

## CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION

### SECTION 1: PERSPECTIVES ON EXPERIENTIAL/SERVICE LEARNING

#### In conversation with Amy Tsui – Challenges of experiential learning

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## **In conversation with Amy Tsui – Challenges of experiential learning**

**JNUSTA:** *Experiential learning does seem like an excellent way to cultivate global citizens, but experiential learning requires thoughtful course planning and careful scaffolding. How easy is it to introduce experiential modes of teaching in a big way in our universities? What have been the challenges faced that you may be aware of?*

**Amy:** Experiential learning has been interpreted in different ways. Some have used it interchangeably with “service learning” or “internship”. Service learning has a long history in schools as well as in universities, and it is relatively easy to organise as it is “extra” curricular, voluntary and non-credit bearing. Typically it is unstructured, learning is incidental and the object of learning is inexplicit. Internship has an even longer history than service learning in universities. It is typically a compulsory component of the “formal” curriculum in professional programmes. Internships are often focused on acquisition of technical skills, the object of learning is explicit, and the learning outcomes are assessed.

How challenging it is to incorporate experiential learning into the curriculum depends on how experiential learning is defined. At the University of Hong Kong (HKU), experiential learning is characterised as follows:

“Experiential learning refers to the kind of learning that requires students to tackle real-life issues and problems by drawing on theoretical knowledge that they have learnt in the formal curriculum. Unlike classroom situations, real-life situations are often unfamiliar to students, and in these situations, problems are not easily identifiable or not well-defined. Dealing with real-life problems requires students to integrate knowledge within and across disciplines, to go beyond technical considerations, and to take into account social and human factors that come into play. It is in these situations that students put theoretical knowledge to the test, gain a deeper understanding of theories and, most importantly, construct knowledge. It is also in these situations that students develop their core values and generic skills. As such, experiential learning is relevant to all programmes.”

Senate Paper, HKU, January 2012

The challenge of providing this kind of experiential learning is enormous. First, how do we integrate this form of learning into a course so that it helps to achieve the learning outcomes of a course in a powerful way? For example, field trips are often touted as a form of experiential learning. However, some field trips are nothing more than “educational” tourism where students visit places of interest, listen to presentations, and write a reflective piece which is read by the course tutor and nobody else. It is therefore of fundamental importance for organisers of experiential learning to address the following questions:

1. What are the objectives of the course and what are the important questions or issues students are expected to address or grapple with?
2. What are the appropriate sites of learning that will lend themselves to engagement with these questions or issues?

Answering the second question is by no means easy. While the sites of learning are readily identifiable in some programmes, particularly in professional programmes, they are less obvious in others, particularly in the humanities. For example, in a course in history, how might historical awareness be cultivated in what kind of experience? In a course on Japanese culture, how might an understanding of the culture be deepened through what kind of engagement with Japanese people? Identifying the appropriate site is crucial as the context of learning is an important part of what is being learnt.

Second, supervision is a very important but most labour-intensive part of the learning experience. Quality supervision of students requires collaboration between community partners and the Faculties. Identifying the right community partners, setting expectations, and defining the roles and responsibilities of each party are critical. Aspects of supervision that must be attended to include the following: the roles and responsibilities of supervisors; the necessary qualities of supervisors; the models of supervision (group supervision and mentoring of individuals or pairs); the relationship between students, university supervisors and external supervisors; the management of a large number of external supervisors; and maintaining the standards of supervision.

Finally, assessment of experiential learning is the least explored area in higher education and the most challenging. Reflective journals, reports, sometimes supplemented by oral presentations, seem to be the most commonly adopted means of assessment. However, the induction of students into writing in this genre, the guidance on what they should reflect on, the determination of what constitutes quality reflection and what counts as evidence of deep learning are important aspects of assessment of this genre that still need further exploration.