

The Transformative Effect of Experiential Education: Creating “Trudeau Terrace” By Susan Johnston and Kristy Webster

Abstract:

Teachers at two high schools work collaboratively to provide experiential learning experiences to increase student engagement, well-being and achievement in the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP). The vehicle for this project is the creation of an outdoor gathering place designed and built by students and staff. Journal reflections by staff describe how as the landscape is transformed, human relationships develop and blossom.

Keywords:

experiential education, teacher collaboration, collaborative learning, student directed learning, hands-on learning, teacher inquiry, project-based learning, Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP)

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In May 2013 a group of teachers from Pierre Elliott Trudeau High School partnered with teachers of an alternative education program from Milliken Mills High School called TEAM (Teaching Esteem and Academics at Milliken) in the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) provided by the Ministry of Ontario, defined as:

The Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) is an annual project-based professional learning opportunity for experienced classroom teachers.

The program funds proposals from classroom teachers who seek a peer leadership role in curriculum, instructional practice or supporting other teachers. The three goals of the program are to create and support opportunities for teacher professional learning, foster teacher leadership and facilitate the sharing of exemplary practices with others for the broader benefit of Ontario's students.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/tllp.html>

In our proposal we stated, “Our goal is to develop a project to increase teacher inquiry and collaboration among staff. We will do this by bringing together a group of teachers to implement an innovative, interdisciplinary, inquiry and project-based approach that will increase student engagement and achievement. Our target students would be in the applied level, locally developed courses in grade 9/10, grade 11 workplace/college, and Alternative Education classes in which the students often struggle with the traditional classroom environment. In our research, we will investigate how to promote and develop inquiry-based learning with our students.” This initiative was

inspired by Student Success Teacher Tazmeen Jajbhay and encouraged and supported by Principal Debbie Linkewich.

Our investigations led us to educator Jackie Gerstein who writes a blog called *User Generated Education* in which Gerstein champions experiential education. One of her article's title says it all; "Experiential Learning: Is there really a question about this?" In the article Gerstein references the principles of experiential learning, some of which are listed below:

Experiential Education is based on the following principles as articulated by the [Association for Experiential Education](#):

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

(<http://www.aee.org/what-is-ee>)

With these principles in mind, staff and students embarked upon creating "Trudeau Terrace", an outdoor community gathering place. Students surveyed the school community on preferences, measured, researched parameters, brainstormed ideas, sketched plan proposals, presented plans to the York Region District School Board and are now in the process of construction. Phase One, now complete, includes a wheelchair accessible permeable pathway, a rock seating area, two berms and six trees. Phase Two will begin in Spring 2015 with picnic tables on a permeable pad, walkways and more trees. This collaborative project has been transformative for all involved. To get an idea of the positively life-changing effects of experiential education please check out teacher reflections by Susan Johnston and Kristy Webster from the building site. Please note that pseudonyms have been used in the place of student names to protect anonymity.

November 6, 2014

It has been an incredible experience to watch students and staff collaborate for the purpose of a common goal. This project is not just about creating an outdoor space for the school community, but it is also about building and fostering relationships between students and staff alike. It has been a tremendous learning opportunity for me to participate in BUILD because in order to achieve progress in a project like this, people must function as a team. For me, it has been a rewarding and humbling experience to have students become my teachers; they are the experts and they seem to have really taken ownership of the project. As teachers, I think many of us get comfortable in the traditional classroom, but this project has moved the “classroom” outdoors and as a result, the learning is different as are the relationships built. Through dialogue and discussion, and with the use of shovels and dirt, something has been transformed... and it's not just the physical space outside.

May 15, 2014

I am totally hooked on the TEAM approach of experiential education offered by “Coach” Chris Williams and Stella Wang from Milliken Mills High School - and feel compelled to sit down and write what I have observed on the Trudeau Terrace Site today. Students who were previously disengaged, marking time in the classroom were working together and actively engaged in finding solutions to questions which arose.

It was wonderful to see problem solving in action. For example, Ron wanted to measure the depth of a hole that a group of students were digging for the planting of a tree. He put the measuring tape to the bottom of the hole. Jacob was having a hard time reading what the measurement was to the ground level. Martin took a shovel and laid it across the top of the hole for reference. Ron said to him, “good idea man”, and they took their measurement from the base of the hole to the handle of the shovel.

Coach was magic with the students. He was patient and thoughtful, always taking time for a teachable moment. Today he told them about how he likes to call Pythagorean theory “3 - 4 - 5”. He showed them how a triangle of 3 squared and 4 squared meet 5 squared to make a right angle. Students get a global connection of the math theory right here and now outside on Trudeau Terrace. He said that he will do the same lesson many times. This way it will really stick.

May 16, 2014

It has been another amazing day on the Trudeau Terrace site.

Brian led the way in rerouting the snow fence to surround the work site, directing Mandy and Jahim in a kind, confident manner. Yes, it was confidence that he exuded. He was confident in his ability to pound in a stake with a crazy tool that looked like a hot dog with handles. He carefully directed Mandy to hold the stake while he pounded it in. When her hands were too high he gently asked her to move them down. After pounding

in a few stakes Brian asked Jahim if he would like to try. Jahim quietly shook his head, but he was happy to hold the fencing and place the stakes in the ground. Brian was reasonable, calm and delightful to work with. This was in contrast to the young man in the classroom who sometimes flares with exasperation while facing a setback.

I especially loved when we were getting our shoes on and Jahim spoke with Brian. They had a conversation. This was exciting because the conversation was initiated by Jahim. I have known Jahim for two years and have never heard him have a conversation with anyone.

May 17, 2014

It was a pleasure to see the natural rapport that teachers have with students, where learning unfolds to respond to the moment. I loved overhearing Coach talk with Martin about the trades as they were digging the pathway to the tree. He told Martin about opportunities and how he could get started. "If you like carpentry then you could apply for an apprenticeship in carpentry". They had a great conversation as they worked about what an apprenticeship looks like and how he could get involved. I felt that Martin would be ok, that he would remember for his whole life how he talked with Coach about carpentry that day in May when they were building Trudeau Terrace. What a difference to my classroom where I lead my students look up carpentry or plumbing or electrician on the computer. Out on Trudeau Terrace deep learning is happening. Deep learning, the kind that you keep for your whole life.

This makes me think of how my own children learned at home as they were growing up. We learned about measurement in the kitchen making pancakes and scrambled eggs and fudge. They loved pouring and tasting and creating. There were lots of opportunities for teachable moments with reading recipes, measuring, and mixing. But the key was that it was natural and had a wonderful context that was engaging for all of us. I can see now that this made learning fun - we all worked together in the kitchen. Coach and Ms. Wang work along with the students and in working side by side the relationship grows. I am reminded that as teachers we need to be a part of the action, digging and building together.

When the students leave the site Coach and Ms. Wang always have a positive word for them. "Hey Cory, good work today", Coach said quietly. Cory beams and said thank you in a way that you know he really appreciates this affirmation. Hey, I can't help but think that a positive word is often not welcomed by Cory. But from Coach, out here on the work site, it is gold.

June 1, 2014

Driving home on Friday after a day on the site, I realized that it is the conversations that we have when working together that are so precious. While digging the hole for a tree Anna and I talked about how we both love making art. She told me that she has dozens of sketchbooks, loves to use just about any medium and feels sad if she doesn't make art for

a while. We agreed that making art is the essential that feeds our soul. Anna said that her father is an aboriginal artist and that she misses the water and Sioux St Marie. She quietly said that there are no lakes in Southern Ontario where she lives. All of a sudden the hole was 24" deep and Coach came over to tell us that that was deep enough. When we started we thought that this was hard work, later we had to be told to stop.

I have known Martin for the last three years. He regularly tells anyone who will listen about the computer programs that he is developing and how he is fixing 4 computers at home. However, when we were digging gravel together somehow there was a sharing that had not happened before. Maybe it was no clock, no desks, and sharing the job that allowed us to have a real conversation. We talked about how it was fascinating that information flowed through the internet, that there was an internet at all, that he has grown up with the world of computers, and that computers were the size of small houses when I went to school. He told me that he wanted to go to college because he did not want to just read but wanted to do. Right now he is working on getting his four computers to speak to each other. Did he think that SMART appliances connected to the internet was a good idea? He drew the line there - he did not want the internet to be connected to his stove, that real people should be the only one to turn on his stove. All of sudden...it was time to clean up the work site and go!

A beautiful thing that happens on the BUILD site is that we are really no longer in the narrow frame of teacher and student. There is a great inversion of teacher and learner that is freely offered by all. When I was using a pick to loosen the pile of gravel so that we could shovel it into the wheelbarrow, Mavis taught me by demonstrating how to bend my knees when I came down with the pick. She was right, I had so much more momentum that way and the gravel broke up more. She probably learned that a couple weeks ago and passed it on to me. Multiply this by hundreds of shared learning experiences each day. Teach someone how to use a zip tie and turn to learn how to stake a tree. The magic is in the shared experience. No sooner do you learn it but you teach it to a co-worker.

June 17, 2014

How could I translate this experience of working together on the BUILD site to the classroom? It's almost as if we have had to burst out of the classroom to understand what learning is about. When I walk away from working on Trudeau Terrace I feel like we have done something together that has meaning. Over the weekend I have thought about how to bring the sharing, the peer teaching, the inversion of the perspective of teacher and student, the real conversations, into the classroom.

The act of building something together has a cathartic effect. I have started to envision challenges/questions that students can explore collaboratively such as 'Is there a way to use human energy to reduce the need for fossil fuels? For example, can a blender make a smoothie, powered by an exercise bike?'

Jackie Gerstein says it beautifully, "I know no other way of teaching. Knowing the powerful results of experiential education, it confuses me as to why more (if not all)

