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Making Explicit Connections between Experiential Learning and Justice: New Approaches to Teaching and Learning through an Imagination for Justice

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Beyond simply being a form of active learning, experiential learning, in its many iterations, has been promoted as a philosophy, a community development model, a theory, a professional skill training opportunity, a global education and civic development approach, and a pedagogical strategy that leads to deep, high impact learning. Indeed, experiential learning has become increasingly specialized in the last several decades with the evolution of numerous sub-fields, such as study abroad and global immersion programs, outdoor education programs, community-based learning (both domestic and global service-learning), internship and work-integrated learning, undergraduate research experiences, and a myriad of other high-impact learning programs. The field of experiential education is vast and deep due to this variety of sub-fields. Upon exploring experiential learning and teaching in the context of higher education, several common themes emerge, but one relatively underdeveloped theme has bubbled up to the surface repeatedly in the past two decades: the theme of justice.

Given events in the past year, from the struggles amid the global pandemic, to the resurgence of the racial injustice movement and politically divisive events challenging democracy, the urgent need for scholarly ideas around this theme of justice is ripe for dialogue. Although justice is often defined as right relationships in a pithy definition, drawing from the critical service-learning framework (Mitchell, 2008), justice is situated within the redistribution of power, developing authentic relationships, and fostering a social change orientation in order “to deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). In order to achieve a

more representative exploration of this theme of justice, the term in experiential learning has grown to include social, economic, racial, and environmental justice. The current context—mentioned above—demands that educators explicitly connect and explore justice within experiential learning and teaching. It is with this context in mind that this special issue of *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* emerged, focusing on the theme of “Exploring the Relationship between Experiential Learning and Social, Economic, Racial, and Environmental Justice.”

Through an intentional, deliberative process with members of the National Society for Experiential Education’s (NSEE) Research and Scholarship Committee, this theme was strategically chosen to meet the committee’s goals and vision:

The NSEE Research and Scholarship Committee seeks to support, encourage, and create space for research and scholarship on experiential learning (EL) in pedagogy and practice with a particular focus on:

1. responding to the current context in order to innovate and lead for the future
2. emphasizing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion
3. amplifying the voices, knowledge, and experiences of communities and partners
4. promoting creative and innovative pedagogical, methodological, and/or epistemological approaches in EL
5. valuing practitioner-scholar approaches that connect practice and theory in EL
6. exploring spaces for scholarship that connect practice and theory in EL

in order to animate the NSEE mission and advance the field of experiential education. (NSEE Research and Scholarship Committee, 2021)

The goals of this committee not only expand the dialogue around experiential learning pedagogy and practice, but also build the field through research and scholarship. The emphasis on creative and innovative pedagogical and methodological approaches, along with explicit articulation of practitioner-scholar approaches connecting theory to practice, signal the creation of new pathways of exploration. Essentially, building upon the foundation of rich literature around experiential learning, the goals of this committee seek to advance the field by paving new pathways and exploring new pedagogies, new methodologies, and new epistemological approaches. This special issue, and the one forthcoming in spring 2022, seeks to accomplish this goal by offering new insights and strategies to apply a justice orientation to experiential education.

In the NSEE Research and Scholarship Committee, justice is clearly articulated and named as a priority emphasis of this exploration. With this emphasis in mind and, as this special issue was crafted, the call for proposals established multiple submission categories beyond traditional research and practice, including theory-building approaches, community-based research, cultural approaches, and public scholarship. This exploratory, scholarly approach to request proposals sought to deepen our understanding of the connection between the practice (experiential learning and teaching) and educational outcomes (social, economic, racial, and environmental justice) by creating space for practitioners, faculty, community partners, and practitioner-scholars to inquire within, reflect upon, and develop strategies for such pedagogy. An emphasis was placed on inquiry related to the relationship between experiential learning and justice, because “inquiry is not a separate, privileged discipline but is directly connected to our lives and the questions we bring to our lives.” (Reason, 1996, p. 16). This approach to inquiry requires us to “start from questions of experience, need, and practice as defined by the people with and for whom we are working. Human inquiry is thus essentially in-service” (Reason, 1996, p. 20). The focus of this issue, then, is on justice as it relates to our experiences with teaching and learning, both in content and delivery.

In the context of exploring the relationship between justice and experiential learning, Glennon (2004) writes that:

... in the case of teaching and learning about social justice, a praxis (action-reflection) model provides a more qualitative experience for learning about social justice than reading about social justice. ... Acting for justice deepens their learning by making ideas about justice

and injustice concrete, forcing students to reflect on the responses people and institutions have to their actions. Moreover, acting for justice now enhances their skills to act for justice in the future. (pp. 32–33)

In essence, this issue creates space for educators to explore justice and experiential learning by interrogating practices in teaching and learning, as well as facilitating inquiry into praxis and building theoretical approaches to practice. This scholarly approach to inquiry is rooted in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Huber & Hutchings, 2011), drawing from a practitioner-scholar inquiry framework (Ravitch, 2014; Green et al., 2020; Green et al., 2018), and anchored in community-engaged scholarship (Blanchard & Furco, 2021), acknowledging and prioritizing community voice, experience, and alternative epistemologies.

Moving toward an *Imagination for Justice* in our Teaching and Learning

Justice-related educational outcomes have long been related to service-learning and community-based learning (Butin, 2007), as well as other forms of experiential learning more broadly (Warren, 2019). The most common association of justice has been relegated to specific forms of experiential learning, such as study abroad programs/global engagement and service learning. For example, Butin (2007) advocated for the link between social justice education and service learning, noting barriers and offering a theoretical reframing around justice-learning. Mitchell (2008) introduced critical service-learning approaches promoting a social change orientation by developing authentic relationships in the community and fostering dialogue on power and privilege. Peterson (2015) furthermore connects study abroad programs with justice, stating that, “Students must be continually pushed to think of how their own lives relate to the conditions that they are studying. What does a commitment to justice and sustainability imply for their future roles as consumers, as citizens, as parents, as professionals?” (p. 202). Breunig (2019) discussed the need for experiential education to connect with social justice learning by increasing the social justice literacy of educators. For Breunig, the need to articulate connections to justice are both to support justice-related outcomes, as well as to not further barriers between justice and equity (e.g., color-blind approaches, white supremacy narratives, etc.). Warren (2019) reflects on how the experiential education field has long discussed social justice through diversity and equity, as well as through critical pedagogy. In this reflection, Warren explores the 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Experiential Education* (42.1)

focused on social justice as an imperative in experiential education, while also hearkening bell hooks' (1994) challenge for scholar-practitioners to teach to transgress so education is a practice of freedom.

Biren et al. (2003) explored experiential learning through the lens of multicultural education by connecting it to democracy and social justice. Their exploration into multicultural education, and its commonalities with critical pedagogy, led to the discovery of educating for democracy through justice:

While coming from different epistemological foundations, the focus of both multicultural education and critical pedagogy is to analyze social life through a lens of diversity and social justice and to prepare students to be transformative democratic agents. . . .

Educational efforts and programs grounded in these approaches recognize that the challenge in educating for democracy is more than instilling new knowledge. Education for democracy requires an ongoing process of 'changing the environmental, cognitive, and pedagogical contexts in which teaching and learning occur' (Gay, 1995, p. 160). Content and pedagogy may be sources of domination, but they can also be a basis for grappling with ethical responsibility, conducting critical analysis, and enacting the democratic ideals of equality, freedom, and justice (Greene, 1993; hooks, 1994; Nieto, 1995). (p. 167)

The study by Biren et al. (2003) indicated that reflection upon practice—which includes a critical consciousness essential for educating about democracy—also required active learning in the form of experiential learning. As such, the authors developed a theoretical model for engaged learning, which included content, active learning pedagogy, and engaged learning. Content was defined as “the emphasis of a structural analysis of oppression and inclusion of marginalized voices” (p. 169). Active learning pedagogy was situated within:

Freire's dialogic process—encouraging collective inquiry into social reality—corresponds to the reflective learning in Kolb's model and to the participatory learning that is emphasized in multicultural education. Active learning is seen to be critical. Education must encourage students to become active inquirers and transformers of the world around them. (p. 169)

The theoretical model commenced with engaged learning, in which:

The three streams also converge in expanding the boundaries of the learning environment from inside the classroom to include students' outside-the-classroom experiences. . . . Engaged learning, as we

define it in this model, is not simple engagement with classroom learning tasks. It is primarily students' out-of-class engagement with issues related to the course, reflecting on concepts after class, applying concepts to real-life situations, and talking with others outside of class. (p. 171)

Applying this theoretical model to their own class, Biren et al. conducted a study of their pedagogical practice and found that experiential learning contributed to the critical consciousness of students. In effect, their conclusions on active learning and engaged learning demonstrated that:

Both have the potential for generalizing the specific in-class learning to real-world situations and across different situations, and as in Freire's (1970) dialogic education process, for encouraging conscientization, that is, a structural understanding of social inequalities that helps people situate themselves in their own immediate social contexts. (p. 188)

The forms of experiential learning that include out-of-classroom experiences were significant in achieving the learning goals of educating about democracy through justice, especially through the lens of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). The study by Biren et al. has stark implications for experiential teaching and learning, suggesting the potential for raising the critical consciousness of students and increasing awareness of structural injustice and social inequalities. The authors in this special issue explore this potential for critical consciousness with theory-building approaches and practice-based inquiry around the design of experiential learning and teaching.

Fenton and Gallant (2016) emphasize how some educators have connected experiential learning to justice, by highlighting how experiential learning may raise issues of oppression and issues surrounding unjust systems. The authors propose a model of integrated experiential education where the goal is to “[create] a more socially just society. Justice can begin to be negotiated through the student-instructor relationship and in authentic community work environments” (Fenton & Gallant, 2016, p. 10). Further identifying the shift of experiential learning focus from professionalism to social justice, the authors noted in their study the importance of the student-instructor relationship to create social change. Since several educators have emphasized the connection between various forms of experiential learning and justice education, it is time to be more explicit in our articulation of experiential learning and teaching approaches. Within this issue, a variety of educators articulate approaches to justice education through the lens of community-based

learning courses, internships, global education experiences, and other experiential learning opportunities. Building on the scholarship of teaching and learning framework, the authors emphasize not only experiential learning theory-building approaches but practice-based approaches encouraging educators to explore what is possible within justice education.

Drawing upon the work of Maxine Greene (1995), the educational philosopher focused on aesthetic education and social imagination, we look to imagination as a source for this connection and clear articulation to justice, since “the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28). It is through this lens of imagination that innovative approaches to experiential learning and teaching may be obtained. Perhaps we need to apply an *imagination for justice* to our experiential learning and teaching so that, as Greene (1995) states, we move:

... toward an idea of imagination that brings an ethical concern to the fore, a concern that, again, has to do with the community that ought to be in the making and the values that give it color and significance. My attention turns back to the importance of wide-awakeness, of awareness of what it is to be in the world. (p. 35)

Greene (1995) advocated for education to be directly connected to justice, both in form and function. Her concept of pedagogy, which included lived experiences and active forms of learning, were inextricably linked to justice:

We should think of education as opening public spaces in which students, speaking in their own voices and acting on their own initiatives, can identify themselves and choose themselves in relation to such principles as freedom, equality, justice, and concern for others. We can hope to communicate that persons become more fully themselves and open to the world if they can be aware of themselves appearing before others, speaking in their own voices, and trying as they do so to bring into being a common world. (p. 68)

Such a vision for education requires us to employ an *imagination for justice* that addresses it in a multi-dimensional way; that is, through social, economic, racial, and environmental justice lenses that can be applied to our teaching and learning. The articles to follow, and the framework detailed in the ensuing section, offer strategies and tactics to *ELTHE's* readership for how to employ an *imagination for justice* in our experiential learning and teaching.

Applying an Imagination for Justice: A Framework for a Justice Orientation in Experiential Learning and Teaching

Upon review of the article submissions, the experiential learning practice and theory-building approaches varied across institutional type, programmatic delivery, and experiential learning format. Yet, the common elements across article submissions, despite whether the submission was theory-building or practice-based, was to provide a framework around the application of justice to experiential learning and teaching. What key elements must emerge to construct such a framework? Lesham & Trafford historically define conceptual frameworks as a structure for organizing ideas and an iteration of a researcher's inquiry that may evolve as the inquiry evolves (2007). Punch (2000) further suggests that conceptual frameworks represent the conceptual status of the topics at hand and their relationship to each other.

Through a thematic analysis of scholarly approaches evident in this issue, a conceptual framework emerges that can inform a deeper connection between justice and an intentional design of experiential learning. Applying Greene's concept of imagination to the educational landscape further enriches the themes emerging from this issue, and substantively enriches the conceptual framework. The framework (see Figure 1) offers an approach that applies an imagination for justice from the perspectives of pedagogy, practice, program, purpose, and policy. When these aspects of experiential teaching and learning are in relationship with each other, often overlapping and interconnected as in Figure 1, such a justice-orientation deepens for student learning through experience.

This framework serves as a guide for planning to incorporate justice education into experiential learning and teaching by recognizing the dimensions related to content, delivery, structure, and format. Operating from the lenses of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Huber & Hutchings, 2011) and engaged scholarship (Blanchard & Furco, 2021), a rich description of the framework follows. A cogent description of each aspect of the framework is offered below, accompanied by examples from my own experience as a scholar-administrator and practitioner-scholar (Janke, 2019; Ravitch, 2014). Finally, each example discussed references articles in this issue that explicate innovative strategies and approaches and enliven the proposed framework (e.g., for an Imagination for Justice in experiential learning and teaching).

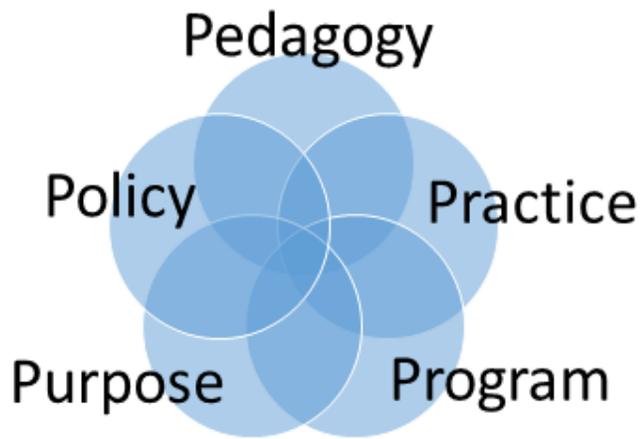


Figure 1. *A Framework for an Imagination for Justice in Experiential Learning and Teaching*

Pedagogy. Beyond course design and engaging activities that support justice, the teaching and learning strategies employed offer another opportunity to incorporate justice in experiential education. Drawing from my experience as an educator of experiential learning at Loyola University Chicago, I have co-taught community-based learning courses with a community partner as the co-educator and in the community (on-site of a non-profit organization). This innovative course design allows the knowledge, skills, and experiences of community partners to be centered and anchored in the classroom, as well as situating the learning in and with the community. From universal design methods to employing anti-racist practices in each program or course, the pedagogical techniques utilized may engage the community of learners differently, while building the class as a community of scholars.

In this issue, Haarman addresses this concept of the class as a community and reframes it through a theory-building article on civic education in “Democratic Community as a Public of Others: Combating Failed Citizenship in Refugees.” Heinrich et al. offer a justice-oriented pedagogical framework in “Reimagining Scripts for Human and Environmental Justice in Experiential Learning.” Emmerling et al. offer a pedagogical reflection tool and explore the transformation of service-learning pedagogy to foster critical consciousness in “Designing Service-Learning to Enhance Social Justice Commitments: A Critical Reflection Tool.” Rasmussen explores the pedagogical approaches that align course learning outcomes with justice outcomes in a service-learning course in “Developing Community Partnerships to Promote Social Justice-Related Learning Outcomes.” These articles also inform and overlap with the topic of practices in experiential learning and teaching.

Practice. The implementation of the experiential learning program, including the in-class and out-of-class activities, experiences, and reflection opportunities, may have a justice-orientation in practice. For example, offering multi-modal reflection assignments (written, oral, and creative) to capture various learning preferences as well as offering multiple experiences at various times are examples of providing equity across experiences. In addition, employing content related to justice is essential, as students raise their consciousness, become aware of complex systemic injustice issues, and explore the world around them through experience. As a faculty member, utilizing community-based learning in both graduate and undergraduate courses, I have implemented written, oral, and creative reflection activities to address learning pathways for all students. I have also engaged community partners to develop both content for class by co-instructing courses, facilitating project-based learning, and leading reflection opportunities within the classroom and on-site in the community. Such practices break down the four walls of the classroom and connect students directly within the community.

In other forms of experiential learning, such as academic internship courses, building multiple feedback loops allowing students to acquire a growth mindset and acknowledging the experience and knowledge of site supervisors may serve as another example. In the context of this issue, Odio addresses issues of social and economic justice, presenting a theoretical framework of liminality and interrogating educational internship practices in “Using Liminality to Understand How Identity and Temporary Status Influence Interns’ Vulnerability.” Raphael’s article “Moving from Dialogue to Deliberation about Campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” applies Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle to intergroup dialogue about DEI issues on campus in order to engage students in DEI learning. DeMartini details a rich portrait of discipline-specific service-learning course aiming to increase student awareness of the historical racial disparities and treatments in US national parks and recreation offerings in “Social Justice through Service-Learning in Parks & Recreation Management Education.” Abbas provides a discipline-specific approach through an introductory anthropology course that lays the foundations for social advocacy and justice work in “Fundamentals of Anthropology as Effective Experiential Learning Strategy to Promote Social Justice.” Such practices inform program development as well.

Program. Designing experiential learning programs or courses dedicated to justice as both substantive

content and as the core outcome is yet another demonstration of applying an imagination for justice. Drawing from my own experience as a practitioner-scholar at Loyola University Chicago, I developed a year-long social justice academic internship program, as well as a community-based research course (EXPL 291: Seminar in Community-based Research), which focused on social analysis and exploring conceptions of justice around issues such as refugee/immigrant rights or diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational settings. Both are explicit examples of such programs designed around justice, in which the content involved interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multi-disciplinary approaches to the themes of the course.

In this special issue, Savoca demonstrates how to employ diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in a complex institution in “Building an Ecosystem of Diversity Talent Development through Experiential Learning.” Bowen and Berrien characterize the Barry Service Corps Fellows Program, a co-curricular program including advocacy, public action, and issue-based projects, in “Implementing an Experiential Learning Program Focused on Civic Leadership to Produce Social Justice Outcomes.” Rogers and Orange detail a civic education program in “Agents of Change: Lessons Learned from the Nation’s First Undergraduate Civil Rights Advocacy Clinic.” Gokcora and Oenbring describe how a collaborative, cross-cultural program helps students connect to justice outcomes in “Experiential Learning across Borders: Virtual Exchange and Global Social Justice.” As each of these articles describe experiential learning programs, they also identify a clear purpose in learning related to justice outcomes

Purpose. Unapologetically articulating justice learning goals and outcomes in experiential learning programs or courses is yet another opportunity to apply an imagination for justice. Explicating the justice learning goals is a crucial step toward communicating the vision, goals, and intention of a course or program. In each of my courses, at least one learning outcome articulates exploring frameworks of justice as a significant aspect of the course. In addition, all experiential learning programs in Loyola’s Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (CELTS) detail program learning outcomes and a conceptual framework with justice as a foundational pillar.

The practice-based and theory-building articles in this issue examine opportunities to articulate such outcomes through a variety of frameworks. Li-Grining et al. propose transformative social and

emotional learning competencies as a conceptual framework to engage marginalized students and approach experiential learning with intentionality in their theory-building article, “Promoting Educational Equity: Embedding Transformative Social and Emotional Learning in Experiential Learning.” Sokol et al. apply an eco-justice framework with students working in the Campus Kitchen program to explore more equitable ways of relating to food and community in “Enriching the Vision of Campus Kitchen: A Recipe for Justice.” These articles not only offer a framework to articulate justice-related outcomes, but also inform the development of policies and structures of experiential learning programs.

Policy. Whether focused on the infrastructure, program structure, or student-instructor-community partner relationship triad, an experiential learning program’s criteria, policies, and organization may include a justice-orientation. From program design that creates access and equity for all groups, especially recognizing and prioritizing underserved student populations, to policies that are inclusive of all learners, the design and structure of program or course may exhibit the justice-orientation. For example, in CELTS at Loyola University Chicago, we recently obtained funding for students with financial need who are in unpaid internships. In addition, we collaborated with the Student Government and our Office of Financial Aid to obtain funding each semester for all students who express financial need are engaged in a form of experiential learning that is unpaid (e.g., research, fieldwork, internship). Such policies and funding opportunities address some barriers and open up new pathways for students.

The framing language, course design, and theoretical foundations that we utilize in our experiential learning programs may be another gateway toward opening an imagination for justice. Course design and theoretical foundations may frame experiential learning course and program structures with a justice orientation. Wessels et al. explore student relationships and course design in the context of a collaboration between a practicum-based course and a social enterprise, in which students examine complex social justice concepts, in “Fostering Self-Authorship and Changemaking: Insights from a Social Entrepreneurship Practicum.” Lauder and Berkey share the SAIL framework and interrogate how a variety of justice theories informs the structure of the experiential learning course in “Justice Isn’t One-Size-Fits-All: Working toward Justice in Service-Learning Courses.”

Conclusion

To create space for practitioner-scholars to examine and explore the connections between justice and experiential learning, the educators published in this volume interrogate programs and their practices in experiential teaching and learning, as well as facilitate inquiry into practice, building theoretical approaches and exploring praxis as a pathway to justice education. The resulting scholarly articles published in this special issue of *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (fall 2021) offer new perspectives into practice and theoretical approaches to expand our justice-orientation in experiential learning and teaching.

The time is ripe to acknowledge how important democracy education and justice learning (Butin, 2007) are in higher education. The recent call for democracy education as an imperative in higher education is noted in the shared commitment pledge for “equitable participation” in “high-quality civic learning” by the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE) coalition (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021, para. 2). The CLDE is comprised of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), Complete College America (CCA), College Promise, and, most recently, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). This coalition of hundreds of institutions has identified four goals: quality and equity; democracy and engagement; collaborative problem-solving; and policy commitment. The emphasis on justice-oriented education is clearly articulated in the description of the collaborative problem-solving goal:

Prepare each postsecondary student, through creative combinations of general education, arts and sciences studies, and career-related studies, to work directly on selected public problems that society needs to solve—e.g., problems in racial healing, health, education, housing, climate, digital access, human rights, justice systems, and interfaith cooperation. (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2021, para. 10)

The explicit lens of social, economic, racial and environmental justice is communicated through references to justice systems as well as references to racial healing, housing, climate and human rights. Multiple professional organizations are advocating for justice to be a central focus in education.

The proposed *Imagination for Justice* framework encourages us to apply a justice-orientation to our teaching and learning through our policies, practices, pedagogy, programs, and purpose. This framework

represents a call to action for experiential learning educators to work toward an imagination for justice that more explicitly connects and articulates justice learning (Butin, 2007) and outcomes in our curricular and co-curricular experiential learning programs. Through this framework, there is powerful potential for deep learning, community building, inclusivity, space creation, and innovative education. As the scholars in this volume indicate, we first need to alter our pedagogical strategies, practices, programs, and policies and prioritize justice as a significant purpose of learning and teaching. ■

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