Reconstructing Dewey, Techne, and Educational Experience in the University

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Introduction

The 21st century has brought unforeseeable changes and challenges to higher education in the United States. In response to global capitalist expansion, a series “technocratic innovations” have been developed within and among institutions of higher education, which include, and are not limited to models of living-learning communities and limited-residency learning. In this paper we support a Deweyan philosophy of education that offers critical insight to theorists and practitioners who are striving to develop and deploy technocratic innovations that respond to some of the major changes in higher education. These problems include and are not limited to the increasing achievement gap, widening income inequality, the exponential growth in costs for residential programs, and the diversification of needs required by more mature students.

Second, we address what Dewey called “the central problem of an education based upon experience,” namely, “to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”[2] To offer constructive exemplars in innovative education, we critically address and examine (1) the experiential living-learning communities developed in Philosophy 4326/5326 – Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities,[3] and (2) the use of limited-residency technology at Prescott College.[4] Both of these examples, we argue, are programmatic developments of techne-appropriate experiential learning that dissolve lingering dualisms in higher education today.

We use these programs to draw experimental and practical lessons. Living-learning communities need not merely add on to an already overburdened core curriculum. Rather, viewed from the perspective of techne-propriety, they are a way to foster intentional spaces that relate to the interests and life experience of students, faculty, the community in which they are surrounded, and to the community which they co-create. Limited-residency learning is not only techne-appropriate but also fills gaps in quality educative experiences for certain mature college students.
who need ways to complete their learning projects independent of the geographic space of the traditional, on-site, residential campus. As the reader can begin to see, an effect of this project is the beginning of an updated and contemporary theory of experience for the purposes of reconstructing and resolving some of the problems and paradigmatic insufficiencies in our technologically-sophisticated, capitalistically reductive, and increasingly complex world.

**Toward an Updated Theory of Experience**

Although Dewey’s theory of experience is as helpful today as it was nearly a century ago (when he first articulated it), it needs further elaboration in light of present circumstances. There is perhaps no place to better study these shifts in culture than in higher education today. On the whole, it is no secret that higher education in the United States is in the midst of immense transitional conflict. [5] The growth of digital technologies over the last decade has been unprecedented; it has changed the shape of knowledge dissemination via the university, as well as the shape of the university environment itself. [6] These opportunities have been maliciously co-opted by for-profit forces intent on expanding the territorialization of a narrow brand of academic capitalism. [7] Examples of such narrow capitalistic reductions of higher education manifest themselves in student residential buildings designed with luxury hotel-like amenities, and by the use of student programming funds and student fees for corporate entertainment that distract from, rather than wholly integrate, campus-learning experiences. This shift has also however, spurred proactive, civic-oriented, experientially engaged, social justice movements within higher education. [8]

While we admire progressive movements in higher education, we heed Dewey’s warning to not simultaneously fall into false dualisms and harsh *Either-Or* thinking that we believe is still prevalent in contemporary higher education. [9] For example, the idea that education and social justice are distinct has made many educators superficially add-on service learning components to classes and universities. [10] Too many of these initiatives rely on the notion that experiential learning and social justice education, for example, are categorically different from *quality* education itself, and need to be added-on rather than wholly integrated. Learning is a creative act where intelligence and agency are both interrelated, and implicit in community-based service, citizenship, and social change. [11]

The movement for the *techne*-appropriate, *quality* experiential education that we advocate can be experienced as the movement for social justice in higher education. This movement does not simply follow the tradition of early progressive education because it does not react against alternatives to traditional schooling. Deweyan reconstruction requires a new theoretical lens to analyze how technologies are deployed to address human problems. [12] To do this, we offer a creative interpretation of appropriate technology. Following Larry Hickman, the etymology of “technology” begins with the ancient Greeks:

*Techne*, the ancestor of ‘technology,’ was used by Greek contemporaries of Plato and Aristotle to designate any productive skill…. *Techne* was thus used to designate a realm of activity that occupied a place between two extremes: the order of nature (or supernature) and the disorder of chance. For the Greeks, productive skill was said to act with respect to both extremes. [13]

In this sense, *techne*-propriety elicits a notion of productive skills used for a purpose: to balance order and disorder. In the context of this paper, we employ *techne* to demonstrate the productive
skills of limited residency learning and the creation, maintenance, and development of intentional learning communities for social justice in higher education. Hickman offers an updated definition of technology, which we also put to work; he says:

Technology in its most robust sense, then, involves the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts, brought to bear on raw materials and intermediate stock parts, with a view to the resolution of perceived problems. Technology in this sense is what establishes and maintains the stable technical platforms – the habitualized tools, artifacts, and skills – that allow us to continue to function and flourish.[14]

If we take these evolving senses of technology seriously, then technocratic innovations in higher education ought to include the integration and development of low-residency learning and living/learning communities (amongst other reforms) as techne-appropriate social justice education. We now turn to the first of two case studies which exemplify the kind of reform we advocate.

Philosophy Camp: A Model of Intentional Experience[15]

The word “experience” has been dragged through the mud and explained in ways that make even what Freire calls the “banking model” experiential.[16] Contemporary “experiential” learning models abound.[17] Intentional experiences for individuals and communities of learners – both purposefully designed and created with enough space for spontaneous bursts of novelty and co-creation – lay at the heart of what techne-appropriate education could look like in the 21st century.

The kind of technology called upon here is related to the techne of the ancient Greeks. Techne means an art, craft, or skill, and not necessarily some prefabricated mechanical tool that lends itself to capitalist production and mindless consumption. To intentionally organize and plan communities of learners (even of short duration) is an art, skill, and techne of meaningful and purposeful educators. College professors and high school teachers alike plan “research agendas” and “lesson plans” for days, weeks, months, units, semesters, academic years, careers, and more. To plan a way of being in the world as an educator and, more specifically, as a teacher, requires intention, planning, and careful preparation.

The experiential learning model of Philosophy 4326/5326 – Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community offers an example of a carefully planned and intentional learning community. Speaking about the role and value of learning in such a community, one student named Beth described her experience like this:

[S]omething that was really brought to light was community, and how important it is to live in a community and to see the people that you live with as part of your community and the things that are important in that community and I feel like it’s good, it’s easy to talk about these things… but in this course, we talked about community, and we talked about what it meant to be a good listener and we talked about what it meant to be a good friend, we talked about the things that were important to us as people within the course and then you got to know people on this such a real true level, you got to know their hearts so well that you couldn’t help but treat them well you couldn’t help but treat them like they were important and you couldn’t help but see everything that made them
up, because you get to know people backwards here…. [18]

Beth’s testimony demonstrates how the uses of a variety of techne-appropriate curricula lend themselves to progressive and traditional learning outcomes in this course. Affectionately known as “Philosophy Camp,” Philosophy 4326/5326 at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, employs techne appropriately, and offers these technologies for use in the 21st century. [19]

In the Danish Folk School tradition, and by extension, the Highlander Education and Research Center, Philosophy Camp employs a residential and intentional learning model “centered on the Socratic tradition of cooperative inquiry into large questions about how we can live our lives well.” [21] The techne put to work in Philosophy Camp is wide-ranging. Students gather in community at Shalom Hill Farm, near Windom, Minnesota, and spend roughly a month in retreat discussing questions of self, vocation, and community. [22] The primary instructional method employed in class is that of the “learning circle,” which focuses on the experiences accrued and brought to the circle by participants. [23] Not only are individual students experts and teachers of their own experience, but faculty and fellow participants are equally engaged in offering up stories that exemplify the philosophical—and practical—subject at hand. Freirian “culture circles” follow and/or employ a similar method, model, or techne. [24]

Philosophy Camp utilizes the surrounding community as a techne-appropriate field of inquiry. Students learn by doing the dishes of communally-prepared meals. Students learn the intricacies of sustainable farming, food preparation, and consumption, by practicing these techniques—some for the first time. Students learn the techne of storytelling and the art of community. Again, as Beth put it:

You learn people’s hearts first, and that sets you up to treat people so much better and with so much more respect, because you learn to love people so quickly and you learn to care about them so quickly and I think that you can’t help but live those community values, you can’t help but care what’s happening to other people in your group and see how your actions affect other people, because you get to know them so well and you care so deeply about them. [25]

By connecting philosophical or practical ideas to their experience, students learn the principle of continuity. We may connect ourselves, our lives, and our experience to a variety of meaningful social phenomena through the appropriate employment of technology.

Prescott College and Limited-Residency Learning

America has a rich history of schools that have moved beyond reductionist educational binaries. In the nineteenth century, schools like Berea College and Antioch College were amongst the very first schools to champion racial and gender diversity, and to stress a commitment to community and social justice. They saw these commitments not as positive additions to education, but as fundamentally techne-appropriate for quality educational experiences. In the first half of the twentieth century, schools like Black Mountain College applied Dewey’s philosophy and created living/learning communities of inquiry. In turn, schools like Prescott College in the sixties and seventies used and extended both social justice education and living/learning communities as tools to invigorate educational experiences.

Since Prescott’s founding in 1966, it has committed itself to the “education of the whole person” through a transactional experiential
learning process with the Southwestern wilderness. Besides developing one of the most recognized and celebrated experimental undergraduate colleges in country, it also developed an innovative adult education program, and a sub-program by and for Native-Americans to get accredited to teach on their respective reservations.\[26\] In recent years, they have also implemented limited-residency distance learning undergraduate and graduate programs. Limited-residency \textit{techne} has become increasingly popular in higher education over the last decade.\[27\] It is easy to be skeptical of these programs, especially as to whether such models really give students a \textit{quality} educational experience, or if they are just promoted by administrators as low-cost, high profit, investments for their schools.

Instead of getting quagmired in reductive and unhelpful narratives about good learning, we should ask if there is potential here for \textit{techne}-appropriate experiential learning. The question is not if the “limited-residency” \textit{technologies} are “good” or “bad,” but whether they have instrumental value in cultivating educated and critically-conscious persons. In the tradition of its previous experiments, Prescott College has offered a limited residency model because administration and faculty see it as furthering the possibilities for quality educational experiences. In particular they recognized,

…that highly motivated working adults needed another way to earn college degrees. Since then the invention of the internet has led to an explosion of fast-paced, purely online degree programs. But Prescott College has steadfastly made face-to-face, high-touch, individualized learning the centerpiece of its limited-residency program.\[28\]

Distance learning is a \textit{techne} for particular types of learners, as opposed to a vulgar instrumentalism that first serves the budgetary needs of a for-profit college or traditional university. The difference is subtle but important. One can use the narrative of adult/different learners to further a pernicious and lazy sort of budget and efficiency streamlining in education, or one can see it as an opportunity to experiment and promote a pluralistic academy.

To demonstrate the quality of this kind of \textit{techne}-appropriate distance learning, we interviewed an alumnus of the program. We asked him the following the questions, which are listed below with the responses received:

1. \textit{Why did you move from Prescott’s residential program to the distance learning program?}

Part way through my third year attending Prescott College’s Resident Degree Program, I became dissatisfied with how much money I was spending on my education without a clear sense of how it might be reflected in an actual career down the line.

2. \textit{Do you feel the program fulfilled your learning needs at the time?}

I have always been a very self-directed, auto-didactical student. Moving to the (non-residential) Adult Degree Program allowed me to complete my degree while working and volunteering within my chosen field. While I had to sacrifice the benefits that come from being surrounded by other students and an active intellectual environment, I was able to delve deeper into the community of my choice gaining a ton of real-world, professional, hands-on experience. I found that the curriculum I developed for myself was as, and often more, rigorous than the curriculum developed by the Residential Degree Program.

3. \textit{For what types of learners do you think Prescott’s program is useful, and what type might be better served by other models?}
There is no question that to succeed in an off-site community mentor focused program like Prescott’s Adult Degree Program, students must be extremely self-directed. Students already working within their field of choice will have much of the knowledge and community resources available for them to be successful, that might be challenging to find for students fresh out of high school. It also seems to be most successful for students who already have some college experience. The off campus-program does not provide some of the learning, research and study skills that the residential program teaches very effectively.

4. Do you think the Prescott distance learning program offers something educationally valuable, besides just being off campus, and better for adult learners with busy lives?

I think the most valuable aspects of the program to adult students are the: Life Experience credit transfer opportunities, access to working professionals as instructors instead of having to rely on professors, and more direct and individualized support from a personal advisor. I think these elements would be valuable for all students if the options were available. I actually completed a few of my courses at 2 local community colleges. That gave me access to a huge range of classes while costing very little and supporting the community based self-designed curricular components of my program. Having a ton of different learning tools available to me, allowed for me to design a program that most fit my unique educational needs. I don’t think that totally online or completely self-directed programs are a good alternative to a cohort model, but I am excited to see an individualized “menu model” with a strong personal advisor component come to fruition.[29]

As can be seen from Zach’s experience, limited residency education is clearly not for everyone, nor should it replace residential colleges and universities. Prescott’s limited-residency program(s) are techne-appropriate for self-directed and mature individuals who use facilitation and support to develop geographically-open educational experiences. Zach’s experience legitimizes (for many students) that limited-residency learning may offer the opportunity for a modernized quality education.

Conclusion

As we have shown, living/learning communities and limited-residency learning can be techne-appropriate means to a quality educational experience. In the spirit of Dewey, we believe these reforms should serve the purpose of the educational experience itself and not be “duck-tape” solutions to immediate capitalist market imperatives. At the same time, living/learning communities and limited residency learning, can, when deployed in a holistic way, help ameliorate these economic problems. Living/learning communities when deployed as a technology to improve the quality of the educational experience, can help with retention, add to the quality of educational experiences, help students with problem solving and conflict resolution, and can offer students practical experience communicating across difference. When distance learning is deployed as such a quality educational technology, it can break down the dualism between residential and online learning. It also offers a way for mature students to take responsibility for their education, and to develop portfolios that expand beyond what a geographic campus can offer.

We recognize that both living/learning communities and low-residency learning are but two tools available in our effort to improve the quality of educational experiences within higher education. We also recognize that this paper is but a small step towards updating Dewey’s theory of experience in light of new
technologies: technologies that reshape the way in which we think and solve problems. Our hope is that by beginning a conversation about how we understand and deploy technology, we can clarify our own (and support other) reforms that seek to activate critical thinkers toward social justice. By carefully and creatively thinking about technology in higher education, we can offer new ways to initiate reform that does not fall into narrow ways of thinking or rely upon short term “duck-tape” solutions.

Notes

[1] Hereafter cited as EE.
[10] For examples of this trend, see: Lisman, et. al., Beyond the Tower (2000).
[24] Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 82. Much more has been written on Freire’s notion of a “culture circle”; see, for example, Mariana Souto-Manning’s Freire, Teaching, and Learning, (2010).

L. Jackson Newell, Katherine C. Reynolds, and L. Scott. Marsh, eds., Maverick Colleges: Fourteen Notable Experiments in American Undergraduate Education, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center, Graduate School of Education, the University of Utah, 1996), 85. The section on Prescott is very illuminating (pp. 77-87).

Another alternative institution of higher education, Goddard College, has become exclusively a low-residency program.


References


