

Jeremy Luke
The Many and the One: Summer Institute
July, 2010

Using Experiential Education to Teach Religious Studies

My Teaching Experience

The Charles School at Ohio Dominican University, or TCS for the sake of brevity, is an early college experiential high school. It was founded with two basic goals in mind. First, we seek to open the door of higher education to students who otherwise might not get the chance to go to a university or trade school. Our ideal student is someone who has the capabilities necessary for college success but does not have the means to foster those skills in their current educational setting. Students who come to TCS are given skills and experiences that will help them succeed at the high school and college level. Most students begin taking a combination of high school classes and college courses their junior year. By their senior year the vast majority of students are at the college full time. The second key aspect of TCS is the experiential program. The experiential program, in short, seeks to provide students with real world experiences that will augment the information and skills that they gain in the classroom. These two aspects, when brought together, provide a unique, enriching, and challenging educational experience for the students and those who teach them.

What is Experiential Education?

Experiential education is long in history and theory but short in practice. While there is a clear cut definition of experiential education, many times we are forced to learn and improvise as we engage students in the experiential setting. This often leads us to expand our theory and practice in tandem. That said, much of the theory that we incorporate into our experiential model at TCS is drawn from the writings and practices of John Dewey. The components that are most fundamental to experiential education can best be summed up by the man himself.

I believe that much of present education fails because it neglects the fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is

to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative.

- John Dewey "My Pedagogical Creed" (1897)

First, experiential education is student centered. While there will always be the need for a teacher as facilitator and guide, the experiential model gives the student almost total control of their environment. Because the student has a choice of what they want to do and how they want to do it, they become the master of their own reality. Oftentimes, the teacher's role is to model the practice of learning to the students as they work along side one another. A great example of this is an experiential learning lesson on cooking. The teacher may not know how to cook a certain dish but if they know where to find the ingredients, how to look up recipes, and how to ask good questions they will teach the students by learning themselves.

The second thing that experiential education does is create situations in which the students achieve true learning. This term is not meant to disparage the learning that happens in a classroom. Rather, it is 'true' because the knowledge often builds upon itself and students are required to demonstrate certain understandings before moving on to other more complicated tasks. A great example of can be found in a lesson we did on surviving in nature. Students had to learn the names of certain plants in the forest before they could select which plants were edible (Delicious blackberries!) and which plants they ought to avoid (Poison oak).

The third aspect of experiential learning states that the learning that students do is situated in the present rather than the future. Modern classrooms, as a rule, prepare students for the future. While this is not a bad thing by any stretch of the imagination, an unfortunate byproduct of this future-oriented emphasis is that the present is undervalued. The typical line is "you will need this someday when you get a job, buy a house, go to college, etc...". Experiential learning allows students to engage in the here and now. Students see the obvious value of the learning because it is tied to a tangible object or action in the present.

The fourth component of experiential learning is a social component. Experiential learning places students and their peers in a real world experience that requires them to interact with one another to complete tasks and solve problems. These experience foster social and interpersonal growth in a way that is impossible in the classroom because students are able to engage the world and their peers at the same time.

Finally, experiential education is always connected to state content standards. That is not to say that every experience must be tied to a specific standard. Students often receive valuable analytic, reasoning, writing, and quantitative skills in their experiences that tie directly into the content standards.

The Expedition Model

The idea of Experiential education is rarely met with opposition from teachers and administrators. Experiences are a valuable learning tool! However, many teachers and administrators rightfully oppose the implementation of the experiential model, or something similar to it, in their schools because of the time and costs associated with Experiential learning. As we designed an experiential system at TCS we were forced to encounter and overcome some very tough realities. The system that we came up with, the Expedition Model, addresses the requirements of Experiential education while balancing cost and time limitations.

What follows is an abridged instruction manual for the Expedition model

a. Each teacher must come up with a theme or skill that they would like their students to know more about. These themes can vary in many different ways. However, the major parameters are that each theme must draw the student's interest in order to get enough of them to sign up for your expedition. They must also be appropriate for school, should have a variety of activities, lessons, and experiences available, and should tie back to the content standards or some sort of content from the student's classroom experiences.

In the past we have had expeditions on French Cuisine, Knitting, Social Justice and the 14th Amendment, just to name a few. Typically we have had 3-4 expeditions each year. This allows the teachers to explore many different interests and topics. When appropriate, we might have a theme that ties the whole expedition together such as the 2008 Presidential elections or the 14th Amendment. In cases such as these each Expedition group's topic would relate back to the unifying theme. Most of the time, though, we have simply allowed teachers to choose their own topic. This often presents an interesting challenge to the teachers as we compete for students. This has driven the quality of the expeditions to a very high level.

b. Each teacher is given a \$500 budget, one week, 20-25 students, and bus access. Teachers are encouraged to take their students to as many real world sites as possible. The \$500 is typically used for passes to museums, supplies, or to help offset the costs of bussing. In the past, we have taken students to political campaign headquarters, museums, concerts, and construction sites among many other things. The small group size allows for more one-on-one interactions among teachers and students. Whereas most high school teachers see their students for 4-5 hours a week, the Expedition model allows the teacher to have 35-40 hours of contact time. The smaller group size also allows students to have a greater diversity of experiences. There are many sites that can handle 20 students that could never consider taking a whole school.

c. *Each teacher must tie their Expedition to some sort of state standard or learning goal.* A common misconception about experiential schools is that they are not bound by state standards. Our school is fully responsible for the scores of our students. We are graded like every other school in Ohio and face the same consequences that other schools face for inadequate performance. However, I'm glad to say that TCS was named an *Excellent* school in the 2009-10 school year which is the highest rating an Ohio high school can achieve.

Religion in America Expedition

Religion is a topic that ought to be part of any high school social studies curriculum. For better or worse, religion permeates our history, shapes our present, and will mold our future as a nation. Because of this it would be irresponsible to leave a study of religion out of the high school social studies curriculum. Unfortunately, high schools have done just that. Students rarely gain a firm understanding of the role of religion in American history and society. There are several reasons for this. First, religion is a difficult topic to discuss with students. Many teachers are rightfully nervous at the prospect of offending or confusing their students. Teachers are also strapped for time and resources. Because the state standards typically call for more content than can be done in a year, teachers must pick and choose their areas of focus. Needless to say, something like religion, which does not show up on the state standards in a meaningful way, is not at the top of the average teacher's priority list. Finally, it is almost impossible to bring religion alive in a classroom. It might be possible to adequately describe a religion or religious practices to students who are at an advanced academic level. However, most high schoolers simply don't have the emotional and social skills to firmly grasp the intricacies of religious practice.

An expedition, like the ones I described earlier, would lend itself very well to a thorough and fair understanding of religion. I am in the process of designing an expedition for the spring of this school year (2011). This process of creation began at the NEH Summer Institute on Religion in America in July and will undoubtedly continue until the last day of the Expedition in March or April. The parameters of this expedition follow.

The religion expedition can be broken down into four main categories. These categories are defined by in large by the style of learning that they engage. Each of these categories will shed a unique light on the topic of religion. The topics, *Religious Scholarship*, *Religious Experiences*, *Experts in Religion*, and *Reflections on religion*, when combined, will provide the students with an enriching and holistic understanding of the topic of religion.

Religious Scholarship

The main purpose of the Religious Scholarship aspect of the expedition is to give the students a basic understanding of the major world religions and an insight into how religious scholars understand and compare religions. My hope is to work with the students to build a framework for categorizing and understanding their experiences. A quick example of where this would be a significant help is in the study of Buddhism. In America, most students automatically associate religion with monotheism. By discussing the main views of the major world religions I could help the students gain an understanding of what it means to be religious without the monotheistic God that shows up in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The major categories that I will cover in the classroom before we get into the experiences are as follows

- a. America's Religious Roots (French, English, Spanish)*
- b. The Religion of the founding fathers*
- c. Millennialism in America*
- d. Modern Religious Topics (Christian Right, Gay Marriage, Islam in America)*

Religious Experiences

There are literally hundreds of enriching opportunities in any city that can give students very realistic and challenging religious experiences. The primary example of this is a tour of a religious establishment or even sitting in on a religious service while it is in progress. One of the main reasons that religion is hard to teach is because we teachers often frame religion purely in historical, sociological, and cultural terms. The experience of a Muslim prayer service, a Buddhist temple, or a street preacher informs the students on a visceral level.

There are three key challenges that we face in the Religious Experience category. First, students need to have a genuine experience of religion that does not proselytize, divide the class, or spread hatred. This will require me to prepare the students adequately for their experience. If we go to an evangelical church, there is a chance that someone there might try to convert many of the students to Christianity! The key is to provide the student with the respect and inquisitiveness to engage people while not feeling pressured. The second key challenge is to prepare the students to be respectful of other views. A muslim student may truly feel uncomfortable or disgusted at a tour of The Church of Scientology. However, I want to reiterate the importance of respect, especially when the worldview of the other person is fundamentally different from the student's. Finally, I want to prepare the students to truly learn from their experiences. It would be easy to

simply go into an experience and check out. I will make sure to reiterate to my students the importance of reflecting on their experiences.

Religious Leadership

Another advantage that the Religious Expedition would provide to students is the ability to hear directly from religious leaders from the community. I want to bring in pastors of local churches, an Imam, a Rabbi and many other religious leaders. It is too easy for us to dismiss other religions or even religion as a whole. It is much harder to do that when we actually listen to what the leaders of different religious communities have to say. By bringing in religious leaders I want to foster respect for all religions in my students while also teaching them the fundamentals of the major world religions.

Reflections, Analysis, and Assessment

At the end of each of the expedition days I want to take a little time to reflect with the students on the experiences that they had that day. It is vital that students be able to reflect and analyze their experiences, especially after an entire day of new and often very abstract activities and information. These reflections can take the form of a written essay, a skit, a poem, a painting, or even a song. The vital thing is that the students must be able to internalize the things that they learn, make those experiences their own, and then communicate their thoughts to their peers.

Assessment is a vital tool for the experiential model of education. One of the most challenging critiques of experiential education is that it is difficult to assess what the students actually learned through their experiences. It is relatively easy to construct a lesson for the classroom, run it, and test the student on the material that was covered. It is quite another to construct an experiential lesson in an unfamiliar setting and still come up with a list of standards to assess at the end. With that said, it is still possible for student learning to be measured. The most accurate assessment tends to be a pre and post test. This measures the students' growth and, more importantly, it provides a frame for the week to the students. If students receive a pre-test they will know what to expect during the week and what questions they should be asking.

Another valuable assessment that I've already mentioned is the end of the week reflection. This can take many different forms but the key is to help the students internalize the information, process it, and communicate their ideas to their peers. Their learning becomes evident as they construct their final project and, of course, when they present to others.

The most valuable assessment for the experiential model is informal assessment. This occurs as the teacher and the student work alongside each other to examine issues and solve problems. Through conversation, questioning, and

guided problem solving, it is possible to tell whether students are gaining something from the experience. The best thing about informal assessment is that it can occur during the students' activities, discussions, and experiences so it is possible to help bring wayward students back on track before it is too late. (This is opposed to formal assessment which typically occurs after the fact).

Conclusions

An understanding of religion and its influence on our society is as vital as math, science, and social studies to our students' growth and development as human beings and successful citizens. Too often, the topic of religion is neglected or poorly taught because it is less scientific in nature than chemistry, government, geometry, or grammar. Nevertheless, it is our duty as teachers to wade through difficult and complicated subjects with our students! The Religion Expedition and Experiential Education on the whole provides teachers with a valuable set of tools for helping students grow in their understanding of and compassion towards religion and their fellow citizens.