

NSEE HERITAGE TALKS

A CONVERSATION WITH TIMOTHY K. STANTON

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Tim Stanton

In this latest installment of [NSEE HERITAGE TALKS](#), NSEE Pioneer Tim Stanton describes his early contact with NSEE in the 1970s; about his collegial encounters with others who would become NSEE pioneers; about the early work of NSIEE; and about the importance of preserving the early history of NSEE and acknowledging the dedicated scholars who created the theoretical and practical foundations of experiential education. This interview was conducted by Jill Burya, Associate Director, Office of Global Programs & Fellowships, Columbia University, and NSEE Board member.

Tell me more about your initial engagement with NSEE.

I can't remember exactly when it was, but it was called SFEE (Society for Field Experience Education) at the time. I was working in Marin County, California with a not-for-profit organization and we were doing internships and service-learning with high school and college students and I came across an announcement somewhere for the SFEE conference in Los Angeles. I think that was the third conference or fourth one. It looked like some other people in the world were doing what I was doing, which was happy news. So, I got in my car and drove down to L.A. for the meeting. I really enjoyed the conference, met people that remain friends and colleagues still today. And I started getting involved.

What was your role at the time?

I came from outside of education. Starting in the early 1970s, I and a colleague were running a very small not-for-profit organization working with the high schools, junior colleges and a university in Marin County trying to involve their students in community service. We developed numerous projects to engage these young people in service and activism. Probably our strongest effort was one in which we trained high school students to run after-school therapeutic activity groups for latch-key middle school kids in the community who were in mental-health treatment. I had a social worker friend and with her we would meet weekly with the high school students after school to train them to lead these groups.

Two things happened over the course of the first-years of that program. First, the high school students started saying that they were learning more from this project than they were learning in school. A light bulb went off in my head that said maybe this kind of a program could or should be school! The second thing that happened was that the therapists started reporting that the children-patients of theirs whom they had referred to us to be in the groups, started to get better and they didn't think that it was because of the therapy. They said that these activity groups were actually having a positive impact on these students' social development. So, we expanded the program to another high school in the district. A couple of years later the board of trustees invited us to apply for funds, so that we could train teachers to take over the programs, so that they could formally be moved into the schools. I had not heard the term "service-learning" back then, and I knew no one else who was doing the kind of work we were doing. So, arriving in L.A. and meeting a group of people who were doing this work in high schools and universities and who had a name for it—service learning—it was a revelation.

Tell me more about your experience at the Los Angeles conference. Did you stay connected with NSEE throughout that time and try to attend the annual conference?

Oh yes, I felt like I found a professional home. I had just met people like Bob Sigmon, Jane Permaul and John Duley—a whole bunch of interesting, lovely people. So, I started staying in touch with them and I went to the conference every year after that, making presentations and developing a network of supportive colleagues that continues today. When I took a new job at Cornell University, I and my colleagues there started taking students to the conference and soon I got elected to the NSEE Board. By then, SFEE had merged with the National Center for Public Service Internships to become NSIEE and eventually NSEE. I was very engaged with the board and staff and was on the conference planning committee one year and co-chaired the conference another year, and eventually I became Vice President and President of NSEE. So yes, I was deeply engaged.

How did NSEE support you professionally through those times?

I feel like the primary support was having a network of colleagues and people who cared about each other and cared about each other's work—we learned from each other. In some ways the conference was almost a spiritual event. We had this little program at Cornell. There were four of us on the faculty and we were very tight and really enjoyed working together, but that was it. No one else there understood what we were doing and few of them respected it. To most faculty members, experiential learning was "loosey-goosey" activity lacking in subject matter and critical analysis. Fortunately, there were a lot of people in NSIEE at the time who were in similar roles and situations. They were literally the only people or part of a very small group of people at the time, who really cared about this work and thought of it as critical pedagogy.

So, in my bleakest moments when my program was under attack I knew I could pick up the phone and call somebody from NSIEE. It really was a support group. If you ran into a problem and needed some advice, there were all kinds of people to call. When we found that we couldn't learn enough from each other at the annual conference, some of us began to invite others to our campuses for consultation visits. John Duley did a review of our program one year, which was really fantastic. Some of us started to do some writing and Jane Kendall, NSIEE Executive Director at the time, helped us find avenues for people to publish. Over those years, she created an informal "kitchen cabinet" of people whose advice she would value. She would often call five to eight of us or send stuff around and swap ideas when she was working on something and wanted some assistance. And then for several years, she convened this small group for an annual meeting, usually in Boulder, CO. Those meetings were some of the most exciting, intellectual exchanges I was having at the time. We would write essays for the meetings and share and debate them. And for Jane, who worked in a tiny office in Raleigh, it was a way to have stimulating interaction with colleagues in the field. She was as much an intellectual leader for us as she was a skillful administrator.

Tell me more about the annual meeting in Boulder.

It was just us; we didn't have any titles. I would call it a "kitchen cabinet." We would go for three to four days. We met in North Carolina once and somewhere else as well. Jane would do most of the planning but it was a participatory process. It was people who really valued their friendship and collegiality. It was a wonderful opportunity to get together to talk and swap ideas. For me it was invaluable. I think the others felt the same way.

When did you notice that others were beginning to show a professional interest in experiential education?

There has been a huge amount of change, but I'm sure there is still work that needs to be done. I think when I began to see a change, my main interest was service-learning and I went from Cornell to Stanford, which was a wonderful opportunity. We were opening a new campus-wide center there with active support of the university president. That was a marvelous opportunity to get a foot-hold for service-learning in the institution. At Stanford at that time—this is in 1985—people were excited about trying new things. It was an open and innovative culture. We were able to raise a lot of money. The original focus was volunteer service, but I focused on building that into service-learning within the curriculum. This was the mid to late 80s and this is when things began to change nationally as well. It was never easy in the early days. We actually never used the term service-learning then at Stanford. Instead, we used "study service connections." It took a while back then to

get this started but now at Stanford there is service-learning all over the place. Just recently a major curriculum review endorsed academically based service-learning and called for its expansion.

Looking back over your professional career, is there something you wish you had known at the start?

I'm not one to look back. I tend to face forward. The one thing that amazes me is that every once in a while, I come across something that I was working on back in those early days and I'm amazed by how good it still looks. I don't know why, but we were on to something back then and we didn't know what it was and it didn't have a name. Back in my Marin County work, we were just looking around for something to motivate young people, to engage them in the community, in public policy. It was the 70's, so it was a different time in terms of interest in education. People were experimenting in all kinds of ways. Existing youth programs were trying new things, for example. As I was developing my work, I was reading people writing really good stuff about educational and social reform (e.g., Freire, Paul Goodman, Morris Keeton, Carl Rogers, etc.) It was certainly an inspiring time.

What advice might you offer to students interested in a career in experiential education?

That is a big question. I think back, for instance, to the Cape Town Overseas Studies Program that I was running for Stanford until recently and in which we had a farewell dinner for each cohort of students. Our program—with its emphasis on critical service-learning and South Africa with its history and turbulent politics—offered students a very intense educational experience, intellectually and emotionally. Because the students experienced all of this in a small group, and living together, they formed strong bonds with us and with each other. So, I used to say to them at the end of each term that when you get back to campus, you will find that this experience has really changed you. But you will also notice that no one around you will have really changed in the same way, including your family and friends with whom you have shared these experiences. They will be interested in what's happened to you, but they haven't had the experience. The only ones who have had this experience are all of you. So, you need to stick together and maintain your connections. This is the only way to make sure that what you've learned sticks with you and doesn't get put back in a box when you get back to campus and start blending back into the campus culture.

Over the years of a very intense career and having a network of close colleagues through NSEE and a few other groups to stay in contact with—this "sticking together" is what helped me maintain my motivation and inspiration, even at the worst of times. To me NSEE cultivates that, or it should. That's why as John Duley said in his own Heritage Talks interview, that we felt SFEE, NSIEE and then NSEE were a movement. If it simply becomes an outlet for professional development, that is not as meaningful. There are organizations out there that allow you to advance and publish, but at least in the years that I was involved in NSEE, it was such a strong movement-type of network. I always looked forward to seeing everybody at the conferences.

I've been very pleased that the leadership of the organization is making an effort to remember its past as we need to know where our work came from and where we came from as an organization to better chart the future.

Tim Stanton is director emeritus of the Bing Overseas Studies Program in Cape Town, South Africa. Prior to joining Overseas Studies he was Visiting Senior Fellow at the John Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities in the School of Education. Before this he founded and directed the Scholarly Concentration in Community Health and Public Service at Stanford's School of Medicine. He helped found and served as Associate Director and Director of the Haas Center for Public Service from 1985-1999. He has taught in African Studies, American Studies, Education, Medicine, Public Policy, and Urban Studies. Tim received his bachelor's degree in English from Stanford in 1969, a master's degree in education from San Francisco State University in 1976, and his Ph.D. in Human and Organization Systems from Fielding Graduate University in 1994. He consults widely in higher education in the US and overseas. As a Campus Compact Engaged Scholar, Tim helped organize and coordinate a national US initiative on community engagement and research universities, The Research Universities Civic Engagement Network (TRUCEN). He has published numerous articles on service-learning and community engaged scholarship, including two books, Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on its Origins, Practice, and Future, and Theory and Practice in Service-Learning Curriculum Design: The Experience of Participants in an Instructional Development Seminar.