

How to Not Know Everything: The Value of Experiential Learning

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As I reflect on my first semester as an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Education I am surprised by how much my perspective on education has changed in four short months. Though it feels silly to admit it at this point, I embarked on this journey to become a teacher with the understanding that this year of my life would be the year during which I learned everything about everything. (How thrilling and yet how daunting!) I had always believed that my really great grade school teachers were simply individuals who liked to be around children and who knew everything about everything. Naturally, I was relieved to discover through the wise words of several of my professors in the first few weeks of classes, that it is not the responsibility of teachers to know everything. Our responsibility is to foster relationships with our students in order to establish a partnership that is founded on learning.

An integral part of the pre-service teacher's education is, of course, self-reflection. In the first weeks of my academic program my colleagues and I spent a considerable amount of time and energy reflecting on our own experiences as grade school students and considering the conditions under which deep and meaningful learning can occur. One theme that permeated many of these discussions is that learning happens when something unique is experienced. I am honoured to have the opportunity to share some of my unique learning experiences as an undergraduate student in the faculty.

My journey as a pre-service teacher began on my 25th birthday. While most of my peers might celebrate this occasion by having a special meal with family and friends, I found myself hiking to the faerie stump...in the dark...with a bunch of classmates that I had met only one week earlier. As I fumbled my way across the challenging terrain one thought resounded in my head: "what am I doing here?" A few weeks later I experienced a similar sentiment. At midnight on a weekday, as I contemplated driving to the grocery store in search of Oreo cookies so that I might teach my colleagues how to demonstrate all of the moon phases by scraping off the appropriate amount of icing, I thought "I must be crazy." When I ended up stooping to collect eggs inside of a noisy chicken coop on a farm that I had never been to before I felt certain that I was, indeed, crazy. I can remember that in those moments I questioned the relevancy of what I was doing with respect to learning how to teach. Now that I have had time to reflect on it, it seems that I was not learning how to teach, rather I was learning how to learn. I believe that this is an especially important distinction for new teachers to make since we are so focused on transmitting knowledge to our students that we can easily lose sight of the fact that there is much that our students can teach us as well. And it is what we learn from our students that will make us better teachers.

So what did I learn through each of these unique experiences? The hike that I described was one part of a field trip to the Brother Brennan Environmental Education Centre that my classmates and I participated in. The purpose of the field trip was for us to experience the impact that taking a group of students outdoors can have on learning, and certainly this purpose was met. But my experience on this trip serves as a noteworthy example of how powerful unexpected learning can be. Prior to our group's departure I was feeling uncomfortable about the whole situation. I

didn't know anyone very well and I was concerned that the time that we were about to spend together would be awkward. Thinking back on it now, my feelings were not unlike those often experienced by young students when they begin a new school year with an unfamiliar teacher and new peers. While walking in the darkness alongside my new classmates I felt vulnerable, but I also experienced feelings of trust. The potential for someone to fall into harm's way if we were not cooperative was tangible. I was one of a small number of individuals carrying flashlights and I felt an unassigned in-group responsibility for lighting the path. At one point I stumbled, but someone caught my arm and prevented me from falling. The hike, though intended as recreation, created an opportunity for relationship building and also allowed me to empathize with what my future students may experience at the outset of a new school year. It was a very valuable experience.

Some of the courses that I completed during the spring semester included group peer teaching projects during which the members of a group would prepare a lesson and teach it to the rest of the class. These projects were important for me because I struggled initially with the notion of lesson planning for imaginary students. The process sometimes felt too hypothetical and arbitrary. My peer teaching group in our science methodology course had decided to create a lesson about vacuums for a sixth grade unit on space. After an energetic group meeting we parted ways, excited to wow our classmates and professors with an experiment for creating a partial vacuum using a dinner plate, water, a candle and a household glass. My responsibility was to determine how this experiment mapped onto the curriculum outcomes for sixth grade science. As I combed through the curriculum guide I experienced worry, anxiety, and then panic as I discovered that vacuums are not mentioned in the authorized texts for grade six, nor are they included in the curriculum guide. I slowly convinced myself that the concept of a vacuum was entirely too advanced for sixth grade students and that my new responsibility was to find another captivating experiment for our project. I engaged in a frantic online search until I stumbled upon an activity in which students scrape the icing off an Oreo cookie to represent the various moon phases. Though I felt that this idea was less intriguing I pitched it to my group because I was fearful of taking a risk. However, with some reassurance from our professor and one of her former students I was able to acknowledge that having the courage to take a risk and to be willing to learn alongside the students can create a high level of engagement, and it can result in a memorable lesson. When we conducted our experiment with our classmates and their mouths dropped open as they observed the partial vacuum that they were creating it was clear that we had made the right decision. I learned that it is okay not to have all of the answers upfront and that if I can engage my students' curiosity and motivate them to ask questions and to learn more then they will remember what they learned in my classroom.

As for my adventures on the farm, they were initiated by an assignment in which I was expected to visit a location that I felt would be a suitable field trip for students. Before visiting the farm I had given what I felt was adequate consideration to how I would be able to carry out this field trip with actual students. My plans included having the students take turns entering the chicken coop to collect eggs. In completing this assignment I learned to appreciate the importance of visiting a possible field trip destination prior to arranging the outing. If I am a little bit afraid of the chickens, then it is a reasonable assumption that my first grade students might be a little bit afraid of the chickens. Who knew how loud and intimidating their clucking could actually be? After visiting the farm I was faced with many new questions about how to make this potential

field trip feasible. One important question that emerged was creating an alternative activity for the students who were not comfortable collecting eggs. I will always remember the experience of planning the field trip and I will certainly never forget to visit the destination beforehand.

The deep learning moments that I have shared are a few among many that I was fortunate to experience during my first semester as a pre-service teacher. I have not described my trials and tribulations in creating a fish puppet that swims, my impromptu public recitation of a favourite childhood poem, or my performance as a stress management and rehabilitation counsellor in a rescue drama, but I trust that I have expressed my belief in the power of experiential learning as well as my gratitude for the quality of the education that I am receiving.

I would like to conclude by challenging pre-service teachers and all educators to embrace the many opportunities to learn that are within our reach. If we make learning a lifelong goal and we take time to engage with others then we are sure to end up teaching somebody something meaningful and enduring, perhaps even if we hadn't planned on it.