

## Sit Down. Be Quiet. Pay Attention.

by Robert L. Sigmon

MANY OF US ASSOCIATE these six words with school teachers, parents, or bosses. And for the most part we hear, "Shut up and pay attention to me or else." As I become increasingly impressed with how we learn in service settings where there is respect and mutuality, these words have taken on new meaning. I think it is time for us to slow down, listen to our own longings, and with keen attention, listen to the external voices around us that we rarely hear.

In much of our experiential education programming, we often talk about "using" the community and agencies for students to gain experience, explore a career path, test a theory in practice, or actually do something for someone in need. I find this a limited way to view our relationships with the beyond-the-campus worlds. Can we reframe the statement to say, "We are there to listen to muffled voices, to learn from the strengths and dreams of the people we relate to, and to become more adept at recognizing the richly textured learning environments the beyond-the-campus world offers us for our growth and development."

I now often suggest to service-learning and community service educators that we slow down, even curtail some of our direct service work, and examine what we are doing, by going into communities and organizations to "sit down, be quiet, and pay attention." After months of listening and seeing, I suggest we spend time in conversations about how we can enter into mutually-fulfilling arrangements where we each can be learners and teachers, servers and served.

Emerging from this conversation, experiential learning program managers will recognize that we rarely consider the learning agendas of community residents and agencies. We will begin to hear of creative ways we can relate in mutual serving and learning across the boundaries of gender, race, age, credentials, economic status, national origin, faith, and educational attainment.

At the core of this point of view is an opinion that too much of our current service-based learning programming is cast as "using" the community and organizations; as being unaware of the moral- and cultural-superiority biases and assumptions we carry with us when we are involved with "others" different from ourselves and the academy; and as being unaware of the strengths organizations bring to the education of the young in high school- and college-based experiential learning programs.

You ask, are you serious about this listening and then redesigning? *Yes, I am.*

One starting point is to involve those you want to listen to with academic representatives in designing a listening process. Begin listening in a few places where you can learn to practice this role. And then map out the rest of the territory and go for it. Develop imaginative ways of recording information and impressions. Students can write about or create artistic expressions about what they hear. Reflection sessions on the multiple voices being heard can be organized, with faculty participating

and being challenged to relate their intellectual specialities to what is being heard. Then gather those you have listened to with the academy leaders and see where the energy is. Community organizations and citizens might ask: "What can we do together to create a society where opportunity is readily available for all, where a movement toward more just relationships among us can be orchestrated?" Experiential learning organizers will ask, "What can we do together to create distinctive conditions for learning for students?"

Two statements have stunned me in recent weeks and inspired me to take this point of view of being quiet and paying attention:

"In the face of oppression, innocence is not acceptable" (M. Wilkerson), and

"Service is a process of integrating intention with action in the context of a movement toward a just relationship" (N. Cruz).

In the face of vast destitution, wide disparities, long-held historical injustices, and limited responses to the voiceless and their situations, I do not think we have an alternative other than to imagine new ways of doing experiential education once we have "sat down, been quiet, and paid attention" to the voices we often do not hear.

My hope is that the seldom heard will speak their stories and be honored for who they are, and that those in the academy will join them in a search for a language that honors our common humanity. My hope for institutions is that they will seek to become distinctive serving and learning organizations, contributing to the well-being of all who are touched by their processes, services, and products.

And in the process, I believe we will invent and design experiential learning programs which are based on a love of life, a respect for all living beings, and a capacity to understand our complex situations and act on them for the good of us all. We will hear of programs that are designed so that the community residents, the agency staff, the faculty and students are all learners and also have something to teach. We will become aware of programs that demonstrate the effectiveness of each of these participants being both served and server. The collaboration among multiple participants will be community-forming in a way that each person is able to thrive and each organization is more self-conscious of its capacity to be a learning as well as a service organization.

Of equal significance to me, we will have slowed down a bit, learned to listen to and honor our own inner stories as well as the stories of people and organizations outside the campus walls. I look forward to reading stories in this *NSEE Quarterly* about reframed and rejuvenated experiential learning programs and people.

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NSEE QUARTERLY is published fall, winter, spring, and summer by the **National Society for Experiential Education**, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh NC 27609-7229 (919-787-3263, FAX 919-787-3381, E-MAIL: info@nsee.pdial.interpath.net.). Copyright 1995. All rights reserved. Send articles or responses to the **Editor**: Anne Kaplan, 7029 Clearview Street, Philadelphia PA 19119 (215-247-3802, FAX 215-247-7656). **NSEE Board of Directors**: President: Hymon Johnson, Antioch University-Santa Barbara; Vice President: Marilyn Smith, Maryland Governor's Commission on Service; Secretary: Lois Olson, Augsburg College; Treasurer: Diana Hayman, U.S. Department of Education; Jill Addison-Jacobson, Service Learning 2000; Eugene Alpert, Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars; Eileen Baccus, Northwestern Connecticut Community-Technical College; Raymond Bowen, LaGuardia Community College; Arthur Chickering, George Mason University; Marilyn Cunningham, Fayette Public Schools; Janet Eyler, Vanderbilt University; Zelda Gamson, New England Resource Center for Higher Education; Peter Gotlieb, St. Peter's College; Rafael Hernandez, University of California-San Diego; Richard Johnson, Dallas Education Center/Alliance for Higher Education; Freyda Lazarus, Montclair State College; Richard Thompson, University of North Carolina System. **Executive Director**: Allen Wutzdorff. **Staff**: Nancy Bailey, Michelle Duggins, Gita Gulati, Sally Migliore, Lisa Rhoades, Rich Ungerer, Lynda Upchurch, Annette Wofford. Contact the chairperson listed below if you are interested in committees or special interest groups.

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**N·S·E·E Quarterly**  
**National Society for Experiential Education**  
 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207  
 Raleigh NC 27609-7229

Serials Dept  
 Univ of Calif-Los Angeles  
 A1581 URL  
 Los Angeles, CA 90024-5175

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 Permit No. 2065  
 Raleigh NC 27611