# A Discussion with David Thornton Moore

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*Long-time NSEE member **David Moore** talks to NSEE members **Jill Burya**, **Scott Blair** and **Jeremy Geller** about the origins and direction of his early work at NSEE; about the complementarities between experiential education and AAC&U's LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes; about the role education abroad should play in transforming the university; and about the faculty engagement and research opportunities NSEE members might want to explore for the future.*
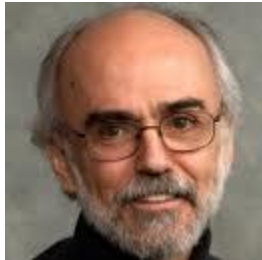
David Moore

David Moore, Thank you very much for joining us today from your office in New York City. How did you first come into contact with NSEE and what was your experience of working with this professional organization across the years?

I got into NSEE through a sort of circuitous route that started in graduate school. I got my doctorate at Harvard in a program in the School of Education called *Learning Environments*, which doesn't exist anymore. But it was an interdisciplinary program in the study of how people learn in different environments and I got attached to a guy named Fred Erickson who was an educational anthropologist and got interested in this type of work. I had come out of teaching in an alternative high school in Philadelphia and was really interested in alternative education. So my dissertation was a study of a small alternative school in Boston but my broad interest was in how people learn in different kinds of contexts— including school but not only school—because the school that I was looking at had a lot of external activities, community service kinds of things, as we call them now.

And did your dissertation research in alternative education influence your approach to teaching as a young instructor in New York City?

It did. My first job was at Teacher's College at Columbia in what was then called the Department of Family & Community Education, which also no longer exists, and I taught courses on educational anthropology, about learning theory as it applies to learning processes outside of schools as well as inside of schools. And I started to do a research project on internships at a place in New York, a high school, that I called the School for External Learning (SEL). It's an alternative high school through which kids get most of their

credits by doing internships. So they'll work at a natural history museum for science credits, or they'll work at a community newspaper for English credit, or they'll work at a hospital for science credit. There are any number of ways you can accumulate credit but they did most of it through direct experience. Interestingly, like AAC&U they used the term LEAP, too—but it stood for *Learning Experience Activities Package,* a sort of learning contract that specified the curriculum of each setting.

So, it was the experience at the SEL program that led you to NSEE?

Well, I chose to use the alternative high school—SEL—because I was really broadly interested in how people learn in the workplace but the easiest way to get access to workplaces where people were supposed to be learning was through internship programs. So it was kind of a back door to joining NSEE because my broad interest is in workplace learning and not in service-learning or in experiential education per se. But I got turned on to that really quickly.

Do you think your path to NSEE is at all representative of how other education professionals join the National Society?

It's interesting that you should ask that! I later did a survey of NSEE members in the late eighties that I wrote up in the newsletter in an article that was called something like "Who Are We?" that asked questions about how people had gotten into the profession and how they had gotten involved in activities related to experiential learning. And the dominant finding was that there is no front door to experiential education as a profession. It's a backdoor profession, or a side-door, or a cellar-door, whatever. Nobody has a degree in experiential education except a few people in adventure education. There's a program in experiential learning at the University of Colorado at Boulder, that's basically *Outward Bound.* So, anyway, I came in through the back door myself because I was really interested in workplace learning, but through the mechanism of experiential learning.

What are your first memories of NSEE?

Through some process—I don't even remember how I found out about NSEE, which at the time was called NSIEE—I got involved in that organization. It took me several years to go to the national conference because the first year I got married and the second year we had our baby and then the third year we had our daughter's first birthday, so I missed the first three conferences, but I think I started going in 1985. And in 1986, I was elected to the Board and became the editor of the newsletter, which was then called *Experiential Education*. I did that for three years through 1989. We were very active then and that's when I got to know Tim Stanton, Garry Hesser, Dwight Giles, Janet Eyler, Rob Shumer, and Steve Schultz. Anyway, there was a whole bunch of people who were active then.

But didn't your interest in experiential education start much earlier?

Yes, let me back up a little. This SEL study got what at that time was a really large grant from the *National Institute of Education*, which also no longer exists. I seem to jump on a lot of sinking ships. I got $151,000 in 1979, which in those days…we're talking real money here. This is the only really big grant I ever got. But it was a two-year study of SEL that I turned into a number of different articles in the *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *Harvard Educational Review*, and things like that. So I was doing presentations at the NSEE conferences much earlier on the research and teaching workshops on how to do ethnographic studies of experiential learning that I don't think ever caught on because I

was one of the few people doing actual ethnography of students in their workplaces.

How did your relationship with NSEE change and evolve over time?

In the early 1990s—I think it was the early '90s—a number of people including Dwight and Garry and so on, got primarily involved in Service-Learning and NSEE moved in that direction. I went to the conferences yearly or at least bi-yearly for many years and had some people to talk to but since my primary interest was in work-related internships and not in Service-Learning (I am interested in SL but it's not my primary commitment) I started feeling like NSEE was moving away from me or I was moving away from them, and so I went less frequently to conferences. I also got involved in a research project with some other people at Teacher's College—Kathy Hughes and Tom Bailey—who were in the *Institute on Education and the Economy* (or IEE) which I think still exists but it's mostly affiliated with a community college research center.

So, it was in the 1990s that you and NSEE began to diverge?

Yes, in the late 1990s, Tom Bailey and Kathy Hughes contacted me, as I said, and asked me to participate in a research project they were doing about high school students and community college students in schools around the Northeast. They brought me on to give some shape to the theoretical perspective and then to the ethnographic methods they wanted to use. Then together, we wrote a book called *Working Knowledge: Work-Based Learning & Education Reform*. It was published by RoutledgeFalmer in 2004.

Yet, you remained active at NSEE.

Yes, I was still doing presentations and workshops at NSEE conferences. I was Chair of the Research Committee for some years, and worked with Janet, Dwight and other people on developing a research agenda. This is when it started getting away from me. They went to the Wingspread conference—I can't remember the year—where they were developing a research agenda for Service-Learning studies. Since then, a large community of practice has developed around the study of Service-Learning, civic engagement, and community-based learning. Again, I was more interested in the work side.

You had practical on-the-job work experience yourself that influenced your approach to experiential teaching and learning. Tell us about that.

Well, during the mid-1990s, I took a two-year leave from Gallatin (my school here) to work for the phone company. I know this sounds really weird, but I was working for NYNEX, what is now Verizon, in a division of the Science & Technology unit of the phone company. Science & Technology develops the hardware and software for the company. I was in a unit called the *Work Systems Design Group* and we were interested in how people work in the phone company and how they get involved with various kinds of technology—software and hardware—and the driving question was why do they sabotage it so often, or ignore it or change it or not use it the way they are supposed to.

So, some really smart Vice President brought in a workplace anthropologist to do studies on the work system in the phone company and she did a good job and hired three other workplace anthropologists, me and two other people, to do studies in the phone company and to work with first-line supervisors and teams of frontline workers on redeveloping the systems of work—how people organize labor in the phone company. So, it was really fascinating stuff.

Did this work at NYNEX take you away from NSEE?

Yes, I got distracted from NSEE doing that because it wasn't really experiential education: it was more like work-based anthropology. But when I got back to NYU and got invited to do this study with Tom and Kathy I started writing things for the NSEE newsletter. One of the things that I wrote that attracted some attention—with some ire, actually—was called something like "Behind the Wizard's Curtain: A Challenge to the True Believer." It was basically a reaction to my impression that a lot of people in NSEE were sort of true believers in experiential learning—they really loved it and had a lot of students who got a lot out of it—but my impression was that they hadn't pushed on that phenomenon very carefully. There were a lot of unanswered questions about how and under what conditions it works, along with the kinds of pedagogical strategies that are used to enhance it, to guide it, to monitor it, to direct it—to squeeze more learning out of it.

"I had always been interested in theoretical perspectives on experiential learning, right from my first piece in the Harvard Educational Review. I had been bringing in ideas from theories of situated cognition and situated learning, from activity theory, and from organizational studies."

Did this experience help redirect your research towards more theoretical work?

Well, not really. I had always been interested in theoretical perspectives on experiential learning, right from my first piece in the *Harvard Educational Review.* I had been bringing in ideas from theories of situated cognition and situated learning, from activity theory, and from organizational studies. But at this point, I ended up doing more research on my own through a grant from my school that enabled me to interview people at a number of different colleges around the country about their internship programs and to do some participant observation kinds of studies of college interns. We interviewed a number of college interns and observed them in their workplaces again and on the basis of those three research projects—the SEL study, the IEE Working Knowledge Study, and my own, which I called the *Teaching from Experience Study*. I did more writing, some of which was published in NSEE, some of which was published in work-related learning journals, and books and so on.

Would you say this was the period when you started drifting away from NSEE?

Well, occasionally I would go to NSEE to share these things but it wasn't my only professional affiliation. So my experience with NSEE was strongest in the 1980s, but this is very old stuff. During the 1990s and half of the 2000s I would say, the drift towards Service-Learning was strong and so didn't attract me in the same way and so I wasn't as deeply involved then.

But periodically, I was involved a lot in the research committee which was over and over again trying to develop a sense of what it was that we could develop as a theoretical and

empirical foundation for the practice of experiential learning. But my impression all along was that that never got traction, basically because very few of the people at NSEE tend to be research oriented. At least that has been my experience. People at NSEE are primarily practitioners. I say that fondly—this is not at all a criticism, but it makes for a sort of "cloudy" audience for research work. For example, I would put out theoretical papers sometimes and people would say: "Oh, that's interesting but what can we *do* with that?" That was the question.

While much of your research has focused on the theoretical foundations of experiential education, aren't you also a practitioner?

I actually do practice in experiential education. I was Director of Cooperative Education when I started here at Gallatin and was instrumental in starting our Community Learning Initiative—what we call CLI. And I taught internship seminars—concurrent seminars--for a while, where students came back to school once a week to talk about their experience in the field and tried to make sense of it in relation to other things they were learning in college. But I kept seeing that that practice was not well developed, by me or by a lot of other people. I think it is well developed in some places but, on the whole, I would say the average internship program is fairly laissez-faire

Dr. David Moore, left, leads a workshop at NSEE"s 2012 Annual Conference.

in terms of pedagogical strategy. So, I have been trying to work on that.

How? Tell us what you are doing to improve pedagogical strategy?

So this piece, which I think you saw in the _Chronicle of Higher Education_, is a response to that. It's a sort of call to arms for people who administer internships: do it right or don't do it at all. This is my position that in some respects has been unpopular in NSEE because I actually think that at some level it's a bad idea to do internships if you are not going to do them right. They are easily marginalized or dismissed by mainstream academics who think they are flaky or only do them because they attract enrollments and tuition dollars. And they don't demand a lot of work, if you don't do them right. They do demand a lot of work if you do them right.

Why are good internships so hard to design and deliver?

Doing internships is a challenge for the organization because it's labor intensive to help students process the work they are doing in ways they wouldn't just by virtue of having a part-time job. It's very challenging and you have to be very interdisciplinary, for one thing, which a lot of people aren't. They *are* in my school—here at Gallatin—but not in a practitioner way. Most of the faculty here are scholars: in comparative literature, in political science, sociology of media and things like that. But they don't think they know enough about what's going on in the work world to work with interns in making sense of the connections between their experience and the things they are learning in school. I am having that struggle in my own school and that is sort of my reason for being involved in

places like NSEE.

Where do you think NSEE has comparative advantages with respect to achieving specific learning outcomes, such as those articulated in AAC&U's LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes?

Well, I think some of them are fairly obvious under categories like personal and social responsibility, civic knowledge and engagement, foundations and skills for lifelong learning anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges, integrative and applied learning. Things like that are obvious and I think that's all true and good.

What I want to add to that is that I think there are ways of thinking about the relationship between academic theory or scholarship and experience that have not been tapped very much. The things I've seen on reflection and internships tend to be fairly practically oriented in my experience.

Is this a problem, and if so, why?

I mention a hypothetical situation in the *Chronicle* article and in my book that illustrates the challenge of developing a pedagogy that helps students examine the connection between theory and practice. Imagine a student who is taking a course in Organizational Sociology and reading Max Weber on bureaucracy, and at the same time she is doing an internship in the New York City Department of Education, which is one of the world's great bureaucracies. The question is: What is the intersection between those two modes of knowing and those two forms of knowledge? How do the experience at the DoE and the reading of Weber inform each other? I don't think that gets explored as much as it could.

In the LEAP *Essential Learning Outcomes*, one is called *Intellectual and Practical Skills*. People say, "Oh yeah, internships are good for practical skills." I think they are really good opportunities for *Inquiry and Analysis*, *Critical and Creative Thinking*, certainly for *Information Literacy* and *Teamwork* and so on. But I also think they give students an opportunity to think about the stuff they are learning in school in ways they that would not just by virtue of sitting in a classroom or a library, or reading a book. Thinking about Max Weber in relationship to the Department of Education is an unusual opportunity. I would like to see us develop ways of getting people to exploit that opportunity more.

What about the role of the University? Does it need to adapt to today's information-based society in order to seize the learning opportunities you highlight?

I think so. The other side that I push some in my book—and this is a really complex issue, a fundamental question—is the function of the University in society. Historically, we sort of have been the site where legitimate knowledge gets invented and then diffused into the society. That's going away because knowledge production is becoming so complex and distributed now. The university is losing its monopoly on mainstream knowledge production.

So, I think that the University would be very good as a forum for the intersection and interaction among people from different sectors of society, from the community, from the corporate sector, from the government sector—a place where people could come together and kind of engage in collaborative inquiry, or even competitive inquiry.

What is needed to make this synergy happen?

It could happen in a number of different ways. To get people from the community coming to the university and offering their take on knowledge and then get people from the government with their take on knowledge, and corporate people and so on. It's a really good forum for doing that kind of thing.

I don't quite see that in the LEAP principles or learning outcomes but the President of AAC&U, Carol Geary Schneider, has written about things that touch on this. So I think AAC&U is actually mildly interested in that sort of "social functions of the University" question, and I would love to see NSEE get into that because I think there's more to internships and Service-Learning than just sending students out. There's bringing them back and breaking down the wall between the community and the University, too.

Would you say that NSEE has a potential for fostering such social ties between the university and the community?

Yes, in terms of this list of essential learning outcomes, that approach would certainly build civic knowledge and engagement, and ethical reasoning. Someone would have to remind us to think ethically about that, but that community forum process is a good place for doing that. So I think NSEE has an opportunity to push a lot of these outcomes. Virtually all the LEAP items are important. I have highlighted the ones that I thought were appropriate for us at NSEE: Knowledge of Human Cultures, especially in international internships. Study abroad generally enhances that; some people refer to study abroad itself, even when you are just taking courses, as a form of experiential education. I think it is, in some ways, but it's a different kind of pedagogy. Certainly *Knowledge of Human Cultures*, certainly *Intellectual & Practical Skills*, *Personal & Social Responsibility*, *Integrative and Applied Learning*—all have implications for experiential education and vice versa.

So, I don't think there's much of anything here that isn't relevant to NSEE. I didn't highlight quantitative literacy only because I haven't seen many students do quantitatively-oriented internships, but there are some. Some of our research, for example, was about students in accounting offices and things like that but that's mostly computer data entry work.

With respect to the forces of globalization now affecting Higher Education, do you think NSEE should seek to position itself as an educational partner for universities pursuing their own goals in comprehensive campus internationalization, through education abroad, for example?

I think that makes a lot of sense as a long-term strategy. It is certainly true that a lot of American schools are moving in the direction of internationalization and globalization. NYU is a capital example of that. Through study abroad, students are getting experientially a sense of what other cultures are like, how people think differently. But to the extent that the institutional setting has a force in shaping people's thought processes, the challenge is in fostering in students radically transformed conceptions of different modes of thinking. As a quasi-anthropologist, I'm really interested not just in having students go abroad and think like Americans when they are in Paris, but come to grips with how identity and culture shape thinking.

Do you have an examples of such expanded ways of thinking?

Well, I had an experience years ago when I was on a search committee for a new Dean for my school. One of the candidates told a really interesting story. He was an American historian and said his department was looking for a historian of China and had an applicant brought in from China. And we realized, he said, that we were really uncomfortable with this guy because he was doing Chinese history like the Chinese. What we came to terms with was that what we were really looking for was a Chinese person who did Western historiography. I thought that was a really brilliant insight and it was really daring of him to

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say that out loud. That's the problem: we think like Americans, wherever we go.

So, I would love to see NSEE get into ways of learning to think differently in different contexts. So if NSEE could develop a program for building a pedagogical strategy and knowledge base that expanded the idea of what it means to be abroad, to go abroad, to interact with people abroad, I think that would be terrific. I think it would be a real boon not just to study abroad programs but to education more generally.

Are you saying that students need a deeper understanding of how culture affects knowledge formation?

Exactly! That's one reason I mention the idea of changing the social function of the university and breaking down the walls between the university—the Ivory Tower—and the community. One thing *we* would have to learn to do is to recognize, and acknowledge, and appreciate the forms of knowledge that people outside the university have. The way we think is not the only way to think intelligently. We have to be much more expansive in our conception of intelligence, wherever it comes from—whether that's abroad or in Bushwick, Brooklyn. It's a radically different conception of what it means to have appropriate knowledge in the university.

I think NSEE could actually take an important role in developing that point. But I think it would require studying programs where that kind of learning happens, trying out experimental programs, collaborating with people in different settings both here and abroad. I would love to see that happen at NSEE but it's a big enterprise. So, good luck with that!

Getting back to your personal history with NSEE, what are your thoughts about how well NSEE as an organization has dealt with and coped with change over the years?

Well, there was a period when the organization was really floundering. Among the many, many reasons for that was that I wasn't taking part in it very much, because it had drifted

towards Service-Learning and a number of people didn't go to the conferences. But there was also the issue of rapid turn-over of membership based on the fact that it was primarily an organization for newcomers to the business. Once you had gone three or four times, you started to see the same show over and over. We talked about, even in the 1980s, about the need for developing advanced workshops and experiences that people could have who had gotten past the Experiential Ed 101 workshop. It's déjà vu all over again, as Yogi Berra would say. That's a problem for NSEE—you tap it out fairly quickly.

What can NSEE do to attract greater membership and conference attendance?

One of things I discovered in that study I mentioned I had done on membership in the 1980s was that because people come in through a "back door" their primary professional allegiance is to some other profession: "I'm a historian"; "I'm a Student Affairs person"; "I'm an administrator" of some kind. They get limited dollars to go to conferences every year and so you have to choose, and NSEE is not one of the ones you go to. I don't know how you go about making it a primary affiliation, other than making it exciting and making it a place where you can go year to year…and still get something out it…and learn things.

Why do you think experiential education is still largely found at the margins of U.S. higher education?

The challenge is finding people who are doing work that other people want to read about. As far back as about 1986, NSEE's Research Committee was contemplating the idea of starting a refereed, peer-reviewed journal on research related to internships and experiential education but didn't take that on because we couldn't find enough people who

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were doing good research to sustain a journal like that. Later, after the Wingspread Conference on Service Learning, they started the *Michigan Journal for Community Service Learning* and that's the major refereed journal in Service Learning. But I don't find a lot of good research on experiential education. If you look at the *Harvard Educational Review*, I had a piece in there on my SEL study in 1981. I'll bet there aren't five others since then in the *Harvard Ed Review* about experiential learning. It's just not happening.

What might NSEE do to change this perception?

Something that NSEE might be able to take up is trying to drum up interest in experiential learning broadly conceived—including study abroad, including internships, including service learning—among funding organizations to support the kind of research that we had in the 1980s. Doing that would mean putting together a compelling argument for the importance of experiential learning as an element of higher education. That argument would have to be really compelling because I think the mainstream of American higher educators don't think of experiential learning as an important part. They think of it as either something that is bogus or as something that is marginal. Most experiential learning I've seen goes through

the career services office and not the provost's and that's very symbolic of the status of experiential learning. That's why I started my article in the *Chronicle* and started my book on the paradox of experience and higher education. A lot of people love it—like crazy—but not a lot of people do it and not a lot of people fund it. It's always kind of on the margins of the university: e.g., career services or interdepartmental offices.

What role do you think faculty members should play in the promotion of experiential education?

Twenty-five years ago, I was suggesting that the way to get faculty interested in it is not to convince them that experiential education as a pedagogical program is worth their time but that there's something interesting going on that they could benefit from studying.

So, for instance, in my book I go into a chapter that talks about the theory of situated learning that comes out of the confluence of anthropologists and psychologists—people like Jean Lave, and Michael Cole, and Etienne Wenger. It comes out of Vygotsky and Bruner and people like that. These are theoretical perspectives and research questions that are actually quite interesting. How people learn from experience is a fascinating phenomenon.

I mean, at some level, I am more interested in the phenomenon than I am interested in the practice. I know this sounds perverse and weird—for NSEE in particular—but I'm really theoretically oriented and there are not a lot of people at NSEE who are; but not enough to convince the situated learning community and other learning theorists, scholars of educational practice, anthropologists, and educational sociologists and so on. It's these people who need to be convinced that experiential education is worth thinking about, worth studying.

As a strategy for getting faculty involved, I think that approach is more likely to generate the kinds of funding that would support the development of a foundation for experiential education that could appeal to lots of different schools rather than just bringing in successive waves of neophyte experiential practitioners.

NSEE would like to express its gratitude to David Moore for generously sharing his thoughts and reflections on the history and evolution of both NSEE and its work in experiential education.