



14

SPRING
2017

A Chat with

maureen drysdale:

*Experiential Learning
Research Pioneer*

INTERVIEWED BY: Cheryl Cates, PhD, University of Cincinnati

Q: Tell us about yourself?

A: I am Canadian and live in Waterloo, Ontario — about an hour west of Toronto. I am an Associate Professor in Psychology and the School of Public Health and Health Studies at St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo.

I really like teaching and being in the classroom. I teach courses in Educational Psychology, Adolescence and Emerging Adult Psychology, clinical courses on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology and Statistics for Social Scientists.

I also really enjoy doing research. My projects center around examining school-to-work transitions and how variables such as learning environments, skill acquisitions, learning outcomes, and overall mental health lead to or impede success. Recent projects include examining (1) the impact of co-operative and work integrated education (CWIE) on several psychological constructs needed for success; (2) the impact of peer support on the overall mental health and well-being of students preparing for work after graduation.

I have served on the CEIA Board of Directors and I currently sit on the Board of Directors for the World Association for Cooperative and Work-Integrated Education (WACE).

Q: How did you get interested in experiential learning research?

A: I have had several profound experiences in my life that have contributed more to my learning that I would ever had gained from textbooks and classrooms alone. In reflecting on these experiences, I became acutely aware of the power of experience. Researching that 'power' just fell into place early on in my career. Essentially, I wanted to know why and how it works.

Q: What are the most important issues facing experiential learning today and how can research contribute to their evolution?

A: Students need to be 'global-ready' (as well as 'work-ready') and we don't have a clear picture of what global-ready means. What attributes and skills are needed to be global-ready? What experiential learning opportunities provide the conditions for students to become global-ready? I think this is one of the most pressing issues. Once we know what our students need then we need to address the other on-going issues such as:

- Clearly stating the learning outcomes and objectives and aligning them with the mission and goals of universities and colleges as well as the expectations of employers.
- Valid, reliable, and practical assessment of the learning outcomes.

- Increased experiential learning opportunities so that all students can benefit from rich practical experiences
- Practitioners understanding the how and why of experiential learning

In terms of research, it is important to understand what students are learning and how they are learning it. This has practical implications such as informing practice, program development, and establishing policies.

Q: For the experiential learning practitioner, what key theoretical foundations should he/she understand?

A: Probably Kolb — He drew heavily on Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. Using Kolb's theory plus theories of reflective practice, we know that students learn best by being engaged — by first *doing*, then *reflecting* on what they did, followed by *transferring* those reflections into new actions or *new practice*.

I would also recommend reading Lave and Wenger's work on communities of practice and situated learning.

Q: For someone who might consider getting involved with research, what background or skills are most important?

A: I recommend knowing what questions are worth asking, worth answering, and how the answers will be used.

It is also essential to have knowledge of research methods. Knowing how to conduct research is only one piece. It's also important to understand what to do with the data. The final piece is knowing what to do with the findings so that they have practical implications.

Finally, I recommend joining a group such as the WACE International Research Group. The IRG offers workshops and also opportunities for partnering with experienced researchers.

Q: Tell us about the current state of research within the field of experiential learning.

A: I am impressed with the amount of research being conducted globally now. We are seeing more from all over the world — Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Ten years ago, there was very little and what was done had poor generalizability. We've (a very big WE — organizations and expert researchers) have been busy advancing it and as a result, we are seeing more and more strong research. We can't stop, so I encourage people to put on their research caps and help advance the literature on experiential education.

Q:

Tell us about your current research.

A:

Well, my research examines emerging adult school-to-work transitions and how variables such as learning environments, skill acquisitions, learning outcomes, social support, and overall mental health lead to or impede success. Recent projects include examining (1) the impact of co-operative and work integrated education (CWIE) on several psychological constructs needed for success; (2) the impact of peer support and sense-of belonging on the overall mental health and well-being of students preparing for and adjusting to their first full time job after graduation. Emerging adults are particularly at risk for mental health issues especially when they are in the period of transition to full-time work. For many, the workplace is particularly important as a social and learning environment, impacting not only on vocational pathways, but also on present and future health and wellbeing. It's an important topic and one that merges my research training in clinical, developmental, and educational psychology as well as public health and health systems.

Q:

Tell us about the WACE International Research Group and your efforts to organize experiential learning research on behalf of WACE.

A:

It was created with the aim of advancing research in the field of co-operative and work-integrated education (CWIE). Our goals are to:

- Establish a strong network of researchers around the globe

- Promote research on cooperative and work-integrated education
- Work with the Board of Directors to ensure that WACE events have a strong research stream
- Identify key research topics that will advance the understanding of cooperative and work-integrated education
- Be involved in research workshops at WACE events
- Collaborate on research projects
- Establish criteria for future WACE research grants and awards
- Assist in seeking research funding from foundations and funding agencies

In four years, we have grown from just over a dozen researchers to more than 100 from all over the globe and we have developed a strong structure led by a dedicated Executive Committee. The research that members of this group conduct can be used to improve experiential education programs.

In terms of my efforts — first, I work with a strong Executive Committee so the efforts are not just mine. We organize and facilitate research workshops. We have a WACE International Research Symposium every two years. This event is very successful with attendance increasing each time. We have a newsletter to inform members of events and research being conducted in the five regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania). Finally, we have developed a research grant and a Best Research Paper award. All of these have resulted in more researchers joining the group. If anyone is interested, they can contact me.

Q: Do you have examples of recent studies that you would recommend for Experience Magazine readers to review?

A: Rather than specific studies, I would recommend scanning the journals where research on experiential learning is published. A few examples are: Journal of Experiential Education, Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Journal of Cooperative Education, Higher Education, Skills, and Work-Based Learning, and the new Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (the first issue has a great article by Alice Kolb and David Kolb). There are also books and handbooks such as the International Handbook for Cooperative Education, The World is my Classroom, Strengthening Experiential Education: A New Era. Finally, there will be a new book coming out next year that I am co-editing with Dr. Tracey Bowen called Work-Integrated Learning in the 21st Century: Global Perspectives on the Future.

Q: If you were given \$10 million to advance the research agenda for experiential learning, how would you spend it?

A: Wow! If only! This kind of money would allow me to do several things. This is a pie-in-the-sky answer to a very hypothetical situation.

a) Get more people (faculty and research professors) involved in CWIE research. We could have very large grant competitions (not the small ones that only allow for small

studies to be done at one institution). Large grants would be more attractive to faculty and worth the time and effort needed to submit a strong proposal. Large grants would allow a group of researchers from a variety of disciplines to collaborate and design large international longitudinal experimental studies examining the long-term benefits and outcomes of experiential learning. Then they could do baseline testing on a number of factors — everything from current skill levels, personal attributes, to mental health and overall wellbeing — then randomly assign them to a variety of experiential learning opportunities during their studies, and then follow them through to graduation, their first full-time job, and then for 10 or more years after graduation. That kind of money would support this kind of study.

b) The money could also be used to pull together a group of research experts and organize two- and three-day training workshops all around the globe for practitioners and novice researchers and teach them how to do sound, valid, and reliable research that is usable! We want research that has implications so that it can be used to inform practice and drive policy. Big money would make it easier to move this agenda along. We've been working on it for over the past 15 years but we could do so much more with a large budget.
