

## **Experiential Learning as a Catalyst for Moral Development in Cognitive Growth**

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The concept of experiential learning has long embedded the process of reflection into the prescribed learning process (Kolb, 1984 Perkins and Rao 1990,2005, Cheetham and Chivers, 2001, McKnight and Sechrest, 2003) as a widely accepted practice that is useful and effective in furthering the learning that happens in the “experience”. In the midst of these student reflections are references to changing worldviews, value shifts and individual development. These concepts represent the ineffable and therefore are hard to capture through student interaction and corresponding measurement. However, these reflective concepts merit exploration and need further analysis. This paper illustrates an initial attempt to measure value development and the use of reflection to assess the change in values observed during experiential learning, provides a thorough review of the literature surrounding these concepts framing the study and its methodology, initial results and plans for ongoing research.

### **Engaged Learning**

Student Engagement has gone beyond educational rhetoric as engaged learning has emerged as a **valid and effective strategy** for educators to promote learning in the classroom. Experiential or engaged learning has now infiltrated institutions of higher education and is embedded in the very culture of the industry. At William Jewell College, we are in a campus-wide discussion about experiential learning, in preparation for a major funding initiative that will allow students to participate in these types of learning experiences as part of the educational 4-year developmental plan. Like many institutions, we participate in the The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This survey is indicative of this shift in culture as it has been administered on almost 1500 campuses and to over two million students since 2000 (<http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>). This survey is widely referred to as a standard in the field for assessment of what students are doing or experiencing during their 4-year undergraduate academic journey. (Van Amburgh, Devlin, Kirwin, Qualters, 2007). Because of its widespread use, this survey provides an instrument for data acquisition and analysis.

### **Experiential Learning**

For the purposes of this paper we define experiential learning as a pedagogical methodology that utilizes experiences in contexts outside or within the traditional classroom as the basis for reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Experiential learning prepares students to function more effectively in careers and communities after graduation because students encounter real-world scenarios that often involve complex scenarios that require adaptable application of fundamental concepts (Kolb, 1984, Eyler, 2009, William Jewell College experiential learning working group, 2011)

### **Experiential Learning and Developing Values**

It has been widely accepted that learning is more effective when students discover new knowledge instead of hear about it through lectures or readings. In other words, students will learn best when they are put into applied situations rather than passively receiving information (Epstein, 1994; D.W. Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Lewin, 1935; Merta, Stringham, & Poterotto, 1988; Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu, 1997; Tyler & Guth,1999). An experiential pedagogical approach to engage real-world situations helps students to identify deeply with what they are learning, contributing to their development as persons who demonstrate a commitment for the shared values that lead to a strong character and common good (Glennon, 2004).

Utilizing encountered situations as a form of experiential learning to teach students to understand complex concepts in concrete terms is essential for the type of growth we are hoping to see (Glennon). Encountered situations are an effective educational method that can be utilized both inside and outside of the classroom. This type of learning requires that knowledge be transferred to the learner, applied in practice, and adopted as significant in the learner's value system (Bloland, 1967). As educators, much of our efforts so far have focused on providing a theoretical understanding of concepts and ideas due to a fear that if we provide experiences too quickly without the underpinnings of knowledge, we may lose the opportunity for active learning to occur. Experiential learning, however, is defined as using one's own experiences to formulate a plan for action so that one can continually modify that action theory to improve its overall effectiveness (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Tyler & Guth, 1999). It is a process that consists of a three-part purpose: "(a) the learner's cognitive structures are altered, (b) the learner's attitudes are modified, and (c) the learner's repertoire of behavioral skills is expanded" (D. W. Johnson & Johnson, pp. 48-49, Lechuga, Clerc & Howell, 2009). If this is the case, then we see the need to develop a model to assess all three of these aspects on our campus.

When using experience to develop values in students, the use of reflection is critical to recognition, transference and adoption. Brodie (2007) states that the holistic nature of the learning experience (extending considerably beyond discipline boundaries) means that students need to recognize knowledge presented in unfamiliar ways in order to develop the skills of meta-cognition. The inclusion of critical reflection for the assessment of these experiences is important for several reasons. First, students develop the ability to apply and critique knowledge, not only in the workplace, but as a skill for higher level academic work through the reflection. Brocklebank and McGill (1998) recognize that, reflection "enables the potential for critical transformation" (p. 88), extending a traditional curriculum's focus on critical thinking. Second, and perhaps more significantly critical, reflection enables students to justify and validate their claims for learning, by using a variety of evidence sources, leading to the development and utilization of meta-cognition. This process also enables them to recognize future learning needs, which is essential for developing a capacity for lifelong learning (Brodie).

As we consider assessment of the students' reflections, we would do well to remember Brodie's recommendation that the assessment tasks should require students to apply principles of learning, to identify where learning has occurred, and to demonstrate how it was achieved. They need to establish the validity of the conclusions they come to through the analysis of their experiences and consequent learning, so the tasks will also require them to reflect critically and effectively. This approach to assessment possesses many of the characteristics of what Boud (2000) has defined as "sustainable assessment", that which "meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their own future learning needs" (Boud, 2000, p. 151). To accomplish this, we are adopting Biggs (2003) three Ps approach: which involves the *presage*, the *process* and the *product*. The *presage* takes place prior to learning and involves consideration of the student's prior knowledge and ability, together with program design, i.e., "what is intended to be taught, how it will be taught and assessed" (18). The *process* is the "learning-focused activities" which the student will undertake, and the *product* is the outcome desired from those activities (19). Bringing these three elements together will ensure compatibility and consistency between the "curriculum" (whatever shape that takes), the teaching method and the assessment set. In fact, Biggs prefers the term "teaching/learning activities" (TLAs) instead of the term teaching method, as he feels it is more reflective of the desired relationship between academic staff and students (Walsh, 2007).

## ***Theoretical Framework***

### **Moral Identity**

The concept of learning has been studied by many over several decades and we will not reiterate the theoretical basis for learning but a few key concepts are critical in our understanding of the use of experience to learn and to impact the values of our students. At William Jewell College, our core curriculum is based on a 3-question inquiry: 1) what can we know?, 2) how do we know? and 3) how should we behave? Walsh (2001) reviews some of the writings of Tyler (1949) as she describes learning as taking place through behavior that is active. She quotes Tyler when she says that, ". . . it is what he [the student] does that he learns, not what the teacher does" (Walsh, 25). This understanding of putting the student in the midst of a problem or situation is central to the value development framework. By creating an opportunity to "behave" it allows students to learn in the context where problems are present and not clearly defined.

This allows them to apply not only knowledge but also values to the situation and wrestle with what that means. In essence, it brings our core curriculum alive as students address real-world problems through the 3 questions they have been engaging. Walsh goes on to distinguish problem based learning from problem solving learning. He states that problem solving learning is a contrived situation where teachers set the context and the boundaries of the problems. This is not representative of the real world. With problem based learning he states that the situation does not define what is to be learned but rather the students need to determine the nature of the problem and learn through that process of deciphering the context. By placing students in a context that is not contrived and limited, students are given the opportunity to wrestle with the messiness of ambiguity, multiple variables and undefined outcomes. By not leading students to the right answer, because there may not be one, it allows students to learn how to not only problem solve but problem find which is a critical skill for today's workforce.

Blasi's (1984) conceptualization of "the centrality of the moral self and the motivational potency of the desire to maintain self-consistency" (p. 110) has been accepted and furthered by others to explain the development of moral identity, the need for consistency and the corresponding chosen moral behavior (e.g., Colby & Damon, 1992,1993; Damon,1984; Damon & Hart, 1992; Hart, Yates, Fegley, & Wilson, 1995). According to Damon (1984), as moral development proceeds from childhood to adolescence, an individual's definition of self begins to integrate with morality. In other words, moral beliefs become the major building blocks of one's self-conception (Shao & Aquino, 2008). Shao & Aquino (2008) work through a self-model of moral identity, offering a character perspective that is based on the work of Blasi (1983, 1984, 2005) who was the first to offer the widely accepted model of moral identity. This model begins to address the limitations of the cognitive developmental model as offered by Kegan (1994) by incorporating three components. First, the model states that people not only decide what is the right way to act by making a moral judgment, they also make a judgment of responsibility, meaning that they assess if they have a responsibility to act based on that judgment. Second the reason people choose to act is based on their own moral identity. Third, people need to strive for self-consistency which is what motivates the moral action(Shao & Aquino). This need for consistency is what causes students to incorporate their values into the situation. When they are faced with an experience that causes some dissonance between their values and the situation they encounter, they are forced to make a choice and further develop those values. By incorporating reflection into the process they are able to assess and compose their understanding of their value structure and act with heightened consistency when they encounter such dissonance again.

There are many values that can be measured in the context of value development but there are some that are more critical than others when looking at traditional college age student value development. Psychologist and educator Robert Kegan (1994) constructed a theory of cognitive development and the ability of an individual to make sense of his world. He indicates that this sense making is an ongoing process from birth to death. Kegan posits that we develop through levels of consciousness or capacities of mind. This begins with birth where a child (typically under the age of six) is in the "fantasy" stage and things do not have any permanence. Eventually children move to a state where they are aware of the outside world and themselves. They recognize that each person has a set of capabilities and preferences that are distinguishable from others and are somewhat permanent. Kegan classifies this as durable categories or the categorical frame and he labels it as the second order of consciousness. This stage is typically operative through the teen years.

Within the second stage the individual is limited by an ability to objectify her own beliefs, acts or perspectives. To be able to develop a perspective of her beliefs, acts or the world itself, she must have a different order of mind, the interpersonal, cross-categorical third order of consciousness. In this stage she can think abstractly, reflect on her own emotions and become capable of engaging in a community of people whose ideas are larger than her own. In short, she is developing the ability to be more "objective" about the world and not to be completely "subject" to the outside world. Kegan claims this is an important developmental step, where "we have object; we are subject. We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect on that which we are subject" or part of the situation, meaning we are not objective observers but a part of the environment and interactive with it (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). Kegan moves on to the fourth and fifth level stages of consciousness that are somewhat beyond the scope of this project, but the principles are important to fully assess the developmental process. The fourth stage occurs when an individual views herself as part of a complex system that incorporates others, knowledge, feelings and morals. That allows her to step back and gain perspective on the system that she employs to make meaning.

The fifth stage moves the individual from her system to allow room for a new system that incorporates room for other systems in addition to her own. This stage represents the evolution from modern to postmodern thought (Kegan, 1994, p 312-316).

Traditional-age college students are normally operating from the second stage when they arrive on campus. They are using the categorical frame of reference but are developing the capacity to transition to the cross-categorical third stage. Kegan's lens allows us to view the movement between cognitive development stages (Author, 2003). This framework is helpful in seeing how experiential learning can complement and accelerate the natural cognitive development stages that students move through, thus providing a framework for assessing results.

**Approaches to Measuring Moral Identity** The literature offers a few different approaches to measuring moral identity. The first is the latent approach where moral identity is measured by behaviors that are "moral" or community service type activities (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998,1999), that exhibit community involvement (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003), or are recognized for having a strong moral identity (Atkins, Hart, & Donnelly, 2004; Matsuba & Walker, 2004, 2005; Reimer, 2003). The relative approach is based on models described by Kegan that assess how important people see their moral actions in terms of their individual identity by asking participants to provide self-descriptions coded for the inclusion of moral traits (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer & Wade-Stein, 2004) or using structured measurement scales (Hardy, 2006; Barriga, Morrison, Liau, and Gibbs (2001).

The direct approach to measuring moral identity asks participants to rate themselves on given moral traits and how important the various traits are to them. This measurement process has been most extensively validated by Aquino and Reed's (2002) ten-item scale, which assesses two sub-dimensions of moral identity called internalization and symbolization. According to Aquino and Reed (2002), the internalization dimension captures the extent to which the moral self-schema is experienced as being central to one's self-definition. The symbolization dimension captures the extent to which the moral self-schema is projected outwardly through one's actions in the world (Shao & Aquino). Aquino and Reed's (2002) measure has demonstrated good psychometric properties and has been used in several studies to assess moral identity (e.g., Aquino et al., 2008; Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Caldwell & Moberg, 2007; Olsen, Eid, & Johnsen, 2006; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Moral identity and development are complex pieces to measure as they are multi-faceted and individualized. However, as we begin to utilize experiential learning for this purpose and claim its impact we need to find ways to measure these ineffable attributes so that progress can be assessed while fully realizing and working within the complexities of the conceptualization of this issue.

### **Methods**

The experiential learning experience that we have used as the context to study value development is a community development project in Honduras. This project enables students to be a part of creating healthy sustainable change in a global context. By partnering with the people of Embarcadero, a village of 17 families located in Atlántida, Honduras, we have the opportunity to heighten the level of our students' civic engagement. Our goals are focused on creating sustainable, healthy change both in the Honduran community and in our college community through cross-cultural experience, community participation and empowerment through partnership.

As a liberal arts college we have the unique ability to combat the complex issues present in this rural, impoverished community from an interdisciplinary approach to partner with the village to create sustainable change in a holistic manner. This approach teaches our students that development is all encompassing. In keeping with the global conversation on development approaches we are implementing a multi-pronged approach that combats poverty at many levels and through many different forms, such as engaging in building ecological dry composting latrines, health care education, efficient ventilating wood-burning stove and micro-enterprise opportunities. As a part of the project, all participants, including faculty, staff and students, must participate in a class that focuses on cultural awareness, community development and our philosophical approach to doing development "well" with an eye to reciprocity, partnership and sustainability.

After the class work, the group travels to Honduras for a 10-14 day visit to Honduras, with a week-long stay in the agricultural village where students sleep in the school house and eat breakfast and dinner in adopted family homes. During this time, students partner with the village on a project defined by the people of the village, connect with the people of the village, and work on next steps for the people of the village and the next visiting group from the college.

Students are required to complete pre-experience and post-experience surveys that focus on value development in the context of their experience. The questions are based on the results of a literature review, organizational goals and NSSE surveys. This allows the college to assess the effectiveness of this program in developing the students who participate towards defined organizational outcomes. They are also required to engage in post experience discussions while still in Honduras. The surveys are both qualitative and quantitative in nature to provide an effective and comprehensive estimation of the success of the program in regards to student development as well as an assessment of the evaluation and goal-setting of the next phase of the project.

### Results – Quantitative

Our results serve two purposes. First, we describe our survey tool, which uses the direct approach, as validated by Aquino and Reed (2007) and described in the literature review. We used questions that utilized value development themes as found in an extensive review of literature, the use of our college mission and value statement as well as themes measured in the NSSE data. Secondly, although our data at this point is based on a limited number of participants (N=53), we provide some interesting initial results that merit evaluation and reporting. We have plans to expand the data collection which is described later in the paper.

The chart below measures how important specific values are to developing as a moral person as questioned in the NSEE survey. ?? not sure what you are saying here

**Table 1: Title**

Question: How important is. .?	Pre-Experience Score	Post-Experience Score	Differential
Helping the poor	3.44	4.80	+1.36
Getting to know those different from you	3.00	4.40	+1.40
Living a successful life	3.22	4.80	+1.58
Living out your values	3.26	4.80	+1.54
Solving real-world problems	3.18	4.52	+1.34
Sharing your resources	3.33	4.80	+1.47

The results displayed in Table 1 are typical of responses from students that we expected as a result of the experiential learning experience. The experience enhanced each one of these values as an element that is of importance in forming a moral identity. As we saw with Kegan's cognitive development, students need to be able to put themselves into the situation to better understand another's view or experience. This result could be confirmation of what Kegan posits. For example, as students were allowed to live with others in poverty, even for a short amount of time we saw an increase in their desire to help the poor. This is not surprising but it is confirming. Given that the experience is relatively short term (7 weeks of classroom experience, 2 weeks of intensive cultural immersion), the increase in these scores are fairly impressive. This may validate that these types of experiential components are effective in developing these type of values in students.

Table 2 examines various traits rather than behaviors, providing results that are, upon initial observation, more surprising than the last table.

**Table 2**

Question: How important is. . . ?	Pre-Experience Score	Post-Experience Score	Differential
Is the trait of caring in developing as a moral person	4.78	5.0	+0.22
Is the trait of compassion in developing as a moral person	4.68	4.90	+0.22
Is the trait of being generous in developing as a moral person	4.80	4.4	-0.40
Is the trait of helpfulness in developing as a moral person	4.75	4.2	-0.55
Is the trait of hardworking in developing as a moral person	4.75	4.3	-0.45
Is the trait of honesty in developing as a moral person	5.0	5.0	+/-0
Is the trait of kindness in developing as a moral person	4.4	4.8	+0.40

These results provide insight into the traits that seem to represent a sense of community, such as caring, compassion and kindness, displaying an increase in the students' perceived requirement for moral identity. However, traits that are more individualistic in nature or represent individual acts such as generosity, helpfulness and hard work actually decrease as a critical component in the identification of the students' description of a moral being. These results deserve further investigation as to the nature of the students' view of personal moral development and how they are beginning to incorporate it into what it means to their own moral identity and its development.

The students' qualitative pre- and post-reflections provide some insight and validation to the analysis of the results observed in Table 1 and Table 2. Their reflections speak to both corporate lessons and individual lessons. As the student's pre and post reflections were compared there was a noticeable change in their understanding of the need to establish partnerships with organizations and groups in Honduras. Pre-reflections incorporated a sense that we could "fix" the problems as is evidenced in this student's quote: "I am excited about what we can do for the people of the village. Building these latrines can really solve their water issues." This same student came back saying how much s/he had learned from the people of the village and commented on how building the latrines was just the beginning of what needed to be done. She commented on the need to work with others to find solutions for their health, education, economic and other issues.

Another experiential aspect that was clearly articulated was the reciprocity of the relationship. Prior to going, students were congratulating themselves for what they were doing and how they were going to help the people of the village. There was little anticipation of the change they would be experiencing in themselves. One student wrote: "I thought I had so much to offer the people of the village, but they gave me more. I think the relationship piece is the most important". This is representative of many other reflections that clearly expressed this change in perspective on relationships. This is exemplified by another student's post-reflection: "It is not what I could do that mattered on this trip it was who I am that mattered and who they are that mattered, it caused me to shift my thinking on what development truly is."

Many of the reflections commented on the need to create change including the recognition of systemic poverty and the need to change structures in order to create sustainable change. This experience opened their eyes to the need to make changes that go deep into the culture of the country, the people and infrastructure of the political system that is in operation. This recognition helped students to define what development really means and how they need to engage it to be a part of real change. This means that sustainable change requires much more than one trip or a few weeks out of their life. They need to be part of the solution by "what they purchase", "how they vote", "what they read", "what they advocate for" and various other behaviors. They saw that they need to create changes that will alter the way they act throughout life and in all of life, if they are to be a part of the solution.

### ***Plans for Ongoing Research***

As mentioned previously this is an initial look at the desire to measure value development. We have many additional pieces we want to look at to determine how the values of students are changed through experiences. The priority for us is to expand our data pool by partnering with other institutions to collect data. We are currently working with two additional schools and have been asked by three others to use the tool. We will be able to increase the size of the data pool significantly over the next 12-18 months. We will also be expanding it to more experiences at our own college to grow our understanding of our campus experiential learning offerings and the impact on our students.

While increasing the data pool we want to look at some variables such as preparation, length of experience, type of experience, etc. in order to assess how the variables impact the outcome and what are some of the best ways to create an environment for growth and learning. As the data pool expands we will be analyzing the data in different ways to see if experiences and growth in values differ by gender, length of experiences, geography of experiences and categories of experiences.

Finally, we want to assess this data with our overall campus NSSE data to see if there is any correlation between experiential learning and value development and isolate the natural growth through normal development and maturation of traditional college students. This will allow us to use a national benchmark to assess the difference that these experiences are making.

## Conclusion

The need for measurement of changes in student development throughout experiences is a needed component of the experiential literature base. The initial findings in this study allow for some interesting results and a strong need to further the study to see the application of this type of research in the decision making of experiential teams across campuses, the design and implementation of experiential components in the curriculum and the overall strategic direction of experiential learning on campuses.

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