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# Experiential Learning: Exploring Its Long-Term Impact on Socially Responsible Behavior

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**Abstract:** Today's students are exposed to world events that require considerable cross cultural understanding and recognition that education is far more than learning facts about specific disciplines and diverse groups while sitting in a classroom. For the past several decades, research in education has repeatedly demonstrated that adults learn effectively through experience. However, does experiential learning, when designed specifically to heighten awareness of a significant social problem, evoke socially responsible behavior specific to that problem in the long run? Employing a qualitative longitudinal research design involving 25 graduate students as participants, this study explored that question. Findings indicated that 94.7% of participants who reported a high impact learning experience when participating in experiential learning while enrolled in a graduate class also reported engaging in socially responsible behavior because of that learning experience. In some instances, the socially responsible behavior continued for as long as three years after the class had ended.

**Keywords:** experiential education, experiential learning, high impact learning, qualitative longitudinal research, social responsibility.

Today's students are exposed to world events that require considerable cross cultural understanding and recognition that education is far more than learning facts about specific disciplines and diverse groups when sitting in a classroom. College curricula are becoming more interdisciplinary in practice as evidenced by the interweaving of topics such as civic engagement, ethics, global studies, leadership and social responsibility within course work across curricula, with the intended goal of influencing students to become more socially responsible global citizens. Increasingly more learning is taking place within communities versus solely within classrooms. In fact in the UK, a national council has been formed for learning outside of the classroom (<http://www.lotc.org.uk/>) and the international "Association for Experiential Education" (AEE) (<http://www.aee.org/membership/>) reports over 1,200 members from 31 countries across the globe.

The purpose of this study was to explore the long-term impact of learning about social problems in environments outside of the classroom. In the educational literature, learning occurring outside of the classroom frequently meets the definition of *experiential learning*.

## **I. Background for Experiential Learning and Applied Theoretical Framework**

Historically, psychologists who are behaviorists generally believe that learning occurs through conditioning and conditioning occurs when individuals interact with their environment (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2000). Relating behaviorist theory to experiential learning, "For behaviorists, observable interactive behavior demonstrates learning" (Caulfield, 2011, p. 33), indicating that experiential learning, when observed, demonstrates learning in itself. While the field of psychology looked to behaviorism to explain learning, around the same time, the philosopher John Dewey became a major contributor to the idea of *learning by experience*. He wrote extensively of its importance to democratic society in works such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938), where he proposed that individuals rely on related experiences to form meaning:

. . . since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another. (1916, p. 248)

Providing practical guidelines for such educational delivery in experience, he argued for "a sound philosophy of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 91) and defined the roles of educators as facilitators connecting learning to students' experiences, helping shape student understanding through "cooperative enterprise, not dictation" (Dewey, 1938, p. 72).

Although Dewey laid the preliminary framework for experiential learning, he did not refer to it as such. Hoover and Whitehead (1975) came forward with the following definition of experiential learning published in the "Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning" following its second annual conference proceedings: "Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement" (p. 25).

It is the well-known work of Kolb (1984), however, that really brought experiential learning to the forefront in the educational literature. Kolb postulates, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Kolb theorized that learning takes place when individuals engage in a novel experience, reflect upon it, conceptualize it and then test its authenticity by applying it to similar future experiences. Kolb's theory of learning is particularly interesting, as it integrates learning styles with the cyclical stages of how he proposed experiential learning occurs.

Boulding (2000), a feminist scholar and social activist for women's and children's rights, renowned for her extensive academic work in the study and promotion of peace has noted the power of experiential education and service learning, in particular in promoting peaceable communities (p. 232). She expresses her appreciation of experiential education for its ability to connect students to "real-life

situations," and expand students' "personal development and capacity for intellectual analysis" (p. 231). Such activities are part of open learning systems, which Boulding identifies as rooted in relationships with others and with the planet.

Eyler & Giles (1999) also noted that "service learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems" (p. 14). Eyler & Giles (2002) believe that service learning is an especially effective teaching strategy for students to learn about complex issues within larger environments, and to discover how complex systems are integrated and reliant on each other. Students gain experience and learning transfers because "students apply concepts repeatedly in real or realistic settings" (p. 148). Service learning mediated courses have reliably reported high levels of student engagement (Turner, 2002). Research suggests that experiential learning can help students develop positive attitudes toward life, encourage acceptance of responsibility, promote community involvement, develop power of thought and help them understand their strengths and weaknesses in a real world context, thereby inspiring personal growth through the development of global competencies (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The more recent work of Fenwick (2000, 2001 and 2003) further develops the concept of experiential learning in terms of five perspectives, specifically constructivist; psychoanalytic; situative; critical cultural and enactivist ecological. Fenwick explains that a major conception of experiential education assumes that a learner will reflect on concrete experience to build new understandings. Within Fenwick's constructivist perspective, the learner reflects on lived experiences; these experiences are generalized to form mental structures. It is these structures of knowledge that are stored in memory as concepts that may be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations, affecting how a learner perceives and interprets information. Fenwick's situative perspective identifies learning as being rooted in the situation in which learners find themselves, including specific interactions that occur within social settings. The psychoanalytic perspective stresses the necessity for learners to work through inner conflicts enabling them to engage fully in the learning

process. The critical cultural perspective emphasizes the imbalance of power and inequity within social structures, which may have a direct impact on social transformations of experiential learning. Finally, the enactivist ecological perspective proposes that learning may best be understood through co-emergence of knowledge with other participants. Throughout this study, the researchers identify instances where the interview data is reflective of Fenwick's perspectives.

Today experiential education is popular on college campuses, often taking place outside of the classroom. The AEE (2012, ¶ 2) offers the following definition for experiential education:

Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposively engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities.  
<http://www.aee.org/about/whatIsEE>

Drawing from this definition, in the context of this study, socially responsible behavior refers to behavior that enhances social well-being within communities.

Leaders in both the "American Association of State Colleges and Universities" (AASCU) and the "Association of American Colleges and Universities" (AAC&U) have advocated for experiential education as a means of fostering civic and global engagement. In a May, 2008 concept paper for AASCU, George Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change, and Harry Boyte, the Co-Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, challenged institutions of higher education to remain connected to the communities in which their students are themselves engaged (p. 3). Boyte & Mehaffy (2008) suggest that higher education should be promoting "citizen learning" that connects students to places and gives them opportunities to develop their "skills and learning habits" to live fully and integrally in community (Boyte & Mehaffy, 2008, p. 5).

In summary, the prevalence of experiential learning for college students is significant as evidenced by the number of college curricula

that now include experiential teaching and learning. The history and definition of experiential teaching and learning demonstrate its alignment with adult learning theory. College curricula often apply experiential teaching and learning to assist students in achieving learning outcomes. Furthermore, many curricula have used experiential learning activities as a way to encourage service learning, social responsibility and civic engagement behaviors.

Research in education for the past several decades (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin, 1999; Kolb, 1984; Fenwick, 2000, 2001 and 2003) has repeatedly demonstrated that adults learn effectively through experience. *However, does experiential learning, when designed specifically to heighten awareness of a significant social problem, evoke socially responsible behavior specific to that problem in the long run?* The purpose of this qualitative longitudinal study is to explore that question, thereby hypothesizing that experiential learning may contribute to students' awareness of social issues, potentially evoking socially responsible behaviors that remain active well after a formal learning experience has ended.

## **II. Methodology**

### *A. Design*

The research question drove the design choice for the study. Farrall (2006) writes:

QLR [qualitative longitudinal research] embodies a range of mainly indepth interview-based studies which involve returning to interviewees to measure and explore changes which occur over time and the processes associated with these changes. The approach is particularly useful if one is studying a process which has a notion of a 'career' of some sort or *which involves a developmental process* [emphasis added]. (p. 2)

Molloy and Woodfield (2002) explain, "Longitudinal qualitative approaches have been used extensively in the fields of sociological research, ethnography and social history to explore individuals' changing life experiences and life course patterns" (p.5). They further state, "The chief goal of longitudinal methods is to explore change

(relating to the unit of enquiry, at an individual or case study level) over time" (p. 10).

Creswell (2007) suggests that qualitative research may be accomplished by talking directly with participants, which supports the use of semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection for this study. Thus, employing a QLR design to study the research question posed seemed most appropriate for obtaining an understanding of what the interviewees experienced when engaged in experiential learning and whether, at a future point in time, these experiences influenced them to become social advocates for change specific to the social problem they had studied. The research was unfunded.

## *B. Sampling Method*

The researchers employed non-probability, purposive sampling to select 25 voluntary participants who were either graduate students or alumni previously enrolled in one of three applied social science elective classes offered in two graduate degree programs; in one instance, a participant was enrolled in two of the three classes. The median age of students in one of the degree programs was 26, and 19 of the 25 participants were from that program. The median age of students in the other degree program was 30. There were 18 female participants. Racial origin was as follows: eighteen (18) Caucasians, four African Americans, two Hispanics and one Asian. One participant reported that she had previous knowledge of sustainability while working with youth in a summer program. Another participant reported that through her work with a non-profit organization, she came into frequent contact with homeless individuals. The programs were offered at a highly ranked research and teaching university located in the Midwest. All three classes were approximately 14 weeks in duration, designed to include significant experiential learning. Participation in the study was voluntary by written consent and all who consented were included in the research.



## *C. Data Collection*

In the first class of 20 students, 13 (65%) chose to participate in the study. As indicated by the course syllabus, the purpose of the experiential learning component was to increase awareness of the issues surrounding urban poverty and the strategies to sustain existence for those living in urban poverty, utilizing community social support services that were available. To maintain confidentiality of both students and professor, the name of the professor and the course has not been disclosed. All students enrolled in the class were given mock identities of graduate students who were living independently and earning minimum wage. The objective of their mock identity was to avoid becoming homeless; they were encouraged to explore and utilize community social support organizations available to low income individuals. Students did weekly journal entries regarding their experiences and their perceptions of those experiences. Any classroom activities were predominantly discussion based and focused on student perceptions of urban poverty as lived in their mock identities.

At the conclusion of the class, the students did a final presentation that was in the form of a filmed documentary whereby they explained what they had learned while living their mock identities throughout the semester and whether they had met their objective of avoiding homelessness. During their presentations, students identified their perceptions of the lived experiences and, in some cases, identified specific socially responsible actions they intended to take because of the impact of the learning experience. The documentary served as the first point of data collection in the study. Approximately three years following the conclusion of the class, the 13 participants were interviewed, which was the second and final point of data collection for the participants who had enrolled in this class.

The second and third classes had the same course numbers and titles and were taught by the same professor, but were offered approximately 18 months apart. In the second class of 12 students, four (33%) chose to participate in the study. In the third class of 18 students, nine (50%) chose to participate. The topic studied in these classes was sustainability. Sustainability is defined as an "international movement for meeting the needs of current generations while

preserving the capacity of future generations to meet their needs” (Sustainable World Coalition, 2010). The course description stated that the “interdisciplinary course explores the values, knowledge base, and organizational models of sustainability, an international movement for meeting the needs of current generations while preserving the capacity of future generations to meet their needs.” To maintain confidentiality of both students and professor, the name of the professor and course has not been disclosed. For these two classes, students visited multiple community organizations that were actively engaged in sustainability projects. They spoke extensively about sustainability with leaders from within these organizations. Any classroom activities occurring were predominantly discussion based and focused on their perceptions of the onsite visits. At the conclusion of both of these classes, students were asked to write a *bold proposal* that identified what they intended to do personally in the future to promote sustainable environments. The bold proposals served as the first point of data collection for the study. Participants from the second class were interviewed approximately two years following the termination of the class while students from the third class were interviewed approximately nine months following the termination of the class; the interview was the second and final point of data collection for participants from these two classes.

#### *D. Format of Semi-Structured Interviews*

According to Rubin & Rubin (2005) open-ended questions encourage the interviewee to describe specific events and experiences. Rubin & Rubin (2005) further explain that probing is a technique used to keep a discussion going while providing clarification. This allows the interviewee to keep talking about the matter at hand, complete ideas, fill in blanks, or request additional information on what was said. The semi-structured open-ended questions that follow were prepared by the researchers prior to interviewing. For the one student who had enrolled in both classes, questions were asked about the urban poverty class and the sustainability class. The researchers interviewed participants from each class over a period of no more than four weeks, recording and transcribing the interviews.

## *E. Interview Questions*

**Introductory question for all participants:** To the best of your ability, please list the classes that you were enrolled in as a graduate student. Please identify which three classes most impacted your life in some way.

**Questions for those participants who *did* identify the urban poverty or sustainability class as being one of the three most impactful classes (n = 19):**

1. Explain how your knowledge of social issues [urban poverty or sustainability] has been altered because of completing this class.
2. Please explain how this class impacted your life.
3. Here are the program learning outcomes and the student learning objectives for the class.  
Please explain how the learning experiences in the class related to or did not relate to the program outcomes and the student learning objectives.
4. Has your behavior changed because of taking this class? If so, how has it changed? If not, why not? Please cite specific examples.
5. You identified two other classes that were impactful to you. Please explain what learning activities made each of these classes impactful. Has your behavior changed because of taking these classes? If so, how has it changed? If not, why not? Please cite specific examples.

**Questions for those participants who *did not* identify the urban poverty or sustainability class as being one of the three most impactful classes (for all three classes, n = 7):**

1. You did not select the class [urban poverty or sustainability] as one of the classes that most impacted your life. As best as you can, please explain why you did not choose this class.
2. Please explain what would have made this class [urban poverty or sustainability] more impactful to you.
3. You identified three other classes that were impactful to you. Please explain what learning activities made each of these classes impactful to you. Has your behavior changed because of taking these classes? If so, how has it changed? If not, why not? Please cite specific examples.

In summary, the overarching question of interest was whether experiential learning, when designed specifically to heighten awareness of a significant social problem, evokes socially responsible behavior specific to that problem over the long run. The research design was QLR. The initial data collection point for the first class studying urban poverty originated from *filmed documentary* of participants' experiences at the conclusion of the class while the initial data collection for the two classes studying sustainability originated from the participants' documented *bold proposal* at the conclusion of the class. Semi-structured interviews of participants occurring at nine (9), 24 or 36 months following the termination of the class they had enrolled in were the second data point. At point of interview, 60% of the participants had already graduated.

### III. Findings

In response to the introductory interview statement, "Please identify which three courses most impacted your life in some way," participants identified 22 different classes as their top three choices. Of those 22 classes, nine were mentioned three or more times. For a rank order summary of the nine classes most frequently identified by participants as those that "most impacted their lives in some way," please refer to Table 1.

**Table 1. Top Nine Classes Ranked as Most Impactful**

Topic Description	Top Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Total Choice
1. Sustainability (n = 4, 9)	5 (1)*	3 (1)*	(2)*	8 (4)*
2. Leadership & Ethics	5	2	2	9
3. Urban Poverty (n = 13)	5	1	1	7
4. Ethics in Public Sector	2	4	1	7
5. Social Entrepreneurship	1	1	2	4
6. Social Justice		1	3	4
7. Police Leadership		3		3
8. Public Policy	2		2	3
9. Research Methods		1	2	3

\*The number in parentheses indicates the number of participants from the class where interviews occurred 24 months following termination of the class (n = 4). Remaining interviews occurred at nine (9) months following termination of the class (n = 8).

## *A. Sustainability Classes*

As noted in Table 1, the sustainability class was the top choice for most participants and had the total highest number in the "Total Choice" column for participants, with only one participant from both of the classes in sustainability that did *not* select the class as one of the top three most impactful classes. That one participant who was interviewed nine months following the termination of the sustainability class stated the following: ". . . just because I did not choose this class [sustainability] it does not mean it did not impact my life, because I see sustainability in everything that I do in my daily life." He further explained that the top three classes that he did choose were ones that taught him how to make a bigger impact on *others' lives* (by profession he was a counselor) whereas in the sustainability class, he felt that the impact from the class pertained mostly to his own life.

*Knowledge of social issue, impact and actions.* In all cases, participants in the sustainability classes indicated during their interview that they had a heightened sense of awareness regarding sustainability and that this newfound awareness impacted their lives in one or more ways. In general, the participants reported making a conscious effort to actively think about sustainability when carrying out daily tasks of living, such as when buying groceries for their family, watering the lawn and plants (conserving water), recycling, and riding their bike more versus driving a car. One participant contacted the local "Office of Sustainability" to learn more about sustainable work environments. Another participant stated:

While I was taking the class I was really self-conscious about how much water I was using and simple practical things; some of that wore off a little especially as I became less immediately connected to a lot of the literature telling me how much water I was wasting so once the shame factor lessened I didn't become as selfconscious about it, but I think it increased my desire to learn a lot more [about sustainability].

Another said:

I remember first feeling incredibly guilty about personal things I was doing like using something as small as a paper towel. I

would feel guilty like I was not living the way we all needed to be living and moving in a certain direction. Then I kind of readjusted and realized that all these problems are so institutionally driven in such a large scale that anything I do, I can't really beat myself up about, because we got to make changes on a huge scalable level like on an institutional level, a federal level, on a larger scale.

These two quotes make evident Fenwick's (2000, 2001 and 2003) psychoanalytic perspective, which stresses the necessity for learners to work through inner conflicts before they are able to engage fully in the learning process.

The participants' bold proposals written at the conclusion of the class identified personal actions to take. Although all participants indicated engaging in actions to promote sustainable environments, those actions did not necessarily match the ones identified in their bold proposals. Based on the nature of the bold proposal and the time of interview, participants may not have had time to act upon what they had identified in their bold proposal. Table 2 contains data from bold proposals and interviews of six participants, mainly direct quotes regarding knowledge of the social issue, impact of acquired knowledge, actions identified in bold proposals and reported actions engaged in at time of interview. Because participant responses for each criterion are frequently related, the quotes have been categorized by participant.

**Table 2. Sustainability: Knowledge of social issue, impact and actions**

<b>Participant 1 (24)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I'm ashamed to say that until registering for the class, I've not given much thought about sustaining our natural capital. I didn't really have a foundation for sustainability . . . it [the class] opened my eyes to the things that were going on in our own community that I pay no attention to."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"But to go and sit in front of these people, listen to them [leaders in sustainability] talk about their passion, listen to them talk about why they do what they do, have them take us through their experience, I think that was the most beneficial thing that he [professor] could have done for someone like me and I would recommend the class to people because of that."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"Create a program for student athletes focused on personal awareness, reflection and gratitude [method of creating heightened awareness of sustainability] as the foundation."
<b>Actions Taken by Time of Interview</b>	Talked with three individuals in department about building a "life skills" program for student athletes and incorporating content regarding sustainable futures into the program. Two of those individuals have begun to build the program.



<b>Participant 2 (24)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I think a lot of what we covered in the class I had a general interest in going into the course, but I can't say that I had the necessary knowledge" [referring to sustainability].
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"... we heard from someone talking about local foods and eating local... I am more mindful of where the milk's coming from when I purchase... we went to a fair trade market... just understanding where the products I use are coming from... those are the areas where I have probably been impacted the most."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"Begin with an element of sustainability in our next advancement event [worked in university advancement] to begin the process and build momentum."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I assisted the College of Business with a sustainability panel discussion followed by round table discussions around the topic and so, having the knowledge from this class was actually incredibly beneficial to be a part of that. And then, through my work here whenever we have roundtable programs we have been able to infuse that sustainability topic in a number of ways so, either bringing it in as one of our roundtable topics that our attendees can choose from or just continuing to help raise that awareness and have that be a part of the different programs we offer. "... being mindful of the food that I am eating and where it's grown, how it's produced, just being mindful of my environment and I think just being aware of where I choose to spend my money reflects how I feel, and knowing that that's a way I can communicate what I feel strongly about I guess, where I choose to buy products or organizations that I support can have an impact."
<b>Participant 3 (9)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"Prior to taking the class, I was not familiar with the sustainability concept. The course offered me the ability to understand in more detail how our society is set-up as a consumer based society."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"The professor took us on many field trips which allowed me to view the world from a way or perspective I never really viewed the world before."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"I propose a national service program that would require all 18 year old Americans to serve their country for two years in a local, state, national or international "Peace Corps" or military unit."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I'm more aware of what I do each day. Even with buying things... we were having issues with our dryer. Instead of buying a new one, which would have been easier, I took it [dryer] apart and it was just a \$20 fuse."
<b>Participant 4 (9)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I had some knowledge prior to this because I use to teach Environmental Education in California, but I still did change; the class changed my thinking with more collaboration on community building."



<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"Where I worked [previously to becoming a student], we were in the middle of nowhere and people came to us. So I was not part of a community . . . this class gave me a lot of resources again and thoughts on how to build a community, and being the solution, being more locally focused moving towards a solution as it relates to sustainability."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"Partner with environmental organizations that can go to schools for environmental education and promotion of a week at an environmental camp."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"trying to find new partnerships with other [sustainability] programs . . . the urban ecology center is making a new place right next to the stadium, and I have gotten their e-mails so now I'm trying to start a collaboration with them, because we could actually bike there and we have biked along the adjoining trail before. . . I sent out e-mails to the community center to start thinking about ways to collaborate with them because they are so close to us now, and we can do community service to help with the building of it and with the programs later . . . with just having the class I think more about community building and using resources that are right here to help form partnerships."
<b>Participant 5 (9)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I would say this class basically blew up my understanding of social issues. Not that I was unaware, for I have always been aware of social problems. But, it gave more urgency."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	" . . . getting more in-depth with the issues and how immediate some of them are. So basically this class gave me a feeling that "yes" I can help with this (sustainability) and be one of the players who tries to fix the issues. . . every other issue is resting on top of the ultimate social issue, which is just take care of our momma, which is mother earth, because none of this is even possible--there are no other social issues if we can't sustain life on this planet . . . every other social issue that I found important [went] back to this foundation of sustainability, with sustainability being the ultimate battle that we will be faced with in the next few decades."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"Volunteers compete in teams for a chance to win meaningful prizes and gift cards by being the team who completes the most improvement challenges and clears the most pounds of trash and recyclables from the streets of our community."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"The [bold proposal] event was a great success! I am still in a celebratory mood and it's definitely sinking in how my 'bold proposal' turned out to be such a successful real-life venture. Here's some of the outcomes from the day... Garbage and recyclables = 2,972 lbs. Illegally Dumped Materials = 403 lbs. Total = 3375 lbs. Total Cigarette Butts = 3,682 Total attendance = 28 teams of 4 or 5 (approximately 126 community members) Approximately 150-180 people during the celebration part of the afternoon"

<b>Participant 6 (9)*</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I now see sustainability as a social issue locally (community development) and at a global level, especially as related to sustainable cultures."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"I learned about the urban ecology center and did an internship there. I now volunteer there on a regular basis."
<b>Actions Identified in Bold Proposals</b>	"Include sustainability courses as part of the mandatory curriculum in schools from k-12."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I make a conscious decision to ride my bike more than previously. I make conscious decisions about water consumption, practice recycling, think about what I use—like every time I grab for the paper toweling, I think about whether I need to use it, and groceries—where to buy them and what to buy and how what I buy affects the world. For example, apples grown in the State of Washington may be shipped out of the country to become waxed and then are returned for sale."

\*Number in parentheses indicates the number of months following the termination of the class that the interview occurred.

Note that several of the direct quotes in Table 2 may be applied to the perspectives in Fenwick's (2000, 2001 and 2003) experiential framework. As an example of the constructivist perspective, consider the following comment from Participant 6: "I now see sustainability as a social issue locally (community development) and at a global level, especially as related to sustainable cultures." The quote is indicative of how the student's reflection on a learning experience expanded her mental structure of sustainability, which in turn impacted the socially responsible actions she identified taking. Another example of the constructivist perspective is illustrated in the following quote taken from Participant 5: "I would say this class basically blew up my understanding of social issues. Not that I was unaware, for I have always been aware of social problems. But, it gave more urgency." Again, this participant's mental structure of sustainability had changed because of participating in the class. By time of interview, he had organized a successful community clean-up day, demonstrating the urgency to act on his expanded view of sustainability.

*Learning objectives and program outcomes.* In all cases, interviewees reported during interview that they saw alignment with what they had learned in the class, the learning objectives as stated in the syllabi for the two classes and at least a few of the degree

program learning outcomes. In most instances, participants reported alignment with all five program outcomes.

### *B. Urban Poverty Class*

As noted in Table 1, the urban poverty class was the third "Top Choice" for most participants and was third (along with public service ethics) in the "Total Choice" column for number of participants. For those seven (7) students that did choose the urban poverty class, during interview, six (6) reported socially responsible actions taken because of enrolling in the class. Table 3 contains data from the documentary filmed at the conclusion of the class and data from interviews of five participants enrolled in the class. As in the case of Table 2, the entries are mainly direct quotes regarding knowledge of the social issue, impact of acquired knowledge, actions or impressions identified in the filmed documentary and reported actions engaged in at time of interview approximately 36 months following the termination of the class.

**Table 3. Urban Poverty: Knowledge of social issue, impact and actions**

<b>Participant 1</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"I learned so much about the rich history of the city. I learned to see parts of the city and its inhabitants in an entirely different way."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"The class changed my life in that I have a better understanding of different social classes and different ethnicities."
<b>Actions/Impressions Identified in Documentary</b>	"I learned to respect the dignity of those individuals" [referring to the homeless population]. . . "I began to better understand my role as a servant of the city" [participant was a police lieutenant].
<b>Actions Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I teach my officers to respect all classes of people and all neighborhoods. . . I tend to look at crimes committed and more carefully consider the need for punishment to fit the crime."
<b>Participant 2</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"It [the class experience] kind of made me realize how quick a couple of life events can really turn your life upside-down. . . I have a better understanding of the struggling single mother and how she has to deal with things."



<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"It made me a lot more conscious with my own personal budget—trying to make sure I stayed on top of things."
<b>Actions/Impressions Identified in Documentary</b>	"When I get those bags from the Boy Scouts to put food in I used to throw them away or use them for garbage. Now I put food in them for other people."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I feel more knowledgeable when people make a comment about something like a single mom who is on welfare, and I am able to say that it is really hard to make it out there on a minimum wage. I feel more empathy for people in those situations. "
<b>Participant 3</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"In my undergrad I did take a lot of sociology classes so they did focus a lot on social issues and I think for this class it was just very nice to see how the different migration patterns impact a city and with that it also brings a lot of social issues based on the lower working class or the middle class."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"I just think that overall talking about those issues and then seeing like the homeless and putting everything together was very significant for me."
<b>Actions/Impressions Identified in Documentary</b>	". . . I can volunteer my time to help people that go through these situations" [poverty, homelessness].
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"Last spring we actually did a volunteer program and we did a soup kitchen . . . it's just really interesting how this class really applied to the real world and how many people are not aware of some of the bigger social issues in the city and it's sad that we have to come up as an office and go there as opposed to us taking a personal interest and learning about this type of issue."
<b>Participant 4</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	We learned about the diverse ways that urban cultures and subcultures settled in urban areas. . . I definitely look at the health care programs that the state would offer infants and young children in a much different light now. This is something that I might not have thought of before taking this class, because I did not have kids. This is something that I would remember from this class. All these different social programs that you had to look up for yourself, to see if you could apply for or be considered for. This was a different way of thinking for me, a different way of making me look at life."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"I thought this was one of my best classes ever in college life, which took me by surprise, because it was not anything directly related to law enforcement. I think that this class made me a tremendously better supervisor at work."
<b>Actions/Impressions Identified in Documentary</b>	Speaks of learning to budget money very carefully. "At \$7.00 an hour after taxes you are basically working an hour to pay for a gallon of gasoline and that gallon of gasoline isn't going to take you far."

<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I am a lot more sensitive to programs that the city would offer. For instance the church I go to . . . we will form groups and go to the meal program as volunteers, and it is a very humbling experience. I know that if you don't know where your next meal is coming from, it is a tough life. Especially when you start seeing kids coming through, and when the night is over and you see kids walking into the darkness with mom and dad, this can really affect you as a person. I understand that even more so after taking this class; this class has made me much more aware of that. The times I spent volunteering at church, this kind of stuff really does affect a person."
<b>Participant 5</b>	
<b>Knowledge of Social Issue</b>	"This class helped me to understand the problem of homelessness. Again, those services [referring to social support services] are needed for the homeless. That experiment we did like interviewing for the shelter opened my eyes. These experiences are not fun, and they do affect people. Not having a stable home can change a person's life, and having resources can help people. This class really allowed one to think about homelessness and how people become homeless . . . It also brought together other cultures as well. So you got to see what's similar and what's not similar."
<b>Impact of Acquired Knowledge</b>	"What made this class very impactful was when we did a social experiment. Each student was assigned a mock identity, and the goal was to prevent ourselves from becoming homeless. I actually interviewed with the head person of the shelter who asked me many questions like how did I get into this situation I was in. So basically she asked me the same questions that they would ask someone who was really homeless, which I thought it was a good experience, because it brings about an awareness of how people can actually become homeless."
<b>Actions/Impressions Identified in Documentary</b>	"Just doing this experiment is something I think everybody should do to make them more aware of homelessness."
<b>Action Taken by Time of Interview</b>	"I have a German co-worker who talks to her parents in German for that is their native culture. I also have a friend who is of Latina decent and I have been trying to learn that language, and a lot of what me and this friend do, our culture is very similar. . . So, basically I mix and mingle with my co-workers a bit with the Spanish and German decent." Participant explains that she realizes that getting to know other cultures better promotes an understanding of those cultures.

Several quotes of participants reflected a perspective highlighted in Fenwick's (2000, 2001 and 2003) experiential framework. For example, "I came into this experiment pretty naïve, thinking that homeless people wanted it to be that way. I learned to respect the dignity of those individuals" [referring to the homeless population]. . . "I began to better understand my role as a servant of the city," is reflective of the critical cultural perspective, which emphasizes the imbalance of power and inequity within social structures that may have a direct impact on social transformations of experiential learning. The enactivist ecological perspective, which

proposes that learning may best be understood through co-emergence of knowledge with other participants, is reflected in the following quote from Participant 5: "What made this class very impactful was when we did a social experiment. Each student was assigned a mock identity, and the goal was to prevent ourselves from becoming homeless . . . and everyone had to report on their situation and how they resolved things."

Six (6) of the 13 participants enrolled in the urban poverty class did *not* choose the class as one of the three most impactful classes. The reasons stated for *not* identifying the class as most impactful were as follows:

*Reason 1:* "I was not from the area [city where university was located] and the class focused on that one city, specifically."

*Reason 2:* "It was too limiting, focusing only on one city. The purpose of the class was not clearly identified."

*Reason 3:* "The class was not realistic. There were too many restrictions that the professor made us conform to that I don't think would have happened in real life."

*Reason 4:* "I didn't select the class because the topic was too related to the work that I already do."

*Reason 5:* "More than anything, it provided a good history of the city. I did not see its relevance to public service."

*Reason 6:* "The book was excellent, but I felt pressured to participate in the role play."

It is interesting to note that Reasons 3 and 6 are in themselves reflective of Fenwick's (2000, 2001 and 2003) critical cultural perspective in that the identified reasons indicate a perceived imbalance of power between instructor and students and, in this case, that perception likely had a negative impact on experiential learning.

*Learning objectives and program outcomes.* In all but one case, interviewees reported during interview that they saw alignment with what they had learned in the class, the learning objectives as stated in the syllabus for the class and at minimum a few of the degree program learning outcomes. In most instances, participants reported alignment with all program outcomes.

*Aggregate findings.* Table 4 reports the findings per class and the aggregate findings. As noted in reviewing Table 4 aggregate data, for this limited sample in the context of these three classes, experiential learning is reported by those participants identifying the experiential learning class as having high impact to have evoked socially responsible behavior specific to the social problem they studied 94.7% of the time. Again, interviews occurred at nine (9), 24 or 36 months following termination of the class, indicating that the reported socially responsible actions continued to occur for a relatively long period following termination of the class.

**Table 4. Aggregate Findings**

Class	No. of months interviewed after class	No. of participants interviewed	No. who identified class as impactful	Of those impacted, number reporting action	Of those impacted, percent reporting action
1. Sustainability	9	9	8	8	88.9
2. Sustainability	24	4	4	4	100.0
3. Urban Poverty	36	13	7	6	85.7
Totals		26*	19	18	94.7

\* One participant enrolled in one sustainability class and the urban poverty class.

## IV. Discussion and Implications

Study findings imply that experiential learning may lead to socially responsible behavior that continues to occur well after the formal learning experience ends. Secondly, several quotations seemingly validated the perspectives that Fenwick (2000, 2001 and 2003) identifies in her experiential learning framework. In the case of the urban poverty class, based on participants' stated reasons for *not* selecting the class, one could argue that the participants may have been distracted by specific pedagogical design features of the class versus having a lack of concern regarding the social problem being studied. Two quotes from the six participants who did *not* choose the class for one of the reasons previously identified implied this. "I now realize how difficult it is for some single parents, so I volunteer my time to the food pantry and I donate food too. I take time to learn about resources that my church has to offer" [for those in need].



Another participant stated, "The fact of standing in line and waiting for appointments-- and I don't know why social programs have appointments in the middle of the day and you have to wait for two hours. You feel like a cow in line waiting for the slaughter." These quotations indicate the impact that studying the social problem had on these two participants, and in one case, the participant identifies socially responsible behavior as related to urban poverty.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the reasons that participants gave for not selecting the class demonstrates the importance of sharing these types of class design criticisms in course evaluations so that teachers become aware of them and may decide whether design changes might improve the overall learning experience. Teachers may motivate students to provide this type of constructive feedback by explaining that it will be used to improve future classes (Caulfield, 2007). It is interesting to note that in two cases, participants stated that the class focused too much on one specific city, indicating that these participants likely did not make the connection that much of the content related to urban poverty, homelessness and the social experiment, would likely apply to other urban cities in the area. Thus, emphasizing that potential applicability to other cities may have been helpful for participants not residing in the area where the social experiment took place.

One final consideration when designing a class with significant experiential learning is that it may be more time intensive and more costly. It may also place students at a higher risk in certain types of environments outside of the classroom with no certainty that experiential learning is more effective over time than other forms of classroom learning.

### *A. Two Remaining Higher Ranked Classes*

It is interesting to note that the class titled, "Leadership & Ethics," which was the top choice for the second highest number of participants and the second highest number in total choice for participants, did have an experiential learning component; but it was not as significant a portion of the class as that of the urban poverty and sustainability classes. With the permission of the professor



teaching the leadership and ethics class, the class evaluations were reviewed. In the comment section of the class many students mentioned that the leadership panel discussion that the students organized and facilitated with community leaders they had selected (the experiential component of the class), was the most valuable learning experience occurring during the class. As one student put it, "I felt that the most instructional portion of the class was the leadership panel . . . I found their ideas and suggestions much more applicable than many of the texts for my own leadership capacity." This quote again highlights what Fenwick (2000, 2001 and 2003) identifies as the enactivist ecological perspective, which proposes that learning may be best understood through co-emergence of knowledge with other participants.

The "Ethics in Public Service" class also had an experiential component where students had to apply ethical concepts to a current work experience in which they found themselves facing an ethical dilemma. As one student participant who had chosen the ethics class as his top choice indicated, "Ethics in public service was very impactful because I had a job in public service. I had the ability to take what I learned in the classroom and directly apply it to my job. Also, the instructor allowed us to give real world examples in the class." The preceding quote is a good example of the situative perspective that Fenwick (2000, 2001, and 2003) identifies in her framework in that this perspective identifies learning as being rooted in the situation in which learners find themselves.

## ***B. Additional Implications***

The remaining five classes, although discussion based, did not have a major experiential learning component that the researchers were aware of as indicated by reviewing the syllabi for the courses. However, it should be noted that many of the participants stated that the reason they identified a class as impactful was due to its immediate applicability to their respective work settings. Another words, experiential learning was occurring on the job at the same time as concepts were being learned in the classroom. This observation implies that full time students who are unemployed may benefit from internships and practicum experiences designed into the curriculum to

facilitate experiential learning that complements other types of learning activities.

Finally, it appears that the point in time when a course is taken makes a difference in the degree of impact. The following three quotes provide evidence of this. "I think it [the class] was for me at that time of my life and career really important." Another participant states, "It kind of gave me training. I needed to work out a budget and find a home for myself and do food . . . at that time I was still living at home with my parents . . . but less than a year later I moved out of my parents' house and I now have to do my own budget." The final participant states, "I think part of it [the impact of the class] was about the time of my life. I was going through the death of someone very close to me . . ." Thus, it seems that significant life events make a difference in the depth of reflection occurring at the time or at some point following the class, which may also increase the impact of experiential learning.

### *C. Limitations to Research*

Clearly the specific context of the classes within this study limits transferability to other contexts. Secondly, the external environment in which the participants were engaged with over the course of 14 weeks was ever changing. Thus, shared perspectives may have changed during the time of the study, decreasing the dependability of the perspectives shared. Another limitation was the researchers' inability to determine whether the difference between selecting the urban poverty class and the sustainability classes as most impactful was due to the length of time from the termination of the class to time of interview, or if the differences were the results of other factors identified by participants who had enrolled in the urban poverty class and had *not* selected it as a high impact class. In other words, teaching style and class structure could have influenced whether they identified the class as one of the three most impactful. Participant past knowledge and experience leading to biases regarding homelessness and sustainability could also have influenced findings. Lastly, lack of comparison of findings to other similar studies further limits transferability.

## *D. Future Research*

To substantiate further the work of Eyler & Giles (2002), future research in experiential learning may explore how integrated classroom education and authentic community learning experiences may influence students to seek a better understanding of the world in which they live by helping them to make sense of unpredictable and complex interactions. To add credibility to the AASCU and the AAC&U stated beliefs that experiential education is a means of fostering civic and global engagement, future research could explore how experiential learning may help students accept responsibility, promote community involvement and develop community collaborations that will aid in students' learning experiences. Lastly, future studies could continue to explore the relationship between experiential learning and other forms of learning and their overall effectiveness.

## *E. Conclusion*

Based on the generally accepted premise that learning occurs through experience, experiential learning has been and continues to be a vital way of learning for adults. As highlighted by Montrose (2008):

The most important reason for integrating experiential learning into existing programs is the benefit that students derive from it. The opportunity to take an individual 'peak experience' and guide students to transcend the mere memory of a situation, to coach them to analyze, theorize, and to better understand themselves and others is an opportunity that many of us welcome and appreciate.  
(Conclusion, ¶ 3)

The purpose of this qualitative longitudinal study was to explore whether experiential learning about significant social problems outside of the classroom evoked socially responsible behavior specific to the social problems being studied. Findings from the study involving 25 graduate students as participants imply that experiential learning does lead to socially responsible behavior that continues to occur as much as three years after the formal learning experience has ended. Furthermore, interview data from the study seemingly validate the five perspectives identified in Fenwick's (2000, 2001 and 2003)

experiential framework, indicating its usefulness in studying experiential learning.

It is the researchers' hope that these study findings will encourage further study of experiential learning in college curricula and community organizations. As indicated by past research that complements findings from this study, experiential learning exposes learners to authentic social experiences that are more likely to engage them in future socially responsible behaviors, transforming them into agents of positive social change within their communities.

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