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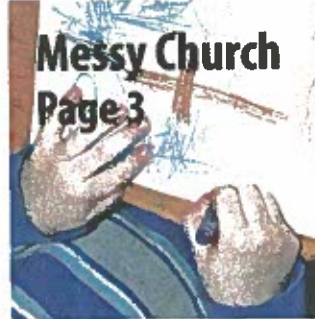
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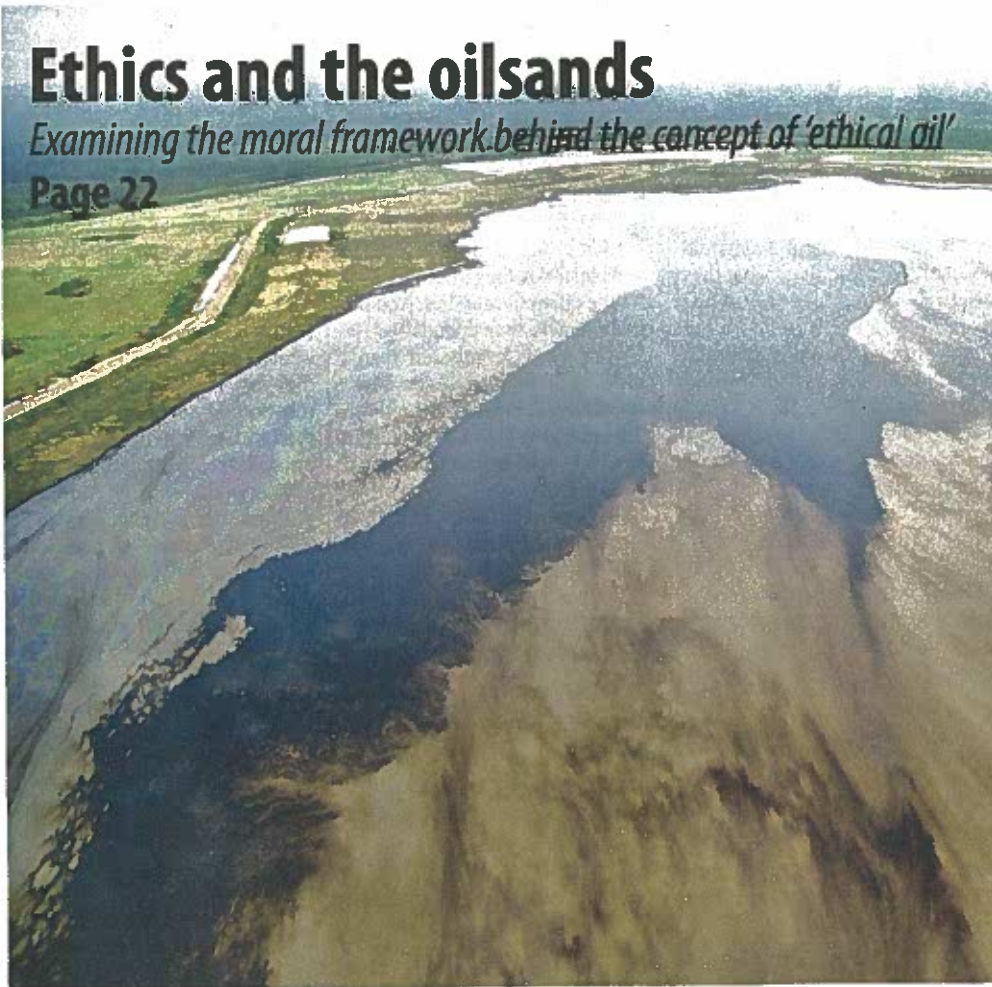
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# Book learning just part of education experience

Teaching profession changing from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side"

Doug Koop  
Special to ChristianWeek

Students learn better when they get hands-on experience to bolster the more abstract lecture-and-book approach to education. That makes sense, and schools are increasingly offering more opportunities to get out of the classroom and into the places where the subject at hand comes alive.

For many years in most post-secondary schools, professors have served primarily as the "sage on the stage." But research demonstrates that it's impossible for students to process all of the information presented during a typical lecture.

Being a "source of information" is not enough, observes Eric Mazur. The Harvard physicist has changed his teaching style and now describes himself as "the 'guide on the side'—a kind of coach, working to help students understand all the knowledge and information that they have at their fingertips."

Knowledge and information are vitally important, but actually understanding how to apply facts and concepts to real life situations is "at the heart of the educational task."

### Beyond the text

Christian universities and colleges in Canada have been travelling this

trail for some time. "Experiential education is not just the icing on the cake. It's the essential catalyst and ingredient that makes the Christian liberal arts experience come alive," says Trinity Western University president Jonathan Raymond.

"We create exposures that go beyond the text and the lecture."

He points out that "the model in many large, secular universities is exposure, test and forget. We try exposure, reflection and dialogue. That way the students begin to internalize the information." He sees TWU's athletic missions to South America and nursing teams learning in Zambia as "exposures that go beyond the text and the lecture."

And it isn't just TWU that does this well, says Raymond. "The bias" among member schools of Christian Higher Education Canada (CHEC) "is very much the same. We close ranks on the importance of this issue: whatever the field, it has to have praxis. Then the students internalize it. It becomes real. They can live it out in their specific vocation."

Hubert Krygsmann, president of Redeemer University College, acknowledges "many institutions are developing a range of such learning experiences to deepen abstract learning and make it more real."

This takes many forms, such as a lab to explore chemistry; performing a play in theatre rather than just reading a play; participating in a research project with a professor; having a co-op work experience or internship in business or social work.

**"Experiential education is not just the icing on the cake. It's the essential catalyst and ingredient that makes the Christian liberal arts experience come alive."**

However, "lectures and books remain valuable for learning, and in fact developing the capacity to think abstractly is an important feature of advanced learning. But even abstract thinking is helped by direct experience and also by creative alternative ways of exploring that learning," observes Krygsmann.

### Experiential age

"Educational philosophy and experience have long advocated for active engagement of students in the learning process," agrees Briercrest president Dwayne Uglem. "This has led to more dialogical and interactive classrooms and it has led to more direct interaction with real environments where the content of learning is being applied."

"To be sure, there are still good arguments for the classroom, but there is mounting pressure with this 'experiential' age to accommodate the learning styles and preferences of the students who are growing up in this age."

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David Guretzki, associate professor of Theology, Church and Public Life, explains how this generational shift is changing the learning experience at Briercrest. Nowadays, all graduating students have to develop and present a portfolio that demonstrates what they've learned.

Citing voluntarism as an example, he observes that students now are much more inclined to be involved experientially than those who came a decade or two ago. "Schools used to set up the program students signed up for. But now, students take the initiative. They choose where they serve."

Charles Nienkirchen of Ambrose University College is famous for taking students on travel adventures. "The Down Ancient Paths travel study program endeavours to engage the mind, heart and imagination in a holistic educational enterprise which seeks the illumination of the mind, the inspiration of the heart and the transformation of the life.

"Change a person's outer place and remarkable things can happen in their inner space. It reframes the way they see reality, improves the quality of questions they ask and the answers they get. Educational travel does this," says Nienkirchen.

**Environmental factor**

Experiential learning is part of many programs at The King's University College in Edmonton.

"An obvious example is the education program, with classroom experience in both early and late phases of the two-year program. Commerce and environmental studies students have practicum requirements in their respective programs," says King's president Harry Fernhout.

He draws special attention to the Environmental Studies program, which focuses on local, regional and provincial issues "using the 'environment' as the curriculum." Students have been involved in monitoring jackrabbit populations, monitoring regional planning, going on field trips to the tar sands, and challenging their own administration to incorporate sustainable practices at King's.

"The program was recently successfully reviewed for Canadian professional certification, and these experiential learning dimensions



caught the attention of the external reviewers," says Fernhout.

Booth University College president Donald Burke agrees that experiential learning is an important complement to classroom instruction. "This, of course, is common in professional programs where the field education component is critical to the development of the required skills.

"Thus, our Social Work program has a significant field component. Our business program has a less extensive practicum component,

but there is still a requirement to be in a placement."

**Character and service**

Carla Nelson directs the bachelor of education program at Tyndale University College. Greater emphasis is currently being placed on the integration of theory and practice—in all programs, she says.

"A dominant story on the educational landscape, being lived and told by teachers of all ages, is that their significant learning

happened mostly in the practicum placements. Many feel that their courses at university were hoops to jump through.

"The onus is therefore placed on universities to be relevant and to offer space to make the connections," she says.

"At the university level, a great lecture can and does motivate a learner to examine one's practice and character. Effective education, whether or not in a faith-based context (but especially in a faith-based context), ought not settle for the development of disciplined minds.

"Character and service are part of the mix. The emphasis on a faith and learning integration is being expanded to the integration of faith, learning and praxis."

"Learning styles also enter the equation. Many of us learn best in a combination of direct experience and reflection/abstraction. But there are students and professors who thrive on ideas and theorizing. We sometimes see them as the bookish types."

Harry Fernhout  
The King's University College

"Truth divorced from experience dwells in the realm of doubt."

Charles Nienkirchen  
Ambrose University College

"An educational philosopher has said that learning from experience is like getting the test first. Figuring out the lessons we are to learn comes after."

Carla Nelson  
Tyndale University College

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