



## **“Experiential Teaching”**

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Most of us know what “experiential learning” is: learning by self-consciously and reflectively doing. Virtually all of us believe that it is important to supplement the transfer of information through classroom lectures and discussions with “hands-on” exercises that require our students to practice new skills and test new attitudes, approaches and ways of thinking. Whether we have our students conducting experiments in a lab, crafting business development strategies for clients, developing policy positions for the Model United Nations conferences, or performing on stage, we expect them to absorb knowledge at least in part through trial and error, through practice, through reflection and self-analysis.

Interestingly, however, as instructors, we tend not to reveal, much less reflect on, the “hands-on” processes by which we accumulated the knowledge and skill that gives us the authority to teach in the first place. Partly as a result, it is probably fair to say that to most students, their instructors are shadowy figures, existing only in discrete times and places—the classroom, the lab, the rehearsal studio, perhaps the Cilantro coffee line or the parking lot—but otherwise we are non-existent, or at least mysterious. (Speaking for myself, I was eleven years old before I realized that my teachers had given names, much less homes and families, and to this day I know virtually nothing of the outside classroom activities of my erstwhile university professors!)

Our students may consider us approachable or formal, amusing or intimidating, but very few of them are curious enough—or impertinent enough—to consider how we came to be in front of their classrooms. The path that brought us here—literally and figuratively, whether a bus from Heliopolis or a PhD from the University of Kansas—is virtually invisible to the students. And most of us are comfortable with that circumstance. We worked hard to acquire our authority and we expect it to be acknowledged without a great deal of reflection, on their part or ours; we neither anticipate, nor welcome, having to rehearse it.

Yet the challenge of moving to the new campus this semester has required AUC faculty to exhibit and perform many of the qualities of mind and character we foster in our students. This semester, largely unintentionally and usually unselfconsciously, at least at the outset, faculty across the campus have been showing students how to learn. We have been, in other words, demonstrating—very openly—our more or less well-honed skills at acquiring and assessing information (finding elusive bus schedules and determining their reliability), testing hypotheses (scarce parking spaces will produce competitive parking lots), collaborating in problem-solving (developing new uses of “found” spaces).

For many of us, this has been a deeply disconcerting experience. We are accustomed to being knowledgeable, expert, respected and reliable. We have deliberately narrowed our domain of active learning to a very specialized arena of scholarship and scientific research and for the rest; we are used to being authorities in the eyes of our colleagues and our students. Being unable to answer even the simplest of their questions (no, we did not know where the classroom was—many of us did not even know where our office was!) undermined our self-confidence and—we worried—weakened our students’ confidence in us.

Yet we were, in fact, illustrating, by our very actions, how people learn. We exhibited all the varied styles of learning—some of us enjoyed the challenge and some were deeply frustrated, some of us demonstrated that we are independent learners and some prefer to work in groups. Some of us are

“print-driven” and learn by reading (checking the university website and looking for signs); others learn by listening (gleaning information from hallway conversations and quick mobile phone calls).

And, whether we liked it or not—and many of us did not—we performed learning for our students. One of the truly remarkable—and, it is fair to say, completely unanticipated—features of the move to the new campus has been the extent to which the faculty has displayed, indeed laid bare, the process of learning. The demands imposed by the move have elicited from the faculty an unwonted resourcefulness, and evoked the spirit of inquiry, the curiosity and ingenuity which made them scholars and scientists in the first place.

In doing so, the faculty of AUC have given the students one of the most valuable lessons they will ever get: that the skills that make a good learner—the abilities to acquire and assess information, to weigh and analyze competing propositions, to work collaboratively to solve problems—will serve them well long after they have left school. Particularly when rules change and the standard operating procedures are suspended—in other words, particularly in the twenty-first century—the ability to efficiently gather and weigh information, to analyze situations and solve problems will be far more useful and important than vast stores of static and often quickly obsolete information. And this the faculty demonstrated in “real-time,” when their professional pride was at stake.

This “teaching by doing” became genuinely exciting—real “experiential teaching”—when it became reflexive, when we began to think about what we were doing. In some ways, this began even before the move itself, with the research on faculty responses to the very prospect of the new campus and as I write faculty in Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology are examining our responses to our new environment. More spontaneously, faculty are engaging in thoughtful reflection about this semester’s enterprise. In response to a provostial exhortation to try to “cover the curriculum [you] intended to offer at the beginning of the semester” in the face of the disruptions of the move, for example, one faculty member begged to differ, saying

I could talk faster, be less open to discussions in class, deny questions altogether. We can fill the students’ schedules and fill the weekends with labs and lectures. But things need to settle, people need to reflect what they learned, time to conduct literature research, time to go out and do term projects, and time to do their assignments.... Yes, we should offer to give the students more content, offer classes (labs/seminars) for them to take if they wish to do so. It is their right to receive the education they paid for and need. But we cannot and should not make it mandatory.

I am not sure I agree. I am never sure students know what they need to know and what is in their best interests but perhaps that is my own customary deference to the authority of my colleagues. I am completely sure in any event, however, that this reflection, this iterative and simultaneous real-time, experiential teaching and learning, is extraordinary.

I was proud to be associated with AUC and its faculty long before I knew exactly how fortunate I would be. I hope that some measure of the self-consciousness and reflection about what we do that was born in the crucible of the move outlasts those trials. It is certainly worth hoping that the spirit of flexibility and openness fostered by the challenges of acclimating to the new campus will be sustained long after we settle into our customary routines. If that is so, we will have learned—and taught—more than any classroom could ever encompass.

***Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to: [landerson@aucegypt.edu](mailto:landerson@aucegypt.edu) and/or [aellozy@aucegypt.edu](mailto:aellozy@aucegypt.edu)***