

Enhancing Teaching Effectiveness through Life Experiences: A Philosophy of Teaching

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Introduction

I am honored to be the recipient of the Award for Teaching Excellence from the Society of Park and Recreation Educators. It is a further privilege to have the platform of Schole to discuss what I believe is significant to teaching effectiveness.

There are many elements to good teaching - having a grounded knowledge base, implementing a program of research, utilizing diverse teaching methods to convey information, developing empathetic and respectful attitudes toward students, losing self-importance to value student comments, providing service to the profession and community, and most importantly in my opinion, teaching from life experiences. This short paper conveys a philosophy of teaching which espouses the need for educators to utilize - and if necessary, augment - life experiences for the enhancement of teaching effectiveness.

The Need for What is Real

If you query students about what they need to know for professional success, the frequent response is "knowledge of what is actually happening in the field". Similar sentiments are echoed by today's practitioner. The need to know the realities of the work world are clearly expressed.

In response to this need for reality in professional preparation, educators seek to blend "book" knowledge with actual professional practice. This blending is accomplished in many ways including required 'volunteer' work, practica, internships, in-class guest speakers, and agency sites visitations. Perhaps another significant way to make education 'real' for students is for educators to use, and in some cases augment, their life experiences.

Teaching from Life Experiences

Teaching from life experiences implies that every experience encountered by an educator has the potential to be used toward the learning of students. While some experiences require more creativity than others to make the application to parks and recreation, other experiences easily lend themselves to provide real life examples of the application of theoretical professional preparation concepts.

Let's take an example to illustrate the point. In a recent classroom discussion on customer service, students were asked to consider how recreation center staff could be more responsive to the needs of their consumers. To help illustrate significant points, I used situations that were recently experienced when I needed to return merchandise at two different stores. In one store, I completed a lengthy return of purchase form, waited ten minutes in the customer service line, and answered a short battery of questions verifying the rationale for the return of merchandise. In the second store, I was directed to find the replacement item wanted, and upon checkout, the cashier made the adjustment...no forms, no waiting, no hassle! Through the use of this example, the students in the class came to the realization of the importance of simplified procedures and the value of empowering employees - even front line staff - to make decisions that enhance customer relations. Through the use of my life experience example, students were quickly able to draw upon their own life experiences for additional applications of good customer relations. The students began to process information and think independently, and I realized that true learning had occurred!

All Experiences Count

When utilizing life experiences as examples for teaching various concepts, it is important to realize that all experiences encountered have the potential to illustrate points. At times, it does take creativity to find an appropriate real life example to illustrate a point, but if we begin to view our life experiences as learning opportunities, than this process becomes easier with time and experience. All life experiences have the potential to enhance teaching.

Creating Life Experiences

Part of the premise of using life experience to enhance teaching is the fact that academicians should seek out opportunities to expand their repertoire of experiences. Being an educator naturally involves learning as a lifelong process, and expanding our scope of life experiences should be a part of that process. Various opportunities can be used to develop life experiences, some of which include summer vacation, sabbatical leave, volunteer work, moonlighting, and job sharing.

Summer "Vacation"

In the early days of my teaching career, I was fortunate to utilize my summer "vacations" as an opportunity to work as a practitioner. My initial motivation was clear; I

needed the money. In hindsight, though, those seven summers as a practitioner provided a wealth of examples that I still use when illustrating points raised in classes today. What continually motivates the desire to get additional life experiences is the change in class dynamics and the excitement generated in learning when students understand the relationships between practice and theory. Life experience examples help students see these relationships more clearly.

Sabbatical Leave

Sabbatical leave presents educators with an opportunity for an intensive experience as a practitioner. Many academicians will be torn, though, between using their leave for a research opportunity or seeking out a practitioner job for the enhancement of their teaching effectiveness. In truth, the sabbatical leave priorities set by many universities will frequently dictate the type of project pursued. However, with some creative planning, parks and recreation educators can probably meet both the research priorities and professional practice priorities during their sabbatical leave.

Volunteer Work

While the thought of working without pay may be repugnant to some, the opportunities available through volunteer placements are excellent. Frequently, volunteer work provides more diversity in tasks and the experiences can be of a shorter duration. This situation can be appealing to an educator that needs flexibility in scheduling.

One of the most exciting, annual volunteer jobs is working with Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado helping to refurbish or build outdoor recreation areas. From these experiences, I have learned how to construct accessible trails and campsites for individuals with disabilities, the relationships between government entities (e.g., U.S. Forest Service, Army Corps of Engineers) and a nonprofit organization, and trail design and maintenance techniques. In every class that I have taught - from therapeutic recreation to recreation administration - I have been able to use the on-site volunteer experiences to enhance student learning. These experiences have not only provided students with memorable examples from which to apply theory also has created the desire in students to be part of similar life experiences.

Moonlighting

Why not get a second job? While this opportunity to increase life experiences is not for everyone, it does present an interesting option for some individuals. Fortunately, the field of parks and recreation provides employment opportunities that occur at diverse times of the day, including weekends and are frequently available on a part-time basis. While the wage may be minimal, the value of the experience can more than compensate by enhancing teaching skills and knowledge of professional practice.

Job Sharing

Perhaps the most creative approach to augmenting life experiences comes from job sharing. Job sharing occurs when a faculty member and a parks and recreation practitioner "swap" parts of their job duties. Typically, the practitioner will teach a course in the educator's

department while the educator takes on administrative functions within the practitioner's park and recreation department. This arrangement might be for as short a time as a semester/quarter or for as long as a year or more.

Critical to successful job sharing is finding a good match between the practitioner and educator. The practitioner must be interested and qualified to teach a course offered in your department. A more difficult part of the job share, though, is finding an appropriate part of the practitioner's duties the academician is qualified to take over for a relatively short period of time. Frequently, job sharing works best if the educator assists the parks and recreation department with a special project such as evaluation, research, or structural reorganization.

Obviously, job sharing requires more than the desire of a practitioner and educator to swap responsibilities. Administrative support, from both the academic institution and the park and recreation agency, is essential. A detailed work plan, depicting exact duties of each professional, is also critical to the success of the program. While job sharing requires much time toward planning and implementation, the rewards toward the enhancement of teaching are numerous. Besides the educator gaining additional life experience, the practitioner is gaining teaching experience as well. The real beneficiary of a job sharing program, however, is the student. Not only will the student gain a faculty member with new information but the student also will have had the opportunity to have a practitioner as a teacher. For academic departments with small numbers of faculty, this approach is ideal for providing diversity in the teaching staff.

Quest for Knowledge

Being an effective educator is an enormous task - especially when you consider that we must juggle the three elements of teaching, research, and service. To make a commitment to enhance teaching effectiveness by augmenting life experiences takes an extra bit of dedication. The reality for many educators, though, is that it may not count in their evaluation system. However, to go beyond the expected in the quest for knowledge has great potential for making us better teachers. Consider a philosophy of teaching based on life experience as an enhancement to your teaching effectiveness. We all - educators, students, and the profession - benefit in the end.