

Time Travelers: The Commute from Campus to Community

It's the academic year 2005-6, and we are about to join the intrepid student time travelers from Campus X as they set forth on a quest to unknown worlds. Venturing far from home where time is measured in predictable credit hours and semesters, they are embarking on a valuable adventure. Their destinations are varied, and so we must resynchronize our watches to time measured in fiscal quarters or growing seasons, the length of a hospital stay or a third grader's recess.

Who are these academic space cadets? They are the thousands of college and university students who participate in academically-brokered, community-based learning. Across the country these programs are mushrooming under various monikers: service-learning, community-based research, co-operative learning, field placement, etc. What they have in common is a desire to connect academic reflection with the "real" world outside the classroom — what we at Beloit College call "hands-on, heads-engaged" learning. Still, even the most eager and capable will inevitably suffer a shock as they transition from one world to the other, from one version of time to another.

One of Beloit's programs, a not atypical example of community-based learning, places students at seventeen very different sites throughout the community: businesses, schools, social service agencies, farms, clinics, government agencies. The students work with little kids and bankers, diabetic patients and organic farmers, officials at city hall and recent immigrants. Varied as these populations and institutions are, they share similarities with each other and common temporal differences with the campus.

On campus, time has a definite horizon. Faculty and students know they only have to tolerate each other for a defined interval: m hours per week; n weeks per semester, then grades are turned in and we move on to the next cohort, just like clockwork. The consequences of our actions are constrained and defined — "you fulfill the requirements, we give you the diploma, then it's over." Or it can be, unless we make the connections between the academic world and the "real" world. Out in the "real" world, people don't graduate, nor can they drop the class. Opportunities are vast; so are the perils. Students need to be ready, because off campus, time has different consequences, as an unprepared student may soon find out. The rewards and penalties are far ranging — sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal. They may appear in the set of a jaw as a junior high kid's cynicism hardens because his college tutor took off for spring break and forgets to show up. Or, they may appear in as a "light bulb" grin when it dawns on this eighth grader that learning can be fun. The syncopation of academic life often causes dissonance out in the real world. Out here you can't hand in the assignment late. As one farmer tried to explain to a group of students, "You have to plant your cucumbers now; they won't wait until mid-terms are over." Out here there are no incompletes. Out here people are fired, not just flunked. Off campus there are fewer rewrites.

Agile student time travelers soon learn to rise to these challenges, moving beyond the predictable rhythm of the classroom to the free fall of working with those in poverty or to the warp speed of high finance. Some students will need to learn to suspend time to be with a dying person for whom the future has no meaning; some will have to speed up to catch a political deal in the making. Those who become adept at navigating between worlds will have secured a survival skill in an increasingly globalized world where cultural border crossings are an everyday occurrence.

On campus, time has regimented predictability. Off campus, time is paradoxical – both open-ended and very particular. A singular incident might yield what ethnographers call a “rich point,” a small vignette that reveals the essence of a whole world. And yet, one might have to live in a community for decades before the richly leaved and interwoven relationships of organizational history become clear.

Academic time is chopped into quanta – credit hours, semesters, academic units. Of course, an advantage of the artificial construct of campus-time is that it is easier to do “assessment” – a favorite activity of those who dwell in academia. Grades, which seem so meaningful in the academic time frame, often make no earthly sense in community contexts. This may be why it is so difficult for those engaged in community-based education to determine how many hours should be required to get an “A.” Progress can be tough to measure. Different units may be necessary in each context – profits are up, blood sugar levels are down, voter turnout is good, an autistic child makes eye contact for the first time. Learning how to define and evaluate success in each different space-time context may be one of the most important and transferrable lessons our student time travelers will learn.

So how do our students get up to speed? Faculty and staff who deploy and teach these adventurers serve two main roles. First, we operate as the clutch in the time machine, enabling these two worlds, spinning at different speeds, to interface smoothly. Time consists of the same fabric as space, as Einstein explained. Thus, it may be more than metaphorical to expect shifts in time to also alter our perceptions of our surroundings. For instance, students may feel as if the gravitational field suddenly increases as they step off campus. Words and actions carry more weight when visiting a teen mom in her living room than they did in the classroom, throwing off students’ reaction times. It is one thing to have an academic discussion about what constitutes an unfit parent; it is another to hold a baby on your lap and say the same thing to her mom. Students need to be prepped for the transitions, lest they come away cynical or confused, rather than enlightened. Buck Rogers may need us to slow him down, so that he listens for a long time before he speaks. Students need our help to connect the texts of their sites with their academic texts, and to find language to transport their truths between worlds. They need our help to recognize that differences in the way time is construed create differences in meaning.

Second, the faculty becomes Mission Control. We all dread the inevitable message from the internship site: “Houston, we have a problem.” To be helpful at such moments, we need to understand the resources and constraints of the contexts into which we send our students. Again turning to the physicists for our metaphors: time is not static, it is in dynamic flux. If we want to help beginning travelers navigate between cultural time zones, we need to be able to read the currents and know where rocks lay just below the surface. Community-based learning requires a constant process of iteration informed by the idiosyncracies of local knowledge. Knowing the

rules is good, but knowing the exceptions is even better. For instance, the starry-eyed time traveler may arrive on the site of the corporate headquarters of a multinational corporation, saying, “Take me to your leader.” Now, at Mission Control, we know this may be the wrong approach, no matter what the organizational chart says. We know that, depending on where we want to go, it may be the receptionist or the janitor, not the CEO, who is the key to the mission’s success. It is our job to help interpret the data, anticipate problems, implement repairs and point out opportunities that may be missed by the inexperienced. And so we, too, need to take time to study the organizational structures and consider time zone differences. To successfully broker these journeys, we need to venture off campus on frequent reconnaissance missions.

In all of this we need to acknowledge that we as faculty are often not much more than novices ourselves. Time travel is not just a skill for students to master; professors may also need to adjust their assumptions. Consider the difference in the manifestation of time for a tenured professor and that for almost any employee in any other context. This difference cannot be overestimated. Tenure can freeze time, allowing complacent faculty members to teach the same class with the same texts and same tests for 30 years. Those who must prove their relevance in a fast-paced world are not allowed to remain static. On the other hand, tenure may have the opposite effect, as profs launch into hyperspace, taking creative risks unimaginable to those who must yearly justify their existence to bosses, stockholders or funding agencies. Awareness of such differences can make us more competent travelers, as we guide our students. If we are willing to hit the “reveal codes” button, making our own learning transparent, we can help students understand that time travel requires lifelong learning. There are always strange new worlds to explore.

At our best, we can play Yoda to these young Luke Skywalkers. As masters to apprentices, we can help our time travelers find a regular beat in what seems to be arrhythmia. For instance, a student teacher entering a kindergarten class for the first time may perceive only random activity, while the master teacher sees purposeful learning and is able to direct it.

What, exactly, can students learn in the community that they can’t in the classroom? One important lesson is how to negotiate a graceful transition between worlds, anticipating when to brake and when to accelerate. This requires the ability to think outside of one’s own reference frame — a fundamental skill as students prepare to boldly go where no student has gone before. Another crucial lesson emphasizes the value of experience, as they get in the habit of testing book-learned theory against experience in the real world; they will, we hope, return to rewrite the books, linking real world time with academic theory.

Yet the most important lesson of time travel may be in finding one’s own stride. By learning to recognize the discrepancies between individual and cultural contexts, students gain the confidence they need to take control of their own explorations. They learn to adjust their pacing as smoothly as if stepping from a moving walkway and into their futures. In this way the journey of a thousand light years can begin with just a single step--off campus.

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