

Outside the Classroom and Beyond the Campus: Community-Based Experiential Education

Expanding the Experiential Concept

After years of incorporating a combination of field trips, active learning, and flipped classrooms, I decided to design a radically flipped course in which I would leverage technology to craft class sessions that would motivate, empower, and transform students' experiences in English Composition. Thanks to the flipped component, class times would be devoted to field trips, guest speakers, "Place as Text" methodology, service learning, discussion, conferences/workshops, and making presentations at our campus Honors Forum conference. I moved the majority of direct writing and research instruction online to Blackboard. During the planning stage, I considered how I could schedule the course to make off-campus experiences possible without interfering with students' other classes. At my institution, very few classes are held on Fridays. Therefore, a two-and-a-half-hour Friday morning class was ideal to minimize scheduling conflicts and accommodate travel times. Students who missed trips were given alternate, complimentary assignments. Based on previous students' positive responses to and engagement with a food theme for a small research paper, I decided to use food as the overarching theme for the whole course, including the readings, discussions, assignments, and experiential activities.

Experiential Course Overview

At the beginning of the course, students built their foundational knowledge of U.S. food systems by reading Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. We explored the critical role bees play by watching the documentary *More Than Honey* and reading articles on the current honeybee crisis. Our first field trip was to an apiary, where we learned about bees and our local food system through a talk from a beekeeper, a peek into a hive, and a taste of fresh honeycomb. It was thrilling to see my students, all clad in head nets, peering into beehives with intent expressions and expansive smiles. Students used the combined sources about the honeybee crisis to craft a synthesis-documentation essay.

Next, students continued their journey through the industrial food system as they watched the documentary *Food, Inc.* This point in the semester coincided with

our county agricultural fair, a perfect venue to observe the pulse of food production in our community. For this field trip, students used the National Collegiate Honors Council methodology of "Place as Text" to make observations about, analyze, and interact mindfully with the setting. Small groups visited various exhibits at the fair, from livestock showings to grain cultivation to food products. After making observations and empowered by their foundational knowledge of food production, they interviewed fair entrants and workers. We concluded "Place as Text" at the fair by debriefing our findings as a whole class discussion—over funnel cake, of course. Students were surprised to learn how little of the food being sold at our county fair was actually local. They also made connections with *Omnivore's Dilemma* by noting how the vast bulk of food choices were corn-based and highly processed. With their apiary experience and knowledge of honeybees, they were particularly delighted to see the local honey exhibit and chat with the beekeepers. I was exhilarated to see them interacting confidently with the environment.

We then moved on in the course to exploring social justice concerns involving food production and food access. Students read "Most Dangerous Job," an excerpt from Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* that reveals the horrific working conditions of industrial slaughterhouse workers. They further explored food production by viewing the documentary *Food Chains*, which highlights the abuses of and horribly low pay received by American farm workers. Moving from field to table, students were shocked by the level of food insecurity in the U.S. when viewing the documentary *A Place at the Table*.

To prepare for the service-learning component of the course, our class hosted a guest speaker from a local nonprofit organization that provides a food bank and soup kitchen for community members in need. He spoke about the levels of food insecurity in our community, contributing factors, and needed donations. Motivated by his presentation and informed by the assigned reading and films, students designed a healthy food drive. At the end of the drive, we loaded the donations into a college van and delivered them to the organization. On site, we organized the donations in the food pantry, assisted with lunchtime prep tasks, participated in a Q&A session, and toured the facility. Students were moved and energized by the experience, and each of them expressed a desire to return for more independent volunteering. The class rated this component as one of the most powerful and satisfying experiences of the semester.

At this point in the course, students selected a food-related topic for their researched argument paper and formulated a research question. In most English Composition classes, it can be a challenge for students to select a topic that is meaningful and appropriate, which often results in low motivation and a lack of research direction. With their food knowledge under their belts, students were able to make informed decisions and select food-themed topics they carried through to the end of the research process. They refined and updated knowledge of the modern industrial food system by reading world-renowned chef (and English major!) Dan Barber's *Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food*. We visited a local food co-op to learn more about alternative methods for food retail, fair trade, sustainable seafood choices, and non-GMO products. Students were encouraged to ask the presenter questions about local foods that pertained to their research topics.

Back in the classroom, a staff librarian came in for a session about early-phase research and a later session to check their progress. Students worked through the research process to complete a research proposal, annotated bibliography, and formal outline, while also participating in conferences and workshops at key points. The class shared that they appreciated the structured approach to the major research paper, which helped them grasp research concepts, build skills, and minimize procrastination.

As students focused on their research in earnest and finished reading *Third Plate*, we embarked on our capstone field trip to Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in New York. Our class received a grant from our institution's Office of Student Engagement to visit the farm Barber writes about in *Third Plate* and experience his philosophy of progressive food production. It was a glorious autumn day in the Hudson Valley, and students were thrilled to not only see what they read about in Barber's book, but also what they read about from Pollan and heard during their visit to the beekeeper. We went on an ecological systems tour and saw how agriculture can work in concert with nature to produce nutritious products and promote environmental health. The Stone Barns experience concluded with a seasonal, farm-fresh lunch, with students buzzing about what they saw and how it connected to what was on their plates. One student even questioned the seasonality of one of the lunch items, demonstrating his grasp of eating locally and seasonally.

Near semester's end with the completion of their research papers, students took the essential information and presented them in film format, using a mini-documentary or public service announcement approach. After posting a rough cut for peer feedback online, students screened their final films in class. At the following session, students shared their films and moderated a Q&A session at our campus Honors Forum conference, attended by Honors students and faculty, as well as friends, family, and community members.

Outcomes and Observations

Overall, the flipped experiential course model was successful for students. From the very first class, students were engaged, energetic, and interested. I still observed some typical English Composition challenges, such as managing time, summarizing rather than analyzing, developing a consistent argument stance, and (for some) attendance issues. However, I feel the course theme and experiential opportunities kept students interested and encouraged them to persist. At the end of the semester, a student shared, "I love the fact that we aren't in a classroom all of the time." Another student wrote, "It is very fun and engaging having field trips almost every week. I learn better from hands-on." Positive outcomes included students internalizing and connecting course concepts to their lives, developing authentic critical-thinking skills, and making an informed selection of research topics and recommendations for local integration. The student pass rate was about the same as other English Composition sections, though the class dynamic was dramatically different.

When asked for feedback on the course, one student observed, "The experiential model helped solidify the information and make it applicable to real life. Also, it was way more fun than normal class. I liked all the different 'textbooks' we used. Mixing movies, a place, books, and live people really help me stay engaged and expand my horizons and learn well." Another student commented, "I like how hands-on the class is. Writing about things you've seen/done in person is a lot more fulfilling than just writing about what you've read." Yet another student stated, "I think going out and seeing what we're learning about is really important to understanding that my life is affected directly by what we're learning, especially running the food drive. I feel like I can make a difference now." These comments show the value of experiential activities in a required introductory college composition course.

For future sections, I plan on providing more robust online modules for writing and research skills and posting past models of student work for analysis, discussion, and modeling. These efforts should provide additional support for new college students. I will continue with the food theme for its high interest, interdisciplinary flexibility, and available community resources. Per student feedback, I also plan to increase the service-learning component.

Recommendations for Experiential Course Implementation

Begin with one experiential activity that will fit well with your discipline and community resources.

1. Choose a relatable topic or theme that has resources/connections in your community.
 2. Find high-interest readings and videos that support and develop understanding.
 3. Scaffold assignments to build skills for summative assessment.
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4. Integrate background material with community experience.
 5. Provide space for discussion and reflection.
 6. Garner student feedback about their experiences.

Conclusion

Providing students with a flipped, experiential course with a theme shows promise in engaging and empowering students with meaningful and transformative experiences. In *Teaching Naked*, Jose Antonio Bowen asserts, "Nothing has more potential to eliminate boredom and create an incentive for students to come to class than a complete rethinking of the use of class time, overhauling it from a passive listening experience into a transformative learning environment." Overall, students met the challenge of this unique learning format, though some tweaks are needed to increase student success rates. As far as student evaluations of the course experience, they can be summed up in this comment: "Best class ever. 10/10 ORGANIC Rotten Tomatoes."

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