

## **Taxing Praxis: One Social Studies' Teacher's Journey with Experiential Education**

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### *Abstract*

*This study examines one social studies teacher's experience developing and implementing an Experiential Education-based (EE) curriculum and her reflection on the experience of putting theory and research into practice. Using a qualitative case study research strategy, we focused on the single case of the teacher's experience. We identified four categories related to the implementation of EE elements into her classes: (a) teacher's values, (b) students' values, (c) teacher directedness versus student directedness, and (d) accountability. We used the teacher's values as the central category for our discussion to explore how these values conflicted and coordinated with manifestations of the other categories. Through this study, we learned more about the importance of teachers as researchers and the value of university and school collaboration. However, the critical result was the disconnect between what is valued by the teacher and what is assessed and the need for a continued examination of this issue.*

### **Introduction**

*"I think I have always been writing a script in my head for what could work for students if they were able to choose to learn what matters to them, if they actively participated in that learning, and if I helped to challenge their choices and their participation" (Launie's journal, January 28, 2004).*

Launie's comment served as her call to action regarding the use of an experiential education-based curriculum in her senior level American Government classes. As an experienced social studies and English teacher, Launie chose to explore the connections among theory, research, and practice in her American Government classes. Kathy and Bob, university teacher education faculty, facilitated Launie's reflections on her exploration. This study examines Launie's experience of developing and implementing an experiential education-based curriculum

as part of a research project related to student achievement in American Government and her reflection on the experience of putting theory into practice.

This collaboration began in the spring 2003 semester when Launie was a student in a graduate class on the foundations of experiential education taught by Kathy. After reviewing the available literature on experiential education and finding a substantial gap in research on academic achievement in traditional classroom settings (Ewert, 1987; Hedin, 1983; Roberts & Yerkes, 2000), Launie proposed her own research project to help close that void. She believed that this project would contribute to the field, satisfy her own curiosity and conform to the local school district's, and her site administrator's attention to "data-based decision-making" in a standards-based environment.

### **Relevant Literature**

Launie's approach to teaching and learning focuses on empowering students to demand relevant experiences that provide them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become engaged members of society. Her decision to develop and implement an experiential education-based (EE) curriculum is consistent with her beliefs about engagement in society. She also believes that students learn by doing, which is reflective of EE and the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1916/1944, 1938/1997).

#### ***Experiential Education (EE)***

Experiential education (EE) is a philosophy of education that is reflective of "...a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and values from direct experience" (Association for Experiential Education, 1991, p. 1). John Dewey and Kurt Hahn promoted educational experiences in which students were active participants in their learning. In particular, Dewey's approach to learning envisioned the classroom as a microcosm of society in which students learned how to function and succeed in society by functioning and succeeding in the classroom community. The specific goals, tasks, and experiences may be different in each classroom, but broad goals and experiences should inform and transfer to an external setting, particularly when accompanied by a strong element of reflection (Dewey, 1916/1944, 1938/1997). In addition, learning should be of interest to the students, and they should want to engage in the opportunity (Dewey, 1933/1998, 1938/1997). For example, students should be involved in choosing aspects of their learning experiences, such as topic, method of delivery (which could be direct instruction), and method of assessment.

Hahn's construction of experiential education and experiential learning was more focused on learning outside of the classroom (James, 1990). Noted for his development of the Outward Bound experiences, Hahn linked experience, civic commitment and service, and the learning of content (e.g., life-saving classes) in settings outside of the traditional school. More recently, Outward Bound experiences were identified as wilderness-type adventures in which small groups of students focused simultaneously on survival and leadership skills and confidence building (Fischer & Attah, 2001; Fouhey & Saltmarsh, 1996).

#### ***Assessment Issues***

Noting the non-traditional nature of experiential based-learning experiences, they also frequently include non-traditional forms of assessment. With foci on student-directedness, real world connections, and critical reflection, a variety of assessments are appropriate. Authentic forms of assessment are a natural fit. Wiggins (Nickell, 1992) defines authentic assessment as “much more a simulation or representation or replication of the kinds of challenges that face professionals or citizens when they need to do something with their knowledge” (p. 92). When students demonstrate their learning of content and skills in these ways, students have more ownership of their learning and the demonstrated outcomes of that learning. One concern about authentic assessment is the subjectivity of the evaluation because of the variety of assessment tasks constructed (Newmann, 1990). Authentic assessments are often crafted or negotiated with an individual student or a small group of students to determine the best way to demonstrate learning, thus creating the probability of different kinds of assessment tasks. This variety and concern about subjectivity pose a particular concern in the current climate of accountability.

### *Accountability Movement*

The current accountability movement, often identified as the standards-based reform movement, began in the early 1990s and is identified with the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Linn, 2000). While the development of voluntary national standards in the different content areas began a few years earlier (e.g., NCTM standards were first published in 1989), this era of standards-based reform is exemplified by individual states’ development of academic content standards and the development or adoption of assessments that measure students’ achievement related to those standards. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002) legislation, this process is now required by federal law. The high stakes consequences of not making adequate yearly progress are substantial. Driven by NCLB requirements, at least 25 states have adopted high-stakes tests that serve as graduation gate keepers (Center on Education Policy, 2004, pp. 58-59). In sum, assignment and course grades, grade point average, previous achievement measures, predictive measures of academic success in future schooling, and other measures are important throughout the K-12 experience, but in some of these states, the only measure that counts for graduation is the final assessment (Kornhaber, 2004). Note that many state standards documents are written to reflect both higher and lower-order thinking skills. For example, one of the Nevada Civics Standards include grade 12 standards stating, “Describe the creation of laws through the legislative process,” “Analyze the effectiveness of checks and balances in maintaining the equal division of power,” and “Evaluate the significance of interest groups in the political process of a democratic society” (Nevada Social Studies, Civics, K-12 Standards, 2000). Description is typically considered lower-order while analytical and evaluative skills require higher-order thinking skills. Other states reflect a similar balance. However, the high-stakes tests more typically measure lower-order knowledge and skills (e.g, recall) as opposed to higher-order thinking (e.g, synthesis) (Chudowsky & Pellegrino, 2003; National Academy of Education, 1997; Neill, 2003).

One negative consequence of high-stakes tests is a narrowing of the curriculum as teachers teach *to* and prepare students to succeed *on* this single high-stakes measure (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Marchant, 2004; Pennington, 2004). Narrowing the curriculum includes choosing to focus on the recall of basic information (e.g., names, dates) rather than in-depth understanding (e.g., cause and effect) as well as focusing just on information that teachers believe will be tested. Narrowing the curriculum also means focused instructional

strategies. Teachers choose time-efficient delivery models of instruction (e.g., lecture) over instructional models that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry (e.g., experiential education-based instruction). Teachers, sometimes at the urging of concerned administrators, abandon innovative, active, and higher-order experiences in favor of rote memorization and drill, believing this specific test preparation is the necessary course of action for testing success, although not necessarily for student learning (Hillocks, 2002; Marchant, 2004; Pennington, 2004). This abandonment of innovation occurs even when state standards and high-stakes instruments are intended for encouraging higher-level thinking, such as through the use of document-based questions (DBQs). Two studies (Grant, 2001; Grant et al., 2002) specifically examined social studies teachers' practices in light of recently adopted state assessments in New York. The teachers involved in these studies acknowledged the need to prepare students to succeed on the mandated test. However, not all of them changed their practice in notable ways, leaving open the possibility that other factors, including the teachers' subject matter and pedagogical expertise, may play a more important role in decisions regarding the narrowing of the curriculum.

In the current era of accountability, many teachers, including Launie, struggle with what they believe are two conflicting goals: preparing students to succeed on tests and preparing them to succeed in life. Launie is concerned that the preparation for success on high-stakes tests might take valuable time and attention away from subject matter content and instructional practices (i.e., EE-based practices) that she believes meet more important goals. In consideration of the intersection of experiential education and accountability, the research question for this study asks the following: How does a teacher, committed to the design and implementation of an experiential education-based curriculum, experience and reflect on the process?

### **Research Methodology**

Greenwood and Levin (1998) describe action research as a process in which researchers and stakeholders “define the problems to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results...” (p. 4). Reflecting a perspective in which knowledge is constructed in an interactive/transactive process by the participant/teacher/researcher (Launie) and the researchers (Kathy and Bob), this model of action research is consistent with our approach. Further, Carson and Sumara (1997) distinguish between the action research product and the action research process. Their use of the term “lived practice” is phenomenological in nature as it emphasizes the entire research process as the researcher lives it. This does not discount the traditional results portion of a study or the product (i.e., this article), but it includes experiences of the researchers (Launie, in this study) as a central focus of that product. Essential to our study were the collaboration among researchers, the goals of changing Launie's practice, and understanding Launie's lived experience of developing, implementing, and studying her practice.

### ***Teacher Praxis***

Throughout this process, Launie's critical reflection on the application of theory into practice, or action, was central to this study. Literature over the past 15 years extended Dewey's conception of reflection into praxis (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003; Houser, 1990; Ritchie & Rigano, 2002). Praxis may be defined as “synthesizing theory and practice in

school contexts in a manner that improves the lives of students and their communities” (Hemmings, 2000, p.68). hooks (1994) concurs, noting that praxis is “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it.” (p.14). Over the last 15 years, praxis has become a common framework for teacher-as-researcher studies (Blocher, Echols, de Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2003; Chandler, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Doheny, 2002; Goodnough, 2001; Ritchie & Rigano, 2002). Our study continued this tradition by exploring Launie’s beliefs about teaching, learning, and EE. We examined how the EE curriculum she developed with Kathy’s facilitation, reflected Launie’s own beliefs. Many of Launie’s beliefs were also influenced by her work with the National Writing Project (NWP) and the Centre for Social Action, using the ideas of Paulo Freire, particularly those expressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000). We also explored whose interests were served by a curriculum reflecting Launie’s beliefs and one not reflecting her beliefs (Beyer, 1992, pp. 250-251).

### *Launie’s Role as Teacher/Researcher*

During the research design and data collection phase of our study, Launie was a 44-year-old white female in her 14<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She had a Bachelor’s degree in secondary education and a master’s degree in teaching English. Launie was certified by the state to teach English and social studies, and her teaching responsibilities reflected that certification. During the study, she taught three sections of senior-level American Government, two sections of junior-level American History, and one section of senior English. Launie participated in a variety of professional development activities, both as a learner and a facilitator. Most notably, Launie served for four years as co-director and director of the Northern Nevada Writing Project (NNWP), working with the teacher-researcher group and a book project about teachers and social action. Launie’s interest in experiential education and engagement in designing a research study reflects Palmer’s (1998) premise that we teach who we are. Launie’s beliefs about the role of the teacher as facilitator and the importance of both social action and experiential education all frame the experiences she creates for her students as she encourages them to engage in and learn from their local, national, and global communities.

Sierra Fields Community College High School<sup>1</sup> (SFCCHS) is a small alternative high school located on the campus of a community college. High school juniors and seniors with a grade point average of at least 2.0 (out of 4.0), who have no serious discipline issues, who are academically motivated, and who are not comfortable in a traditional high school setting comprise the population of SFCCHS. Typically, these students resist both the structure of the traditional high schools (e.g., conformity and social pressure) as well as the structure of honors courses. For lifestyle reasons (e.g., jobs), they often appreciate the flexibility of a college schedule. The reliance on student responsibility and the flexibility of a college setting along with the opportunity to complete required high school courses (taught by state-certified teachers) while also enrolling in college classes (taught by college faculty) and paying no tuition fees for the college classes makes SFCCHS an attractive option. SFCCHS students are predominantly white, female, and academically (using GPA) above average. Their socio-economic and family status range from upper middle-class students with no financial responsibilities who live with their parents to those students who are emancipated minors working at minimum wage jobs and living at the poverty line with no family financial support. The majority of SFCCHS students plan to attend some form of post secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the name of the school and individuals, other than the researchers.

### *Kathy's and Bob's Roles*

Kathy and Bob are both teacher education faculty at the state's land-grant university. Kathy's background is in social studies education with a specific interest in teaching and learning experiences that foster civic engagement. Her research background is in qualitative methods. Bob's background is in special education with specific interest in quantitative research methods. Kathy and Bob saw their role in this process as individuals with research expertise who were able to facilitate Launie's goal of studying her practice and her newly developed curriculum.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected during the spring 2004 academic semester. These data included Launie's journal in which she recorded her thoughts, questions, and concerns related to the implementation of the experiential education-based curriculum. Briefly, Launie's semester curriculum focused on each student or a small group of students identifying a relevant, current public issue that they were interested in and that could be examined in depth and linked to the state American Government curriculum and accompanying standards. For example, two students worked on the Green Party national campaign while another student explored the local government-supported foster care program. Students were to find and read text-based information about their topic, becoming responsible for establishing themselves as experts. As experts, they submitted written work describing how they were connecting their learning with specific American Government content standards, and they contributed to weekly on-line and live current events discussions. They also developed a final product that synthesized their learning throughout the semester. The final product also included some aspect of advocacy related to their issue. Two examples include a letter to the editor of a local paper and the direct involvement in a political campaign. Daily class sessions varied. They included direct instruction, typically at the request of the students who wanted some background knowledge, guest speakers, films, discussions of current events, and progress reports on activities. Launie facilitated these conversations, synthesizing student comments, asking questions, and explicitly connecting the class experiences to multiple students' projects.

Journaling was Launie's decision and was based on her belief that people write their way into understanding. Journaling as a data source is also consistent with teacher research, providing a window into teacher thinking (Johnson, 2001). There were no specific directions regarding journal topics; Launie wrote about what she felt was relevant to her experience at the time. Entries included excerpts of student work, lesson planning thoughts, questions for Kathy and Bob, frustration and reflection upon an assignment gone awry, as well as satisfaction and reflection on student engagement and learning. Nine journal documents (multiple entries in each document) were emailed to Kathy and Bob bi-weekly. Kathy and Bob independently read the journal entries and developed questions or prompts based on Launie's writings and any questions related to their observation visits to Launie's classes. With few exceptions, Kathy and/or Bob observed one or both of Launie's classes each week.

The questions and prompts created by Kathy and Bob framed the second source of data for this study: transcripts of seven audio-taped, bi-weekly meetings among Launie, Kathy, and Bob. Launie typically brought copies of student work, lesson plans, and resources along with any other information she considered beneficial to our conversations.

### *Data Analyses*

Data analyses began when the journal entries and transcripts of the bi-weekly meetings<sup>2</sup> were reviewed independently by Kathy, Bob, and Launie. After these independent reviews, the three of us met multiple times to construct and refine categories, compare data that had been independently coded, and determine results (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). Specifically, copies of the journal entries and interview transcripts were reviewed with the goal of identifying patterns across these sources, labeling the patterns, and identifying exemplars of the patterns. Noting the varied backgrounds of the three authors, we determined that a close collaboration throughout the data analysis portion of the study would provide another opportunity for learning and reflection as well as add credibility to our results. Over the course of several meetings, we agreed on common labels and definitions for our patterns and determined that our coding was generally consistent across researchers. We also determined that our labeled patterns (categories) were understood better when examined against one another.

### **Results**

Throughout our repeated codings and recodings of the data, we identified four categories of topics in Launie's writings related to her experience of implementing more Experiential Education (EE) elements into her American Government classes: (a) Launie's values, (b) the students' values, (c) teacher directedness versus student directedness, and (d) accountability. While identifying these categories, it was continually evident to us that each of these categories interacted with all of the others in complex ways. For example, Launie's role as teacher was grounded in her values, and her role as teacher implementing EE sometimes came into conflict with student values regarding what they thought their roles should be, based on their own values. Starting from any one of these categories, we could readily construct connections to all of the others. This interrelatedness helped to justify our frequent meetings to compare and discuss our coding as well as our collective and repeated reviews of the results section of this article. We decided to use Launie's values as a focal point for discussing her efforts to negotiate between her values and the other categories.

#### *Launie's Values*

In describing her goals for implementing more EE practices in her classroom, Launie offered an exceptionally clear statement of her values that run through all of the data:

I began devising a set of course guidelines that would allow students choices while using our state civic and economic standards to design a semester project that would help them achieve those standards while participating in real world activities that would engage and inspire them to continue a lifetime of civic participation while using higher-level thinking skills. (JE)

One important aspect of this statement is that it includes all three elements of our definition of EE. Launie wanted her students to direct their own learning. She wanted to

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<sup>2</sup> Journal entries are noted with a "JE" at the end of the quote. Transcripts of audio-taped meetings are noted with a "TS."

incorporate real-life connections in the curriculum. She also wanted to encourage higher-level thinking.

We also noted that how Launie's students responded effectively to the curriculum that was important to her. In the more general statement above, she hoped for inspiration and engagement. In many other statements, she characterized this ambition as "passion." She also acknowledged her view that this kind of student engagement was not typical for high school students, "I know that it's a more true experience that school is irrelevant and not meaningful in their life" (TS).

Launie prioritized the state standards that are relevant to the course. She wanted to ensure that her students received an education that was consistent with these standards for a variety of reasons, including being successful on high-stakes testing. She wanted to ensure that their learning in the course was not too narrowly defined and to be able to justify her curriculum to anyone who might question it.

A final element of this complex statement that we want to emphasize is the importance Launie assigns to active civic participation. For Launie, the importance of education does not lie in simply learning. Education must empower students to act, and they must act on that empowerment for education to be successful. "I don't think raising awareness is enough" (JE).

Other professional values that Launie holds are important for her practice as a teacher. One is that she prioritized conceptual understanding over rote memorization and knowledge of facts. This is clear from statements like, "I place a higher value on students' understanding the politics of the worlds in which they live rather than worrying about whether they can recite the amendments to the Constitution" (JE). This same priority was stated more emphatically and more personally when she wrote, "I cannot continue to teach if I'm just teaching information and facts" (JE).

Another value that Launie holds high is the importance of reflection on her role as a teacher. Sometimes this was manifested in comments about specific topics during the semester, as when she wrote, "I'm thinking about my role as facilitator" (TS). However, the importance of self-reflection was evident in a much broader context when she commented about the entire semester of this study: "I also hope that I will be able to seriously question my own frame of reference" (JE).

Launie's broader political and social values could be characterized as liberal and progressive. At the same time, she recognized this bias in her own approaches to instruction, including the selection of instructional materials. For example, in reviewing film selections she had made she noted that "These movies do feel like WASP guilt" (TS). More than just recognizing her own political and social values, Launie also acknowledged that they reside both implicitly and explicitly in her instruction and that her students recognize this as well. "I'm not gonna to pretend that I don't teach my own values in the classroom. I just can't keep pretending that I could, even on my best days, be value-free" (TS). At this same time, this quote also suggests that Launie saw teaching in a way that was value-free to be somehow better than teaching that included her values, even if this was impossible to accomplish.

More interesting to us than Launie's values in isolation was the theme of Launie's negotiation when her values came into conflict with other constraints. Her values came into conflict with student values, accountability issues, time constraints, and her changing levels of enthusiasm for the process. The following sections explore some of these conflicts and Launie's processes for dealing with them.

### *Teacher's (Launie's) Values vs. Students' Values*

Launie's values often came into conflict with the values of her students during the semester. One way that this occurred was when her students chose projects that were in conflict with her political and social values. While students who chose projects consistent with her values received uncompromised support, Launie struggled with being supportive of those projects that conflicted with her values as opposed to trying to guide those students to a different understanding of the relevant issues. At the same time, Launie was keenly aware of this inconsistency. "I'm noticing a trend here with students who are choosing topics that go against what I believe to be true about the world" (TS).

Launie also struggled with making a distinction between students' values that simply differed from hers but might be legitimate in their own right, and values that she believed lacked legitimacy. "I also don't want to validate rigid, narrow views of the world or immature notions of how the world works" (JE). The challenge for her was to distinguish between values that were somehow immature, rigid, or narrow as opposed to values that were simply different from hers. In one case, Launie believed that a student had written, "denigrating responses, especially in response to the articles that were about the gay community. I wrote him back that I thought his responses were shallow attempts to denigrate people who are different than he is" (JE). Here Launie identified the student's comments as not just different from hers but also inappropriate in a more general sense. In response, the student suggested that Launie was no more qualified to comment on the rights (or lack thereof) of gay men than he was to comment on abortion, because he was not a woman and would never be in the position of making the latter choice. The student's response raised another conflict within Launie's values. Her valuing of equal treatment regardless of sexual orientation came into conflict with her valuing of the abstract analogic reasoning the student had used to justify his position.

### *Teacher (Launie) Directed vs. Student Directed Experiences*

Launie often commented on her efforts to find a balance between her roles as facilitator and director. In other words, she was continually negotiating the balance between what she would direct in the course and what the students would be expected to manage more independently. She acknowledged this when she wrote, "I am really wrestling with the notions of facilitation and choice" (JE). Later in the semester, she also reflected on choices she had previously made, seeking to revisit the balance and consider alternatives. "The discussion still felt manipulated by me, and I'm questioning how I could have set up this discussion so that it fit more of the EE model" (TS).

From the beginning of the semester, Launie was clear about her belief that there are limits to student-directedness. "I knew from previous experience that some things weren't negotiable" (JE). Products that the students were expected to generate were often not very negotiable; Launie asserted, "I began with a half a page of some products I knew I wanted to see from students" (JE). Of course, the exceptions here would be for students who opted out of the EE experience and participated in more traditional instruction. These students were able to choose a prescribed program of more traditional kinds of products, although they could not choose those individual products.

In offering students more flexibility in determining their educational expectations and experiences, Launie was concerned about students "taking advantage of the open-endedness of

the project by cutting corners and/or faking their way through some of the requirements” (JE). In fact, she discussed this with her students, some of whom acknowledged that they probably would only do what was required of them. She reported summing up this dilemma, “If I don’t hold you accountable, you probably wouldn’t have done this project, and if I do hold you accountable, then that tension is there” (JE). This concern was balanced against the desire and commitment to empowering students to determine for themselves how their success would be measured as she explained, “I think it is important that students design their own rubrics” (JE).

On another occasion, Launie became concerned that one student had become too emotionally involved in a project. The student struggled with an eating disorder and this was the topic of the student’s project. Although the student wanted to continue, Launie decided that this student needed to get away from the project temporarily. “I told her to take at least two weeks off and distance herself from the project” (TS). While Launie described her discussion as a negotiation, the negotiation was primarily an effort to persuade the student that taking this break was the right thing to do. Before the two weeks were up, the student came back to Launie who described her making a strong plea to continue with the project, “She came in on Wednesday and she was like almost begging me, ‘Let me come back, and I just didn’t feel like she was ready’” (JE). Here again Launie’s choice was to be more directive rather than give in to this student’s choice.

Launie also acknowledged that her students recognized this conflict of her encouraging students to take charge of their projects while she was imposing constraints such as specific assignments and deadlines. She paraphrased one student as saying, “You tell us to go out there and you want us to have all this freedom to make our own choices, and then it’s like you got this chain on us and you’re jerking us back. ‘Cause we gotta document everything” (JE).

### *Teacher’s Values vs. Accountability*

Launie began to see that the state standards were becoming a comprehensive lens for viewing the projects on which the students were working; she asserted, “I keep finding myself going back to ‘em because everything about their project can be related to nearly every single standard” (TS). As a result of these new understandings about the standards as applied to her curriculum, Launie came to value them much more by the end of the semester than she did at the beginning. “As resistant as I have been about the standards, I now feel a lot better about ‘em” (TS).

Launie also identified another accountability issue that persisted throughout the semester. She repeatedly described the documentation that she required of her students in terms of her need to document their work. “because I did want weekly documentation” (TS). Launie asserted that the primary rationale for the documentation was to determine and justify students’ grades at the end of the semester: “They are still a part of an educational system that forces them to take my class and perform in some way so that they can prove they’ve earned the grades” (JE). These comments indicate that Launie believed she needed this documentation but that she did not place a high degree of value in them. In fact, Launie sometimes pointed out that the required documentation may actually have been hindering the quality of her students’ experiences: “Some of the expectations that I have for them in terms of producing writing that will show me something seem to be the biggest block to their being as engaged as possible in the project” (JE). This need for documentation came into conflict with Launie’s belief that the students should be the judges of their own success. As with other conflicts among Launie’s values, this one seemed

to be noticed by her students as well as she explained, “I know that they must think that I talk out of both sides of my mouth ‘cause it’s their project and they have to be the success judge of what it is that they need and what it is that they’re doing and how they’re achieving their goals” (TS).

For Launie, a critical difficulty with the requirement for documentation was that her documentation did not match her definitions of success for the course and the EE experiences. Launie typically defined success, or elements of success, in two ways. One was that the semester would inspire passion in her students or that students would bring existing passions to bear in their work, as she commented:

I feel like this is an example of success because she is confronting something that’s really frightening and that controls her entire life. I could measure success because Abby has changed how she feels about the world and her role in it. (JE)

The second element of success that Launie offered was that her students should not only feel empowered to take action within the social and political systems in which they find themselves but that they actually act on that feeling of empowerment. In her own words, she hopes:

...that they feel empowered by that, learning to act on their own behalf. I guess I see success in my students’ desire/ability to see themselves as part of a political system in which they believe they can take action or at least make educated choices. (JE)

Although Launie typically distinguished between passion or engagement as an outcome and action as an outcome, she did occasionally question the distinction between the two; she stated, “I am wondering if the passion I am looking for is truly ‘passion’ or if what I am looking for is for students to ‘perform’ in ways that I find acceptable for political participation” (JE).

Launie’s definition of success was based on her values for education in general and American Government in particular. At the same time, her documentation assessed numbers of pages read, numbers of learning logs written, and other quantifiable but indirect measures of student work. None of these measures seemed to address the passion and action that Launie valued for success. “I don’t grade on engagement, no. I mean, I can only grade on what I tell them I’m gonna grade on, and there’s no way for me to create any sorts of criteria, a rubric for engagement” (TS). She was keenly aware of, and frustrated by, the fact that she did not have the tools to assess this element of her definition of success. When asked if she thought passion would continue to be an expectation in future semesters, she responded, “Yes, but I can’t write that into a rubric” (TS).

As we approached the end of the semester when Launie was going to have to assign grades to students, this inconsistency between her values and her assessment criteria became an acute problem for her. In some cases, students submitted the required documentation but seemed to be going through the motions without passion or independent action. “A student who’s very bright, very articulate and can just get the work in and knows how to play the game. And I know that they’re not really learning anything, but they’ve met the criteria for the class and for the A” (TS). In these cases, Launie felt constrained to assign a grade that was higher than she believed the student deserved, because the student had met the criteria prescribed by her grading scheme.

More distressing to Launie was trying to assign grades to students who seemed to fulfill her success criteria of passion and action yet failed to submit commensurate documentation.

I hated it . . . about the kid that stays after class and talks to me for a half hour after class.

And I can tell he's really learned a lot, but he never turns in his work. But I ... I feel like I have to have some sort of product. She's an "A" student who is performing at a "D" and an "F" level, in terms of producing work. She loves her project. She loves coming to class. She gets really engaged in our discussions. The person I think that if I had to have a passion scale, she'd be at the top of it—but no documentation, no self evaluation, no action proposal. (TS)

In each of these cases, Launie believed that higher grades were subjectively justified, but she did not have the documentation to more objectively justify them. When Launie looked back at the entire semester, her holistic view of the work her students did was similar to her specific views of the work students did in these examples. The class, as a whole, seemed to her to have been successful, based on her own definition of success, but her grading did not reflect this impression. "They have done so much more than any other government class I've ever had, and I feel that I don't have evidence to prove this" (TS).

Launie came to one more disconcerting conclusion about her definitions of success. If she believed that passion cannot be measured and that action was successful when it continued outside of class and after the semester was completed so that action is no longer required for a grade, did that mean Launie would likely never know if her class was successful? If she would never be able to confirm this success, the obvious question has to be whether she can continue to make the extra effort to teach in this way without regular feedback about her success. Of course, Launie's response can be seen in the context of some of her earlier comments on her values of teaching and education. These included her personal needs to bring the outside world into her classroom and to teach more than facts. At the end of the semester, Launie's response was indeterminate, "Yeah, I'll always wonder." but "I can live without knowing" (TS).

## Discussion

Originally, we were interested in providing evidence that EE can be used effectively in a classroom to foster higher-level thinking and civic engagement without putting students at any disadvantage with respect to standards-based high stakes assessment (see Ives & Obenchain, 2006). However, our results here indicate another important result: Launie's discovery through this process that many of her practices conflict with her dearly held values about teaching, learning, and society.

One particularly troubling example of this conflict was the fact that her grading criteria were not consistent with her expressed elements of success for her students. This particular conflict raises some enormous challenges with respect to training teachers to carry out assessment in their classrooms, particularly with the messages carried in the current accountability movement. When teachers assess basic knowledge and skills, they are assessing constructs that are directly observable or constructs for which the teacher can identify behaviors that are close to the construct.

In contrast, trying to assess a student's higher level thinking skills, commitment, or passion will likely be more difficult. There are several reasons for this difficulty. For one, the constructs being measured are more complex. This added complexity means that the assessments are more vulnerable to intervening variables that will introduce error in the assessment. This is one reason why, for example, tests of word recognition tend to be more reliable than tests of reading comprehension. A second challenge to the quality of assessment of these complex constructs is that they are not readily reflected in observable behavior. It is relatively easy for a

teacher to identify right and wrong answers on a multiple-choice test of facts. It is much more difficult to identify a behavior that clearly reflects commitment or higher-level thinking. A third reason for the difficulty of assessing these complex constructs is that assessment of these constructs typically involves more professional judgment. In other words, these assessments require a higher degree of subjectivity. Launie repeatedly reported that she was not comfortable with basing grades on subjective judgment. If passion could not be fit into a rubric, Launie could not fit it into her grading.

As teacher educators, we should feel a responsibility to help teachers like Launie to resolve these difficult conflicts. This particular example is certainly a huge challenge, but we should not encourage teachers and pre-service teachers to value these more complex constructs if we are not prepared to invest the effort needed to help them develop the skills and judgment to work with them. We need to find ways to help teachers like Launie to develop assessment approaches that incorporate what she feels is really important for her students—things like engagement and action. These skills will not only serve to close the gap between what she values and the grades she gives. These skills will also help Launie to justify her grading to others as well as help her simply feel better about the assessment she is doing.

We are not suggesting that this is easy, but we are also not suggesting that this would mean giving grades based on a whim either. Teachers like Launie may be responding to the pressure of the current accountability movement by losing confidence in their own professional judgment. The suggestion that teachers learn to use more subjectivity in their assessment of outcomes they value is not a call for poorer quality assessment. Rather, it is a call to learn to develop assessment that is subjective but still maintains the levels of reliability and validity needed to feel confident in the results. In other words, we need not only to help teachers develop assessments that measure what they value, but also we must help them value the results of those assessments. We need to help teachers like Launie gain confidence as professionals who are qualified to use their professional judgment and assurance that when they use their professional judgment, the judgment is credible.

### **Conclusion**

Our qualitative study focused on one secondary social studies teacher in one non-traditional setting. In telling one teacher's story, we acknowledge that a different teacher and/or a different school would offer some different results. Additional qualitative and quantitative studies are warranted, examining the conflict that teachers face, particularly in the accountability era.

In the context of the accountability movement, teacher research is a worthy practice. Teachers can use evidence-based practices, based on their own research, to resist the pressure to narrow their curriculum and instruction in a high-stakes testing environment. Consistent with the teacher research genre, Launie posed questions regarding experiential education, interrogated her assumptions and practices, and made her classroom a site for inquiry for the purpose of learning how to improve her teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 17). However, Launie's interest in demonstrating the effectiveness of experiential education took a secondary position to the conflict between her beliefs about what was important about school and what and how she believed she needed to teach and assess her students. Accordingly, the answer to the study's research question regarding EE was secondary to the discovery of this central conflict in assessment. In Launie's words, "I was using the original question, whether or not EE can work in

public classrooms, to avoid what did become the question: Would I be able to design an EE classroom if my values conflicted with my actual practice?” Her belief in experiential education was unchanged, but she began to examine her understanding of classroom-based assessment in light of her professional and personal beliefs—beliefs that valued experiential education and beliefs that were not assessed in her classroom. Appropriate assessment is an essential part of the curriculum and instruction process. If we do not prepare teachers to accurately fulfill this role, we have not adequately prepared our teachers.

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