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Experiential Education in the College Context: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters

Roberts, Jay W.

Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016

Book Review

Tags: active learning | community based learning |
experiential education | integrative learning | problem-
based learning

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Experiential Education in the College Context provides a useful introduction to both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical application of experiential education. Roberts, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Director of the Center for Integrated Learning at Earlham College, writes out of his experience as a faculty member, administrator, and philosopher of education. His volume is well-equipped as a guide for leaders in higher education interested in “harnessing the power of the live encounter between students and teachers” (xi).

Roberts divides the volume into two main sections, the first covering theoretical aspects of experiential education and the second exploring its practical facets. Each section is comprised of four chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to the current educational landscape, noting that it is not merely a time of “disruption and destabilization,” but a time of “tremendous opportunity” (18). Chapter two defines experiential education, teasing out some of its many implications through three curriculum models. In chapter three, Roberts sorts experiential education models into “four core methodologies”: active learning, community-based learning, integrative learning, and problem and project-based learning (63). Chapter four identifies models such as the seat paradigm and the teacher as expert paradigm that educators should leave behind as they embrace an experiential approach. In chapters five through eight, Roberts shifts to the practical application of the theoretical principles discussed in the first half of the book. Chapter five considers design, chapter six facilitation, chapter seven assessment, and chapter eight the integration of experiential education in the college classroom and across the campus. Finally, the Afterword places experiential education in the

wider world of the academy, and an Appendix offers a reference list for a variety of experiential education programs.

My one critique - and it is a small one - of Roberts's work is that he quotes too many secondary scholars at length. Block quotes fill the pages and definitions abound. The volume would have been infinitely more accessible had he compiled the many definitions in a glossary in the back of the volume and confined his extensive dialogue with other scholars to the footnotes. Still, Roberts's volume provides rich descriptions of the variety of practices that fit under the experiential education umbrella and offers useful examples for incorporating these models in the classroom. In short, the text offers a fine introductory resource.

Roberts wrote this book "for students who wish to learn more about the theoretical concepts behind the approach, for faculty who might be interested in what experiential education looks like in practice, and for administrators trying to respond programmatically and creatively to a rapidly changing landscape in higher education" (xi). While I am not convinced that many students will wade through its theoretical waters, the volume does address the needs of faculty and administrators investigating the possibilities that experiential education offers. I will carry Roberts's image of "teachers as curators of experience" rather than "content providers" with me for a long time (81).

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