## Field Report on Expanding Experiential Learning in High School Social Studies Classrooms

## Timothy Kirkpatrick

## University of Colorado- Denver, Summer 2016

## The Story of Experiential Learning

 Imagine a situation where students cannot wait to get to their high school United States History class. Of course, their teacher is great and delivers the most fantastic lectures and presents the most intriguing worksheets, but on at least one to two days of every unit students are presented with a lesson that requires them to get mentally and physically involved. This involvement has them out if their seats, moving around, participating in their learning through role playing and problem-solving. They get to become active participants in their own learning process, active participants in history, and this type of learning sticks with them.

 This type of learning has been advocated by some of the most prominent scholars in the realm of education. David Kolb is a current writer and researcher in the area of experiential learning. He points out that many educational scholars and theorists such as Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget think that learning is a continuous process that is grounded in experience. He believes that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (2015, p. 49).” As the graphic below shows, the only way we could get students to learn more would be to get them to become teachers.



 Experiential learning has a lot of connotations to a lot of people. Often times experiential learning brings up the idea of a type of internship where a student is out in the “real world.” Experiential learning is also often equated with adventure programs and learning team-building skills through a ropes course day or a camping trip. These types of activities are certainly great examples of experiential learning and can provided terrific learning environments, but these are not the only types of experiential learning. Ultimately, experiential learning needs only to involve “the integration of students’ experiences into a learning objective where the use of experience refers to engaging the physical body in an effort to holistically enhance the process of learning (Clem, Mennicke, & Beasley, 2014, p. 491).” Learning in an experiential way is fun and this can aid in student performance.

## The Problem at Cherry Creek High School

 The experiential learning program I am formulating would help address the problem of a high freshman failure rate in the required United States History class at Cherry Creek High School (CCHS). This class is the most failed class in the entire school. Admittedly, there are numerous factors that go into this statistic. One of the most important is the fact that this class is not yet tracked and there is still not an honors option. This means that all incoming freshmen are still together in this class, whereas other departments such as Math, Science, and English have incoming students split into many levels already. We in the Social Studies like this and call our department the “last bastion of egalitarianism,” but when these classes get taught at a high level, many lower achieving student can become lost and frustrated. This leads to a high failure rate in US History and it can be assumed that this could lead to bigger problems such as increased truancy, higher drop-out rate, and lower graduation rate.

 There are a few intervention programs that have been designed and implemented at the school to address this problem. There is a junior/senior level US History class that is available for students who did not pass either or both semesters of US History in their freshman year. However, this does not address the concern when the actual failure is occurring; rather it seeks to fix the problem after it has occurred. There is also a recently developed intervention program called Academic Service Center United States (ASCUS) which has been met with some success. This program requires any student with a D or F to spend one of their off-periods per week receiving extra help and tutoring. This program is beneficial because it does address the problem at the correct time, however it requires students come in more for extra help from another teacher. It takes up extra student time and also must be administered by teachers during their planning time. So, while both of these programs are useful and necessary, I think there is still a large opportunity to address the problem in the classroom where the students actually are for five hours per week.

## Fixing the Problem

 One solution to fixing this problem in the classroom is to make US History more fun and engaging. “When learning is an adventure rather than an exercise in rote memorization, students can enjoy what they are doing and will be more motivated to participate in the process (Clem, Mennicke, & Beasley, 2014, p. 491).” The best students will learn whatever is presented to them in whatever fashion it is presented, but the more marginal students need to be entertained and motivated. This can be done through experiential learning activities, which are also often known as simulations.

 My role in this would start as a bottom-up role. I would like to share some of the activities I do with my fellow teachers. The most informal way to start this project would be to just talk to other teachers in my department about what they do to engage students and then share with them what I do. This could become more involved by presenting lesson plans to my co-workers at department meeting and during our Professional Learning Community (PLC) time. This role could expand into something far bigger than where it is starting. There is a potential to make this relatively small idea into a program that would be sought after by schools and districts around the country. I would then be in a role of leading Professional Development (PD) in the area of experiential learning with a more top-down approach. I could travel the country presenting and modeling these types of activities to Social Studies teachers, explaining to them why it is theoretically beneficial for students to be interactive with their learning. My role, throughout this class, this program, my dissertation, and my life may be to create a program of experiential activities that address most of the major learning objectives in the US History curriculum.

 There are a few goals related to this kind of work. The first are implementation goals. I believe it is realistic to have a goal of asking every US History teacher to implement at least one experiential activity per unit. That would be a good baseline to then utilize data to measure the second main goal of this program. That is, that student achievement improves as measured by a decrease in the failure rate of freshman US History. Both of these goals will be discussed in more detail below.

## Intervention

 A US History curriculum that integrates experiential exercises would not be very difficult for teachers to fit into their existing classes. This does not ask all teachers to be lock-step in what they are doing or where they are in the content. It only asks that teachers attempt to get their students involved in their learning by having students, on a regular basis, learn content by actively engaging in the process of their own learning. As mentioned, I have a vision of this program eventually evolving into a fun and inviting workshop that interested teachers could take. At a PD opportunity like this, teachers could receive the materials and knowledge they need to conduct numerous experiential activities right inside their own high school classrooms. It would also be possible for this program to be presented in a book, or in a web-based format, that published lesson plans so teachers could implement these activities on their own.

 I believe this would meet the goal of more engaged students because teachers would be employing more engaging activities. I know that in my classroom students definitely look forward to the days that this type of activity is planned. I often hear student who miss a day of these activities lamenting to their friends that they are sorry they missed class that day. I do not think I have ever heard a student say they are sorry they missed a lecture. This type of active learning brings kids in who are not as self-motivated as the top-tier students. Also, I think recall, or learning, takes place on a deeper level through this type of activity. This aids in student performance so more students answer questions correctly on assessments and more students stay in school and graduate on time.

 Technology could certainly be employed in this type of program, although I must say that experiential activities do not rely heavily on it. I use more in the way of tape, paper, chairs, and bodies for these activities than technology. The use of technology would obviously be useful for disseminating lesson plans and teaching these activities to teachers. I could certainly create diagrams of classroom arrangements and digital copies of handouts and questions to consider, but again, experiential learning is not heavily reliant on having students plugged-in for their learning. I would prefer to teach these activities to teachers in a way that holds true to their essence.

 In terms of progress of the development of this work for me, I am still very much in the conceptual phase. In fact, this class has really begun to open my eyes to the fact that this type of work could be beneficial. I currently conduct about five large experiential activities throughout my year in US History, so to see this idea come to fruition I will have to design more activities. Also, the current simulations I do are led by a few notes jotted down relatively random sheets of paper. I know how I want these days to work, but to explain all the plans and nuances to another teacher would be very difficult. I would like to use the tech stretch assignment to actually write-up one of the activities into a formal plan. This is really the first of many steps that will need to take place to make this program a reality.

## Outcome and Impacts

 The main outcome I am working toward is making US History more fun so students are more engaged. Higher engagement leads to greater learning and better results for students. I have much information that is non-scientific to back up my beliefs that experiential learning is positive for students. For instance, I have had many students return to say hello to me after they have moved on to college. Not once has a student returned and told me they really remembered my lectures, but many times I have had students return and tell me that they really remembered the experiential exercise we did in class. This informal data proves to me that there is value in this work.

 Ultimately, in today’s climate, I need to produce data that says all this work is worth it. I think it is either fated, or the University of Colorado powers decided, that this class is taken in conjunction with the first class on collecting data. This is extremely important and I am connecting my work in this class with my work in RSEM 7001. I understand that in order to “prove” that experiential learning will benefit students I need to be able to show it. I have already begun to collect data on experiential learning and I plan to continue that work when I have students again in the upcoming fall semester. I will collect data related to the specific information my classes learn through experiential exercises and how the students do on final assessments related to that information compared to how they respond to assessment questions based on lectures and readings. I will be very curious to see if my preconceptions will be supported by research and data.

## A Final Thought

 I have found that students are generally open to being involved in the work of their teachers provided they have a good relationship with each other and teachers are open to sharing information with students. This has become apparent to me through the work I have been doing for National Board Certification over the last two years. I have spent time explaining to students why I need to send permission slips home to their parents to use their work for analysis and why I need to visually record our class periods. This has been nice because it allows me to connect with students on another level. I can explain to them how I am a student and this allows me to delve into the idea of life-long learning with them, which I feel is a great thing to model for them.

 The reason I bring this up in my field report is that I see a great deal of work ahead that involves my students. I look forward to explaining to them, in addition to teaching them history, the reason we are doing the activities we are, my rationale for it, and why I am collecting their feedback on what we do in class. All too often, in my opinion, teachers direct to students and talk down to them because the teachers are the educational experts in the room, however, if students have a role in their learning and they are aware that their feedback is important to the teacher then they will only have more buy-in and involvement in their learning.

References

Clem, J. M., Mennicke, A. M., & Beasley, C. (2014). Development and validation of the experiential learning survey. *Journal of Social Work Education,* *50*(3), 490-506. doi:10.1080/10437797.2014.917900

Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.