



Experiential Learning in the KU Academic Accelerator Program: Field Trips, Fun, and a Whole Lot More

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Introduction

Successful experiential learning is heavily dependent on clear learning outcomes and thorough instructor preparation. When students are prepared well, their experience is enhanced and they are able to make progress toward their academic goals. This essay discusses an experiential learning component the authors created, organized, and implemented in sections of AAP 101, the foundational English for academic purposes (EAP) course for first term students in the Kansas University Academic Accelerator Program (KUAAP). A variety of steps were taken to ensure that students' knowledge of the content would be expanded and that their ability to communicate clearly about academic content would improve.

Even in a sixteen-week term, teaching in the Academic Accelerator Program (AAP) feels like the accent is on *accelerator*. Now imagine covering the same content in an eight-week summer session. The AAP 101 course is six credits, which requires twelve contact hours in the summer. In the summer of 2015, this course met for two hours Monday through Thursday and for four hours on Friday. In order to make the four-hour sessions interesting and productive, the instructors of this course incorporated field trips into the curriculum.

During the first month of the term, the weekly four-hour Friday class served as an introduction to KU, Lawrence, and Kansas. The lessons focused on local symbols and history and introduced students to concepts they would be covering in future AAP courses. The excursions included outings on campus, around Lawrence, and to Topeka. After each class, students completed a writing activity that complied with the academic learning objectives for AAP 101 students. With these goals in mind, experiential learning opportunities were designed.

Field Trips around KU, Lawrence, and Topeka

The primary academic goals for these field trips were to help students improve their abilities to think critically and communicate clearly about cultural and historical content which is a part of the AAP curriculum. To reach these goals, students were exposed to cultural and historical aspects of Lawrence and eastern Kansas, and their vocabularies and understanding of these topics were expanded through multiple and varied exposures. In order to increase students' abilities to communicate verbally about these topics, the instructors encouraged students to ask questions of and dialog with their guides, instructors and conversation leaders who accompanied them on the trips. After each trip, students were assigned a descriptive/response paper to assess their ability to think critically and write clearly about what they had learned.

The excursions related to this local history unit included (a) a trip to a computer lab on campus so students could research topics related to the themes they were going to study on the subsequent field trips; (b) an instructor-guided tour of sculptures on the KU campus with materials provided by the Spencer Art Museum; (c) a guided walking tour of sites in downtown Lawrence related to Quantrill's raid, followed by a driving tour of more remote sites including the Pioneer Cemetery on KU's West Campus where some of the victims of Quantrill's raid are buried; and (d) a guided tour of the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka, followed by a trip to the Kansas Museum of History where students got to see exhibits and learn more about the Civil War events that occurred in eastern Kansas.

Laying the Groundwork for Experiential Learning

The first week was devoted to laying the groundwork. Students needed to be introduced to terms related to Kansas and be exposed to the academic skills of researching topics, working with a partner, and giving short oral presentations. Students were paired up, given two terms (e.g., *buffalo*, *prairie*, *Native American*, and *teepee*) to research, and were sent to a computer lab on campus. They were encouraged to look up images for their terms to increase their comprehension of the concept. During the second half of the four-hour class, students presented their findings to the class while the rest of the class took notes. A picture illustrating each term was displayed so students would be able to connect a visual with the verbal description of each term.

This lesson was pivotal to the success of the future field trips because students were going to be exposed to these terms repeatedly throughout the four-week unit. Within a week or two, they were able to understand these terms and use them to discuss and think critically about the content, which were the two main goals for this series of lessons.

Before the three off-campus excursions, students were informed of the goals for each trip, including the content they were expected to learn and the topic of the follow-up writing assignment. Because students knew what they needed to learn and how they would be asked to demonstrate their knowledge of that content, they were engaged during the trip. For some excursions students were asked to prepare questions before they went to ensure they would learn the content they needed to complete the follow-up assignment. Many students asked additional questions and were actively involved in the learning process. They demonstrated a sincere interest in the content and in clarifying their understanding of it so they could communicate about it clearly. This curiosity and engagement may not have occurred if the learning had been relegated to the classroom.

Following each of the field trips, students were assigned to write a short descriptive paper on one aspect of the content and then reflect on that topic. The goal was to help them develop their descriptive and reflective writing skills. Over the course of the month, students were provided with a significant amount of feedback about how to use their own words to write descriptively about historical events or pieces of art. Many of the students chose to search for the topics on the Internet and initially plagiarized much of the descriptive portion of their writing. However, these assignments provided them with many opportunities to gain confidence in their own knowledge of a topic so they could feel more certain of their ability to summarize the content without plagiarizing it. Revisions of revisions also aided in this process. Descriptive writing is a very common type of writing in the General Education AAP courses, so helping students develop this skill was a key component of this portion of the course.

Learning Language through Experience

Through the Friday outings, the instructors discovered that interacting with students outside of the classroom opened up opportunities for instruction that are less likely to occur while everyone is sitting at a desk. Rapport among students and between students and teachers grew quickly, which led to more in-depth conversation. Most importantly, as students directly engaged in the rich content available on these trips, they were all the more compelled to learn the language necessary to dialog about that content. They were able to identify their own gaps in lexical knowledge as they encountered buffalo, Native Americans, abolitionists, slavery, and tornados in the readings and excursions. Because students were able to interact firsthand with much of the content, they were more engaged and made extra effort to express their thoughts clearly. They struggled to find the right words, asked many questions, referred to their phones, and persisted until they could share their

ideas. For example, many of them ran their hands over the ridges on the Prairie Formation sculpture by Blake Hall and learned the words to describe texture and what the texture represents. At the State Capitol Building, they were able to stroke a buffalo pelt and talk about its texture and purpose. At the Kansas Museum of History they had the opportunity to peer into a teepee, walk around a covered wagon, look inside a log cabin, and learn vocabulary to describe what they saw. At the Pioneer Cemetery, they stood next to tombstones of Lawrence teens slain in Quantrill's raid and worked to share their feelings of sadness and gratitude that Lawrence residents stood and died for the cause of freedom.

Below are a few excerpts from students' papers this summer.

Excerpt 1: Based on the Kansas Museum of History Field Trip

The tipis certainly attracted my attention when I entered the Kansas Museum of History. The tipis are not only huge, but also it expresses human intelligence. When I saw the tipi, I unconsciously admired how these indigenous people could make that. It is an amazing structure because it can be moved and assembled easily and it is practical and comfortable.

Excerpts 2-4 are based on the KU Campus Sculpture Tour Field Trip.

Excerpt 2: When I first looked at this Jayhawk, I remembered all my suffering with success. The Kansas Jayhawk gives you a spirit of determination that will lead you to victory.

Excerpt 3: The Tai Chi sculpture explores the power of action and law. This sculpture uses balance as the mid point to show authority. The sculpture embodies the shape of traditional Chinese fighter, which shows it in a powerful way and makes us respect other cultures.

Excerpt 4: I learned many things when listening to the story of this sculpture. First of all, I learned that Moses is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. I thought he was mentioned only in the Holy Quran. Secondly, Moses' story in the Quran has similarities with the one in the Torah.

Excerpt 5: Based on the History of Lawrence Field Trip

While I did not know about any of this before deciding to come to Lawrence, it confirms that my choice was a good one. I am happy to live in a city that has a history of defending the freedom of everyone regardless of their color. It is hard for me to imagine such a peaceful town once being a place of so much violence. Even though these events happened a long time ago, it is good that the people of the city remember their hard times and the sacrifices they made. I am proud to be a student in a city that has such a great heritage.

While these papers went through a couple of revisions, these musings illustrate how students' encounters with symbols from other cultures, artifacts, and historical events made a significant impact on them and, because of that impact, they put forth much effort to communicate their thoughts clearly. These types of reflections would probably not have occurred if the students had not left the classroom.

When evaluating the effectiveness of these field trips and related assignments, the instructors realized that they had missed an opportunity to incorporate simple citations into the writing assignments. Much of the descriptive writing students did was based on a piece of art or comments from a tour guide. These provide excellent opportunities to teach students how to include direct quotes and paraphrases from museum information cards and from tour guides. This is something that could easily be incorporated into the writing instruction.

Additional Opportunities for Experiential Learning around Campus

When instructors contemplate field trips, the first obstacle is often logistics. Transporting students off campus is not simple. While it is possible to use the bus for short trips downtown, there are quite a few locations on campus that make interesting field trips, and they are only a 10- or 15-minute walk from Lippincott. A guided tour by art historians, biologists, or other educators who enjoy the opportunity to share their expertise with international students can be scheduled. Here are some possibilities for on-campus excursions:

- The Natural History Museum provides several types of downloadable museum guides on a variety of subjects, some of which are directly related to exhibits.
- The Spencer Museum of Art offers tour guides for classes, or students can use the museum's "An Ear for Art" tour, which describes 14 works of art in the museum and can be accessed by smart phone.
- The KU Campus Sculpture Tour, also sponsored by the Spencer Museum of Art, has "An Ear for Art" smart phone description of 15 sculptures on campus.
- The Monarch Watch located in Foley Hall on KU's West Campus allows students to observe a large butterfly garden and all the developmental stages of monarch butterflies.
- The Forum, a student-designed addition to Marvin Hall, features a living wall covered with ferns and blooming plants.
- The Booth Hall of Athletics in Allen Field House features exhibits of Phog Allen's coaching career at KU and his relationship to basketball inventor, James Naismith.

Conclusion

This summer of field trips exceeded the instructors' expectations. They witnessed the value of experiential learning as students encountered cultural artifacts first hand and then talked and wrote about them. These hands-on encounters were beginning steps toward research as students had to ask questions, report on the answers they discovered, and critically reflect on what they learned. Finally, getting students out of the classroom helped them discover some of the rich resources in the area and right here on the KU campus.



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