



## Multi-learning Course for Psychology Undergraduates: Combining Experiential Learning and Theory Based Research for Learning about Disabilities

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### ABSTRACT

The advantages of experiential learning for psychology undergraduate are well documented, especially for developing practical skills and check computability for the field. To this date, classes either enable direct service learning or research service learning. I describe a unique multi learning experience combining the two types of experiential learning in one year-long seminar on disability studies. The course enabled students to learn relevant theories, design and conduct research, volunteer with people with disability and develop communicational skills in supervision. Evaluating this integrated experiential learning revealed its importance for students' personal and professional growth, the psychology department and promoting social equality

*Keywords: disability studies, experiential learning, undergraduates, psychology, disabilities*

### INTRODUCTION

The advantages of experiential learning for psychology undergraduates have been described and discussed at great length (Bringle, Ruiz, Brown & Reeb, 2016; Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Raupp & Cohen, 1992) since Kolb (Kolb & Kolb, 2006) introduced the experiential learning theory (ELT) in 1971. In addition to the social and community benefits derived from the volunteering itself, the advantages described for the students include a holistic learning experience, increased commitment to the profession, social responsibility, and greater engagement and interest in their academic studies (Bringle, Ruiz, Brown & Reeb, 2016; Fleck, Hussey, & Rutledge-Ellison, 2017). Zuccherro & Gibson (2019) also showed greater personal outcomes in comparison to traditional pedagogy courses.

As a faculty that teaches psychology graduate students, we strive to create a curriculum that maximizes their ability to become future therapists, researchers, and theoreticians. It is my belief that these three skills are essential for all psychologists who aspire to obtain a better understating of their patients and to contribute towards expanding the body of knowledge on which we base our psychological undertakings. Therefore, my goal was to design a course with an inherent experiential component.

The topic selected for this course was disabilities, a field of study relevant to psychology and society, due to the great challenges and obstacles that inhibit the participation of people with disabilities in society. In addition, hands-on experiences and encounters with people with disabilities are key components for enabling students to determine their needs and challenges as future therapists (Barney, 2012). This form of integrated learning is essential for disability studies since it creates a learning opportunity for students to examine their beliefs and stereotypes about the topic, thus facilitating both acquisitions of knowledge and personal development (Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

To achieve these goals, a unique, integrated course was created that combines volunteering and theory-based research experiential learning. Thus, the course addresses all the goals recommended by the APA guideline for curriculums in psychology (APA, 2013; Mayo, 2010). These goals include gaining familiarity with fundamental knowledge, theoretical perspectives, historical trends, and empirical findings in disability studies; applying research principles to design, conduct, and interpret psychological research on the topic of the course; promoting the development of ethically and socially-responsible behaviours for professionals and of personal and professional values that address multicultural and global concerns; developing competence in written, oral, and personal communication skills by incorporating journal writing and group supervision as part of the course; and encouraging students to pursue meaningful professional directions after graduation by exposing them to health and rehabilitation psychology (APA, 2013).

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This course is innovative in several ways. First, it combines two types of experiential learning - direct service learning and research service learning (Bringle, Ruiz, Brown & Reeb, 2016) - contrary to most, if not all, courses that are limited to a single experiential type. Second, it is a full-year course (two semesters), which enables students to experience a therapeutic relationship that lasts more than six months. Third, the course includes supervision to facilitate the students' personal development and growth, and promote communicational skills.

### **ABOUT THE COURSE**

The course was designed as a seminar, lasting a full academic year. A theoretical syllabus was prepared, including an introduction to disability studies, definitions, and main concepts, an overview of relevant literature and current research, and contemporary legislative changes.

For the research aspect of the course, all students conduct a study in pairs on the topic of perceptions of disabilities. Each pair chooses its preferred study design and variables while using an established questionnaire to measure attitudes towards disabilities. The questionnaire was discussed in class, and its application in research was presented in order to enable students to choose variables accordingly.

For the direct experiential aspect, I collaborated with JDC Israel, the Israeli branch of Global JDC. The organization identifies the needs of groups to which it is committed, and together with its partners develops social programs that address those needs accordingly. One such program is Israel Unlimited, which assists people with disabilities. One of the goals of this program is to enable high-functioning adults with cognitive, developmental, and physical disabilities to live independently. Professionals in this program support these adults in various ways and enable them to develop the skills needed for independent living. These include psycho-social support, financial guidance, and employment. JDC choose members interested in being accompanied by volunteers for the duration of the academic year.

#### **Student admission**

The course is designed for undergraduate students in their third and final year of their studies at The Academic College of Tel-Aviv-Yaffo. Therefore, students applying for this course have already completed basic core courses in psychology, research design, and academic writing.

When this course was opened as one of the optional courses available for students, it was received with great interest and twice the maximum number of students enrolled. All were asked to write about their specific interest in this course. Students mentioned their desire to engage in experiential learning, particularly with the non-hospitalized adult population, and were thrilled by the opportunity to combine all three aspects, research, theory and practice, in a single course. Fifteen students were chosen randomly.

#### **The ongoing integrative experiential learning process**

At the beginning of the first semester, we introduced the theoretical framework and the JDC program, and the students met with the key personnel. Each student was assigned to a

person with a disability and received contact information for the social worker from JDC who would be accompanying them. During the course of the year, the students met with the social workers from the JDC to exchange updates about their progress.

Each week, the students met with the JDC members to whom they were assigned for a 90-minute, one-on-one meeting outside the college setting. They also engaged in weekly reflective writing assignments and documented their meetings and personal experiences. All written entries were emailed to the lecturer as part of the learning process, allowing feedback, counselling, and guidance on issues related to their experiences and relationships with the JDC members. The students also participated in group supervision sessions held twice per month, facilitated by the lecturer who is also a licensed psychologist and supervisor. The group supervision sessions continued throughout the year until the volunteer program ended.

In order to expose the students to the lives and experiences of people coping with disabilities, we organized two expert panels. The first one was held at the beginning of the semester just before the volunteering program began. The panel consisted of five adults with various disabilities who shared their stories and gave the students an opportunity to ask about their perspective of the volunteers, their needs and expectations.

The second panel consisted of four parents of high-functioning adults with cognitive, developmental, or physical disabilities who shared their stories. These panels offered the students an authentic, first-hand experience of life with a disability and how it affects families.

In the middle of the first semester, students begin working on their designated research design and a working hypothesis and gradually started collecting data, analyzing it, and writing their research papers.

#### **Evaluating integrated experiential learning**

Like similar experiential learning courses in psychology (Kretchmar, 2001; Kritzinger & Pillay, 2010; Simons, et al., 2012), this course received high evaluation scores and overwhelmingly favourable responses. The evaluation was based on an analysis of students' reflective writings, themes discussed during group supervision, and students' overall ratings.

#### **Students' experiential learning process throughout the year**

Analysis of students' reflective writings and themes discussed during group supervision throughout the year revealed two parallel processes personal growth and acquiring therapeutic tools.

At the beginning of the year, most students shared concerns about their professional capabilities as counsellors. They hoped being in close contact with adults in need and acquiring experience in counselling and psychological support would help them decide how suitable they were for psychology, though at the same time they expressed their fear of discovering they were not. This dualism was heightened in group supervision as they discussed their inexperience in establishing a therapeutic alliance, helping others, setting goals, and fostering change. They felt undertrained.

At this point, most of the students shared their realization they were more stereotypic than they had thought. This realization was even further enhanced after the panel held by people with various disabilities. Facing their own stigmas and prejudices toward people with disabilities made them feel uncomfortable and uneasy. "I always thought of myself as open minded and accepting, and I found out I had my own fears about meeting people with disabilities", wrote one student. Another stated he hadn't realized how similar people with disabilities were to him. "I listened to him talk and at first I could not see the disability and thought he was normal; these people with Asperger and autism are so similar to us". Several students shared how uneasy they felt when they realized they were thinking of disabled people in terms of how normal they look or sound. Others were surprised by their own feelings of embarrassment and pity.

As the semester progressed, the students slowly began to trust themselves as they formed relationships with the disabled adults whom they met weekly and learned to trust their fellow group members, as they felt support and empathy when sharing their experience with others. Thus they began to feel both personal and professional growth. Their reflections revealed a better understanding of disability and the challenges it encompasses. They focused on the similarities between themselves and the JDC members and developed warm feelings towards them. "He and I share the same taste in music and when we talk I don't even notice his disability. I say to myself 'you are like him'". Another student shared her experience of a full day with the JDC member. "We spent all day together, took the bus to the city, it was fun, like friends. We have so much in common, we are the same age. I didn't even see her wheelchair".

Towards the end of the year, students focused on the forced termination of their experience and shared concerns about the well-being of the JDC members without their involvement. They also expressed sadness as their role as counsellors came to an end.

#### **Feedback from JDC social workers and members**

The feedback from JDC was very positive. The social workers received weekly progress reports from both the students and the JDC members and noted that for most members, this experience was a first-hand, peer-like relationship. This was important to the participants in this program, as they were lacking social relationships due to their disability, especially with their peer groups. Their relationships with the students were not bound by a client-patient setting, which facilitated a mutual relationship based on common interests and friendship. Social workers also spoke of the added value in terms of holistic care for the JDC members. Two main challenges described were the added workload for the social worker, who held weekly conversations with the students and guided them; and situations in which the social worker's goals were not in-line with what the members wanted to address. During our supervision sessions, we addressed the students' roles and the boundaries of their relationships compared to the social worker.

#### **Overview of the students' experiential research**

The students' involvement in research started at the end of the first semester. By that time, they were engaged in the research and expressed their desire to study attitudes about disability that were of special interest to them. They were divided into pairs or groups of three and designed a study based on the MAS questionnaire (Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities, Fidler, Vilchinsky & Werner, 2007). Each group wrote a research design, found subjects to fill out 120 questionnaires, collected data, analyzed it, and wrote their findings and a discussion.

Our main concern was related to the students' academic load. Their ability to meet the experiential requirements and academic demands required preparing in advance. The faculty assigned a teacher's assistant to help students get organized with the research design.

#### **Students' overall feedback on the learning experience**

At the end of the year, students rated the course and gave it a very high score (6.57 out of 7, in the third percentile). Perhaps more enlightening were the students' voluntary verbal responses. Our analysis of their written summaries regarding their overall experience revealed an empowering experience both from their contribution to society and the discovery of their strengths as future therapists. Some stated this was their first experiential encounter, and their first opportunity to integrate the theory and body of knowledge with practice. Others described it as "their most influential course" since it gave them an opportunity to experience what it feels like to treat a patient while receiving the supervision and guidance they would expect to receive. Some spoke of the personal growth they experienced as they confronted their stereotypes and prejudices, and succeeded in transforming them in less than a year through personal interactions.

#### **CHALLENGES**

Nonetheless, this course presents several significant challenges, mainly in terms of the logistics it requires. This is an issue discussed by others as well (Kretchmar, 2001). First and foremost, it involves coordinating with an organization that can provide the volunteering infrastructure, and find suitable participants who can benefit the most from a student volunteer while also being physically, cognitively, and emotionally capable of connecting and maintaining a connection for the duration of the course. Another challenge is providing the students with a framework for learning, sharing, and ventilating, as an integral and formal part of the course syllabi. This requires the lecturer to have expertise and knowledge as a supervisor in psychology or related professions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The overall feedback on the course was highly positive. Students described a meaningful experience of personal growth that helped them choose their future direction as therapists and stated that they would recommend it to others. This pilot experience was deemed successful by all measures and by all parties - students, faculty, JDC staff, and JDC members. Due to this positive feedback, the course remained in the curriculum.

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