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Exploring Social Issues Through Experiential Learning

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I have for some time now been of the opinion that university language teachers should go beyond being teachers of language. Rather, we should consider it our responsibility not only to raise students' own sense of investment in the language-learning process, but also to raise their interest and concern for issues that affect themselves and the world around them. (Ford and McCafferty, 2001). Having said this, I would like to call your attention to a project with which I was privileged to be associated several years ago in Hungary. As I proceed to present a detailed recollection of that experiential learning project, I would simultaneously like to explain how it interweaves quite well with the series of stages framework suggested by Fried-Booth (1997). This framework provides a means for systematically incorporating experiential activities into the language learning curriculum.

Ten years ago when I was teaching at a Hungarian university, I found myself in a radically changing country surrounded by free-spirited, open-minded and highly curious students. They had just said farewell to Communism, and found themselves in a vacuum, and where they contemplated what path to follow next. They had many questions about issues that they were eager to discuss, and for which they might find answers. Their entire society had been turned upside-down, and they were busy questioning many of the old ways of thinking, which now seemed to have suddenly become outdated or obsolete. These university students were impassioned, restless, frustrated with the status quo, and ready to change with the times. A great many of them were looking inward, and re-evaluating the socioeconomic structure that was in place, and of which they were a part. Significant changes were happening on a daily

basis, and these students were looking for a forum in which to ventilate their concerns, and find a new direction and hope for a brighter future.
I couldn't imagine being in a better teaching environment. It didn't take much of an effort to motivate my students. They were like live wires- they had opinions to express, and they were excited about expressing those opinions in English after years of being forced to study Russian as a foreign language. The atmosphere was primed for having inspiring critical-thinking exchanges about a diversity of topics. As a teacher, I was also truly excited and inspired to facilitate the learning process in any way that I could. It was great to be a witness to a wonderful explosion of ideas.

The ideas left no social issue or concept unscathed, and we reflected and weighed in on every aspect of the culture from the way people perceive one another to how people should treat the less fortunate. We talked about issues of trust, which led to many discussions on empathy and compassion and ways to demonstrate it in our everyday lives. We also shared our thoughts on whether it was a good idea to openly embrace the Western countries that were first beginning to invade this new and vulnerable democracy. All of these discussions were stimulating and dynamic to say the least. We all spent hours upon hours of class time engaged in passionate exchanges. We gradually began to wonder how we might channel some of this energy into an interesting project. Once we decided that was the thing to do, we began brainstorming about various areas of society that might be crying out for our attention.

We actually did come up with some areas that we thought could easily have been left behind, with all the sweeping changes that were afoot. Everyone was in consensus that the physically challenged people in the society should be looked after. Once we focussed in on that particular group, we began to discover an amazing amount of related issues that were begging for attention. We found ourselves talking about the five senses that we often take for granted. We discussed them in great detail, especially the sense of sight, and how being deprived of it could influence how we choose our friends. We wondered about such issues as trust, and whether we could trust others who

might suddenly take on the role of being our caregivers. We also considered on the other hand what kind of caregivers we might become if the situation were reversed. As a result of all these discussions it seemed now that we had found our predominately learner-generated project that we could wholeheartedly embrace. It felt like it was the right project at the right time.

It would be useful to summarize for the reader the sequence of events, which have transpired up to this point in the experiential learning process as it relates to the Fried Booth framework. During the Stimulus phase students had initially discussed an idea for a project, and then in the Definition of the Project Objective Phase they derived implementation for that idea through negotiations, suggestions, and friendly arguments. From this point on it became necessary for students to mobilize and to prepare to go out into the community to collect data. We thus spent the next two class lessons during the Practice of Language Skills stage and the Design of Written Materials stage, learning how to formulate questions for interviews, both in English and Hungarian. We also discussed other types of research that we could do. The next thing that happened was that I put my students into small groups and had them decide what each group wanted to investigate. They decided to disperse into different areas of society. For example: schools for the visually challenged, public health and welfare institutions, etc. There, they would try to obtain various kinds of data and public perceptions regarding the challenged population through, surveys and interviews. The students then reported back to their small groups with their findings. During the Collating Information stage, students reviewed their notes and discussed information as well as performed similar activities. This small group collaboration continued into the Organization of Materials phase as they consolidated their data, and began discussing and negotiating the type of final product they would produce.

Lastly in the Final Presentation, students demonstrated what they had learned through such things as graphs, charts, questionnaire results and other types of technical displays. My Hungarian student presenters painted a fairly bleak picture of the realities regarding public awareness and perception that

were pervasive in the Hungarian community regarding the visually challenged population.

This Final Presentation would normally mark the end of this experiential learning process, which students had successfully participated in from the earliest stage, the Stimulus stage, where the students initially discussed an idea for a project to the Final Presentation, where students thoroughly demonstrated what they learned. The students, however, considering their findings, were in no way ready to declare their project officially completed. Although they had successfully and competently achieved all they had set out to do and fulfilled all the requirements that were stipulated in every stage of their project, they could not in good conscious walk away. They felt there was more that could be done to alter the negative perceptions and increase awareness regarding the plight of the visually challenged in their community.

At this point the students decided and I concurred that it would be appropriate to expand upon what we have done so far. Another words instead of simply reporting on the discouraging state of affairs regarding the public perception and level of awareness regarding this pressing social issue, we chose to pose the question whether there was any course of action that we could take in order to affect a positive change. Our answer came in the form of a resounding "yes" We were given our new mandate. Our Project Work would as of now be modified. This new stage would be our "Remedy stage" For this newly added stage we went back to our brainstorming process, which we had first undertaken in the Stimulus stage. We discussed how we might be able to remedy the unacceptable state of public awareness regarding the visually challenged. Students once again through the process of brainstorming and negotiating arrived at an idea for a proposed event. The students proposed an English-speaking event where the people from the community would take part promoting awareness regarding the visually challenged. Forty persons would be invited. Twenty persons would be blindfolded for approximately six hours while the remaining twenty would assume the role of care-taking guides. The students were wondering how blindfolded persons might react if they were not able to see any of their guides until the end of the event. In other words, they would have no clue to as to what other participants

looked like. This dimension added to the already rich experience.

Students continued to brainstorm what kinds of activities they would include in their six-hour event. There was no shortage of wonderful ideas. They were sure to include different activities that would focus on different senses. One such activity allowed participants to experiment with and evaluate their sense of smell. This was accomplished by providing them with several small bags in which they were asked to identify the contents. In order to focus on the sense of touch, we would have participants participate in another activity involving the recognition of various shapes. We made it a point, that during each activity we would collect data that would be interesting to look at later. We also included a "trust walk" on the agenda. For an hour participants would leave the safety of the building that they were in.

Guides would be paired off with blindfolded persons and would go off to experience the outside world and nature. This would afford everyone the chance to get fresh air, touch various trees, and to discover their environment.

Students spent the next eight weeks preparing for that lovely day in the country- side. They had selected their venue and had begun the process of recruiting participants. Students then once again returned to their small groups with new assignments such as making application forms, deciding the criteria for choosing applicants, and writing up an itinerary for the event. Students were also responsible for organizing all the practical concerns such as the logistics, the mode of transportation to the event, the blindfolds, the food, having a first-aid kit on hand as well as other staff responsibilities. It was my personal observation that everyone collaborated wonderfully in the preparation of this very elaborate and far-reaching event. The event itself also proved to be a glowing success.

Indeed that was an amazing experience that year in Hungary. All the instability and uncertainty which were only a hundred miles away in Budapest were nowhere to be found among those Hungarians who got together as a result of a special project put on by some university students.
Discovering new ways of looking at language, culture, friendship making and in particular fostering a new found empathy for the visually challenged population, were some of the elements that were part of this sensory-filled,

trust sharing experience.

These Hungarian students created their own learner- generated project that was very much of the magnitude that could transcend public perceptions of the human condition and provide the community with new awareness and courage and the learners themselves with a true sense of accomplishment.

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