

Transformational high impact learning practices and alternative breaks



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Transformational Learning of High Impact Practices

High Impact Practices (HIPs) have garnered substantial traction in the higher education field over the past decade because of their transformational impacts on student development (Kinzie, 2018; Kuh, 2008). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has identified ten HIPs that have been rigorously tested and have shown to have positive outcomes for a wide range of students. These ten practices are; first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, Service-Learning, Community-Based Learning, internships, capstone courses and projects (AAC&U, n. d.). While not specifically defined in the ten practices, Alternative Break experiences combine two of these HIPs in a seamless, student leader focused manner, specifically Diversity/global learning and Service-Learning or Community-Based Learning.

Characteristics and outcomes of HIPs

High impact practices have six essential characteristics (Kuh, 2008): They (1) require a significant amount of time and effort focused on a specific educational goal, (2) involve shared intellectual experiences with peers and faculty, (3) involve students stepping out of their comfort zones and being exposed to diversity, (4) involve students receiving prompt feedback, (5) provide opportunities for application of learning, and (6) encourage students to internalize new ideas and change the concepts that govern their awareness of the world they live in (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014, p. 19).

According to a study by Hansen and Schmidt (2017, p. 76), high impact practices affect not only short-term retention and persistence in first-year students, but also have long term outcomes in a three-year persistence rate.

Brownell & Swaner (2010) study further suggested “ sewing several high-impact practices into one activity may further magnify the positive impact of the experience” (viii). In addition, these experiences are so powerful because they combine several behaviors such as investing time and effort, integrating with faculty and peers about substantive matters experiencing diversity, responding to more frequent feedback, reflecting and integrating learning, discovering relevance of leaning though real-world applications” (ix). These topics are frequently enhanced by service-learning within local communities or study abroad (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2010) and can be integrated with multiple associated academic content to promote critical thinking and an openness to diversity that will help students experience diversity in meaningful ways (Neihaus & Rivera, 2015; Neihaus, 2017)

Interactions with Diversity

College is often the first opportunity many students have to confront issues of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination; gender identity; basic freedoms, human rights; and power and privilege. Experiences and courses involving these topics can address differences that exist globally and nationally, and they require critical thinking and self-reflection in the processing of the information involved in the examination of the issues. Mungo (2017), found that for students of color, community-based learning is especially important in enhancing student retention especially in light of race relations in the

United States. According to the author, “ Race has a legacy in American society that is fundamental to the social order. It has been and continues to be an organizing element that describes, prescribes, and dictates access and opportunity—including educational opportunity” (p. 42). Mungo’s study supported the idea that service-learning does help to retain students of color, and those students who participate in one or more service-learning course have higher GPAs at graduation than their peers who did not participate in service-learning. Mungo unexpectedly found that female students benefited most from service-learning.

Further, offering experiences that help students explore other worldviews, cultures, and life experiences is becoming more commonly accepted as a high impact practice(Niehaus, 2016, 2017). Subsequently, Niehaus, E., & Rivera, M. (2015) found that 74% of students reported that they had a better understanding of people from different racial/ethnic groups, and 40. 2% reported that they had a better understanding of their racial/ethnic identity as compared to before their Alternative Break experience. 62. 5% of students indicated that their Alternative Break experience had a substantial influence on their understanding of people from different racial/ethnic groups, while 34% indicated a substantial influence on their racial/ethnic identity (p. 218). One of the most salient findings of this study was that students of color volunteering in racially similar communities were more likely than all other groups to report both growth in their understanding of their racial/ethnic identity and in the influence of the Alternative Break experience on their understanding of their racial/ethnic identity.

Alternative Breaks as Transformational Learning

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Alternative Breaks are intensive, transformational, student-facilitated immersion experiences. These experiences share several defining characteristics such as a social justice focus, direct service with a community partner, guided reflection, and commitment to future action or synthesizing a civic ethos. Paramount to the alternative break experience is active citizenship. The active citizenship continuum is a developmental model that describes the transformation of participants from volunteers to change agents as the participants confront systemic societal issues and do the work to address those issues in tandem with community members (Sumka et. al., 2015).

Bowen, (2011), identifies alternative breaks as part of the experiential education lexicon in the way alternative breaks serve as a catalyst for future civic engagement by fostering a sensitivity to social issues and developing a commitment to community. As often the case with this type of experiential education, many participants indicate a life changing experience because of their participation in well-developed service break programs based on the Break Away model.

Further, Kiely, (2005) & Jones, et. al, (2012), built on Mezirow's model for transformational learning, in particular how people make meaning through critical events both well intentioned and negative impacts. Of great importance in this study is the idea that " participation in certain service-learning programs can sometimes have a transformative impact on student's moral, political, intellectual, personal, cultural, and spiritual perspectives" (p. 6). This study seeks to determine how or why it doesn't happen more often

Kiely found that contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing,
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processing and connecting are important components in transformational learning, these learning processes, in connection with certain programmatic factors, need to be fostered by the educator to help students make meaning (p. 8-9).

Pedogeological Frames

The two pedagogical frames informing this study are Paulo Freire's praxis and Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Kolb's experiential learning cycle is adequate in looking at development from experience to reflection, to thinking to action, but it does not delve deeply into the systematic oppression and social justice learning necessary in alternative break programs. Praxis, however, based on the Deweyan philosophy of civic engagement, helps to articulate the development of critical consciousness and reliance on those who are oppressed to define their experiences (Freire, 2000).

Although Freire and Kolb operate on the same trajectory, higher education has embraced Kolb's apolitical method over a more radicalized politicalized, civically engaged Freirean pedagogy (Dostilio, 2015, p. 62). For activists and educational reformists like Paulo Freire it is not enough to know about social ills, one must act upon them. So rather than an individualistic view, like self-help, individualism, and the myth of equality, where the power of change is dependent upon how much effort is put forth from the individual, Alternative Break experiences look at the underlying systematic oppressions that subjugate citizens and use their collective knowledge to enact change.

Transformational Learning Theory

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In addition to the pedagogical frames, this study may look at transformational learning theory and social change theory with particular focus on citizenship in the society/community values area of the social change model of leadership to identify the manner of change occurring.

Transformational learning is learning that changes problematic assumptions/habits or mindsets to make them more inclusive, open, and receptive to change. This ability to change the mind, helps to guide the learner to a truer set of beliefs and opinions as old learning is mixed with new learning to produce a new reality for the learner (Mezirow, 1991).

Problematic assumptions rooted in culture and societal norms, can include cultural bias, political affiliation, stereotyped attitudes and assumptions, moral-ethical values, religiosity, even artistic aesthetic (Mezirow, 2013, p. 59) are challenged through a defining moment, or praxis. It is this moment that students often define as transformational.

Social Change Theory

Social change theory of leadership looks at the way individuals act as change agents while confronting civility and citizenship. This is another transformational model in that the individual acts in three distinct spheres; individual, group, and society/community. In the individual sphere, the actor is concerned with consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment.

Alternative Breaks, and other transformational experiences, have the actor confront incongruencies and ideations of self through immersion in “otherness.” The alternative break experience also helps the individual to look

at themselves in context of group dynamics and the values of collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility.

The first two characteristics are readily apparent in the alternative break experience. It is the controversy with civility that could prove to be a fruitful area of study in that as the individual is confronting their own personal praxis on one hand, they must also hold controversy in the other. This embroilment of controversy creates a primordial soup from which a new self-identity can emerge. Leaders or facilitators of alternative break programs must be adept at facilitating civil dialogue, confrontation, and conflict resolution, not only in terms of group dynamics, but also for individuals experiencing change. Controversy with Civility is “ characterized by a safe and supportive environment of trust, respect, and collaboration” (Komives, 2016, p. 151).

The third arena in the social change model of leadership looks at the social value of citizenship. Looking at the Break Away model of alternative breaks, it is apparent that citizenship through direct service is the goal of well-planned experiences. The impacts on individuals and groups when interacting with communities and “ others” can be transformational as well as individuals confronting, perhaps for the first time, their privilege and power. Intrinsic to alternative break programs are groups of well-intentioned students exploring social issues in community settings different than their own (typically). What remains to be discovered is how to build the case for alternative breaks as a high impact practice where the immersive experience is often times one to two weeks in duration.

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