Beyond the Classroom...
Meaning Making and Mission in Experiential Education Abroad

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NAFSA Colloquium
2013 • St. Louis
Dr. Alison LaLond Wyant serves as the Assistant Dean for Experiential Education. In this role, Alison provides leadership and support for The College of Global Studies’ rich experiential education offerings. Included in the portfolio are service-learning courses, internship courses, field research courses, and practicum courses – with new ideas coming all the time from our faculty and institutional partners. Alison brings years of experience in service-learning curriculum planning, community-university partnership building, and higher education administration to the role, but she finds Arcadia to be on the leading edge for global, integration-based experiential education that is directly applicable to American students’ course of study and professional aspirations.

Before joining The College, Alison served as the Stouffer College House Dean at the University of Pennsylvania. She had also held positions in other mission-driven units at Penn: the Greenfield Intercultural Center, The Netter Center for Community Partnerships, and Civic House. Alison has taught courses about community engagement and about service-learning pedagogy, and she draws energy from watching students bring their academic work to bear on real-world problems. Alison worked in community-based organizations in Baltimore, Maryland, before her career in higher education.

Originally from Massachusetts, Alison earned her B.A. in Political Science from Loyola University in Maryland, and her M.S.Ed. and Ed.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation analyzed Penn’s relationship with one of its neighboring public high schools, and her broader research interests include higher education’s service mission and, more specifically, the processes and products of campus efforts to serve the public good through community engagement.

Alison and her family reside in Glenside, and the remaining four of her top five favorite places in the world (so far) are Galway, Ireland; Cascais, Portugal; Leuven, Belgium; and Cape Cod, Massachusetts.
Experiential education abroad can serve as an opportunity for high impact learning, an arena for meaningful integration into the host community, a training ground for workforce competency development, and a forum for developing self-efficacy about making societal contributions.

So we should do more of it, and we should do it better.

Of course, doing more of it means a significant commitment of resources and doing it better means generating a sense of the ideal and working toward it. As prelude to that ideal, we must assess where we’ve come from, what we’re doing now, and why we’re driven to increase our activities and improve our model.

That agenda breaks down into three parts, 1) a background and definition of experiential education – the what; 2) Arcadia’s approach to experiential education abroad – the how; and 3) our passion for and drive toward experiential education abroad– the why.

First, as foundation, there is the idea of experiential education – its history and its definition.

THE WHAT...

The National Society of Experiential Education describes experiential education as “learning activities that involve the learner in the process of active engagement with and critical reflection about phenomena being studied” (2006). This dual process can take place within the curriculum or in co-curricular contexts. That definition may be modern, and experiential education may be popping up in the practice and rhetoric of study abroad more recently than it has in the past, but it has deep roots. We can follow the literature of experiential education from its modern advent with John Dewey through its evolution with David Kolb and into its current iterations as celebrated by educators and scholars like George Kuh.

From Dewey’s body of work in the first part of the 20th century, we learn that education is a social, interactive process, and one that works best when learners are actively engaged in the work of generating knowledge, not simply passively taking in information from teachers. Dewey conceived of education and schooling as democratic processes, through which students make meaning of their experiences not only in relation to themselves, but also in relation to others, and possibly to the greater good.

David Kolb (1984) extended the thinking about the practice and value of experience and application in education by creating a four-part cyclical model of experiential learning:

Born out of that tradition is a contemporary conception of experiential education as an iterative pedagogical process of preparation, action, and reflection. Experiential education has been subdivided into a number of fields – service-learning, project-based learning, internships, field research, lab research, practicum modules, etc., but they all engage students in that same, basic pedagogy:
As scholars learn more about the learning process, they lay out more evidence about the value of this pedagogy in any field. The literature even lauds the messiness inherent in the variables and the cycle. In a seminal work, Grant Wiggins (1989) asserts that quality education “should involve students in the actual challenges, standards, and habits needed for success in the academic disciplines or in the work place.” There is value in students applying their learning in the world beyond the classroom (e.g., Franklin, 1927; Dewey, 1938; Kuh, 2008; Wiggins, 1989).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) holds up experiential education in three of their ten examples of “high-impact educational practices:” 1) undergraduate research, 2) service-learning, and 3) internships (Kuh, 2008). These practices have been shown to increase rates of student retention and engagement, and to positively contribute to students’ cumulative university learning (Kuh, 2008). Study abroad also makes the AAC&U list. Brownell and Swaner (2010) contend that purposefully integrating more than one of these high-impact practices in an educational experience (for example, layering study abroad and an internship course) “may offer even greater potential for student growth and learning.” According to Brownell and Swaner, intentional linkages of these activities broaden the prospects for applying learning across contexts, for deeper results.

In brief, we know this can work.

To illustrate how experiential education can be done well: Arcadia’s approach to experiential education.

“EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION ABROAD IS MISSION-CRITICAL WORK”

THE HOW...

The College of Global Studies defines Experiential Education, as; Purposeful learning opportunities that incorporate substantive engagement in/with the host community, beyond the traditional classroom. We use experiential education to describe both curricular and co-curricular options for students.

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CURRICULAR:

Although many wonderful courses offer fun-filled, learning-rich field studies or community service opportunities, to fit into Arcadia’s model of experiential education, credit-bearing courses must meet two criteria: 1) the experiential components of these courses are integral to the syllabi and 2) the experiential component is an applied, active learning experience with outputs beyond the traditional classroom. In experiential education courses students dedicate significant work for the course to an activity with outputs outside the classroom, and learning objectives include students’ ability to analyze the translation of course material to the out-of-class environment.

Despite drawing these parameters, The College of Global Studies is able to offer experiential education courses among its center-based options; among courses of our international partners’ design and instruction in an integrated model; and among courses co-designed by Arcadia and a partner institution, with instructional delivery provided by the partner. We offer internship, service-learning, field research, and lab research experiential education courses.

Experiential education courses vary significantly in format and other ways across discipline, region, institution, and other dimensions. In any case, the activities inside and outside the classroom of an experiential education course have a reciprocal relationship. Just as the in-class syllabus supports the work in the placement, the work in the placement supports the curriculum. Through this linkage,
students experience and develop the relationship between theory and practice (Sgroi & Ryniker, 2002).

CO-CURRICULAR:

Our co-curricular options don’t need to meet the rigid criteria we hold for courses. Instead, we encourage co-curricular options across a wide spectrum of experience – from exposure to active application. These opportunities include homestays, excursions to cultural or historic sites, community service projects, and student leadership opportunities. In each of these cases, faculty and staff (often together with students) construct goals for the experience as participants/contributors and learners, and then debrief the experience to develop their understanding of the context. We are continually refining our offerings to strengthen opportunities for encouraging, deepening, assessing, rewarding, and cataloging learning through these experiences.

The Co-curricular Learning Certificate (CLC) program is the strongest of our co-curricular experiential education opportunities because it offers not only an array of co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences, but also a formal arena and a reward for producing a critical reflection on the related learning through a variety of media (e.g., essay, e-portfolio, video, photography, etc.). Students participate in an activity or series of activities engaged in the host culture, document their learning through a final project, and receive a certificate upon successful completion of the program. A selected number of students also have their CLC submissions published in IMPACT, our study abroad journal.

The CLC program is a tool for students to develop their narrative about the lessons they are taking away from their time abroad. In one staff member’s words, “writing the reflection cements the learning for students.” Our faculty and staff assess the CLC project against a common rubric in deciding when to award the Co-curricular Learning Certificate. The project narrative itself could support students’ endeavors to be good stewards of the story of their host communities when they return to the US; and also could help students as they plan for cover letters and interviews that speak to the lessons of their time abroad.

Such benefits bring us to the crux of our argument, the reasons why Arcadia is investing in experiential education – and why we suggest you do the same.

THE WHY...

The College of Global Studies champions experiential education as a tool for our students to integrate themselves into the host community; strengthen their preparation for the global workforce and for our increasingly interconnected global society; and apply the theories of their disciplines to practice. To put it simply: we invest in experiential education for our students because applied learning activities are relevant to their futures in tangible ways.

Our students’ education needs to be relevant for at least three reasons:

First, campuses are calling for societal relevance in their students’ education through their most public statements of purpose. Mission, vision, and strategic planning statements of campuses across the country are calling us to develop participatory citizens, globally aware members of our increasingly complex society, and members of a highly skilled workforce. What better way to prepare students than to engage them in activities that are directly relatable to the world beyond graduation? What better venue for that than a new city in a new country, where they may challenge and expand their competencies in the world beyond their home community? Experiential education abroad is mission-critical work.

Second, our culture of assessment tells us that our students must demonstrate learning and a growing range of competencies upon graduation. Assessment bodies measure societal benefits of higher education in terms of how college-educated residents contribute to the civic and economic wellbeing of their communities, and the individual benefits in terms of job market returns and learning (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). That push for relevance and for learning support one another, since relevance deepens learning for students (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Kolb, 1984; Kuh, 2008; and Wiggins, 1989), and students with deeper learning outcomes are better prepared to translate their learning to life beyond university.

Finally, our students are crying out for learning that will
be relevant in work environments and other practical arenas. Daggett insists that the importance of relevance comes down to one simple question – students’ question: “Where will I ever use what I’m being taught today?” (Temple University, 2009). Students struggle to make meaning of their experiences, and, according to Daggett and a slew of others (e.g., Wiggins, 1989), if they are able to apply their learning to problem solving situations, then it actually strengthens their learning as they make meaning of their experiences in new contexts.

The academy needn’t respond to students’ every whim when refining the curriculum. At the same time, the question of relevance looms large, with Pew’s (2011) “Is College Worth It?” study putting the question front and center. In order to avoid being left behind, those of us committed to higher education must continually prove the academy’s worth.

We must evolve together into a pedagogy that highlights the relevance of the writing, critical thinking, reading comprehension, scientific methodology, and cultural literacy skills traditionally at the core of our work. What might that look like? How might we facilitate students bringing those skills to bear in the 21st century?

It’s incumbent upon us to help our students make meaning of their education, so they’re not bogged down by anxiety that their investment is meaningless. Based on the proven deep, active learning of the practice, we see no reason why experiential education abroad shouldn’t serve as the ideal venue to reintroduce students to the meaning of their education. To that end, we should be doing more of it, and we invite your participation as we work to do it better.
REFERENCES


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