

Creating Meaningful Co-Curricular Experiences in Higher Education

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Abstract

The value of students' co-curricular engagement is well recognized, but how may learning and development be enhanced through these experiences? Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Kuh's (2008) theory on creating high-impact practices in higher education are used to propose a framework for enhancing the educational quality of post-secondary co-curricular programming. Recommendations are posed for ways in which the co-curricular record may move beyond its use as a recording tool and instead become an integral part of the learning process.

Keywords: experiential learning; higher education; co-curricular record; co-curricular transcript.

1. Introduction

Participation in co-curricular programmes is widely recognized and promoted as an integral part of the student life experience (Kuh, 2001). The term co-curricular refers to “activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement, in some way, what students are learning in school – i.e., experiences that are connected to or mirror the academic curriculum” (Great Schools Partnership, 2013). Common “life-enriching” learning objectives focus on enhancing students’ holistic well-being and their knowledge and skill acquisition in areas such as adaptability, decision making, problem-solving, teamwork, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, practical competence, leadership, cognitive complexity, ethics, humanitarianism and civic virtue (Kuh, 2001). This learning is mostly voluntary in nature and is facilitated through the programming of student affairs offices/departments primarily, as it is viewed as transcending the various academic disciplines and career trajectories. Some examples of co-curricular learning opportunities include participation in clubs, organizations, associations, student government, recreation, athletics, arts, community service, committee membership, career exploration/mentorship programmes, and student life workshops.

Benefits of co-curricular participation include self-efficacy, satisfaction, feelings of support and institutional challenge, retention, academic achievement and intellectual engagement, enhanced understanding of others, deepened sense of spirituality, and practical skill acquisition such as interview skills and networking abilities (Daniyal, Nawaz, Hassan, & Mubeen, 2012; Kilpatrick & Wilburn, 2010; Lourens, 2014; Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Turrentine, Esposito, Young, & Ostroth, 2012). Additionally, co-curricular experiences reportedly enrich student learning by complementing students’ curricular education and enhancing holistic student development (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Elias & Drea, 2013; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Kuh, 2001).

Complementing students' academic achievements, college and university graduates are expected to be able to transition into and navigate modern careers successfully, and enhance society through service, citizenship and respect for diversity (Ahren, 2009). Outcomes such as identity formation, reasoning, wellness, professionalism, leadership and career awareness and planning, reflect the breadth of expectations placed on undergraduate education and expose the importance of lessons that may be learnt outside the classroom (King & Anderson, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005a, 2005b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

2. The Co-Curricular Record

Recognizing the importance of student's co-curricular engagement and the potential benefits gleaned from these experiences, many colleges and universities have implemented a co-curricular record (CCR) – also known as a co-curricular transcript – as a method of formally recording the activities in which a student participates outside the classroom. The co-curricular record was first fashioned in the 1980s by a number of U.S. post-secondary institutions, with more recent initiatives to adopt this transcript in colleges and universities across Canada (Elias & Drea, 2013). This record is designed to document students' educational experiences beyond what is already accounted for on the academic transcript. More specifically, the CCR provides a database of co-curricular activities, identifies respective competencies, and validates participation on an official institutional document (Elias & Drea, 2013). King and Anderson (2004) propose that a co-curricular transcript should be included as the final stage in all postsecondary co-curricular activity programming as it “gives the students an opportunity to thoughtfully plan their college experiences and relate these experiences to future outcomes” (p.98).

Despite a growing recognition of the value of students' co-curricular engagement and the merits of the CCR, recent research indicates that the actual benefits of student learning and development derived from engagement in co-curricular programming are limited. More specifically, benefits appear to be concentrated primarily in personal and social development, with very little impact on general education and practical competence (Ahren, 2009). These findings lead to questions about the extent to which learning outcomes are achieved rather than simply inferred. Further, what conditions are necessary to facilitate student learning and development through co-curricular programming? Ahren (2009) suggests that a more systematic use of educational practices is required to assure that the relation of co-curricular participation to educational and personal development is more than merely assumed. Moreover, to enhance the educational efficacy of activities recorded on a student's CCR, the conceptualization of the respective co-curricular initiatives should be grounded in student learning theory. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to propose a framework for enhancing the educational quality of post-secondary co-curricular programming. Applying this framework, specific recommendations are posed for ways in which the CCR may be extended beyond a documentation tool to be an integral part of the process of student engagement, learning and development. The proposed framework for developing high-impact practices in higher education will be grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Kuh's (2008) application of experiential learning theory to higher education.

3. Student Learning Theories

3.1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory was developed as a model of adaptive development, but is best known for its cycle of learning. Within this model, learning is described as a four-stage process consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. One of the key defining characteristics of experiential learning theory is the role of purposive experience in learning (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). A purposive experience involves creating the most effective conditions for learning, by linking real-world experience to intended learning outcomes, and balancing all four learning modes. According to Kolb, learners may enter the cycle with a preferred learning style, but require the abilities within each stage for learning to be most effective (Kolb et al., 2001). This assertion has been supported by other theorists' recognition that experiences itself it not necessarily educational.

If [student] experiences are structured effectively and processed rigorously, they can add a great deal of value to students' learning and to the educational strength of the university... But these transformative effects depend on careful planning and execution, on avoiding the tendency to fall back on the adage that every experience is educational, on pushing students and faculty to think rigorously and extensively about the intersections between theory and instruction, so students can understand not only how to do things, but why they work the way they do, and what ethical principles are at stake as they engage in real-world activity. (Moore, 2010, p.11).

Consistent with the assertion that not all experiences are educational, Moore (2010) asserts several criticisms of the degree to which experiential learning theory is applied to higher education activities including, a lack of emphasis on defining clear learning outcomes, an overemphasis on the activity itself, lack of rigorous and critical reflection, lack of integration of theory and practice, and a lack of connection between the experiential activity and curricular learning.

3.2. Kuh's Application of ELT to Higher Education

Supporting the use of Kolb's theory of experiential learning in co-curricular programming, George Kuh has published extensively on creating engaging high-impact practices in colleges and universities through the use of the experiential learning cycle (Kuh, 2001; 2003; 2008). According to Kuh (2008) facilitating high-impact student learning in higher education requires teaching students to: Reflect – think about experiences inside and outside the classroom; Integrate – see the connections between different courses, out-of-class experiences, and life beyond the institution; and Apply – use what one has learned in different settings by identifying contemporary challenges and presenting novel approaches and practices. While the majority of the activities referred to by Kuh (2008) may be more appropriately classified as curricular education (i.e., study abroad, internships, capstone courses, service learning, etc.), his work in enhancing student life, supportive campus environments, and the respective programming therein is analogous to the co-curricular student life programmes at most postsecondary institutions across North America. Furthermore, Kuh (2013) strongly emphasizes the interrelation between curricular and co-curricular experiential learning as a part of holistic student development.

4. Enhancing the Educational Quality of Co-Curricular Programming

Applying Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Kuh's major tasks for facilitating high-impact student learning, a framework for post-secondary co-curricular programming is proposed.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

4.1. Curricular Learning/Professional Practice

Although this model focuses on co-curricular learning, the headings of curricular learning and professional practice are included to emphasize the interrelation between curricular and co-curricular experiential learning as a part of holistic student development. In a higher education setting it is fair to assume that students' co-curricular experiences will occur alongside curricular activities such as academic courses and curricular experiential activities (e.g., internships, practicums, field trips, study abroad, capstone courses, etc.). Students may also enter the higher education setting with previous professional practice, or may engage in professional practice throughout their schooling. These previous/concurrent experiences (curricular learning and professional practice) will influence the students' subsequent experiences in co-curricular activities and their respective perceptions and reflections on such experiences. Furthermore, the learning acquired through students' co-curricular experiences will relate back to and influence the students' curricular experience and professional practice. The process of applying co-curricular learning to curricular learning and professional practice reflects the active experimentation stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, as well as the concrete experience stage as the learning cycle continues and the student engages in new learning experiences. Arrows are used to highlight the interrelationships between curricular learning and professional practice.

4.2. Co-Curricular Pre-Training

Students may engage in pre-training workshops prior to their co-curricular participation. This training is intended to teach students the particular skills/knowledge they may require to engage in the co-curricular activity (e.g., job specific training, team building exercises, leadership training, ethics and diversity training). While the intention of this pre-training is often to enhance task performance, this training may also be used to shape intended learning outcomes. Leading into purposive co-curricular participation, pre-training workshops may present an opportunity for students to define personal learning outcomes for the activity and complete formal or informal learning agreements.

4.3. Purposive Co-Curricular Participation

Purposive co-curricular participation involves creating the most effective conditions for learning, by linking the students' experiences in the co-curricular activity to intended learning outcomes and balancing all four learning modes of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation.

One way to link students' experiences to specific learning outcomes is to have facilitators/local evaluation committees of co-curricular activities outline potential learning outcomes for the students. This could be done informally by listing potential learning outcomes next to each co-curricular activity on a webpage or formally by creating individualized learning agreements based on learning outcomes. In a learning agreement the student and activity facilitator would identify the student's individual learning outcomes and develop a specific learning plan including learning outcomes (What do I intend to learn?), strategies and resources (How can I best learn this? What resources are available?), and criteria for evaluation (How will my goal be assessed?). King and Anderson (2004) propose a co-curricular activities program that emphasizes a progression of learning outcomes across four years of co-curricular programming. In students' first year, the intended learning outcomes of co-curricular activities may be identity development, student wellness and well-being, and university citizenship. Second year could focus on communication skills, reasoning, and interdependence. Third year intended learning outcomes may include transformational leadership, civic virtue, and career awareness. And in the students' final years of study the intended learning outcomes may include a focus on enhancing previous co-curricular learning, transition to the workplace, empathy, social responsibility, interpersonal relationships, problem solving abilities, flexibility, self-evaluation, integration and application of content knowledge to real word situations, lifestyle decision making, career planning, and professionalism. These are just some examples of potential learning outcomes that may be identified during this purposive participation phase of programming.

As a part of the students' purposive co-curricular participation, it is important to balance all four learning modes of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation within the activity itself. Activity facilitators should be encouraged to provide mini-reflection opportunities (e.g., planning/debrief meetings). The reflection at this stage is proposed as surface reflection as the students would be asked to reflect upon their experience within a specific co-curricular activity and may or may not include a review of theory and/or relate directly to the students' individual learning outcomes. For surface reflection students may be asked to 'describe' their experience (What took place? When and where did the experience in question take place? Who was and was not present? What did I and others do/did not do? What did you see, hear, etc.); 'examine' (In what ways did I succeed or do well? In what was I challenged? How did this experience make me feel (positively and/or negatively)? How has my perspective/thoughts changed in light of my experience?) and 'articulate learning' (What did I learn? How did I learn it? Why does it matter? What will I do in light of it?) (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Activity facilitators should also provide students with formative feedback, and where appropriate, opportunities to experiment and test new ideas. The purposive co-curricular participation reflects the concrete experience, reflective observation and active experimentation stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

4.4. Professional Development Workshops

Professional development workshops focused on integrating theory and practice would occur following the commencement of the students' co-curricular participation. The objective of these workshops would be to enhance students' theoretical knowledge on specific learning outcomes (i.e., managing conflict, interpersonal communication, leadership, etc.) and facilitate deep reflection integrating the theoretical knowledge and students' perspectives on their co-curricular experience. There are many potential mediums for this reflection to occur. A few examples include group discussions, poems, journal entries, paintings, photographs, games, and video recordings. Students should create a tangible summary of their deep reflection from each professional development workshop. This summary piece could be created as a part of the workshop or as a take-home assignment. Ideally students' co-curricular participation and participation in the professional development workshop would occur simultaneously so that the students have an opportunity to reflect on their co-curricular experience relative to a broader theoretical understanding of the specific learning outcomes prescribed, and then have the opportunity to apply these reflections back to the same co-curricular activity.

This timing will not always be feasible, but it is recommended that a student has at least started participation in a co-curricular activity with a potential learning outcome matching the topic of the workshop so that the student has relevant co-curricular experience to reflect on. Similar to the surface reflection conducted as a part of the co-curricular activity, deep reflection occurring in the professional development workshops should challenge students to describe, examine, and articulate learning - in this case relative to the theory presented on the specific learning outcome. By offering professional development workshops to facilitate students' integration of theory and practice, it removes the responsibility from each individual activity facilitator to teach the theoretical content associated with the learning outcomes and spend the time facilitating this level of deep reflection.

This should also help ease any facilitator's concerns about having to substantially alter current programmes. Instead of each co-curricular activity being modified to address each stage of the experiential learning cycle, done in this way the cycle is completed through supplemental workshops/assignments designed and delivered on a programmatic level. This eases previous concerns that all co-curricular administrators must be experienced activity facilitators, possess strong theoretical knowledge, and also be experts in cognitive, psychosocial, and moral student development (King & Anderson, 2004). The professional development workshops reflect the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

4.5. Co-Curricular Portfolio

The co-curricular portfolio, also representing the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, would be a capstone project designed to enhance students' co-curricular learning. This portfolio also touches upon active experimentation as the students would be asked to apply their co-curricular learning to professional practice. The purpose of this portfolio is to have students reflect and articulate learning on the totality of their co-curricular experiences, including their practical experiences, professional development workshops, and the intersections of these with curricular learning and professional practice. The specific requirements of this project could include: 1) A summary of co-curricular activities engaged in while at university; 2) A collection of tangible deep reflection summaries created in professional development workshops; and 3) A brief application piece on what was learnt, how this co-curricular learning applies to the student's academic studies, and how this learning may be applied to future practice in the student's chosen career path. In addition to the pedagogical benefits of this project, the capstone project could be used to award certificates in co-curricular learning. By requiring a certain number of workshop summaries be included in this capstone project, students may be encouraged to engage in more activities and professional development workshops and optimize the overall educational value of the students' co-curricular experience.

5. Summary and CCR Recommendations

Recognizing the numerous potential benefits offered by co-curricular engagement, a framework for creating meaning experiences, grounded in experiential learning theory, is proposed for post-secondary contexts. The recent adoption of the CCR transcript in post-secondary institutions across Canada provides an opportunity to re-define, emphasize, and assure the educational quality of co-curricular experiences. With the adoption of the CCR, there is also an opportunity for the documenting process to be an integral part of a meaningful co-curricular experience. Strategies to facilitate the quality of co-curricular education include the following:

The objective of the CCR should be twofold: 1) To document student's engagement in co-curricular learning activities; and 2) To facilitate student learning. The CCR should include professional development workshops completed and co-curricular certificate awarded. A list of potential learning outcomes for each co-curricular activity should be published, as determined by local evaluation committees. Activity facilitators should be encouraged, where possible, to complete learning agreements and plans with the students at the start of the activity.

Activity facilitators should be trained in and encouraged to facilitate surface reflection exercises, formative feedback, and opportunities for students to take risks and test new ideas. Professional development workshops on topics complementing the learning outcomes identified for the co-curricular activities should be identified and developed. For each workshop identified, a tangible reflective summary should be included and to attend to various learning styles, reflection mediums for the deep reflection should vary. A co-curricular capstone project should be developed with specific guidelines and questions for students to follow. A co-curricular certificate should be awarded upon completion of the co-curricular capstone project and a determined number of professional development workshops. An assessment and evaluation component, particularly on what is learned through participation in co-curricular experiential activities, and programmatic feedback from multiple perspectives/stakeholders should be considered.

6. Summary

Recognizing the numerous benefits to be gleaned from students' co-curricular engagement, the CCR is designed to document student's educational experiences at the college and university beyond what is already accounted for on the academic transcript.

Applying Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Kuh's (2008) major tasks for facilitating high-impact student learning, a framework for learning-centred co-curricular in higher education and corresponding recommendations for the CCR are proposed. It is presently an exciting time with regards to programmatic change and development within the field of co-curricular education. While several colleges and universities across North America have already implemented a CCR, the recent adoption of this transcript in post-secondary institutions across Canada provides an opportunity to re-define and emphasize the educational quality of co-curricular in higher education student development. With the adoption of the CCR not only is there an opportunity to document student's engagement in co-curricular learning activities, but by moving the CCR beyond a recording tool to become an integral part of the learning process, it can further serve to enhance holistic student learning and development in higher education contexts.

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