

# Developing and Assessing Experiential Learning Opportunities

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Classroom experiential learning projects can extend the benefits of student media to more participants. Social media tools offer efficient and cost-effective ways to engage students that allow them to publish their work, promote events, and enhance their professional networks. A case study of one such project is performed to provide a framework for assessing the ability to create engaging and productive experiences within journalism curricula.

## INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has always been an important aspect of a university education. On the most basic level, the experience of “going to college” provides learning in the form of being on one’s own for the first time, making friends, and finding one’s way around a new campus and community. More is often learned outside of class than in, and experiences provide the opportunity to reflect upon and assimilate classroom learning. There is a growing trend to more formally introduce educational experiences in which students can participate, innovate, and influence the processes and work flows. Social media tools offer efficient and cost-effective ways to engage students that allow them to publish their work, promote events, and enhance their professional networks.

There are many ways to engage students by getting them involved in conferences, seminars, and workshops. Rather than simply attend an event, students can actively engage the event by providing extensive coverage via a blog and other social media tools. The event can be covered by

an entire class or a recruited group of students, or as an activity for a student organization, or one that is engaged by student media. Typical media coverage of an event may include one story using few sources, photos, or a short video package. However, web and social-media tools provide a much larger news hole for more extensive coverage that a large-scale event often merits. A team of reporters can extensively cover a conference, engaging an external audience, often on a national or international level, and providing a permanent archive of the activities. Students can use tools and technologies in their reporting to cover the event in innovative ways.

Experiential learning has been discussed in journalism for the past two decades. Most recently, the “teaching hospital” model, where journalism students receive practical experience as an integral part of their education, has been proposed and promoted (Knight Foundation, 2013). However, few case studies exist that illustrate innovative ways to add student media experiences into journalism curricula. This study outlines one such endeavor, the SXTXState.com

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project from Texas State University, in which students cover the South By Southwest Interactive Festival in Austin, Texas. Since 2008, this project has put students in contact with professionals and cutting-edge communication topics, allowing them to use the most current technologies and media platforms. Internships, traditional student media participation, and classroom exercises can qualify as experiential learning, but this analysis describes a course-level experiential activity. A rubric is introduced that can provide an assessment tool for judging the level of experience provided by any experiential learning environment.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning is a “process during which a person experiences an event, acquires competencies and then compares the knowledge gained with that gleaned in similar situations” (Brandon, 2002, p. 62). Bloom (1956) developed a taxonomy of learning that is applicable to experiential environments. He identified three domains: cognitive, or mental skills; affective, or emotional and attitudinal areas; and psychomotor, or manual and physical skills. Each domain had a series of categories that reflected the level and type of learning, thus demonstrating learning as a series of phenomena that can each be exercised and measured in different ways. Bloom’s Taxonomy was later synthesized by Lorin Anderson into the following categories: Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating (Pohl, 2001). These categories represent a hierarchy moving from passive learning (remembering, understanding) to active learning (applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating) and highlight the role of experiences in the process.

Various theorists have defined approaches to experiential learning. Dewey discussed experiential learning in regard to the agency it creates. He stated that experiential learning consists of observation of conditions and an understanding of how it relates to past experiences and judgment that integrates what is observed and recalled. In

this way, concepts a student has learned in the past are summoned to usage by the experience (Dewey, 1938). Dewey was careful to point out that while “all genuine education comes about through experience, this does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (Dewey, 1938, p. 13). Their purpose should be based on the learners’ needs, with a comprehensive criteria that includes a realistic setting, physical or psychological challenge and risk, emphasis on balance of action, reflection and application, active participation of learner in multiple roles, and progress monitoring and feedback. In Dewey’s model, the instructor acts as facilitator of the experience.

Lewin’s model (1951) is similar to Dewey’s in that it is based on the integration of past and current concrete experiences. Lewin emphasized the feedback mechanism to describe the learning and problem-solving processes.

Piaget, mostly concerned with child development, described experiential learning as a cycle of interaction between the environment and the individual. Like Dewey and Lewin, Piaget presented a process of accommodation of concepts to the real world and assimilation of events and experiences into existing concepts and schemas, highlighting the balanced tension between what is experienced and what is already known (Piaget, 1966).

Based on these earlier models, Kolb (1984) described the processes by which learning contains a holistic structure, a transformational process, and the process of self-regulation. There is an interaction between concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (acquiring experience) and active experimentation and reflective observation (transforming understood experience).

Honey (1992, pp. 6.38-6.42) offered the following as characteristics of an experiential learning environment that have more practical ramifications than those offered by Dewey.

- addressed career development needs
- encouraged initiative

- offered training that would lead to different job positions
- allowed input
- used mistakes as learning opportunities,
- provided frequent feedback on performance
- encouraged use of knowledge gained in other learning settings

Just as Bloom's taxonomy suggested a hierarchy, Gibbons and Hopkins (1980) created a scale to determine the level to which an educational setting is experiential. Using a five-stage scale (each with two parts), the degree of experience is based on the extent of direct contact with objects, forms, features, and processes; the extent that students are involved in the analysis, planning, and execution of an activity; the extent that participants are responsible for mastering an activity; and the extent that participants have an opportunity to experience personal growth.

#### *Receptive mode*

- Simulated—sees by watching films, television or digital presentations
- Spectator—sees the real thing in normal setting

#### *Analytical mode*

- Exploratory—plays, experiments, explores and probes the setting
- Analytical—studies the setting and experiences it systematically

#### *Productive mode*

- Generative—creates, builds, organizes, theorizes or otherwise produces
- Challenge—sets difficult but desirable tasks to accomplish

#### *Development mode*

- Competence—strives to become skillful in important activities
- Mastery—develops high standards of quality performance

#### *Psychosocial mode*

- Personal growth—pursues excellence and maturity
- Social growth—becomes exemplary member of community (Gibbons & Hopkins, pp. 33-34)

This model expands upon Bloom, who ends with Creating, and upon Dewey, who culminates with Feedback, but adds the Development and Psychosocial modes as the learner seeks mastery and acceptance into a community.

Experiences can be very important in determining whether a student chooses to enter a journalism career. Exposure to the field of journalism while one is in school significantly increases the chances that the individual will work as a journalist (Feldmax, 1995). This early introduction to and assimilation in a community of practice via experience is critical to the formation of identity (Wenger, 1998).

In 2002, Brandon discussed experiential learning as a new path in journalism education. She addressed the long history of journalism education: teaching the printing trade, the addition of writing to the curriculum, the tension between skills/theory and professionals/scholars in journalism programs, and the skills and competencies needed to excel as a journalist. Brandon referenced several major studies in the 1980s and 1990s performed by the major professional organizations in journalism that outlined the challenges to the future of journalism education, culminating with recommendations by Dickson (2000) that included a balance of practical and theoretical, alliance building in the community, a broad media core, integration with the central mission of the university through offerings for non-majors, and evaluation of professional accreditation based on academic standards.

Few other studies in journalism have dealt directly with experiential learning theory. Rhodes and Roessner (2009) discussed experiential learning in magazine curricula and Steel, Carmichael, Holmes, Kinse, and Sanders (2007)

explained experiential learning in general in the United Kingdom.

### METHOD

The method employed by this project is case study. This research study will assess this project with the following questions:

- Which specific aspects of the project conform to the Gibbons and Hopkins taxonomy of experiential learning, and how do they manifest in the progression of experiential development?
- What were student impressions of the student media environment (captured in post assessments)?
- What are some observations of the implications for the learning process?

### Case Study

For the past eight years, students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University have covered the South By Southwest Interactive Festival (SXSW), a major technology conference that takes place in Austin, Texas, each March (sxsw.com). SXSW Interactive has grown to more than 32,000 attendees in recent years and now includes more than 400 panels and keynotes and some 1,500 speakers. The larger conference also includes music and film festivals, and the SXSW brand has grown to include new events for education (SXSWEDU) and start-ups (SXSW V2V).

This project started as a class assignment for the Advanced Online Media course, consisting mostly of graduate students who have taken a series of digital media courses, including basic Web design and digital issues courses. These courses ground students in both the technical and conceptual aspects they will encounter in covering the event. As part of the Advanced Online Media course, students also were introduced to other topics that dealt with advanced Web design, programming and data journalism techniques. For the past three years, the project has evolved into its own course, with students applying to

participate and competitively selected. Course sessions leading up to the event are handled both in person and online via Google Hangouts. The current online presentation of the project is at SXTXState.com.

Over the years, the project has evolved from a simple blog where students merely covered the panels they attended to a full-blown project in which students preview panels and perform preliminary interviews of attendees, both in person and via the Web. This important preliminary preparation serves to integrate students with various course topics and engage with a robust and important community of tech and communication professionals.

Over time, tools have been added to enhance student coverage. In addition to a blog, which was initially hosted on Blogger, then WordPress.com, then ultimately a self-hosted WordPress installation, students have engaged Twitter, live streams via Ustream, video interviews, Skype, Pinterest, Instagram, Storify, and group messaging via Beluga, GroupMe, and WhatsApp. Each year, a new feature is added so that students are engaging with and using the most current technologies that are being discussed at the event. In 2014, students experimented with Google Glass.

Using the Gibbons and Hopkins scale as a model, the project was assessed as an experiential learning environment, identifying activities as students progressed through the scale of experientiality.

### Receptive mode: Simulated and Spectator.

Gibbons and Hopkins' receptive mode includes two states: Simulated, where one engages with the experience in a virtual manner through relevant media, and Spectator, where engagement is in the normal setting. The project engages the Simulated phase in many ways. The preparation phase includes students first becoming familiar with the event via exploring the website and analyzing the programming as it rolls out in advance. The event selects programming via an

innovative online system in which prospective panelists submit proposals, and the community votes and comments on them. In the fall, students who will participate in the project start reviewing the panels and accepted programming as it is announced beginning in November and December. This head start allows the students to have more time to assimilate the event's objectives and goals, well before the spring class begins. There are many other online resources that are either introduced in class or that students are encouraged to seek out that enhance the simulated aspect of the experience. These discussions happen in class and on the course blog, so these preliminary pieces are not part of the main project's coverage, but used to get students familiar with the event.

In addition to the preliminary posts and interviews, it has been beneficial to have past participants of the project visit with the new class and describe their role and the effect of their participation. Students are able to ask questions and have a better idea of what is expected and what they might hope to get out of the event. They are able to simulate the experience through the experiences of others. They also watch videos of past speakers to gain the feel of the conference.

In the Spectator aspect, students attend the event. They go to panels and keynotes and are part of the experience when it begins in March. The Simulated preparation in advance of the event is critical to the students' readiness for its content and overwhelming scale. This is where the experience could have ended, with simple attendance, but the project is designed to engage students with a multimedia reporting opportunity and a chance to learn and practice skills. This project offers a unique opportunity to seamlessly weave and navigate the virtual and physical worlds, with students communicating via a variety of online methods as well as participating in events in person in real time.

### **Analytic mode: Exploratory and Analytical.**

The Analytic mode has students engaging in and exploring the environment. Related to the Receptive mode, students go beyond merely observing to explore and understand the purpose of the event and what their roles will be. Students are required to write blog posts on panel topics they find interesting, as well as to look at past posts to critique previous coverage and make recommendations for the current year's project. After initial observations are made, students begin to identify sources they can interview and preview in advance of the event, for publication on the project's blog.

As the participants begin to work on the current year's project, they are divided into three groups: content, social media and design/functionality teams. The main group is the content team, which determines the direction of the content and makes sure coverage is complete and robust, starting early in the spring semester. The instructor is tasked with the role of "publisher," a mostly hands-off, but coaching and directional role.

While all students in the class are responsible for some level of content, the two other teams have specific roles. The social media team is responsible for all the social media aspects of the project, including posting to Twitter and Facebook and recommending new tools for communication. This group is responsible for publicizing the project, announcing new content on the site and engaging with the audience.

Another group is the design/functionality team that works on the appearance of the WordPress site and recommends changes and additions, which include widgets and plug-ins that add functionality. This organizational structure provides the systematic requirement of the Analytical aspect, placing students into competency groups and assigning responsibilities.

Coordination and planning are key aspects. Students need to know their schedule for the event and what they are expected to do when

they are there. There is no “newsroom” per se, but participants gather each day in the same location before heading out for the day’s panels and events. Students are expected to produce and post content throughout the day, which means using a laptop or mobile device, writing content, shooting and editing video—all while attending panels and conducting interviews. This is a very hectic environment, with the ability to provide additional content and editing in the evenings and directly after the event.

### **Productive mode: Generative and Challenge.**

The Generative aspect of the Gibbons and Hopkins scale is where the production of work on the site begins. Production of content on the main site begins early in the spring semester, primarily consisting of panel previews. Students are encouraged to do research on and speak directly to those who have had panels accepted, rather than merely restate what is in the schedule. In addition, students over the years have identified new ways to provide coverage, with weekly news roundups of panelists and technology topics or writing posts identifying panels by theme (e.g. *Top 5 Panels for Web Designers* and *Top 5 Panels for Journalists*). The student teams set their own goals and schedules.

The Challenge aspect occurs throughout the semester, as students are encouraged to employ a broad range of skills including photos and video in their coverage. Students are encouraged to arrange interviews, either in person or via Skype, and get interesting, engaging and visual content on the site. The role of the instructor is critical at this point, pushing students to put in extra effort and to stretch their comfort zones. In many cases, the instructor accompanies students for particularly tricky interviews that might include a high-profile subject or occur in a location that offers challenge. For example, one student chose to interview a musician who would be speaking on an Interactive panel. The interview was to be before a gig, thus presenting challenges in terms

of noise and lighting. The interview ended up being held at a nearby restaurant, where space in the seating area was limited. The instructor knew in advance that the musician environment often presented these challenges and volunteered to assist the student. In another situation, a student secured an interview with the CEO of Gowalla. The instructor volunteered to assist the student in getting equipment set up and making the proper introductions. While the instructor had a generally hands-off role, willingness to assist at certain times helped alleviate some of the more stressful situations.

During each class period throughout the semester, students provide reports from each team and discuss any challenges or issues. While there are certain goals for the project, students are highly encouraged to work autonomously, be creative and go beyond the baseline requirements. Students are encouraged to find new ways to cover the event beyond simply attending panels and videotaping segments. They are encouraged to find ways to visually represent the conference that include interviews with panelists and other attendees and taking advantage of the wide range of offerings at the event (outside convention center, videogame arcade, book signings, trade show, workshops, etc.)

### **Development mode: Competence and Mastery.**

Again, the project could stop at the Productive mode, satisfied with the content produced on the site and the experience of attending panels. The Competence aspect begins with previous courses students have taken in which they learn and execute multimedia skills. The preparation phase allows students time to set up interviews and hone their editing skills. But once the conference begins, the fast pace requires students to achieve the Mastery phase through confident use of equipment and software so they can be most productive in making their posts. There is no time to learn a new skill during the event, so students are expected to know how to use a camcorder,

smartphone or other camera and have the ability to edit photos and video on the fly, with laptops or other mobile devices. Sitting on the floor, multitasking during another panel, squeezing into a crowded table or camping near an open electrical outlet are all likely options for a workspace. Students are encouraged to solve their own problems and do their own troubleshooting.

### **Psychosocial mode: Personal and Social Growth.**

The Psychosocial mode is where students gain the most long-term benefits, which are sometimes difficult to assess during or directly after the event. In terms of Personal Growth, students gain a level of comfort in interviewing people and networking with top technology leaders including Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Gary Vaynerchuk (best-selling author of *Crush It* and *The Thank You Economy*), Jeff Jarvis (media consultant), Bob Metcalfe (Internet pioneer), Josh Williams (former CEO of Gowalla), David Karp (Tumblr) and Chris Anderson (former editor of *Wired*). These experiences provide a basis for future networking in which students can share their observations of the most current technology topics as heard from the people who are developing them.

The final, and possibly the most important, aspect of the project is Social Growth. Students become slowly integrated into the technology and media community throughout this process. They see that they are not outsiders looking in just as reporters, but have valuable insights gained through previous experiences that allow them to be contributing members of the community. Many students indicated that by the end of the project, they felt more comfortable and at home with a group to which they had never previously associated themselves. Many continue to attend in subsequent years, and it is not unusual to run into former students at the event.

In addition, many students have changed career plans or research objectives based on their experiences. In 2011 and 2012, several graduates

of the project proposed or were on accepted panels. In 2013, a final requirement was instituted for students to develop and submit their own panel proposal for the event. Two of these panels were selected in the very competitive panel-picker process. At least four graduates of the project have covered the event for other media outlets in subsequent years. And an overwhelming majority of the graduates of the project now work in technology or multimedia careers that are relevant to the topics to which they were exposed at the event. One even works for the organization that runs the event.

The impact of these activities is extensive. They provide an opportunity for students to do real-time reporting and offer a deeper integration with the event, a better understanding of what goes into producing timely media and an excellent opportunity to network with professional participants. In general, these experiences provide students with a professional language and level of comfort in dealing with their network and a dynamic and increasingly integrated media and technology landscape.

For academic programs, an activity of this nature provides increased exposure via the blog itself and the use of embeddable media, like YouTube and Storify. Audiences can be attained at a national and international level. In 2012, two students in the project were named in a Fast-Company.com article for their Storify coverage of the event (Holmes, 2012).

### **STUDENT IMPRESSIONS**

Students over the years provided the following feedback on the project:

It was truly an eye-opening experience. I was blown away by the ideas I heard and the people I met. Actually, one of the panels inspired me to change my thesis idea. I got to interview my favorite author and was interviewed by *USA Today*. It was pretty neat to see our program mentioned on the *USA Today* web

site! We also had the project mentioned on TV in San Antonio. It was just so exciting to be part of it.

It was so inspiring to be surrounded by so many people that had innovative ideas about our profession. Not to mention, it was a great opportunity to network and learn how to write, shoot video and interview on deadline. I think the project is a crucial part of our program, as it not only gives our students the opportunity to learn about what is happening in the industry, it is also an opportunity to get the university's name out there. It made me so proud to hear people talk about our new media program and the great professionals that emerge from it. It was a life changing experience.

It was one of the best experiences that I have had in my college journey. I was exposed to diverse opinions on current and future technologies and challenged in a new, uniquely creative environment. I was able to establish new connections and talk with peers about various ideas presented by people from all over the world. I feel I learned more than I ever could in the classroom alone. I also learned how to blog better, but so much more came from this event that I did not expect.

I appreciate that the students were very much in control and did not feel micro-managed. I felt really prepared but also felt that I had unlimited freedom to be creative and make my own rules with this project. The team was very much able to take the project as far as we wanted—and we did!

I've always been very quiet and reserved, especially in these big public situations. Being at the event for this project made

me realize that I really have nothing to be afraid of by actually getting out there and talking to people. I've made it a point this semester to really push myself and do things I wouldn't have done before (joining grad club, volunteering for the editor job on the site), and the whole experience has been the epitome of what I've been trying to do.

We're building a base of knowledge that can be used in marketing, online journalism, social media, development, entrepreneurship and so much more. This was really affirmed because we were surrounded by people like us in a variety of exciting fields. Also, it was cool to sit in panels and really feel like I was part of a community of people with similar skills, interests, and values—I especially felt this way during the WordPress panel and Al Franken's talk on net neutrality.

This is by far the most useful, eye-opening project I've ever been part of (especially for school). I learned more in the 3 days I was at the conference than I've learned in full semesters of most other classes. It was a lot of work but it was so much fun, and I got so many comments about how good our stories were and how cool our site was. I think it gives our program a leg up on other New Media/Journalism departments because we get to be part of something so huge, and we all made so many valuable connections.

This project may have been the most valuable at preparing me for real-life work of any in my college career—both in my undergraduate teacher preparation and in post-grad. We got some sense of the pace of work, the high expectations of employers, made invaluable contacts and



saw our work have an impact beyond the classroom.

Meeting people who are doing what I'd like to do, then talking to them, connecting with them, made me feel so validated and inspired. It feels great when someone you admire thinks you are smart. So, my major takeaway is that I think I know what I'm going to do with my vast and varied interests.

After speaking with so many inspiring and amazing people, I am starting to believe that this curriculum should be the foundation of any PR or J-school program.

Personally, I discovered the reporter in me. I love writing and gaining insight into various topics.

As soon as I sat down in the front row of the first panel and opened my MacBook to start working, everything clicked. I felt prepared. That moment exemplified all of the hard work that we've been putting in. I felt right at home. That feeling stayed with me every moment that I was on site.

## CONCLUSION

Since its inception in 2008, more than 60 students have participated in the SXTX-State.com project. Student learning outcomes include 1) providing students a real-world reporting environment; 2) developing the platforms on which reporting and coverage will occur; and 3) immersing students in a community around topics important to their futures in digital media. These outcomes are assessed through the content students create, peer reviews of responsibility areas, and final assessment of their own panel proposal for the event for the next year and a final presentation. Perhaps most importantly, over time we have been able to offer an assessment

of this project through the future successes of the participants. Alumni of this project now work in roles at top local and national organizations including The New York Times, NPR, Austin American-Statesman, Spredfast, HomeAway and Blackbaud. However, the framework provided in this analysis provides a way to assess the range of experientiality for crafting future projects of this nature. While not specifically meant for assessing student participation, this model provides a scale from which expectations for experiential projects can be more meaningfully comprehended.

As a professor, it is extremely gratifying to see students actively engaging with classroom concepts and networking in a professional environment. The impressive media projects can be submitted to various competitions. These projects can serve as a showcase for student work and can bring recognition to the program. They can be extensions of existing student media organizations or create additional publication and reporting opportunities for students beyond the traditional student media outlets. There is a permanent archive of the activity that can be used as the basis for future projects, funding justification and program expansion.

But there are many challenges associated with projects of this nature. Some projects may require funds to secure access or provide other activities during the process. Much time outside the classroom is required of both the student and instructor. This event usually occurs during spring break, which requires giving up some personal or otherwise productive time. Different students have varying reactions to the demands of these types of projects, so the instructor must adjust teaching and motivational techniques to accommodate different learning styles. And, all participants must become comfortable working in a setting where new information and skills are assimilated very quickly. It can be a stressful environment, both for the instructor, who is coordinating the logistics and coaxing and encouraging students to stretch their capabilities, and for the students, who are exploring new territory and

meeting new people. These challenges, however, are no different from the challenges graduates are likely to face in their careers.

In conclusion, one of the most compelling things about this type of project is the self-referential nature of some of the work. By attending this event, students are participating in discussions about concepts they learned in class and techniques they are using in their coverage, thus constantly reinforcing the importance of what they are doing. While this particular event is a unique opportunity in which to develop an experiential project and may not be available in all geographies, other events or series of events, on campus or in the local community, can offer similar benefits for any program or course. The Gibbons and Hopkins model can provide a tool with which to assess the extent of the experience.

A prescient moment came during SXSW 2012 when the instructor attended a panel by Peg Faimon and Glenn Platt (2010) of Miami University that was titled "Universities in the 'Free' Era." In it, they outlined their view of higher education and the various roles of the "new" professor, which they identified as project manager, angel investor, curator, resource allocator, life coach, validator and creator of experiences. It was that "a-ha" moment, in the midst of an experiential project, that galvanized the critical importance and commitment to activities of this nature. Education must become more collaborative and interactive and must grow and change with advancing technologies. The role of instructor must also change from that of lecturer in a one-way conversation to facilitator of learning experiences, developer of student media opportunities and co-learner. This study outlines one such activity that has engaged students in comprehensive and meaningful ways, demonstrating long-term benefits to participants and their academic program.

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