

2013

# Re-Envisioning the Honors Senior Project: Experience as Research

Kevin Gustafson

*University of Texas at Arlington, gustafson@uta.edu*

Zachary Cureton

*University of Texas at Arlington*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip>

---

Gustafson, Kevin and Cureton, Zachary, "Re-Envisioning the Honors Senior Project: Experience as Research" (2013). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 194.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip/194>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors in Practice -- Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Re-Envisioning the Honors Senior Project: Experience as Research

KEVIN GUSTAFSON AND ZACHARY CURETON

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

## HONORS EXPERIENTIAL CAPSTONE PROJECT (KEVIN GUSTAFSON)

One of the NCHC Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program is that it creates opportunities for undergraduate research, opportunities that frequently culminate in a senior thesis or capstone project (Spurrier 200–201). The senior research project typically distinguishes honors students from their non-honors counterparts in a significant way. The emphasis on undergraduate research may also distinguish an honors program or college (“or college” will be understood throughout this essay) within the university, where honors often becomes a *de facto* center for undergraduate research. Increasing opportunities for undergraduate research thus not only benefits honors students—by giving them a greater range of educational experiences and making them stronger candidates for jobs, fellowships, and graduate or professional school—but also helps honors programs institutionally as they seek to create alliances and obtain resources in both the university and the larger community.

Promoting undergraduate research within a comprehensive university also presents a number of challenges, perhaps the most basic being how to define research. Many honors programs acknowledge this difficulty by making a distinction between a thesis and a creative activity, but research varies much more widely, as is readily apparent to any honors administrator faced with reading projects well outside her field of academic specialization. The difficulty of defining research within honors in many ways reflects challenges within universities and even individual disciplines. Some of these differences are longstanding: between qualitative and quantitative methodologies in the social sciences, for example, or between more or less overtly politically informed scholarship in the humanities. Other differences are more recent, such as the move to promote entrepreneurial research or to make universities more socially accountable by addressing “wicked problems” such as poverty, illiteracy, and climate change (Thorp and Goldstein). A second new challenge involves what might be called (to adapt a term from Alfred North Whitehead) the differing rhythms of education across a comprehensive university. The traditional thesis is no doubt better suited

to some disciplines than to others. It may work well in the liberal arts, where the primary goal of honors education may be to prepare students for similar work in graduate school, but less well in majors in which advanced undergraduates are expected to do a semester- or year-long residency or internship, either for certification or as preparation for the job market. Here the honors capstone is potentially in conflict with a senior requirement that the student be off-campus gaining professional experience while honors is requiring a sustained individual research project with a faculty mentor.

Several writers have discussed the impact of such disciplinary differences in honors enrollment (Jones and Watson; Giazzoni; Noble and Dowling). The present essay describes one attempt to address this problem at a programmatic level by tailoring the honors research project to the needs of curricula that promote or require a significant extramural capstone. This solution was developed within a specific context. The University of Texas at Arlington Honors College is a well-established, distinct unit within a large comprehensive public university that identifies itself as research-intensive and is seeking to be more so. The college follows a model of honors education in which students accrue most of their honors hours through contracted courses in their major rather than in a core sequence of interdisciplinary classes, and the college requires a substantial senior project, which the student is expected to pursue primarily under a faculty mentor in her home department but also in consultation with members of the honors staff.

Although rooted in a programmatic desire to increase participation from historically underrepresented majors, our experiment with more experiential approaches to honors senior research—the “experiential capstone”—quickly took on more philosophical dimensions and can no doubt be adapted to a variety of institutions. The potential for an experiential model is suggested by the section, later in this essay, that demonstrates a student project rooted in a year-long study abroad program. As this project reveals, incorporating experiential learning into undergraduate research requires a great deal of forethought and flexibility from students, faculty mentors, and honors administrators, but it can be a productive means of expanding conceptions of research and of building relationships both across and beyond the campus.

There is already a rich tradition of experiential learning in honors, from the pioneering monograph *Place as Text* (Braid and Long) to subsequent essays on specific courses or programs (Parker; Braid; Smith; Dunbar et al.; Bishop and Sittason; Holman et al.; Powell). The NCHC Basic Characteristics, in fact, explicitly encourage such learning (Spurrier 200), but they treat experiential learning and research separately. Our aim was to integrate experiential learning in a research-based capstone project. The possibility of doing so at our institution was suggested by the success of students in nursing, which has a high rate of participation in honors despite the fact that the program requires extensive clinical work from its undergraduate majors. These students have succeeded in part because the nursing program has a faculty liaison committed to helping honors students develop research projects rooted in their clinical placements. These

projects give nursing students in honors an important added educational experience in ways that promote the academic goals of the major. The challenges have also been instructive. In the most successful projects, the student had a clearly defined research objective and methodology before stepping into the clinical placement, which necessarily became the student's primary focus. The student also had to assess in an ongoing way the particular strengths and weaknesses of the clinical placement as a forum for conducting research. The most frequently noted advantages were the ability to work in depth with subjects and to observe situations over a period of time while the most typically cited disadvantage was the limited N (number of research subjects) for purposes of quantitative analysis: usually the student either had a limited population to study or was dependent on respondents' completing a survey while they were seeking or providing medical treatment.

The overall success of these clinically based projects was the impetus to develop three experiential honors capstone options that could be used across campus: a community service learning placement, a paid or unpaid professional internship, or a semester- or year-long study abroad program. We decided from the beginning to allow each unit to decide which options might constitute honors for its students. To this end, honors administrators provided department chairs with brief descriptions of the options, including basic learning outcomes, and where possible gave presentations at department meetings. The goal was three-fold: to give departments a greater sense of ownership of their honors students, to convey the desire of honors to be responsive to differences among various undergraduate programs, and to encourage units to approve more experiential options if faculty were willing and able to serve as mentors for such work. Many departments readily agreed to all of the options, others adopted some and not others, and yet others decided that their honors students should be allowed to do only a traditional thesis.

While expanding the range of options, we also wanted to maintain a degree of uniformity among them so that potentially quite different kinds of projects would share certain family resemblances. All projects had to be grounded in a recognized scholarly concern within the student's major field, and all had to lead to a substantial written product that included a formal proposal of the research topic, a literature review, a discussion of the research methodology, and an account of the results and significance of the study. To this extent, the thesis remained the model for all senior project options; the chief variable was the archive. Students pursuing an experiential capstone would have an obligation to determine the nature of that archive and a methodology appropriate to their work off-campus. The pressing—and productive—question became how and why research for this project had to be completed outside the lab or library.

The general aim of all the experiential options was to push students to work within what Kolb calls "a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (21). At its best, such learning can help students "develop a sense of agency" and explore intersections of their biography with that of the world (Palmer cited by Braid 41). We

expected more specific goals to differ by individual project and, in a more predictable way, by option. A capstone rooted in study abroad might focus primarily on different approaches to cultural understanding—as indeed was the case of the sample project below. By contrast, a capstone based on an internship might be more concerned with developing professional competence, and one in community service learning might foreground attitudes toward and expressions of civic responsibility, which are often seen as central to such work (Bringle and Hatcher, “Implementing,” 223).

As it turned out, community service learning offered a useful model for all of the experiential options, in part because it has a strong institutional presence on our campus that includes a resource center and faculty training in how to design transformative learning experiences (see also Eyler and Giles; Furco; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz). Community service learning also has a well-developed literature on off-campus placement as a parallel archive and on how a student must rethink traditional methodologies in order to make use of it (Howard). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it has a literature on reflective practices and how to map the cognitive trajectories of such reflection. Like many in the field, Cooper associates effective critical reflection with writing. Drawing on the educational philosophy of Dewey and Kolb’s standard work on experiential learning, he presents written reflection as a way for students to practice detailed observation, to analyze and work out the implications of those observations in light of received theories, and to entertain and evaluate alternative conceptions. A similar emphasis can be found in Eyler et al., who note that effective reflection “need not be a difficult process, but does need to be a purposeful and strategic process” (6). Bringle and Hatcher argue that reflection can help in clarifying values, but only if it is guided and occurs regularly. Similarly, Stanton warns that less structured or goal-oriented reflection can lead to service learning that is “haphazard, accidental, and superficial” (185). Ash and Clayton effectively sum up and develop these attitudes when they define critical reflection as “an evidence-based examination of the sources of and gaps in knowledge and practice, with an intent to improve both” (“Generating,” 27–28)—a process designed to lead students to develop capacities for “generating,” “deepening,” and “documenting” their learning:

It *generates* learning (articulating questions, confronting bias, examining causality, contrasting theory with practice, pointing to systemic issues), *deepens* learning (challenging simplistic conclusions, inviting alternative perspectives, asking “why” iteratively) and *documents* learning (producing tangible expressions of new understandings for evaluation). (27)

Clayton and Ash are specifically concerned with the dynamics of such reflection and specific mechanisms for facilitating it. Working in the framework of Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains, they present critical reflection as a means of progressing through a hierarchy of thinking skills: knowledge,

comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (31–32). They present successful critical reflection as a way for students to develop these skills in response to specific learning goals. In the case of applied learning, that process is broken down into three main stages, which they identify with the acronym DEAL: (detailed) Description, Examination (in light of specified learning goals), and Articulation of Learning (which implies action to be taken and anticipates renewal of the process) (41–42; see also Ash and Clayton, “Articulated”).

Such work on critical reflection has been particularly useful in setting academic expectations for the experiential capstone. The focus on critical reflection as a tool rather than merely a product of learning has gone a long way in reminding the student that the activity is not the goal, which is instead to gain and articulate a clearer understanding of the way their discipline creates knowledge and of the personal and social context for such knowledge. Scholarship on critical reflection also foregrounds the importance of design: the need to develop in advance the specific disciplinary goals of the capstone while realizing that these goals will be shaped and modified in an ongoing process of critical reflection.

Presenting critical reflection as a sustained intellectual and discursive effort also makes the experiential capstone less deceptively seductive. Students who might otherwise associate reflection with merely noting opinions and feelings will realize that they are tasked with examining the cultural basis of their impressions and with exploring how their discipline gives them particular tools for analyzing and evaluating what they observe. They will also realize that critical reflection requires writing within the framework of clear, if flexible, research objectives, perhaps even more than in the case of a traditional thesis. Finally, students will become aware of the generic conventions of reflective writing, which might include the common narratives of cognitive development (e.g. enlightenment, illumination, transformation) or cultural interaction. These narratives might concern emotional and ethical development, as described in the work of Rockquemore and Schaffer, whose analysis of journals kept by community service learning students noted a tendency for these students to move through phases characterized as shock (a lack of identification with those in need), normalization (a growing capacity for identification with those in need as individuals), and finally engagement (a move from mere identification to a desire to understand and remedy the structural causes of poverty).

The process is challenging not only to students but also to faculty mentors and honors staff. Most honors programs rely on the goodwill of faculty to serve as mentors, often with little institutional incentive, and the traditional thesis has the advantage of resembling standard academic work in the discipline. An honors thesis in the humanities and social sciences may look like a shorter version of an MA thesis while one in the sciences may grow out of research conducted in the mentor’s lab. The familiarity of the traditional thesis may in part explain its popularity. An experiential capstone is likely to be messier and less predictable. Howard writes of community service learning that it is a counter-normative pedagogy for those accustomed to teacher- or content-centered learning (Howard; see also Clayton and Ash, “Shifts”), a comment that can no doubt be applied to

experiential learning more generally. As research migrates out of the library or lab, the role of the mentor typically changes from authority figure to facilitator. The faculty member and administrator may also be required to spend more time with the student, articulating and negotiating expectations for the project, and both the student and the mentor have to allow for the possibility that the original disciplinary questions may need to be radically revised or even jettisoned. Yet the process is also potentially quite invigorating as it prompts students, faculty, and honors administrators to focus in a consistent way on the nature, methodologies, and aims of discipline-based undergraduate research.

Zachary Cureton describes below one example of a challenging and invigorating experiential capstone project that drew on his honors double major in Russian and psychology and developed in conjunction with his year-long study abroad program in St. Petersburg. Like many students in modern languages, he signed up for a year abroad primarily to improve his language skills and to immerse himself in a culture that he had known only through his classroom studies of cultural artifacts in print and other media. He was also interested, because of his psychology major, in how people adapt to new environments, a question that led him to intercultural theory. He first used the theory as an interpretive lens for Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—work that he might have completed without going abroad. In order to make his research experiential, he expanded the project by reflecting on his own process of adaptation, first to Russian society and then back to the U.S.

Cureton's project cannot be taken as representative of all experiential capstones, but it offers a particularly good example of critical reflection that combined a personal dimension with discipline-specific analysis and evaluation. The success of his project is in part a product of its structure: he was challenged to write about interculturality from three distinct perspectives and in the different discursive modes of theoretical exposition, literary analysis, and personal memoir. The project involved considerable negotiation and numerous potential pitfalls. One danger was that Cureton might rely too heavily on personal narrative or not relate that narrative sufficiently to the research question. Another was that, by juxtaposing his account of adaptation with that of the character in Solzhenitsyn's novella, he might seem to trivialize Solzhenitsyn's work or produce offensive commentary on contemporary Russian society. As it turns out, working through this problem was a crucial—and unanticipated—feature of his critical reflection.

## **SAMPLE PROJECT (ZACHARY CURETON)**

I originally planned to study in Russia for a year to work on my language skills and become more cultured. (I now realize how little I understood the meaning of that term.) Then I was offered the chance to build an honors senior research project based on the trip, and I eventually developed a project that would combine intercultural theory, literary study, and personal reflection on

my time living in Russia in order to understand ways in which people do and do not adapt to new surroundings. I had traveled quite a bit and was accustomed to languages I did not understand and seeing behavior that seemed odd, but, before this project, I did not have a way of describing why that behavior felt odd or of accounting for the emotional effects of going to a foreign place or returning home from one—or even how home might seem different once I did return. Part of my goal was to learn some theory and apply it to myself, but I also wanted to bring that theory to a literary work. I eventually chose Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1962 novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* for several reasons. The book was on a syllabus for class, and it was short enough—and the Russian basic enough—for me to read and absorb the original. The work also defines a particular point in Soviet-era Russian history. Finally, the novella showed how someone could adapt—even adapt too much—to circumstances that most of us could not imagine enduring.

### INTERCULTURALITY

I approached the novella through the lens of intercultural theory. The birth of intercultural studies is usually traced to Franz Boas's interactions with an Inuit community on a trip to the Arctic in 1883 (Shaules). An accomplished man in Germany, Boas found himself helpless without his Inuit companions, and his surprise at cultural differences led him to approach their culture from a fairly neutral point of view, without feelings of superiority. A second milestone was Edward Hall's publication in 1959 of *The Silent Language*, in which he coined the term "intercultural communication." He argued that cultural conditioning was something deeply imbedded in each individual's psychological makeup (Shaules 47–9). Intercultural communication involves awareness of the reactions we have during intercultural interactions because of our own cultural conditioning. Such interactions occur all the time, but some are strong enough to appear novel to a normal mind and cause a spontaneous reaction. Intercultural communication occurs when a person is moved by such interaction to question not only himself but also the part of himself, derived from culture, that he assumed to be correct and absolute (Alred, Byram, and Fleming 57; Sen Gupta 162; Ickes 54).

Intercultural theory thus uses "culture" in a very specific way to denote a set of values that inform a person from earliest childhood so that, as an adult, he comes to embody identifiable features of a particular ethnic, linguistic, or geographical group (Nørgaard 194; Lyons, Kenworthy, and Popan 1269). The intensity of one's reaction to another culture can often be attributed to the thoroughly subconscious nature of this cultural learning. Constructivist theories of psychology suggest that a person's behavior is less a matter of genetic programming than a function of how environment activates genetic seeds, but genetic programming and cultural learning probably work together to build an individual. The genetic ground on which to build is selected, certain genetic predispositions are dug out of the individual by society and repressed, and on this genetic base the conscious self is built. Society builds individuals through this process of



enculturation, in which they develop certain tastes and preferences alongside a sense of belonging. Culture runs deep. As Sen Gupta puts it, “Effective enculturation produces ways of being, doing and thinking that are so deeply entrenched that they are automatic and we are simply unaware that our behavior is caused by these unconscious mechanisms” (162; see also Phinney 33).

### ***ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH***

Intercultural theory gave me a general framework for cultural exchanges and adaptation, but, as Sen Gupta suggests, we often are not immediately aware of our own cultural assumptions. So I turned to a work of Russian fiction to gain some distance and trace a case of adaptation in a slower and more deliberate way. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* offered a useful, if extreme, example of enculturation. The novella was also, in retrospect, a risky choice because, by using intercultural theory to examine both it and my own experience in Russia, I might seem to be trying to compare modern Russia to a Soviet-era Gulag or my experience as a U.S. study abroad student to that of a political prisoner doing hard labor. Intercultural theory ultimately could not help me avoid this problem. The theory was useful for explaining how we come to be who we are, how and why we react to others different from ourselves, and how we do and do not adapt to new circumstances, but it did not readily provide a way to think about radically different kinds of circumstances. In fact, Solzhenitsyn’s novella was ultimately valuable to this study precisely because it suggested the limitations of a purely theoretical approach to cultural adaptation.

*One Day* recounts the working day of a prisoner in a Gulag, a Russian prison camp for political dissidents. Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, referred to in the story simply as Shukhov or “Shcha-854,” takes the reader through his normal routine, noting a few experiences that made this day “almost a happy one” (181). He is awakened at five in the morning by a hammer-banging reveille. He lies in a little too long, however, and is punished by an angry Tartar, who initially threatens to throw him into the “hole” but instead decides to have him clean the floor in the warders’ post. Shukhov cleans the floors and then shuffles off to sickbay, where he is not admitted, and returns to his hut. His gang eats at the mess and then sets to work at a power station construction site. Shukhov is one of the most skilled of his work crew and so avoids the most gruesome labor. After the workday is over the gang returns to camp for a bowl of soup, and Shukhov begins to do some of the side jobs that keep him alive. By saving a friend a spot in line, he receives part of his parcel. He also buys some tobacco from a Latvian. Shukhov goes to sleep content with his day’s handiwork, which has consisted of hiding in his bunk a piece of bread that he couldn’t eat, hustling part of a cigarette off someone, stealing tarpaper for his work site, and sneaking a piece of metal into the camp. He survives day by day through dubious means that sometimes deprive others of comfort—a quiet fight for survival.

Shukhov’s account testifies to the power of people to adapt to even the harshest conditions. Yet the novel and its reception also witness a quite different aspect of intercultural theory: the difficulty, once transformed, of returning to

one's original culture in any simple way. The novella was begun in 1957 and first published in the literary journal *Novy Mir* (*New World*) in 1962, when Khrushchev's regime was seeking to repudiate Stalin's rule. One of the first targets for reform was the Gulag system. Millions of prisoners were released, and many Soviet leaders found Solzhenitsyn's book a powerful tool for revealing and discrediting Stalin's brutal system. Publication also prompted those still in prison to flood literary magazines with memoirs of their experiences. Yet as Khrushchev started a program to free long-time prisoners, many of them could no longer survive in the highly ordered Soviet culture of the time. The program was canceled. The implication, from the standpoint of intercultural theory, is that one can adapt in such a severe way as to lose one's previous self. Such adaptation typically occurs when one is confronted with a new cultural imperative. In this case, the prisoners had to surrender all of themselves to the culture of the Gulag in order to survive. Yet that adaptation was so extreme as to be difficult or even impossible in many cases to reverse. As Dobson writes, whereas the inmates had been imprisoned within the Gulag by dogs, guns, and men, outside of it they were imprisoned by the culture that they had so thoroughly absorbed (586). Solzhenitsyn may have realized the problem. Although *One Day* was published well into the Khrushchev thaw, the novella does not end with, or even hint at, Shukhov's release—perhaps because the novella is the account of one day back in the Stalinist era and also possibly because Solzhenitsyn may have recognized that physical liberation would be only be a starting point and that those who had by necessity adapted to the culture of the Gulag would in some ways always remain imprisoned. The matter-of-fact narration of prison life in *One Day* underscores the power of adaptation as for Shukhov the daily battle for survival has become normal. Prison culture runs deep.

*One Day* also seems to preclude the possibility that one can become effectively bicultural, or able to move from one culture to another and have a double vision of both. This problem was quite likely outside the aim of the novella, which was written primarily to make the rest of Russia (and the world) aware of the inhuman treatment of millions of political prisoners in forced labor camps and to give witness to the resilience of Shukhov and others in surviving in such circumstances. Yet Solzhenitsyn was himself bicultural: he spent time in the Gulag, was eventually released, and lived for decades in exile in the U.S. before returning late in life to Russia. Adaptation, in his case, was only one part of a larger, tri-partite narrative that began with a more or less unconscious existence in one culture, interaction with an alien culture, and then a more conscious awareness of the conventional nature of his own assumptions.

The third part of my project was to trace this trajectory by applying intercultural theory to my own intercultural experience as a U.S. student in contemporary Russia. Once again, my purpose was not to compare myself to Shukhov, or Solzhenitsyn, and I recognize the dangers of a theory that would allow me to do so, yet, as I studied intercultural theory, I became increasingly aware of the deeply emotional ways I was responding to the journey from Texas to Russia and then back again to Texas.

## MEMOIR

**I Woke Up**

Intercultural theory emphasizes the little things that make us who we are. Finding out what my daily routine in Russia would be and how it would vary from my routine in the U.S. forced me to wake up and accept my new life. Initially I was not sure how to act or what my routine was supposed to be. How would I dress, what I would eat, and how would I adjust to the weather? I awoke to hoarfrost at times. My host family and I lived in a seventeen-story apartment complex that curled like a lazy U. Because my flat was in the cup of the U, it was sheltered from the worst of the winds, yet during winter and spring I would invariably put on two coats, two shirts, a fur hat, a scarf, a pair of gloves, two pairs of socks, thermal underpants, jeans, and tall boots before I walked to school in the morning. The earflaps of my hat were always tied behind my neck, half up and half down, so that I looked like some warrior riding into battle.

Some intercultural awakening is dramatic, as when one witnesses, or is the object of, an act of violence or discrimination. Mine was more gradual. On my daily commute, I did not have a sense that others singled me out as a foreigner. I was instead aware of how people barely acknowledged me (or others) on the metro, how they shoved and pushed on the tramway, and how they threatened me if I spilled my tea. These were new forms of communication to me, and I might have dismissed one or two such incidents if I had been simply a tourist, but, because I was there for months and because commuting became part of my daily routine, I came to see the brusque functionalism of these interactions as part of the culture, as the means by which Russians—and perhaps others who rely on high-volume forms of public transportation—protect their personal space. I also recognized early on that this cultural difference was deeply ingrained in Russian commuters and that I was the one who was going to have to change. This realization was a moment of intercultural awakening. I had to wait for my ticket home, push my way with the rest of the crowd, keep my head down, and guard my space.

**I Walked**

In the U.S. I drove, often too quickly, between school and work and home. Like so many others in my culture, I was used to traveling in my own pod and, except during traffic jams, on my own schedule. We call it a freeway for a reason. In Russia I learned to walk, and to walk deliberately, as part of a large group. I came to associate walking with resistance to the elements—the cold air, the snow crunching under my feet—and a quiet determination to persist. My walking self was perhaps the most mundane expression of the new Russian identity I was forming, a solitary figure even when surrounded by other people. In my daily commute to school, there was one line-switch that always had the same feeling about it: Dostoevskiaia, at the junction between the orange line where my home was and the red line that led to my school. Only two escalators took

the crowds from the first to the second level, where we could walk a little further and board a train along the red line. Upon exiting the metro car, everyone headed toward the escalators. There was never a break in the line, and each of us huddled with the person in front and behind in a procession that combined unity and anonymity. Most of all, however, walking gave me time to slow down and simply think. I began to see why people use the phrase “Russian soul” to describe both the dark view of life and the strength to face darkness. I began to see such a soul in myself.

## **I Went Home**

By the end of the second semester it was time to leave Russia and return to the U.S. Intercultural theory posits and even praises the idea of the bicultural individual, mostly based on the assumption that people with two cultural selves can more readily accept, and peaceably co-exist with, those different from them. I found the transition frustrating, at least at first. By the time I left Russia I was in some sense bicultural, and I had been there long enough to develop a Russian personality. My Russian family, friends, and colleagues required me to be only Russian, and when I returned to the U.S. it was difficult to be American again. Research on interculturality was not very helpful at this point. It explained how I developed my Russian self but offered little other than “culture shock” to describe what coming home would be like.

The difficulty of my return inspired me to do further research into studies of assimilation and repatriation—of how an individual can change back or at least reach a point of balance and a new conception of home. Living in another culture was a life-changing experience, but not in any simple way. For me at least, it was both freeing and terrifying because the strangeness of another culture challenged me to confront the strangeness of my own. It was also a chance to shape a new version of myself through adaptation as the Russian cultural and even physical environment drew on or accentuated aspects of my character that were largely dormant in my home culture. Not all of these aspects were positive. In Russia I was quieter and less eager to please; even tougher for me was that Russia asked me to stand up and walk in ways that I had not had to in suburban Texas.

As I gradually adjusted to life back in the U.S., I changed yet again—and again not in a completely positive way. One of the greatest challenges in adjusting to life back home was how to interact with my family and friends. Even more frustrating than trying to navigate between my new Russian and old American identities was my inability to explain the process of doing so. I found that the only people who could understand were others who had experienced deep intercultural change. Others, even those close to me, acknowledged how much I had changed but seemed threatened by it, even to the point of hostility, perhaps because the malleability of my identity made them feel less certain about the fixity of their own.

The emotional dimensions of study abroad were the most important and also most difficult to track and translate in theoretical terms. Put it another way,

part of the point of intercultural theory—and perhaps the limitation of it as a theory—is that experiences can be compared but not completely shared. This was one of the lessons of Solzhenitsyn’s novella: I could read *One Day* and feel sympathy and outrage, but I ultimately could not fully relate to Shukhov’s struggle because I had never lived in a prison camp. I believe that Solzhenitsyn described an emotionally detached prisoner in part to suggest the limited ability of those outside the Gulag system to empathize.

## CONCLUSION (KEVIN GUSTAFSON)

The project described above met many of the goals we had set out for an experiential capstone: it defined a disciplinary problem, presented a survey of scholarship on the topic, and then explored the problem in methodologically innovative ways. The project also revealed several difficulties, most of which turned on the role of personal narrative. One problem was specific to the project: the attempt to apply intercultural theory first to Solzhenitsyn’s classic exposé of life in a Stalin-era Gulag and then to the student’s own experience as a U.S. undergraduate in contemporary Russia. Cureton was asked at every stage to think about the implications of such juxtaposition, and the lesson was ethical as well as methodological. The student was also challenged by how to use memoir within an academic context. He was encouraged to keep, and did keep, a detailed journal of his time in St. Petersburg. Such writing came very easily to him, as it does to many students, and he embraced the freedom to be creative in this way. It took time and practice for him to develop the habit of going back to the theory to enrich his understanding and account of his experience. It was no doubt fortunate that he had an entire year in Russia, giving him time to rethink the project and look more deeply into his reactions while he was still there. Students who do not have this luxury will be more pressed to make sure that their journals or blogs are submitted regularly and that such writing includes not only detailed description but also analysis of the experience and its significance to disciplinary research questions or problems. In this way the journal can, in the words of Ash and Clayton (“Generating”), be a tool for generating, deepening, and documenting learning.

Experiential capstones are by nature individualistic, even idiosyncratic, and for this reason they are not for every student. They may seem deceptively easy because of the opportunity for personal reflection, but, in fact, they are probably most likely to succeed for students who are self-motivated, highly organized, and patient. Experiential capstones are also likely to be more labor-intensive for faculty mentors and honors administrators, particularly at the front end, yet there are ways to avoid reinventing the wheel with each project, one of which is to put greater emphasis on active learning in the honors curriculum. Honors administrators can encourage students to do contracts in courses that have an active learning component, and the honors program can offer workshops or a credit-bearing course on experiential learning. Such a course might combine

foundational readings in the philosophical and institutional bases for experiential education, recent work on experiential pedagogy in practice, published case studies of experiential research, and practice in designing a discipline-based project. Our experience is that students are more likely to understand and embrace sophisticated modes of critical reflection if they have a sound working definition of experiential learning as well as a sense of the philosophy underlying it.

For all its challenges, the development of experiential capstones has a number of potential benefits. Experiential research is a good way for the college to help students develop their résumés, engage in outreach, and build partnerships in the local community. Experiential options are also a good way for honors administrators to engage in academic reflection of their own. The work of designing the experiential options has already had a positive programmatic effect at UT Arlington, prompting us to revisit our more traditional capstones. The standard thesis option stands to benefit from the option of experiential capstones since, although the thesis can be an excellent means of developing a number of skills, its status as traditional or venerable can suggest a focus on the mastery of technique, perhaps to the exclusion of other kinds of critical reflection.

The benefits of experiential capstones have been most obvious in the creative activity option that had traditionally been reserved for students in fine arts: the previous tendency had been to see this option as simply an alternative to research, but our work with experiential options has helped us underscore more fully the ways in which creative activities can be a form of research. For example, in one recent creative project—an original screenplay—the student was required to outline her research into the formal and technical dimensions of the screenplay genre, to describe and evaluate the various archives (personal and published) used to develop the content of her screenplay, and then to write critically about that work in light of generic expectations and potential marketability.

As Dewey would remind us, a thesis is an educational experience, and thus in his view it is important for us to understand the purpose of that experience and how best to shape it. The experiential capstones tend to foreground the larger social, ethical, and even personal dimensions of doing research. As such, they offer not just interesting alternatives to the traditional honors thesis but an opportunity to enrich it.

## REFERENCES

- Alred, Geof, Michael Byram, and Michael Fleming, eds. *Intercultural Experience and Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2003. Print.
- Ash, Sarah L., and Patti H. Clayton. "The Articulated Learning: An Approach to Guided Reflection and Assessment." *Innovative Higher Education* 29.2 (2004): 137–54. Print.
- . "Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning: The Power of Critical Reflection in Applied Learning." *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education* 1 (2009): 25–48. Print.

- Bishop, David M., and Kelli S. Sittason. "Integrating an Honors Minor, Education Major, and Global Teacher Preparation." *Honors in Practice* 3 (2007): 87–97. Print.
- Braid, Bernice. "Major in the Minor: A Closer Look at Experiential Learning." *Honors in Practice* 4 (2008): 37–42.
- Braid, Bernice, and Ada Long. *Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning*. Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council, 2000. Print.
- Bringle, Robert G., and Julie A. Hatcher. "Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education." *Journal of Higher Education* 67.2 (1996): 221–39. Print.
- . "Reflection in Service Learning: Making Meaning of Experience." *Educational Horizons* 7:4 (1999): 179–85. Print.
- Clayton, Patti H., and Sarah L. Ash. "Shifts in Perspective: Capitalizing on the Counternormative Nature of Service-Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 11 (2004): 59–70. Print.
- Cooper, David D. "Reading, Writing, and Reflection." *Academic Service Learning: A Pedagogy of Actions and Reflections*. Ed. Robert A. Rhoads et al. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. 47–56. Print.
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938. Print.
- Dobson, Miriam. "Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers' Responses to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*." *Slavic Review* 64.3 (2005): 580–600. Web. 29 Oct. 2011. <<http://libproxy.uta.edu:2055/stable/3650143>>.
- Dunbar, David, et al. "An Honors Interdisciplinary Community-Based Research Course." *Honors in Practice* 9 (2013): 129–40.
- Eyler, Janet, and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. *Where's the Learning in Service Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999. Print.
- Eyler, Janet, Dwight E. Giles, and Angela Schmiede, eds. *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service Learning*. Nashville: Vanderbilt, 1996. Print.
- Furco, Andrew. "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education." *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service, 1996. 2–6. Print.
- Giazzoni, Michael. "The Fessenden Honors in Engineering Program." *Honors in Practice* 3 (2007): 79–82. Print.
- Holman, Debra K., et al. "Honoring Experiential Education." *Honors in Practice* 5 (2009): 211–18. Print.
- Howard, Jeffrey. "Academic Service Learning: A Counternormative Pedagogy." *Academic Service Learning: A Pedagogy of Action and Reflection*. Ed. Robert A. Rhoads et al. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. 21–30. Print.
- Ickes, William. *Strangers in a Strange Lab: How Personality Shapes Our Initial Encounters with Others*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. eBook.
- Jones, Beata M., and Peggy W. Watson. "Separate but Equal: Will It Work for Professional Honors Programs?" *Honors in Practice* 5 (2009): 53–67. Print.

- Kolb, David. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983. Print.
- Lyons, Patricia A., Jared B. Kenworthy, and Jason R. Popan. "Ingroup Identification and Group-Level Narcissism as Predictors of U.S. Citizens' Attitudes and Behavior Toward Arab Immigrants." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36 (2010): 1267–1280. Print.
- Noble, Lynne Steyer, and Jennifer E. Dowling. "Where Are the Education Majors and Faculty?" *Honors in Practice* 3 (2007): 83–86. Print.
- Nørgaard, Jens Lautrup. "Intercultural Ethics: A Hermeneutic Approach to Ethics in Intercultural Communication." *Intercultural Alternatives: Critical Perspectives on Intercultural Encounters in Theory and Practice*. Ed. Maribel Blasco and Jan Gustafsson. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School, 2004. 193–215. Print.
- Parker, Ann T. "Service Learning in the Honors Composition Classroom: What Difference Does It Make?" *Honors in Practice* 3 (2007): 53–59. Print.
- Phinney, Jean S. "Understanding Development in Cultural Contexts: How Do We Deal with the Complexity?" *Human Development* 53 (2010): 33–38. Print.
- Powell, Patricia L. "Honored to Be a Part of Service Learning." *Honors in Practice* 4 (2008): 97–109. Print.
- Rockquemore, Kerry Ann, and Regan Harwell Schaffer. "Toward a Theory of Engagement: A Cognitive Mapping of Service-Learning Experience." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 7 (2000): 14–24. Print.
- Sen Gupta, Amita. "Changing the Focus: A Discussion of the Dynamics of Intercultural Experience." *Intercultural Experience and Education*. Ed. Geof Alfred, Michael Byram, and Michael Fleming. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2003. 155–73. Print.
- Shaules, Joseph. *A Beginner's Guide to the Deep Culture Experience: Beneath the Surface*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2010. Print.
- Smith, Michaela Ruppert. "Self as Text: Adaptations of Honors Practice." *Honors in Practice* 7 (2011): 175–80. Print.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich*. Trans. H. Willets. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991. Print.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *Odin den Ivana Denisovicha*. Web. <<http://lib.ru/PROZA/SOLZHENICYN/ivandenisych.txt>>.
- Spurrier, Robert. "A View from Outside: Some Reflections of an NCHC-Recommended Site Visitor." *Honors in Practice* 9 (2013): 191–205. Print.
- Stanton, Timothy K. "Liberal Arts, Experiential Learning, and Public Service: Necessary Ingredients for Socially Responsible Undergraduate Education." *Combining Service and Learning*. Ed. Jane Kendall et al. Raleigh, N.C.: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1990. 175–89. Print.



## RE-ENVISIONING THE HONORS SENIOR PROJECT: EXPERIENCE AS RESEARCH

Stanton, Timothy K., Dwight E. Giles, Jr., and Nadinne Cruz. *Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice, and Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

Thorp, Holden, and Buck Goldstein. *Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Print.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. New York: Macmillan, 1929. Print.

---

The authors may be contacted at  
[gustafson@uta.edu](mailto:gustafson@uta.edu).