

Learning by Doing: The Case for Experiential Education

By John T. McCrann on February 25, 2016 2:41 PM

"I learned more because I did it instead of just talking about it."

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This analysis came from a student on an outdoor "winter survival" trip that a colleague and I lead a few weeks ago, called Harvest Survivor*. It was clear from this feedback that the student got the essence of what I call "experiential education."

Experiential education is when learners actively engage in activities or experiences. [I've written before](#) about the fact that I was an experiential educator, leading backpacking and other outdoor trips in North Carolina, before I was a classroom teacher. I brought the teaching skills I'd learned in the outdoor environment into my math class on my first day as a teacher, so my practice has always leaned towards the idea of "learning" as inherently tied to "doing."

But are these two necessarily related? Isn't all this "doing" just a waste of time when students could learn so much more content if I just told it to them?

Students learn better when they are actively engaged in the learning process. This is a lesson that I have learned time and time again on outdoor trips, and one that was reinforced on the survival skills course from which we just returned.

Here are three takeaways from my reflections on the Harvest Survivor trip that make the case for the value of experiential education as a model for all teaching and learning:

1. Students will want to know more when they need to know more

One of the performance tasks for students on Harvest Survivor is to cook dinner on a fire that they build. They know this from day one of the course. Every time we talk about one of the parts of fire making (collecting fuel, constructing a fire structure that allows for enough air,



tending the fire) they know that their ability to effectively execute the skills being taught will determine whether or not they get to eat a hot meal that night (it bears noting here that we do have a stove available so we would not actually make anyone go hungry).

In the planning of Harvest Survivor, we created an authentic need for students to learn a new set of skills and understandings. Teachers should structure classroom learning in a similar way. Presentations of learning and oral defense activities create a need for students to show academic knowledge that they have gained. Contexts like using mathematics to solve science or engineering problems or having students in a health class write a letter to an imaginary peer with a health question can accomplish something similar.



2. You never know what problems will need to be solved

Experiential learning occurs in a context and the wonderfully messy thing about life is that it doesn't make things easy on you. This year we had a big snow storm right before Harvest Survivor and then a warm sunny streak while we were on the

expedition. Melting snow created mud and slippery conditions while waterlogging some of the would-be kindling of our students' fires.

The changing conditions meant that we literally could not prepare the students for all the obstacles they would face. Knowing this forced us as instructors to lead from alongside our crew, and gave them an opportunity to use the base line knowledge they had gained in new and creative ways. This is part of what David Perkins writes about in **Making Learning Whole**, when he encourages us to "Play Out of Town."

When we give students actual problems to grapple with (such as non-routine math and science situations that have no "method" for finding a solution, or role plays of historical dilemmas with no right answer) we require students to engage in the kind of messiness that makes them genuine thinkers.

3. Give students the space and they will find the learning

While the major learning objectives of Harvest Survivor relate to learning how to use resources to create safety and comfort, our students' main takeaways often have little to do with shelter or

fire building.

In this year's closing circle, students talked about the value of spending time away from technology and the value of a quiet space on their mood and ability to reflect.

When we see our role as facilitators who provide experiences, rather than purveyors of knowledge, we give students the chance to make meaning of the situation in a ways that they need. This doesn't mean that we abdicate our responsibility to expose students to new and important ideas. It does mean that we take care to expose ourselves to **the power of the students' ideas** as well.

Think back to a time when you learned something. Something that you know deeply and can apply with flexibility, ease, and grace. Whether it's a favorite recipe, sport, mathematical tool, or song, I'm willing to bet that you came to that knowledge through a series of experiences that brought meaning to the skill or understanding. How are you creating a context for students to gain this kind of knowledge in your classroom?