

Creating Innovators: The Importance of Self-Directed Experiential Learning Projects

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Abstract

Experiential learning is foundational to education at the University of Cincinnati (UC) and has been since cooperative education (co-op) began here in 1906. All UC undergraduate students are required to engage in at least one mid-collegiate course or academic experience that includes experiential learning. Experiential learning provides students with the opportunity to apply their learning and engage in reflective and integrative practices.

As educators preparing students for the future, we believe it is our responsibility to help students consider how they will use their gifts, talents and strengths to make a contribution to the world. This will look different for each student, but the common denominator is helping students develop innovative capacities as a result of their collegiate experiences. Why innovation? In our ever-changing world, there isn't anyone who doesn't need to be a creative problem solver and, at the core, that is exactly what innovation means.

Through this article, we will introduce the University Honors Program (UHP) at UC and our approach to guiding students through self-directed experiential learning. Self-directed experiential learning opportunities allow students to explore interests with the maximum amount of creativity which is necessary for students to become innovators within their fields (Wagner, 2012). We will explain how we require reflection and integration and how self-directed experiential learning can be a catalyst for inspiring students to become engaged citizens of the world.

Experiential learning is foundational to education at the University of Cincinnati (UC) and has been since cooperative education (co-op) began here in 1906. It has since expanded far beyond the co-op model and is now purpose-

fully integrated into every academic program at the institution. All UC undergraduate students are required to engage in at least one mid-collegiate course or academic experience that includes experiential learning. Experiential learn-

ing provides students with the opportunity to apply their learning and engage in reflective and integrative practices. As educators preparing students for the future, it is our responsibility to help students consider how they will use their gifts, talents and strengths to make a contribution to the world. This will look different for each student, but the common denominator is helping students develop innovative capacities as a result of their experiences. Why innovation? In our ever-changing world, there isn't anyone who doesn't need to be a creative problem solver and, at the core, that is exactly what innovation means.

Through this article, we will introduce the University Honors Program (UHP) at UC and our approach to guiding students through self-directed experiential learning. Self-directed experiential learning opportunities allow students to explore interests with the maximum amount of creativity which is necessary for students to become innovators within their fields (Wagner, 2012). We will explain how we require reflection and integration and how self-directed experiential learning can be a catalyst for inspiring students to become engaged citizens of the world.

Program Overview

The UHP comprises undergraduate students in the top 7% of the university and offers an engaging environment in which students are inspired to experience and learn more. As of fall 2017, there were approximately 1500 participants. The UC experience of these academically talented and motivated students is enriched through honors seminars and experiences, which provide students with opportunities for experiential, interdisciplinary, reflective and in-

tegrative learning. UHP students are challenged through honors seminars and experiential learning projects that focus on five thematic areas: community engagement, global studies, leadership, research and creativity. Students are required to complete five honors experiences and maintain an online learning portfolio by graduation.

The UHP's vision is to develop students into global citizen scholars who lead innovative efforts toward solving the world's complex problems. We recognize the keys to becoming an innovative global citizen scholar include developing a sense of self, a reflective capacity and the ability to integrate learning from experiences rich in meaning. "To participate responsibly as local citizens, then, people must also be citizens of the world, aware of complex interdependence and able to synthesize information from a wide array of sources, learn from experiences, and make connections between theory and practice" (Huber, Hutchings, Gale, 2005). High impact experiences are important but guided reflection and integration are equally important for students to become global citizen scholars.

One important hallmark of the UHP is the focus on the individual student. As our program serves students from all colleges and academic disciplines, we provide unique opportunities for students to gain a better understanding of themselves. Students meet individually with their professional honors advisor to create a plan for exploring their interests. Our ratio is approximately 1:275. Through mandatory advising appointments with their assigned advisor (designated by a student's primary major), we learn about each student's goals, interests, aspirations, and strengths. We ask students to

reflect upon the motivation for their goals and what they would do if they knew failure was not an option. We promote quality over quantity, though many students are still very involved in the program and the university at large. Intentionally choosing experiences that build upon one another leads to a stronger understanding of self as a global citizen scholar. Each student is required to articulate their definition of what it means to be a global citizen scholar at the end of their first semester in the program. This definition is then revised throughout the remainder of their time as a member of the UHP as part of their learning portfolio requirement.

Through a robust self-designed experience proposal, on-going reflection, a culminating reflection and an online learning portfolio showcase of the experience, students have the option to engage in a unique process of self-guided experiential learning to enhance their collegiate experience. Self-guided experiences (known as self-designed experiences in the UHP) provide an opportunity for students to pursue their unique interests without a grade assigned to their efforts. While students have the freedom to complete any combination of the three types of honors experiences (honors seminars, pre-approved experiences or self-designed experiences) to total five experiences by the time they graduate, most students will complete at least one self-designed experience. For high-achieving students, this freedom from external evaluation encourages innovation because the student's success (or failure) is not connected to a grade. Upon the conclusion of each honors experience, a student must reflect on the experience on their online learning portfolio. Students work one-on-one with their honors advisor to develop and execute academically

sound experiences to explore interests to complement and/or diversify their undergraduate experience. Students have the option to develop one or more self-designed experiences and grant funding is available to support experiences with a financial obligation. During the 2016-2017 academic year, we approved 600 self-designed student proposals.

Student Directed Experiential Learning

Student directed experiential learning, known as the self-designed experience process in the UHP, is an example of a formula that Tony Wagner (*Creating Innovators*, 2012) suggests with regard to developing innovators. According to Wagner, educators should encourage the pursuit of play, passion, and purpose. Play refers to uninhibited exploration of interests which lead to the development of passion. Then, students should use their passions to frame their larger purpose and goals. Innovation begins with understanding oneself and creating opportunities to impact those around them. "True innovation means using your imagination, exercising the capacity to envision new possibilities... It's not about inventing a new machine or a new drug. It's about inventing your own life. Not following a path, but making your own path" (William Deresiewicz, 2010.) Self-designed experiences are the perfect example of how students can create their own path for growth and learning which can complement their educational curriculum.

Self-designed experiences range from independent, international travel experiences to students developing their own small businesses. Through the self-designed proposal, students complete five sections which require the student to: 1) articulate their personal connection to the

experience, 2) create goals for the experience and their personal development, 3) identify academic resources that ground the opportunity in academia, 4) outline a plan for on-going reflection and 5) develop a plan for sharing their learning upon conclusion of the experience. Students are also asked to identify a project advisor who can guide the student through the completion of the experience. The project advisor is not the same as their honors advisor; the project advisor must have a level of expertise on the chosen topic. Students are encouraged to use alternative forms of reflection beyond the traditional form of journaling for their ongoing reflection. Examples of on-going reflection that the UHP staff developed to share with students include sketching, photography, guided discussion groups, lab notebooks, blogs, or video journals.

Students consider interests, both related and unrelated to their major, as the basis of a self-designed experience. Through the process of writing the proposal, students take ownership of their growth and learning. Self-designed proposals are an opportunity for students to explore interests that may not initially seem connected to their major, but through the reflection process, they find ways to weave their interests together into an integrated, cohesive story. The self-designed proposal template can be found here: www.uc.edu/honors/students/experiences/self-designed.html. Here are topics for several recent self-designed experiential learning projects:

- Researching the recolonization of butterflies in the Canadian Rockies.
- Designing a water bottle that was integrated into the body of a commuter-style bicycle.

- Developing a science fair afterschool program for juniors and seniors at an urban high school across the street from UC's campus.
- Collaborating with peers to learn several programming languages to design a video game.
- Writing a novel and researching multiple editing and publishing options.

Student Story

To further explain the impact of self-designed experiences, we will share the story of one student who we will refer to as Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a student at UC studying industrial design. She began her UHP involvement by participating in the LeaderShape Institute which is a 6-day national program designed to help students lead with integrity. The institute requires intense reflection and students create a personal vision for their future. Through reflection, Elizabeth discovered her passion for understanding others and making a difference one person at a time. She realized that her lived experience was not the same as others and that it would take ample time to truly learn about and appreciate others.

Elizabeth met with her honors advisor to brainstorm how she could explore the interconnectivity of the world and learn about others through community engagement. Over the next three years, she developed four self-designed experiences with the support and challenge from with her honors advisor, each building off the previous experience with the goal of deepening her growth and learning. All four experiences shared a common theme of learning about individuals from different areas of the world—rural Appalachia, urban Philadelphia, Guatemala and Japan. In preparation for each experience, Elizabeth spent time researching the

culture to gain a better understanding before arriving in each destination. The travel to each location was not part of a required course or her academic requirements; rather, these self-designed opportunities were developed in pursuit of her goals and they counted toward her requirement of completing 5 honors experiences. Her guided reflection questions helped her process what she was learning and how her learning connected to previous experiences and future plans. Each experience broadened Elizabeth's appreciation for others as she learned the stories of those around her and began to understand the power of community. She applied lessons learned from each experience to the next, so that by her junior year, she had a nuanced understanding of how to collaborate with others toward a common goal and lead positive change. This not only impacted her ability to design for a wider audience, but she also considered how she wanted to make a difference in the communities where she lives.

During her junior year, Elizabeth co-founded Sidekick's Made, a non-profit organization, with two of her friends. Elizabeth wanted to make an impact before she graduated and homelessness is a significant issue in Cincinnati. The idea behind Sidekicks is to give comfort and stability to kids experiencing homelessness in the form of custom-made toys and storybooks. Elizabeth and her co-founders ask children to draw a new best friend. They inquire about elements of the drawing to make sure they understand the details and they let the child pick out fabric. Then, they create custom, one-of-a-kind toys for the children based on their drawing and provide them with crayons and paper for continued creative expression. This project is cross disciplinary and collaborative, and it is the sum

of Elizabeth's exploration of understanding others and community.

Upon graduation, Elizabeth will continue her work with Sidekicks in addition to securing full-time employment. The opportunity to take risks, engage in prompted reflection and integrate her learning through the online learning portfolio have aided in her success. She attributes her involvement in the University Honors Program, and specifically her individual pursuit of interests through self-designed experiences, to what led her to where she is today. This directly informs her personal understanding of what it means to be a global citizen scholar.

Reflection and Integration

Reflecting on the learning resulting from the experience is more important than the success of the experience in the case of self-designed experiences. Students are required to write a 1000-word reflection about the experience that they submit to their honors advisor. This reflection follows the "what, so what, now what" format. We encourage students to circle back to the learning goals they established when writing the proposal and articulate how they accomplished their goals and what they learned from the experience (the "what"). While it tends to be easy for students to describe what happened in the experience, we challenge them to think critically about the impact and implications of the experience (the "so what" and "now what"). The 'now what' prompt is especially critical to help students integrate their learning and place the experience within the context of their future plans.

Once they write the personal reflection, they are required to write a 200-word summary of the experience for their online learning portfolio.

This succinct summary should explain the connection between the experience and the student's broader goals/aspirations. The learning portfolio is designed to be an opportunity to practice integration and share learning in a concise way. Learning portfolios help students "overcome fragmentation and make the connections that are vital for personal growth and academic success." (Aracario, Eynon & Clark, 2005). Each learning portfolio includes an introduction of the student, a showcase of each honors experience (brief overview and sample of their work), and an annual reflection about successes/challenges and lessons learned from the previous year. The annual reflection includes an updated reflection on their personal definition of what it means to be a global citizen scholar. The honors advisors read the yearly reflections and provide qualitative feedback to the student. These reflections often serve as the initial brainstorm for future honors experiences. Students are encouraged to share their learning portfolios with professors, peers, and potential employers. Sample learning portfolios can be found here:

www.uc.edu/honors/students/portfolios.html.

Summary

As educators, it is our responsibility to prepare students for life beyond graduation. Self-directed experiential learning opportunities are a great way for students to explore interests and develop a unique definition of what it means to be a global citizen scholar. With an understanding of how they can make a contribution to the world, students prepare to make a difference in their fields as a result of experiential learning opportunities. Through self-designed experiential learning projects, students gain a better understanding of themselves and how to approach

problems with creativity. These skills will prepare them for life after college and help them consider what it means to be a global citizen scholar.

To finalize self-designed experiences, students must reflect and integrate their learning so that they are able to articulate their experiences to a wide audience and develop the innovative skills that will help them to solve problems in creative ways within their discipline. Online learning portfolios and guided reflection questions are practical strategies to help students reflect and integrate their learning.

Learning portfolios and reflection can be used to promote integration within classroom settings and in optional program (such as an honors program). When learning portfolios and guided reflection questions are layered with experiential learning opportunities, the student will gain a deeper understanding of their growth and learning. This is the result of students being required to think beyond what they experienced to articulate the immediate and long-term impact of the experience on their personal and professional goals. Depending on the scale and size of a program or college, there are tremendous benefits in offering individualized advising and coaching students to identify opportunities for customized experiential learning opportunities that align with their personal and professional goals. If it is not feasible to manage the oversight of helping students develop their own experiences, programs may consider including experiential learning opportunities within the classroom to allow students to explore their interests. Beyond the experiences themselves, students should be required to reflect and integrate their learning as a key learning outcome.

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