their experiential learning experiences, especially when they are in control, from a learner-centered perspective, in setting their learning goals. Students can begin their experiences by defining their own learning goals and proceed through reflecting on those goals throughout their experiences, with the program facilitating their learning and growth. The chapter will explore essential building blocks and best practices for faculty as teachers and mentors to implement an online internship program experience. Furthermore, valuable assessment techniques allow faculty and students to measure and reflect on growth through experiential learning and whether the student generated goals have been met.

BACKGROUND: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Learner-Centered Education

Learning is a process, and that process can be enhanced by engaging students in that process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Higher education has experienced a general shift from teacher-to learner-centered approaches to education (Schiller, 2009; Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012), which has implications for developing students beyond a course and into lifelong learners (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005). Traditionally, curriculum has been teaching-centered, in which students passively received information from instructors and then were assessed on objectively scored tests (Jones, 2002). However, curricular reform is leading to more learner-centered models where students are more actively involved and students work on real-world open-ended problems that are instructor monitored, or facilitated (Jones, 2002). Learner-centered teaching is teaching that empowers students. It gives them control over the learning process, shares the learning agenda, promotes students’ reflection about what and how they are learning, and includes explicit learning skills instruction (Weimer, 2013).

Learner-centered paradigms resemble more the altered power relationship where learning is co-produced with the learner that Freire (1970) envisioned, rather than the “We Don’t Need No Education” Pink Floyd rendition that is power controlled. Learner-centered environments are those in that empowers students to construct knowledge for themselves (Webber, 2012) in an environment that instructors create that is supportive and safe. For instructors, learner-centered environments can bring a sense of excitement (Smart, et al, 2012) for all involved. The instructor supports and challenges the students (Schroeder, 2012). “Critical to the structure and process of a learner-centered curriculum is the notion of “choice” regarding learning” (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005, p. 99). This process of choosing lends to helping students understand expected outcomes, methodological options (which should be provided and flexible), and themselves as the learner. This gives new roles to both faculty and students, with increased responsibility placed on the student as learner and as learner taking over some responsibility for the design and management of the learning process (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005).

Learner-centered theory builds on constructivism. Constructivism is building on what students already know (Smart, et al, 2012). Duffy and Kirkley (2004) identify five key pedagogical goals of a constructivist learning environment that are central in creating a supportive spaces for students to learn. They include: 1. engaging the student in inquiry that leads to useful understanding of concepts and skills (identified in the course objectives) by linking to student interests and creating student interest; 2. providing structure and support to students as they engage in goal-oriented inquiry and problem-solving;
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