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Quenching the Thirst for Experience in a Liberal Arts Education

“College experience” often invokes thoughts of dorm life, campus clubs or other social life. Many people consider it something that “you do *before* you experience the so-called real world, or even what you do *instead* of gaining valuable hands-on-experience” (Ayers 6). In “The Experience of Liberal Education,” Edward L. Ayers, Ph.D., discusses the importance of making experience an integral part of a vital liberal arts education. The piece is an adaptation of Ayers’s closing address at the 2010 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Ayers served as president of University of Richmond from 2007 to 2015 and was named Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation and Council for Advancement and Support of Education (“Newsroom”). Moreover, President Barack Obama awarded Ayers the 2012 National Humanities Medal for his “innovations in digital humanities [that] extend higher learning beyond campus boundaries” (“Ed Ayers”). Thus, Ayers’s extensive background makes him a credible source regarding the integration of experience in a liberal arts education.

In this article, Ayers emphasizes the importance of experience in higher education. He contends that liberal arts colleges and universities need to integrate experience into the curriculum. Next, he refutes the claim that experiential learning degrades traditional teaching. In closing, Ayers criticizes programs that serve to divide experiences, and offers instead ways to integrate experience into the liberal arts curriculum.

Ayers opens up the piece by interpreting information in a clear manner as he explores the importance of experience in the higher education realm. First, he offers his colleagues' view that experience is considered "a fundamental building block for the National Survey of Student Engagement, which has proved so valuable in thinking about [their] work in broader ways" (Ayers 6). Then, he provides a denotative definition of experience, and explains how Americans "embody just this sort of hands-on sense: Learn by doing" (6). After that, Ayers refers to the 2005 Rebekah Nathan field study of first-year college students who demonstrated a thirst for "unregulated experience, immoderate experience, often transgressive experience" (9). In the end, it is easy to understand that experience is valued by educators, society and college students alike.

Furthermore, Ayers presents noteworthy information to support the integration of experience into the curriculum. First, he points out and sees the value in the institutions' attempts to enrich a student's experience by creating student centers, career development centers, multicultural centers and more. However, Ayers understands that college students' thirst for experience often includes risky behavior, such as "unprotected sex and binge drinking and new drugs" (9). Ayers supports colleges that counter such "episodes of tragic, stupid, and mean experience with countervailing experiences -- group discussions or teach-ins -- that give students personified, embodied, experiential ways to understand complex issues" (9). Ayers believes "these experiences do teach valuable things, essential things" (9). He cites two recent students wherein higher levels of education correlated with happiness, healthy choices, and responsible citizenship. Thus, Ayers effectively highlights the importance of healthier experiential outlets for college students and how the integration of experience into the curriculum can lead to happy and responsible college graduates.

Moreover, Ayers makes a persuasive argument as he refutes the claim by the opponents of experiential learning. First, he explains the opposing point of view that an experiential focus gives students the assumption and implication that “traditional teaching is somehow inadequate” (9). Ayers counters this claim by stating that traditional teaching “can provide a profound experience” ... [and] [g]ifted teachers will use every means they can imagine to touch students, and sometimes words alone are enough” (10). In other words, valuable experience does not have to entail experience outside of the classroom, but has more to do with how the teacher engages the students. He refers to his own college experiences, and how a traditional professor inspired him and, ultimately changed his life, simply through teaching and writing. Therefore, by providing examples of his own college experiences that led him to be the renowned educator he is today, Ayers makes a convincing argument.

Lastly, Ayers presents clear ideas for colleges and universities to integrate experience into the liberal arts curriculum. For example, he recommends a connection between traditional learning and other programs, such as study abroad, community service, career development, health and fitness, cultural understanding, or spiritual growth. Ayers refers to his own University of Richmond’s “Tocqueville Seminars,” wherein they are “channeling experience back into the curriculum, into the classroom, helping students see themselves more broadly and more deeply, translating experience into education and vice versa” (10). Ayers concludes the article with a call for “educational experiences of depth, breadth, intensity, and lasting meaning” (11). Hence, Ayers provides clear actions for colleges and universities to end the division of experience and to create rich experiences within the liberal arts education.

I wholeheartedly agree with Ayers’s position that it is important to integrate experience within the liberal arts curriculum. In fact, as I analyzed this piece, I could not help but see that I

am living proof of its effectiveness. For instance, as I pursue elementary teacher certification with a language arts major, I greatly benefit from many courses at Madonna University (MU) that integrate experience into the curriculum. This is easily seen in my education courses wherein I receive hands-on training and develop skills as a future teacher through in and out-of-class assignments, observations and practicums.

Since this piece deals with integrated experience within a liberal arts curriculum, I will also consider my courses in my language arts major. A perfect example is evident in the English 3540 American folklore and literature course. We learn through experiencing in and out-of-class writing assignments, guest speakers, videos, performers, and a culminating folklore project that includes folklore fieldwork. We learn through small and whole group discussions that deepen my understanding of complex issues, such as the historical and philosophical investigation of human experience through multiple views of the human condition. The professor's passion for the study of folklore and literature keeps me interested in learning more. Consequently, by experiencing all of these things in a humanities course, I truly learned about American folklore and literature, as opposed to just memorizing information for a test.

Overall, Ayers corroborates his main points about the importance of experience in higher education, the need to integrate experience into the liberal arts curriculum, his rebuttal that experiential learning degrades traditional teaching, and instead provides ways to integrate experience. He proved these by interpreting information in a clear manner as he explores the importance of experience in the higher education realm. He also presents noteworthy information to support the integration of experience into the curriculum and makes a persuasive argument as he refutes the claim by the opponents of experiential learning. Lastly, Ayers provides clear recommendations for integrating experience into the liberal arts curriculum.

Notwithstanding all these positives, the piece was lacking in a fundamental way. Ayers does not compare the experience attained in a liberal arts education with the experience gained in professional training. It is as if he only touched on this issue, even though his article specifically deals with attaining experience within a liberal arts education. For example, he suggested that colleges and universities get rid of “those spaces [that] divide liberal arts education and professional training” (10). However, he does not expand on such “spaces” or why they need to be eliminated. Had Ayers provided more specific and supporting information about this issue, he could have emphasized the importance of experience in a liberal arts education that encompasses the professions and professional training.

Works Cited

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