HOPE, REMEMBRANCE AND UNDERSTANDING: DEVELOPING CIVIC LEADERS THROUGH AN EXPERIENTIAL HOLOCAUST EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the result of an experiential learning program, the March of Remembrance and Hope (MORH), on the development of civic leaders. The program was established a multinational effort to raise awareness and understanding of the event and to encourage students' growth as future leaders. Additionally, this article seeks to connect the concepts of experiential education and leadership development with the impact that this intensive program had on participants.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, hundreds of college and university students from more than 20 nations travelled to Poland to learn about the Holocaust through a program called March of Remembrance and Hope (MORH), "an educational leadership program that brings together university and college students in Poland in order to teach about the 'dangers of intolerance' through the atrocity of the Holocaust, and to promote positive cross-cultural relationships" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 3). Participants were from a variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds—including survivors of the Rwandan genocide residing in Canada. The experience involved visits to historical sites, lectures from prominent scholars, interaction with Holocaust survivors and multiple forms of reflection. This program provided an opportunity for collegians to learn more about the tragedy that claimed more than 6 million lives through an intensive experiential program. Additionally, it offered a glimpse into the culture and traditions of Judaism through ceremonies and traditions (i.e. Kabbalat Service, Shabbat Dinner, and an inclusive service/ceremony for Havdallah)—for relatively few participants were Jewish (Clyde, 2002; Rosenblum, 2007).

Itin (1999) believes that if institutions of higher education truly wish to develop students who have the potential to be contributing members and leaders of society, efforts must be made to develop aptitudes for critical thinking, self-motivation and problem solving. This trip offered such an opportunity by creating an interactive and moving experience for participants. Hopkins (1994) suggests recent events in world history indicate "fundamental social structures can change in very short order when minds change. Minds change when questions are asked differently, when information flows around the barriers directed to keep it out, and when the issues are reframed" (p. 71). Experience has the potential to be a powerful influence when used to enhance student development. John Dewey, believed by many to be the father

of experiential education, asserted that education was not only the transmission of facts but more so the education of the individual which prepared them for participation in a democratic society (Kraft, 1985). This program focused on experiential activities in order to develop civic leaders who benefitted from remembrance of the past while providing hope for the future.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In 1938, John Dewey's publication *Experience and Education* set the stage for educators to scrutinize the role of experience as an element of the learning process. Jacobs (1999) notes, "experiential [learning] intentionally provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the learning process. Students move from being recipients of information to seekers of knowledge" (p. 50). For the purpose of this paper, experiential learning "refers to learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process" (Keeton and Tate, 1978, p. 2).

Kolb (1984) explains that experiential learning as a theory of development is focused on the transaction that occurs between external circumstances and internal characteristics—between social knowledge and personal knowledge. "It is the process of learning from experience that shapes and actualizes developmental potentialities. This learning is a social process; and thus, the course of individual development is shaped by the cultural system of social knowledge" (p. 133). For the individual, experiential learning provides the opportunity "to engage with the interrelatedness of self and the social context, inner experience and outer experience, content and process, and different ways of knowing" (McGill and Weil, 1989, p. 246).

John Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning focused on linking experience with reflection; essentially making the connection between doing and understanding. Simply knowing without doing was not sufficient, and understanding without doing is not possible (Itin, 1999). Therefore, reflection is an essential element for effectiveness. "Reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985b, p. 19).

The process of reflection requires a re-examination of the experience "in the light of the learner's intent, associating new knowledge with that which is already possessed, and integrating this new knowledge into the learner's conceptual framework. It leads to an appropriation of this knowledge into the learner's repertoire of behaviour" (Boud, 1989, p. 27). There are identified objects and starting points in the process of reflection, including "the totality of experiences of learners, the behaviour in which they have engaged, the ideas of which learners are aware and the feelings which they have experienced" (p. 20) which serve to designate outcomes of reflective practice. The outcomes may take many forms, such as the appropriation and integration of knowledge, validating personal knowledge, a personal synthesis, an altered affective state, or a conscious decision to engage in further activity.

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Kuh, Douglas, Lund and Gyerneck (1994) refer to a number of studies (Astin, 1993; Astin and Kent, 1983; Smart and Pascarella, 1986) that indicate a positive correlation between the interaction between students and faculty outside the classroom and development in students in areas such as leadership, intellectual self-esteem, social activism, social self-concept and academic self-concept. Experiential learning is an optimal way to develop that interaction for both collegians and citizens. Chickering (1977) believes experiential learning elicits broad-based interest, spanning a vast array of institutions and organizations associated or interested in higher education. Boud (1989) notes that the area of experiential learning is rapidly developing in a variety of contexts. The influence of experiential learning in areas outside of higher education to address social issues is also high. "Governments and institutions are discovering the potential for dealing with complex problems by the use of new forms of learning through experience" (p. 48).

DEVELOPING CIVIC LEADERS

The importance of creating change in individuals is essential to the MORH program, which aspired to create change in individuals which would transpire to meaningful action in a community context. It is believed that random

activity or projects to satisfy others do not promote true personal growth. "Development and growth occur when the objects of learning are associated with lived experience of learners" (Hopkins, 1994, p. 104). Empowering individuals through personal development "can have profound consequences for the role they play in society" (Evans, 1994, p. 4).

Democratic experiential learning is oriented towards community and service by students. Experiential learning projects often promote active participation by students in the process of democracy. There is a clear link between America's traditional civic and democratic values and experiential learning. With nearly half of the participants on MORH hailing from the United States, a democratic approach to development was considered. A number of experiential features have been noted as contributors to the creation of responsive citizens. These include active participation in civic activities and the political process, consensus building ability and communication and human relations skills inherent in experiential learning (Lempert, 1996).

Higher education perpetually faces public scrutiny, Chickering (1977) asserts that the integration of concrete experience with active application provides the opportunity for higher education to potentially improve its usefulness and quality. The issues experiential learning tends to raise "go to the heart of the academic enterprise" (p. 86). Experiential learning forces higher education to look beyond the time spent learning subjects and credit hours earned. Instead, institutions begin to explore issues of competence, working knowledge, and information most pertinent to life (such as jobs, family relationships, community responsibilities and larger social issues). Higher education is capable of much more than depositing information into students; it contributes to higher level intellectual development which is a requirement for successful citizenship. When social stratification experiences "are projected against the rhetoric of democracy, then the foundations for more enlightened citizenship and more active contribution are strengthened" (Chickering, 1977, p. 63).

Henry (1989) suggests that the real challenge to education is in developing competent individuals. These individuals must have initiative, sensitivity to others and consciousness of practical realities. They must also have sufficient flexibility, insight, confidence and skill to act effectively in a continually changing world. They must be adaptable, self-motivated, assertive communicators who serve as situation improvers –knowing how to find and apply pertinent information. Experiential learning methods intrinsically provide these opportunities.

A study by Bennis (1980) on effective leaders, notes a common trait of "centeredness" among many leaders in any stage of life. "With centering comes the experience of transcendence, the conscious experience of hierarchic integration where what was before our whole world is transformed into but one of a multidimensional array of worlds to experience" (p. 20). Transcendence allows the capacity for integrated judgments, where conflicts potentially interpreted as win-lose are reformulated into that which either makes everyone involved a winner or makes the act of winning and losing irrelevant. Centering conveys a commitment to integrate abstract ideals in the present life of a leader. "The dawn of integrity comes with the acceptance of responsibility for the course of one's own life. For in taking responsibility for the world, we are given back the power to change it" (p. 20).

Studying the Holocaust "cannot be and must not be an intellectual exercise alone. The way to bring home the realities of the Holocaust is to confront students with its horrors and allow them a vision of a world bereft of moral concern" (Gregory, 2000b p. 58). Abrams (1981) notes that in the context of learning about other cultures, independent study is "not only a proved tool for exciting learning but an ideal instrument through which off-campus learning can be brought back to campus and integrated into the student's continuing education" (p. 70). MORH organizers hoped that participants would return from this experience with a capacity to become involved in cultural tolerance activities and that the program would develop leadership abilities in the students. As noted by a number of students, this was accomplished (Clyde, 2002).

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REMEMBRANCE AND HOPE: THE JOURNEY

The prominent intention of the MORH program was the education of students at the college and university level about the atrocities of the Holocaust. Participants began the learning process during pre-departure seminars let by distinguished faculty university at local institutions. Other educational elements potentially included reading prominent Holocaust Literature (such as *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi or *Night* by Elie Wiesel). Lectures

and discussions addressed issues such as the rise and establishment of the Nazi party; Europe before, during and after the Holocaust; and survival methods for prisoners. Educational elements were also included throughout the trip; convening participants for lectures by distinguished religious leaders, governmental representatives and faculty (Clyde, 2003; Rosenblum, 2007).

MORH is a multinational education program designed to inform students of the Holocaust and encourage leadership and involvement towards a better of society (MORH, 2001). The inaugural trip, held during summer 2001, involved nearly 270 students from 22 nations who were involved in an eight-day journey through historical sites and cities in Poland. Program activities included lectures and presentations by renowned Holocaust scholars and dignitaries. Of particular note was the high level of involvement with Holocaust survivors, who shared their personal experiences allowing for intense interaction and discussion. Guided tours were also given of Jewish ghetto sites, Polish cities and death camps. Activities were selected to provide a rich experience to participants, thereby meeting the objective of developing community leaders who would work against prejudice and intolerance.

Elsaesser's (1996) statement that history "is not just what's past, but what is being passed on" (p. 145) was poignant for the development of this program. Reading a memoir or poem about the a death camp is very different than walking through a barrack at Majdanek or Birkenau, and hearing personal accounts of what transpired in the yards—to not only see and touch the buildings or artifacts; to smell and explore and reflect. Watching a harrowing scene from the movie *Schinder's List* takes on new meaning when you hear the first-person story of a man who experienced some of the atrocities perpetrated by the Commandant of Płaszów. A university student, involved in another travel program to learn about the Holocaust, remarks "what would it be like for visitors [to Holocaust sites], thirty or fifty years from now? With the absence of survivors and eye-witnesses, who will see to it that the Shoah does remain in our collective memory?" (Gilbert, 1997, p. 405).

Romi and Lev (2007) believe emotional-cognitive experiences, such as travel programs to Poland, require active participation, thus enabling a more authentic and broad understanding of the Holocaust. A MORH participant explained:

> My entire perspective has changed on the effects of genocide and the Holocaust (Shoah). Before the March, World War II and many of the events surrounding it were historical, but not real to me. Being able to put a name and a face to those who died and survived made everything more personal to me. I now feel like I have a vested interest in the lives and stories of my brothers and sisters who can not share theirs. (Clyde, 2003, p. 134-135) Haydn (2000) argues that in order to convince students of the Holocaust's importance, connections must be made with the present. Part of the Canadian contingent on the trip represented a group of survivors from the Rwandan genocide. Their own story of fear, anguish and death left participants overwhelmed and determined to learn more. Hearing a story of the loss of family and friends due to identity was for many, a harrowing example of why the Holocaust is an essential lesson in history. To go beyond the words of "never again" to a level of interest and involvement that suggests they will work to live the words. One MORH participant commented "We also had students from Rwanda who greatly influenced my concerns for genocides [and] my perception of the US international policies" (Clyde, 2002, p. 112-113).

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CONCLUSION

An essential task of higher education is to take a leadership role in defining the critical issues of society in a provocative way. "All universities of the 21st century… have to redefine their missions to include the needs and problems of the communities in society of which they are part" (Ladner, 1996, p. 22). Chickering (1976) notes "the disciplinary and interdisciplinary subject matters, the areas of vocational and professional preparation, and the programs oriented toward social problems and social concerns will remain the practical focus of most students, and the bread and butter of higher education" (p. 98).

Only when each generation articulates it's own personal relationship with the event will memory be preserved and passed on (Baum, 2000). When studying the Holocaust, each individual must confront the myriad of issues which surround responsibility. "The issues of moral indifference, failing to stand up and be counted, being a bystander to such appalling

events, need to be addressed with a view to understanding better the nature of the responsibility humans enjoy one for the other" (Gregory, 2000a, p. 40). As we move toward a more tolerant world with the hope of greater peace, we must remember the past. "The twentieth century's strange roads show that people will not be equipped to live well in the twenty-first century unless teaching and learning pay attentions to the dimensions, principles and practice of Holocaust education" (Roth, 2000, p. xi).

A fundamental human lesson from the Holocaust is "the importance of participation and the consequences of passive acquiescence" (Haynes, 1997, p. 148). The current "desire for interracial and international harmony is a prominent theme in our society and, subsequently, throughout the mass media. Virtually all educators and public leaders support a broad agenda of cooperation, toleration, and peaceful conflict resolution" (Roth, 1998, p. 179). Programs such as MORH provide the opportunity for such development in college and university students. "Through an awareness of the competing traditions of experiential learning and the importance of making creative responses to unique situations, experiential learning can be a potent influence for human development and social change" (Boud, 1989, p. 48).

Lempert (1996) challenges us to imagine the potential of creativity and spirit that are enhanced through "building and implementing the vast panorama of potential student adventures" (p. 215). As reported by one MORH participant:

> I could have never anticipated the changes that the program had on my personhood. Yes, it met the objectives of heightened awareness, increased exposure, an active attempt at understanding. But, I could have never anticipated the conversations I had with survivors, the feeling of walking through the barracks in Majdanek, of being confronted with the Polish people leisurely walking through the camps as if they were a public park. These images and events have both haunted and inspired me—I never could have foreseen such a profound impact. (Clyde, 2002, p. 137)

This was not just evident of the initial trip—a 2003 program study of MORH reported "even two years post-trip the participants still grappled with powerful emotions related to how to put all this multilayered information into perspective and, in turn, transform it into social action" (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 185). Profound impacts such as these give us hope that Holocaust education is a perpetual process of teaching students about human rights, dignity, tolerance and leadership—and therefore creating the civic leaders of tomorrow.

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