As we noted in a previous post, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have the potential to transform higher education. But as online education makes headlines, a quiet revolution is under way that is already having a profound pedagogical impact. It is called engaged learning (sometimes immersive or experiential learning), and it has substantial benefits for students, their eventual employers and participating communities.

Engaged learning is a departure from the traditional model of learners as isolated individuals who listen to lectures, participate in discussions, write research papers, and take tests without assistance of any kind from anyone except the instructor. At its best, engaged learning resembles problem solving in the real world, where individuals are encouraged to get help wherever they can find it.

In classrooms, engaged learning involves assignments to teams of students, capstone projects, portfolio creation, and for-credit opportunities for undergraduate research. Beyond the classroom, the Carnegie Foundation defines engaged learning as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” Students who participate in engaged learning programs don’t just volunteer free time between classes; the hands-on work they do is part of a curriculum and complements what they learn in the classroom.

AguaClara (“clear water”), a team of Cornell engineering students that designs low-cost, low-impact clean-water systems that don’t require electrical power for Central American villages, is a prime example. The student teams work closely with clients (rural Hondurans) and learn to communicate effectively,
make decisions and solve problems in the moment. The result of each project is a group of young engineers who have learned to work in teams and to use their technical and scientific expertise in a challenging setting, and a water filtration system that makes life easier and healthier for the people it serves—more than 30,000 people in less than a decade.

In the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany, students can earn academic credit by teaching adults to read or prepare for the GED, assisting teachers in area schools and running arts programs. Students in the Community Engaged Learning program at Brandeis University went to the Mississippi Delta to record oral histories; they also conducted a survey of resources and needs for the Latino community in Waltham, MA.

No one denies that this kind of work benefits the students and those they serve, but there is considerable debate over whether they should receive academic credit for it. In order for a degree to be meaningful, college faculty set standards and learning goals that students must meet in order to graduate. In each course, an expert in the field decides on the curriculum and the assignments and evaluates the work submitted by the students. An individual who spends a semester teaching schoolchildren to grow organic vegetables may well be doing important work—but how can a college or university determine whether it has added to his or her store of knowledge? Where should institutions draw the line between experiences that deserve academic credit and those that don’t?

Research on student learning outcomes and the generation of new kinds of relevant data in this area have produced major advances in the means of assessing the academic outcomes of engaged learning, and these important means of measurement are beginning to have a significant impact on colleges’ educational approaches. Although that process of defining and recognizing “engaged learning” and of evaluating the individuals involved in it is still in early stages, an increasing number of colleges and universities are embracing the approach.

Engaged learning opportunities are featured prominently in mailings from admissions offices to high school students around the country. More than 90 percent of Cornell undergraduates opt into one form of engaged learning or another before they get their degrees. As our academic year ends, many are taking advantage of the summer break to apply, test and stretch their knowledge and skills in their hometowns, other cities and other countries.
Employers value the skills acquired through engaged learning, though they may not be familiar with the concept. In a 2011 Michigan State University survey of large and small companies, employers rated “soft” skills, such as communication, social skills, collaborative decision making and problem solving, higher in importance than job-related knowledge and technical skills.

Employment is an important objective, of course, but it’s not the only reason students pursue engaged learning. Many see education as a means to address complex problems: sustainable energy, social inequalities, racial and ethnic intolerance and terrorism. A Cornell student group focused on sustainability has competed successfully in national arenas such as the solar house decathlon and recently won the Engineering News Record Global Best Project Award in education and research for designing a schoolhouse in South Africa.

As the Kellogg Foundation has acknowledged, “Engagement—in which institutions and communities form lasting relationships that influence, shape, and promote success in both spheres—is rare.” By teaching students to practice and internalize engaged learning, broadly conceived, we believe that colleges and universities can prepare them for the 21st-century world of work and give them the tools to effect real change in the world.

This article is available online at: