

the magazine about Middle Tennessee State University

mtsu

spring/summer 2006

What About Socrates?

*Applying the philosopher's theories
gets students thinking*

#1 Women Burn Up
Sun Belt Conference!

Excellence Awards

**Chris Massaro—
Team Player**

From philosophical coffee groups to senior mentors, the buzz is all about

EXL

(experiential learning)

A Chinese proverb says “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” You might say the Chinese were first to employ the concept of experiential learning (EXL). Now, as part of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process, MTSU is taking steps to formalize an EXL program, placing the university once again at the leading edge—as it has been in aerospace, mass communication, and recording industry—of learning models and curriculum.

It sounds like a mouthful, but you already know what EXL is. Did you intern at a local business? Study abroad for a semester? Spend a summer at an archeological dig? Learn to play an instrument? Then you've participated in experiential learning, described as hands-on activities that enhance knowledge. And since what students do in college has a direct bearing on how they earn a living, EXL is a logical bridge from theory-based learning to Life After School.

Just ask Ron Kates. An associate professor in the English Department, Kates coordinates MTSU's service learning practicum, in which he advises students as they devise and execute a project, alone or in teams. Service learning is a type of EXL that involves “giving back” through projects undertaken with a community partner, often a local school (literacy programs, for example). In addition, students complete reflective thinking assignments; in essence, they assess for themselves what they've learned.

“I tell my freshmen, ‘You'll learn more outside class than you will inside,’” Kates says. And while that statement might make some parents cringe, he has a point. An important requirement of the service learning practicum is the self-reflective essay: “I have students who just rave about what the class meant to them. They've learned about having a civic consciousness, about the value of diversity, that one individual can make a difference! They write that this was a transformative experience for them—both positive and negative.” Last semester, after completing a project with special-needs children, “one student realized that she didn't want to be a special ed teacher because she didn't

have the commitment...to make it work, and I thought that was a very mature statement for a college sophomore to make.”

Kates believes that EXL is a way for students to maximize the college experience, to take control of their education. “Student life is experiential learning,” he says. “You could sit in your dorm room and play on the computer all day and just go to class, but how you use that time is up to you. You could sit in a classroom with 200 other students and listen to a lecture, or you could get into a class with 12 other students and put what you're learning into practice.”

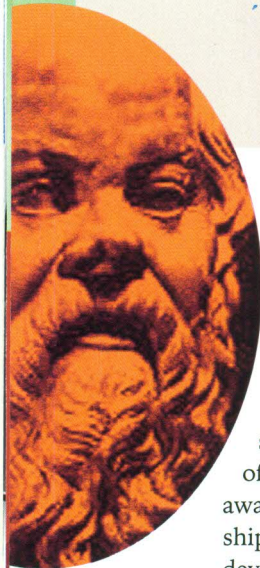
Not to mention what it looks like on a curriculum vitae or résumé. “I think that employers...look at students who take hands-on classes like these, who go above and beyond. We graduate hundreds of education

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majors and if they all have about the same grades, about the same experiences, they've all joined the same clubs, what's going to make some stand out? It's doing these experiential learning classes,” Kates concludes passionately.

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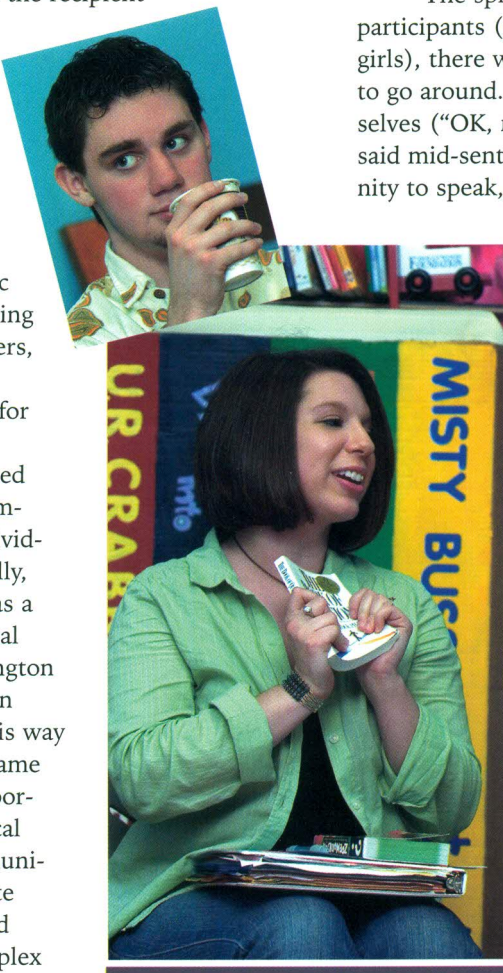
Sure, there's some fuzzy thinking...but there's passionate, well-thought-out debate, too.



Which brings us to Ashley Edington, a student whose college career—and life, she'd say—has been transfigured by experiential learning. A double major (anthropology and Spanish, with a minor in psychology) looking forward to a spring 2007 graduation, Ashley found herself in Kates' service learning practicum three semesters ago. Today she's the recipient of a prestigious national award, numerous scholarships, and, as an undergrad, developed an important psychology research study—all a result of her service learning project, called Café Symposium.

Exposure to the Socratic method, which focuses on giving students questions, not answers, in order to foster disciplined thought, was a breakthrough for her. "After I took philosophy as a freshman," the bubbly coed says, "I realized that I had completely transformed as an individual—I had matured emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually as a result of constant philosophical discussion and analysis." Edington wondered why she hadn't been offered the chance to learn this way in high school. "Learning became fun! And I gained a lot of important skills, such as logic/critical thinking, interpersonal communication, the ability to appreciate differing ideas and beliefs, and confidence in expressing complex ideas."

Ashley Edington, center, started Cafe Symposium so high school students could experience the same kind of philosophical intercourse that changed her educational experience. *photos by Ken Robinson*



And this was just the beginning. She developed Café Symposium to expose area high school students to knowledge gained in philosophical discussion. Facilitated and moderated by Edington, students from four Murfreesboro high schools meet once a week at Linebaugh Public Library for coffee and meaningful discussions about topics they choose.

The spring '06 group was lively—and with 26 participants (pretty evenly divided between boys and girls), there were more than enough ideas and opinions to go around. The kids contributed, corrected themselves ("OK, now I'm contradicting myself," one boy said mid-sentence, while another declined the opportunity to speak, saying humbly, "I was thinking of something that was half-formulated, so I thought better of it."), and often generously gave up the floor. Sure, there's some fuzzy thinking, some unresolved trailing off...but there's passionate, well-thought-out debate, too.

Café Symposium's success has contributed to Edington's academic development and probably her admission to graduate school. This is only one of many success stories (see sidebar), which is why the university is developing a coordinated EXL certification program to encourage even more participation.

As part of accreditation

by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, universities must demonstrate ways they are evolving to meet the changing needs of students. Specifically, they must develop a Quality Enhancement Plan showing how they're enhancing and improving student learning. At MTSU,

that's the EXL Scholars Program. Dr. Jill Austin (chair, Management and Marketing) chairs the QEP committee and oversees the fledgling program that, by all accounts, wowed the SACS team.

"When they graduate, EXL students will have some real experience in their disciplines," says Austin.

Ron Kates, center, and Honors students in the EXL Hometown Project class created the Front Porch Institute to increase communication and leadership skills of high school seniors. photo by J. Intintoli



“They’ll have a designation on their transcripts that certifies them as EXL Scholars, and that will help them get into grad school or get a job.”

This won’t involve extra classes—EXL courses will be part of required general education, major, and/or minor requirements. Students will complete at least one external project—service learning or scholarly research—and one service project, and they’ll document their activities in an electronic portfolio or Web site. The program has quality standards, cross-discipline consistency, and minimum requirements built in.

Austin says, “Experiential learning has value for teachers too: when students get to do ‘real world’ things, they’re more engaged, which means they’re more attentive in class.” In fall 2006, administrators plan to offer EXL classes in all five colleges and hope to see the first graduates with EXL Scholars certification in two years or so.

Experiential learning works; it gets results. As students become more engaged in “learning to fish,” they’re attentive and excited; teachers with enthusiastic students get excited about teaching. There are MTSU graduates eating today because they learned to fish right here—and thanks to some forward-looking educators, there will be plenty more. ~

EXL in the real world

EXL success stories are plentiful at MTSU, many of them emanating from the service learning programs. And since MTSU attracts many education majors, the local schools are logical community partners and beneficiaries. They aren’t the only ones who profit.

“We’ve been doing a lot of school-based programs; we just finished some creative reading programs,” says Ron Kates. Fourth and 7th graders were put in reading communities; MTSU students devised a curriculum that not only encouraged reading, but improved comprehension. The project developed communication and discussion skills; mentoring was noticed going on between the older and younger kids.

In another project at an area primary school, MTSU students worked with Rutherford County’s Business-Education Partnership to bring 5th graders and their parents to a series of meetings at which they discussed a book and did activities together. As Kates says: “Now you’ve got kids and their parents talking about books!”

Probably the longest-running service learning program on campus is Dr. Catherine Stogner’s AHEAD program (Department of Human Sciences), in conjunction with the City of Murfreesboro’s St. Clair Senior Center. With a focus on intergenerational relationships, the program pairs students with seniors in an attempt to “positively affect health and well-being,” as the course description says. It’s hard to tell, of course, who benefits more—students or their senior mentors.

While benefits to education majors are obvious, students from a broad spectrum of disciplines participate in experiential learning. In the special education project mentioned, only one participant was a special ed major; one was a German language major (and music minor), one a psychology major, two were studying speech disorders, and the other three were elementary education majors.

Kates tries to keep student projects local and small-scale, but sometimes they take on a life of their own. One involved a partnership with Nashville’s Country Music Hall of Fame and the “Night Train to Nashville” exhibit. The curator wanted a way to preserve aspects of the (2005) exhibit, and a couple of Kates’s students (who happened to be art majors) got on board. Five 8-by-6-foot multimedia exhibits resulted from the collaboration; the murals are currently displayed at Nashville International Airport (photo at left).

“We partnered with TSU, Watkins College of Art and Design, Oakland High School, Riverdale High School, and [Nashville’s] Stratford High School,” Kates recounts. “[MTSU art education student] Katie Mirgliotta ran the whole artistic end of it, and she worked her tail off, but for her it was a fantastic experience. She’s gotten to go to conferences as a result of this; she’s gotten great experiences working with three different art teachers from the public schools.”

Stories in the national media about college students giving up their spring breaks to volunteer in Katrina-devastated areas have been plentiful. MTSU students were there, too. “We were just there for five days,” recounts program supervisor Jill Austin, “but you could see them realize that they were doing something important.” EXL projects don’t just give graduates something to highlight on a résumé—they build intangibles like maturity and self-confidence, too. ~

