Teaching & Learning Community of Practice: Small-scale Experiential Learning – brief discussion notes
September 18, 2015

The group discussed the definition of the term “experiential learning.” Members suggested that learning through doing, learning that personalizes information, and learning where the outcome is open, rather than pre-determined (as it might be in a conventional lab experiment) are elements of experiential learning. Building on this idea, experiential learning can provide an opportunity for students not just to discover or generate a solution, but to identify, experience and reflect on points of challenge, conflict and even failure in navigating a project or concept.

One member noted that there are multiple, mutually informing terms that we might use to think about the goals or outcomes of experiential learning. These include applying knowledge, integrating different kinds of knowledge, mobilizing knowledge, and rehearsing or practicing skills or approaches.

The group acknowledged that participating in experiential learning activities can be challenging for some students. This is a new mode of (classroom) learning for many of them, and occasionally students express anxiety about having class time that would normally be dedicated to content transmission used instead for experiential activities or reflective/peer learning thereupon. Some suggestions shared by the group for addressing and mitigating these student concerns included:

- Sharing some reflective prompts prior to the experiential activity, to help guide students’ learning.
- Similarly, explaining to students why you’re offering them an experiential opportunity, and how you think it will support their learning.
- Gathering student feedback about experiential activities, either through a quick conversation with current or former students about your plans, or by gathering mid-course feedback.

Much of the group’s time was dedicated to discussing the challenge of assessing experiential learning meaningfully and consistently, given that much of the experiential learning process is a) often not directly observed by the instructor and b) an experience that varies from student to student or group to group. These challenges are compounded when the experiential learning takes place in collaborative groups. Members of the group shared strategies that have worked for them, including:

- Tools that allow you to see who has contributed what to a group project, or to facilitate peer feedback, including Github and peerScholar, activity logs, and 360° review processes.
- Asking students to reflect on the collaborative process and assessing that reflection, rather than or in addition to the output of the group.
- Dividing group projects into discrete pieces, and assigning one piece to each group member.
- Providing students with some agency over the assessment process, including allowing students to select whether to complete a project individually or as part of a group, or allowing students to select from one of several assessment approaches (e.g. a reflective essay or a group presentation).