

Bridging Theory to Practice Through Experiential Capstones in a Local Study Abroad Semester



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Background

The Adirondack Semester at St. Lawrence University is a residential immersion program founded on the model of study-abroad in another culture that engages students in the study of nature and humans' relationship with nature through academic coursework, material simplicity and an integrated experiential curriculum while living in a close-knit community. The students in the program are sophomores, juniors, and seniors who come from a variety of academic majors. This year, the program piloted an experiential capstone called the Transitional Experience which placed students with individuals and organizations throughout the Adirondacks in an attempt to bridge the gap between academics and application.

Focus Questions

- What are the effects of an experiential capstone on university students in a local study abroad semester?
- How are experiential capstones best developed and facilitated?

Literature Review

- Liberal education has been challenged by career-minded students, a dramatically changing workplace, and by the passive and impersonal nature of instructional methodologies (Donahue DiConti, 2004)
- Undergraduate students are now, more than ever, trying to make a connection between subject and content in the educational marketplace (Donahue DiConti, 2004).
- While numerous models have been developed and hundreds of studies have been done, no definitive answers have been found to fully explain the 'gap' between the possession of environmental knowledge and awareness and displaying pro-environmental behavior (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002).
- Research suggests the potential for bridging the gap through the development of environmental action skills, a greater emphasis on the affective domain, and the propagation of hope and empowerment (Hsu, 2004)
- One source of renewal and transformation of liberal education and teaching is through incorporating more experiential approaches and field experiences such as community service, internships, field study and research projects (Barker, 2000).
- The goal of a capstone "experience" in a liberal arts education has been described as the "sharing of ideas, synthesis, and critical informed reflection as a precursor to action" (Wagenaar, 1993, p 209).

Experiential Capstones

The Transitional Experience was designed as a three-week, individualized, experiential capstone. All twelve students who took part in the fall 2007 Adirondack Semester completed the Transitional Experience between November 25th and December 13th. Students were mentored over a two month period in the planning of their project and the development of a conceptual framework. Once dispersed throughout the Adirondacks, some students were in home-stays and worked with organizations such as North Country Public Radio and the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks while others backpacked in small groups. While the outcomes differed for each capstone, they all culminated with a twenty minute presentation to faculty, staff, family and friends.

Methods

To assess the effects of these experiential capstones, data was collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The instruments used included Pre & Post Transitional Experience Surveys, Post Transitional Experience Questionnaires and a teaching journal. Along with these, the students' Transitional Experience presentations were video taped and a two-month follow up Transitional Experience Interview was administered, both of which were coded. Surveys, questionnaires, video tapes and consent forms were all completed confidentially and mailed to a third party for holding until grades were submitted to protect the students from the possibility of coerced participation. After themes and trends were identified in each question through analysis and coding, a second round of analysis was completed to identify larger overarching trends and themes.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Using the two focus question to guide the data analysis, six themes surfaced. Three major themes were identified that relate directly to the effects of experiential capstones on university students which include *people & community*, *independence & personalization* and *reflection & synthesis*. The other three major themes identified relate directly to the development and facilitation of experiential capstones and include *experience & confidence*, *structure and planning*. While less than half of the students continually made references to *people and community*, the data suggests that the impact that it had on those students was significant through an assortment of comments and repeated references. This, in and of itself, is promising to the potential that these capstones have when students are partnered up with individuals and organizations. The data throughout the research showed that students had both experiences which were highlighted for their independence/ personalization and/or the synthesis/ reflection. While these themes surfaced the analysis clearly suggests that the potential for both of these has yet to be realized. The need for a flexible structure that more effectively guides students through the development and framing of their projects can be seen with both the shortcomings in meeting the objectives and student responses and comments from throughout the research.

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