Experiential Learning: The Ethical Dimension

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Introduction

Embedding opportunities for experiential learning across the subject spectrum is a core component in the curricular changes underway at HKU. A key challenge in designing and implementing new experiential learning initiatives is posed by the ethical questions and dilemmas which can emerge for everyone concerned – the teaching staff, the students, and the members of the community in which the learning is taking place. Such questions can have carry-over implications for the equitable conduct of assessment if not constructively addressed and, where possible, obviated or minimised through careful advance planning.

This briefing therefore aims to provide some initial guidance on the steps that can be taken by course teams in seeking to anticipate and forestall ethical issues in the day-to-day management of experiential learning. Seven steps are identified and outlined. The salience of each of these will of course vary from one course setting to another, depending on the form, content, focus and goals of the experiential learning initiative concerned.

The guidance set out has been distilled from the panel-led discussions that took place at a seminar on Ethics in Experiential Learning convened by the Gallant Ho Experiential Learning Centre at HKU on 3 December 2014[1], and a debt of gratitude is owed to the panellists and other seminar participants for their rich reflections and insights.

The briefing forms part of a cluster of three on the theme of wise assessment practices in experiential learning. The companion briefings are Assessing capstone projects and dissertations by Mick Healey (Briefing 4) and Assessing experiential learning by Tracy Zou and Sonia Cheung (Briefing 5).

Preparing the ground

Before students actually embark on the formative experience, careful groundwork can be beneficial, both to create an anticipation of the learning experience for the students and to begin to equip them with information and tools they will find invaluable in their subsequent interactions.

This can be achieved by means of pre-internship activities or briefings which provide students with an overview of the project, including course objectives, learning activities, and assessment methods. And even at this preliminary stage, there may be a great deal to be gained through engaging students in discussions of case scenarios that serve to highlight and illustrate the questions and issues that are likely to arise.

Establishing guidelines and codes of practice

Once students have acquired a basic understanding of the experiential learning project, it is desirable to establish clear ethical guidelines (perhaps in the form of a code of practice) and to ensure that these are appropriately communicated to them. The guidelines might include, for example, a statement of overarching principles to clarify boundaries between what kinds of actions or behaviour would be appropriate and what would not. In some instances, there may also be a formal programme accountability framework to be adhered to.

Where significant fieldwork is involved, students can be asked to enter a formal agreement about ethics by signing up to a written code of practice or its equivalent.

Getting to know the community

In order to act in a responsible manner, students will need to make an effort to acquire more than a passing acquaintance with the community with whom they will be engaging. Where necessary, careful exploration of the community's needs (possibly even leading to a systematic needs assessment) would enable students to build empathy, develop good cross-cultural understanding, and consult adequately.

Students can also be encouraged to think about how to build sustainably on local resources for the benefit of the community, rather than necessarily starting from the assumption, for instance, that bringing in resources from outside will offer the most productive way forward.

"Passion and commitment are important, but they're not enough. Students also have to learn how to think responsibly before they act."

Sharing information and monitoring progress

In many experiential learning projects that unfold over a significant period of time, there is great value in creating a space for student interns to come together to participate in processes such as shared reflection, collective discussion and review of critical incidents, collaborative brainstorming, and problem-solving. This could also be pursued in tandem with reflective journals.

In some forms of experiential learning, it may be difficult to predict what sorts of ethical issues might arise, and therefore jointly reviewing matters on a case-by-case basis may be the most viable way to proceed. It can also be important to encourage students to proactively seek help, rather than struggling with a concern or simply hoping that matters will somehow resolve themselves.

"We don't give solutions. Instead, we allow student interns to conduct brainstorming and problem-solving together."

Reconciling goals and expectations

Where a project or initiative involves multiple stakeholders (e.g., interns, expert advisors, community members, sponsors), students need to be alerted to the possibility of potential conflicts of interests arising from differences in intentions and expectations.

It is important that the host or sponsoring organisation concerned has made clear from the very beginning where it stands on issues of ethics and morality and what is expected of interns. Nonetheless, scenarios can arise in which students find themselves in a situation that runs counter to their personal morality. In such instances, there

needs to be provision for an individual to withdraw from a particular situation (or even perhaps from the internship), or to be reassigned, where they feel uncomfortable or unable to proceed.

"Good intentions can sometimes cause harm, however inadvertently"

Maintaining confidentiality and trust

In some experiential learning settings, it may be essential to maintain strict confidentiality, especially in relation to very private or personal matters, or where children or vulnerable adults are involved. Similarly, issues can arise concerning the need to seek consent from the participants, to respect others' dignity, empowerment, to avoid exploitation, and to place a premium on the prevention of harm. In certain circumstances, the declaration of any criminal record may be required.

"Students nowadays are so accustomed to communicating with friends and family on social media that, before they've even given it a thought, they will have posted photos of the school children they're working with on Facebook. They just need firmly reminding that it would be inappropriate."

Balancing learning and service to the community

Part of the challenge for teachers in designing good opportunities for experiential learning is to strike a balance between providing a fertile learning environment for students and maintaining a high quality of service to the communities concerned. In some cases, inevitably, there will need to be trade-offs when, for example, a particular form of learning activity (or the approach taken to assess it) affects service quality, or when satisfying the clients' needs adequately may affect the attainment of worthwhile learning objectives. Sometimes, however reluctantly, a new community partner may have to be found.