



Raising the Stakes: The Role of Adaptive Expertise in History Experiential Learning Projects

Sarah Scripps, Department of History and International Studies, UW-Stevens Point

Background

How can we raise the stakes in humanities courses to encourage student engagement? This project analyzes the role of experiential learning projects in history classes, namely whether planning and implementing a service learning project for a general audience helps foster problem-solving skills. Over the course of the semester, students in the upper division history course HIST 390: Museum Exhibits researched, designed, and installed two exhibitions that culminated in an opening reception for the general public.

This study evaluates how raising the stakes in the classroom through a public outreach project enhances students' adaptive expertise, or capacity to deal with messy, complex problems (Wesch 2018). In particular, it argues that a culminating event (in this case, completing two exhibitions showcased at a formal reception) is critical in fostering students' metacognitive awareness of their role in overcoming challenges that often accompany service learning.

Methods and Questions

Students in the course completed a qualitative survey at the start of the service learning project and another qualitative survey at the end of the course following the exhibit reception. Out of a class of 26 students, 22 students participated in the survey and gave informed consent.

Students were asked a series of questions, including:

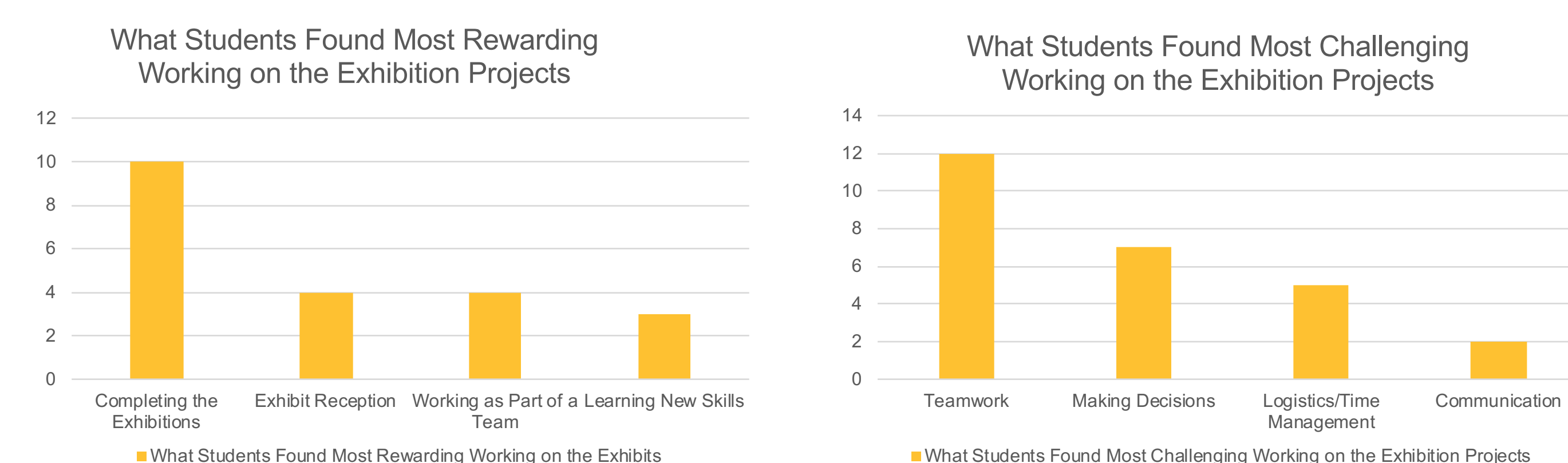
- What did you find most rewarding working on the exhibitions? What did you find the most challenging?
- Did you encounter any unforeseen issue or conflict that you needed to problem solve? If so, please describe the issue and the steps you took to try to resolve it.
- In general, do you think this class helped prepare you for unpredictable issues you might encounter in the workplace? If so, please describe how. If not, what skills, exercises, or activities should the course include in the future to students problem solve issues related to the project?



Scenes from the exhibit reception, Dec. 2019

Findings

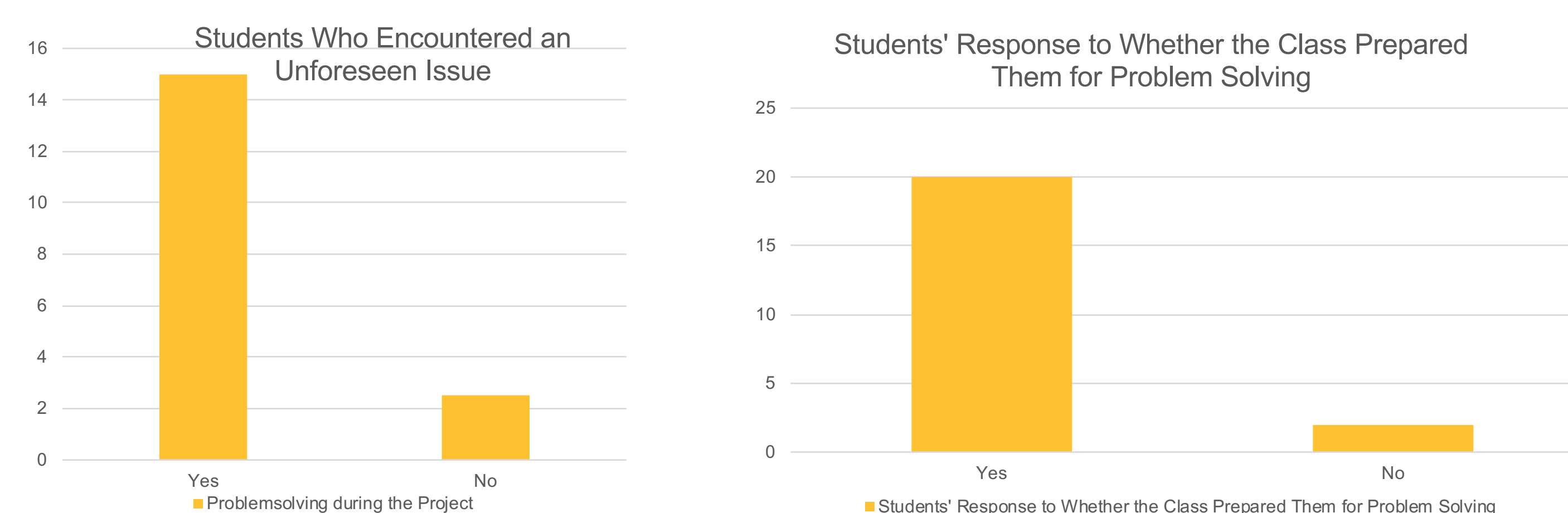
What students found most rewarding and challenging:



Sample Responses

- The most rewarding part was seeing the entire exhibit, including our outside research, come together in the final exhibit for the reception.
- I found it rewarding that we got to educate our community and bring context to the images in this building.
- The most rewarding was having a group that worked together well and pulled their own weight, as well as turning in a script we were proud of.
- Starting it and not knowing anything about producing a museum exhibit and then seeing the final product and all the hard work we put into it [in response to what was most rewarding].

Whether this class helped prepare students for unpredictable issues they might encounter in the future:



Sample Responses

- I learned that I can still be creative even if I don't have direct control of every decision.
- I feel that this class better prepared me for group work. In order to communicate more productively, I need practice working toward a common goal with multiple people who share different mindsets.
- I think I have gained a lot of patience throughout this semester and I learned that you can't please everyone. Even working with adults there will still be conflicts.
- Often I worked with people who dealt with conflict differently than I do. It was worthwhile to understand how to approach those situations.

Conclusions

Moments Matter.

When students identified what they found most rewarding about the service learning project, the majority addressed seeing the exhibitions completed and participating in the reception. It was not just the process of creating the exhibits but seeing the outcome of their labor publicly celebrated that students found most fulfilling (Heath and Heath 2017).

Teamwork is work.

The issue that students discussed most frequently was teamwork. Students mentioned teamwork as both one of the most rewarding and challenging aspects of the project, and the majority of students taking the survey identified teamwork as the skill they will most likely apply again in the future.

Adaptive expertise coincides with high impact practices.

Students shared that they valued the experience they gained working in groups (collaborative assignments), communicating to the public (service learning), and having a personal stake in the the final result (culminating experience). These results suggest that adaptive expertise aligns with high impact educational practices (Kuh 2008).

Acknowledgments

This project received generous support from the UW System Office of Professional & Instructional Development and UW-Stevens Point Provost's Office, Center for Inclusive Teaching and Learning, and Department of History & International Studies. Special thanks to the students of HIST 390 as well as the facilitators and 2018-2019 cohort of the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars Program for their feedback and encouragement.

Selected References

- Carbonell, Katerina Bohle, et. al. "How Experts Deal with Novel Situations: A Review of Adaptive Expertise." *Educational Research Review* 12 (2014): 14-29.
- Heath, Chip and Heath, Dan. *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.
- Kuh, George D. *High Impact Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2008.
- Sipress, Joel M. and Voelker, David J. "The End of the History Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model." *The Journal of American History* (March 2011): 1050-1065.
- Wesch, Michael. "Life 101: Lessons from Students in Pursuit of a Real Education." Public Lecture, UW System OPID Conference, 2018.

