

Theories of Learning

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John Dewey in 1938 described the learning process as a cyclical loop of observation, gaining knowledge, judgement, action, observation, gaining knowledge, judgement, action, observation and so on. In this process new concepts come from and are changed by experience (Kolb, 1984).

In experiential learning the focus is on the process more so than the outcomes. That process should pull out a student's ideas and beliefs, challenge them and ultimately transform the original ideas and beliefs by broadening them and adding to them. Struggling with conflicts between opposing viewpoints and opinions is part of the transformative experience that makes learning happen (Kolb, 1984).

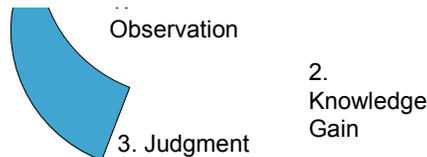


Figure 2.1 Dewey Model of Experiential Learning



Creating a community both in the sense of students with common interests and also in the sense of a community of learners who would work together to collaborate was highly important. In student learning communities students should be involved in learning through collaboration with each other and engagement in the process. Both the group as a whole and the individuals involved all benefit from the collaborative nature of the project (Lenning,

1999).

In creating a student farm, student involvement is necessary. Without student input this program might as well be a faculty-run farm or a staff-run farm. Although to fit into the structure of a University course, the farm needed to have staff and faculty direction. However, we still wanted the students to be able to engage as much as possible in making their and our collective visions a reality.

Meeting our objectives

Creating a curriculum for a new program can be as daunting as it sounds. As our program began, student farm literature was all but non-existent. In 2004, NewFarm.org took an inventory of student farms and found over 40 programs at different colleges and universities. They ranged from a quarter acre garden that started that year by a small group in Appleton, Wisconsin to a century and a half old student farm in Kentucky. Like commercial farms, student farms tend to fill niches as well. At Michigan State University the student farm has become a model of season extension possibilities in cold climates with a 50 week community supported agriculture farm. At the University of California Santa Cruz the student farm is a national model for a farm to college program providing fresh, local foods to campus cafeterias (<http://www.newfarm.org/features/0104/studentfarms/studentfarms.shtml>).

Most student farms focus on vegetables. A few have pastures for animals, and some are certified organic. Most just use organic practices. In each case, the farm is molded by a combination of students, staff, faculty, the land and the climate into learning experiences. The student farms at these campuses also act as a meeting place and center for a community of students interested in sustainable agriculture. We also hoped that by creating our own Student Farm we would also create a similar community meeting place for students.

In order to give students a real world experience in starting a farm we wanted to use a business start-up model approach rather than an organizational development model approach. The Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide To Developing A Business Plan For Farms and Rural Businesses was created and published in 2003 to address the needs of beginning and experienced rural entrepreneurs. Rather than just addressing the economic aspects of business planning this guide focuses on a holistic approach that addresses personal, community, economic and environmental values and practices.

We used the first four tasks in the business planning guide: Identifying Values; Farm History and Current Situation; Vision, Mission and Goals; and Strategic Planning and Evaluation to create a framework for the class and the program overall. The guide also covered the crucial areas of operations, finances, marketing and human resources for creating a business framework.

Creating an environment in which students would be the ones to make the decisions equally with faculty and staff was important for laying the groundwork for student interns to be empowered to make decisions and for creating a student driven process. Consensus building was appealing for a number of reasons. It is not a majority vote system - it gives each individual an equal say and demands that everyone participate in each decision. It's also based on compromise and the ability to find common ground. Neil Corcoran's work from Michigan State University proved to be the perfect primer on consensus building especially for large groups for the class (<http://www.msu.edu/~corcora5/org/consensus.html>). For the large group consensus building process we combined Corcoran's work with Fletcher's Fist to Five Consensus Building method (<http://freechild.org/Firestarter/Fist2Five.htm>). We also utilized a cooperative learning piece from Wheeling Jesuit University's K-4 Teacher's Earth System Science Course for small group consensus building process

(<http://www2.cet.edu/ete/hilk4/guide/learn.html>).

As I engaged in the process of facilitating this course and finding the right resources to guide us, the opportunity to attend a American Community Garden Association Workshop around the Growing Communities Curriculum (Abi-Nader, 2001) presented itself over spring break in Des Moines, IA. I brought several students in the class with me to engage in a weekend workshop focused on "Community Building and Organizational Development through Community Gardening". Within that curriculum I found the tools to help us create a lasting organization that would be rooted in the internal University and the external Twin Cities communities. Utilizing the Asset-Based Community Development Model in this curriculum helped us engage in both community groups in ways that we would not have initially done without this model. The model has also proved to create relationships that transcend initial ideas about ways different groups can work together.

Students ended up researching many different ways of growing organically through the organic classic books of Jeavons (1974), Mollison (1988), Coleman (1989) and others. Not surprisingly, actually getting out and growing on the land proved to be more powerful than the research on how we could do it. Creating practical experiences in organic agriculture was what this project and program were all about.



Figure 2.2 Students transplanting lettuce plants into larger containers in the greenhouse