Experiential learning in HE and implications for student volunteering

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Introduction

Students in HE are twice as likely to have volunteered for a charity compared to other groups (nfpSynergy, 2016). Volunteering is a type of experiential learning and improves students' career advancement. Experiential learning is centred on the notion "experience is important" and you can learn from it through reflecting on it.

A study on the impact of volunteering on university students in London found that students that volunteer benefit from it. Volunteering brings students into contact with the wider community, strengthens their ties with their institution and builds skills, employability, and opportunities for personal development (viz Education for Social Justice Framework [ESJF], 2019). However, students can experience difficulties adapting to the volunteering environment. The 'Bursting the Bubble' report shows that students who are supported by their university gain greater benefits than those who are not (Brewis, Russell and Holdsworth, 2010). The success of an experiential learning curriculum is dependent on the alignment of the teaching and assessment.

This paper presents a critical review of experiential learning in HE, by exploring the roles of students and practitioners with reference and application to my own prior professional area of student volunteering and its implications with a focus on London Met and education for social justice.

Experiential learning and its importance

There are numerous factors that can affect the environment and character of HE. Each nation has its own unique approach to HE corresponding to the government's political programmes - moderate, neo-liberal or revolutionary (OECD, 2017). Employers have become an increasingly vocal stakeholder in what the job of HE is (Selingo, 2016) - leaving HEIs to ponder: "What employers want". The response appears to be "intellectually skilled graduates with industry-related work experience" amongst others. Hearteningly, despite the commodification of not only education but of the graduates themselves, a few of the abilities necessary for lifelong learning are additionally sought by businesses (Miller, Imrie and Cox, 1998).

The UK Quality Code (2018) for Higher Education Advice and Guidance for Work-based Learning (WBL) offered some guiding principles for UK universities and WBL, emphasising the benefit WBL brings to students, HEIs and employers. Kolb (2015) presents a compelling case on the significance of experiential learning in the present environment of widening participation in UK

HEIs. For these learners, WBL or volunteering can be an inspiring event that allows them to utilise their practical muscles whilst understanding just how to use what they've discovered in their degree course (viz also ESJF, 2019).

Experiential learning and student volunteering

In the USA and Australia, they bring together experiential learning and volunteering in what they call service learning. Australian students reported an increase in independence through real-life experiences, through augmented confidence and attainment of individual development, through acquiring fresh understandings into the processes of community organisations and by becoming accountable citizens (Parker et al., 2009; ESJF).

Gibbs (2001) wrote that HE in the UK works inside the financial marketplace as a product. To fulfil a financial standard of learning, students are tallied and certified. He says students get HE certificates instead of an educational experience. I contend that qualities of learning can't be exclusively helpful in success to employment. Transferable skills aren't for career or individual advancement solely. What abilities are exclusively instrumental to success in work that don't alter the individual constructively? Student volunteering enhances the students' campus life and WBL contains critical thinking aspects of their education.

At London Met most of the student body arrives from what are called 'non-traditiona'l backgrounds, some with unusual credentials which are not clearly identifiable by businesses, and hence the necessity for abilities expansion, and work experience is vital (ESJF). Additionally, obtaining useful work experience can be difficult for specific parties; an instance would be students with disabilities, who might already encounter challenges in gaining access to openings in the labour market. Volunteering supports development of emotional intelligence and resilience (Bernacki and Jaeger, 2008; ESJF).

A study that included eight London-based HEIs found that student volunteers noticed a growth in their own advancement in numerous fields, involving more confidence, curiosity in "attempting different things" and self-control. Participants thought their transferable skills improved because of volunteering (Braime and Ruohonen, 2011). Handing London Met students the chance to embark on WBL with a not-for-profit organisation as part of their degree programme facilitates the elimination of the normal obstacles the non-traditional students encounter, shortage of time, absence of funds, unavailability of links.

Placing experiential learning into practice

Experiential learning as considered in HE arises from andragogy or the teaching of adults. Knowles indicated that life events can be an impediment to new learning - a viewpoint change may be required if not a specific paradigm needs to be dropped for a conceptual version to be incorporated (Sutherland, 1998). It's vital to establish a safe space where learners and educators can believe and appreciate each other, where discussion is encouraged and supported (Blaschke, 2012; ESJF).

Added to the advantages for the student who is volunteering there will additionally be gains for peers on their curriculum because the learners will be capable of delivering a helpful understanding as well as communicate whatever they have discovered. Teachers can rely on the practical experience of learners to make what is being taught more authentic. Moreover, student interaction can "enhance classroom participation by international students but also allow international and local students to interact more productively with each other" (Hellmundt, Rifkin and Fox, 1998, p.333).

Teaching strategies for experiential learning

Students are located at the core and the teacher's part is to advance approaches aimed at engaging the students in practices that offer them contact with information then training in specific skills and dispositions (education.stateuniversity.com, 2020). We want to allow the change from "experts in knowledge" to "experts in facilitation" which will lead to choices regarding what sort of skills and expertise learners in various specialties may require (Harland, 2003, p.271). Vital to the procedure of transformation is reflection (education.stateuniversity.com, 2020). Assessing experiential learning is a continuous process founded upon the learning outcomes defined at the start of the practise or programme. Kolb's Experiential Learning model indicates it is not enough to simply have an encounter with no reflection, because it might be swiftly overlooked, or the educational possibility gone. Educating learners on how to self-reflect facilitates their critical analysis of their personal education and assesses them versus what they now know with their peers' or teachers' experience (Harland, 2003).

Advocates of experiential teaching describe education that emphasises both cognitive and emotional development: Education is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, p. 41).By way of an illustration, Evans contends that student assessment is *"a matter of making independent judgments about the level and quality of learning which has been reached by an individual at a particular time"(Education.stateuniversity.com, 2020, p. 68).* David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, and David Walker (1985) presented examples of numerous approaches for encouraging reflection, for example relaxed questioning in meetings after experiential activities and written responses to experience facilitated by photographs and so on. Strategies that can be used in other disciplines to make assessment more owned and inclusive (ESJF).

Conclusion: Implications for student volunteering

Volunteering has expanded since 1997 backed by the Higher Education Active Community Fund by HEFCE. The Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund was the most recent cycle of financing by the government to HEIs that included volunteering. Following that universities were invited to self-fund volunteering provision. In London Met the money has been steadily shrinking, at the same time, in 2016 London Met made WBL a necessary component of an undergraduate degree. Consequently, students are nearly always concerned about certifying their volunteering. This change has benefits and drawbacks. Benefits involve a nearly continuous quantity of volunteers to help our not-for-profit partners, the chance for our student body to gain from this occasion without

having to lose time nor income. Drawbacks include that some volunteering requires lengthier commitment than what a regular WBL module permits, and some not-for-profits are under-resourced and incapable of offering appropriate WBL openings, which leave students at the mercy of luck, except if they have a personal connection, and can maybe generate a mentoring relationship with somebody in the organisation or sector. Well resourced volunteering programmes benefit the student, their peers and the HEI - and aligns well with our ESJF.

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Biographical note

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