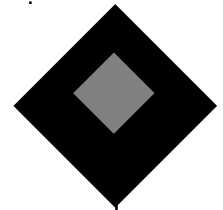


Experiential Learning in Adult Education: An Overview of Orientations



Experiential learning is, as Michelson (1996) suggests, arguably one of the most significant areas for current research and practice in adult education. Sometimes called *informal* and *incidental* learning, experiential learning is related to many other concepts in adult learning: self-directed learning, lifelong learning, working knowledge, practical intelligence, and situated learning. The term “experiential learning” in adult education is usually associated with particular theories and practices based on reflection on concrete experience.

In practice, however, it seems counterproductive to separate experiential learning as an evolving adult education practice from a broader consideration of learning through experience. Much adult learning is commonly understood to be located in everyday workplace tasks and interactions, home and family activity, community involvement, and other sites of nonformal education. Many of us believe that our skills and concepts, and certainly the construction of our practical knowledge, the know-how that we use in our daily activities and work, are best learned through “doing.”

This monograph presents conventional notions of experiential learning and invites more discussion about alternative conceptions by comparing five perspectives of experiential learning. Experiential learning here means a process of human cognition. The root of the word cognition in fact means “to learn,” and thus the two terms are used interchangeably following standard usage within each perspective. The dimension of experience, broadly understood, is defensible as a classifying category in cognition: what manner of learning can be conceived that is not experiential, whether the context be clearly “educational” or not? Experience embraces reflective as well as kinesthetic activity, conscious and unconscious dynamics, and all manner of interaction among subjects, texts, and contexts. Experience flows across arbitrary denominations of formal and informal education, private and public sites of learning, compliant and resistant meaning formation. If the category of experiential learning refers to nonschooled learning, then control and educators’ presence are being reified as classifying dimensions. This creates a logical problem in that educators created the category and thus are present in it. In any case, the category implies that some kinds of learning do not incorporate experience, which is an absurd proposition from any definitional viewpoint. Moreover, attempted divisions between human experience and reflection on that experience have proved problematic for all kinds of reasons that are discussed later.

However, the term “experiential learning” is used here both because of its well-established tradition in adult education and to avoid epistemological arguments within broader constructs such as knowledge or cognition. This monograph does not address theories of learning derived from behaviorism or cognitive science, nor does it enter debates about the nature and construction of theoretical or disciplinary knowledge. The discussion is restricted to conceptions of knowledge calling themselves learning, that is,

that situate themselves within a pedagogical frame theorizing some sort of intersection between situation, educator, and subject whose position is designated “learner” by virtue of a traceable developmental moment. In particular, the focus is on contemporary perspectives on learning that are directly linked to individual and collective human actions and interactions, perspectives that perhaps hold greatest promise for future research and practice in adult learning for reasons described in the sections that follow.

To this end, this monograph offers a summary of the reflective constructivist view of experiential learning, then presents in comparison four additional theoretical orientations that have emerged in recent scholarly writing addressing (experiential) learning and cognition. These were selected for discussion here either because of their prominence in recent writing about learning and development, or because they offer an original perspective on the relationships among experience, context, mind, and learning that may raise helpful questions about the dominant constructivist view. For each of these five different orientations to experiential learning, certain influential theories and models are presented, followed by critique of the orientation launched from other perspectives. Space considerations prevent a comprehensive analysis of any particular perspective, and in most cases extended discussion of each is available elsewhere. In this monograph the purpose is to present only a brief overview for comparative purposes, to honor and clarify different perspectives along similar questions of learning so that dialogue among them may continue.

The next section gives an overview of the development of the concept of experiential learning in adult education theory and practice during the 20th century; it introduces certain issues raised by critics about how experiential learning has been incorporated into adult education.

Experiential Learning in 20th-Century Adult Education

Experiential learning first became popular in adult education to celebrate and legitimate people’s own experience in their knowledge development. It was one way to acknowledge the process of learning as much as the outcome in terms of new skills and concepts developed. Adult educators were also motivated by a genuine desire to counter a general lack of recognition or reward for experience in workplaces and higher education because experiential knowing has been traditionally uncredentialed. Their pedagogy, when focused on learners’ experience, challenged well-established ways of thinking about education as program, the educator as expert knower, and knowledge as theory.

The notion of experiential learning has been used to refer to everything from kinesthetic, directed instructional activities in the classroom to special workplace projects interspersed with “critical dialogue” led by a facilitator to learning generated through social action movements, and even to team-building adventures in the wilderness. Definitional problems continue when one tries to disentangle the notion of experiential learning from experiences commonly associated with formal education, such as class discussions, reading and analysis, and reflection.

Important questions have been raised about the intrusion of educators into people's ongoing experiential learning. Sometimes this educational intrusion becomes management of learning for economic goals, turning experience into a productive object or knowledge. Sometimes the intrusion ensures conformity and upholds existing dominant categories of knowledge, as when adults' experience is shaped and assessed through prior learning assessment processes to fit institutional standards and understandings of knowledge. Sometimes education is surveillance, as when adults are asked to explain their private experience to an educational group or share it in written reflective journals and portfolios. Sometimes educators view experience as something to be produced or designed to "motivate" learners and enhance training. The point is that educators' consideration of and intervention in others' experiential learning are neither neutral nor innocent.

Influential Theories of Experiential Learning in Adult Education

Progressive educator John Dewey, in his classic book *Experience and Education* first published in 1938, challenged the reigning pedagogy and justified education based on learning by doing. He showed how individuals create new knowledge and transform themselves through a process of learning by performing new roles. Dewey was interested in education for a democracy, the social nature of learning, and internal growth and process. He emphasized that not all experience educates. We have all witnessed or lived through episodes from which people can emerge apparently unchanged, not having learned lessons that others have attended to in the same experience. As well, sometimes we learn things from our experience that are actually dysfunctional for our growth or prevent us from reaching our goals. Dewey wrote that, for learning to happen, an experience must include two key dimensions. The first is *continuity*: the learner needs to be able to connect aspects of the new experience to what he or she already knows, in ways that modify this knowledge. The second is *interaction*: the learner needs to be actively interacting with his or her environment, testing out lessons developed in that environment. Dewey believed the educator should help link disparate experiences into a coherent whole.

Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins animated the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia in the 1920s on principles of adults learning through the experience of action to improve their economic quality of life, creating what they needed through small groups. Civil activism such as Myles Horton's work (see Adams 1975) at Tennessee's Highlander Center during the 1950s and 1960s was committed to learning through social action: small groups decided the issues of their oppression, then together learned the necessary resources (including liberating their own creativity) to take action toward resolving these issues.

With the rise of humanistic psychology in the 1960s and 1970s, experiential learning, which emphasized placing the learner at the heart of the learning process, began to acquire status as a movement. Malcolm Knowles (1970) in particular focused North American adult educators' attention on the importance of experience as one of the five principles of his theory of "andragogy" or adult learning. Knowles argued for a learner-centered educational process, in which adult learners are encouraged to reflect upon and

share their biographies of experience rather than simply accept the authority of texts (content) foreign to their own experiences. Knowles' ideas are responsible for a sweeping wave of change in the 1970s, as lecturers became facilitators of dialogue and learners exercised voice in determining the issues, goals, and applications of course materials.

Other writers on experiential learning include David Kolb (whose 1984 model of experiential learning is described in the next chapter), Jack Mezirow (who developed a theory of transformative learning describing critical reflection on experience), and Paulo Freire (whose theory of conscientization and praxis, learning through radical action combined with critical reflection, has galvanized emancipatory education around the world). Donald Schön popularized an approach to professional education he called “reflection-in-action,” which acknowledged that important learning unfolds through problem solving in the heat of everyday “messy” experience, where problems are ill structured, outcomes uncertain, and situational dimensions constantly shifting.

David Boud and his associates (Boud and Walker 1991; Boud, Cohen, and Walker 1993) have also written extensively on experiential learning in adult education. They maintain, as do others, that learners must be (consciously) engaged for learning to occur at any level. Like Kolb, Knowles, Mezirow, and Freire, Boud and Walker (1991) assume that our construction of learning from experience is an intentional act: as learners we are always actively pursuing knowledge and will find opportunities for learning in a variety of situations, whether labeled educative or not. Theories of informal learning, such as the model presented by Watkins and Marsick (1992), showed how adults often learn to understand puzzling new situations or develop new skills without going near a classroom. They suggested that, although informal learning is planned and intentional (though controlled by the learner), incidental learning occurs almost unconsciously, such as when we start a new job and before long, find out we have just “absorbed” important cultural knowledge about the politics and norms of the organization. Some writers describe this continuous active pursuit of knowledge as ongoing meaning making. Proponents of a movement in using life history and autobiography for pedagogical purposes have argued that an important need for many adults in a postmodern time of fragmentation and anxiety is to find coherence in their experiences and celebrate their meaning (e.g., West 1996).

The term experiential learning is often used to distinguish ongoing meaning making from theory and nondirected “informal” life experience from “formal” education. This is why experiential learning was often understood to be radical, associated with learner empowerment, and its proponents sometimes evangelistic in tone. In direct challenge to disciplinary bodies of theoretical and canonical knowledge, educational interest in experiential learning has typically championed recognition and valuing of the learner's personal practical knowledge and informal or incidental experience. As Reeve and Gallacher (1999) argue, “taking experience as the starting point for learning has the potential at least to erode traditional boundaries between knowledge and skills, vocational and academic learning, and between disciplines” (p. 127). Much of the focus on experiential learning throughout the 20th century has intended to challenge prevailing orthodoxy that worthwhile or legitimate education is planned and properly accredited and occurs only in programs, institutions, and classrooms. For some, learner empowerment has

meant transformation through recognizing the power of one's own (informal) experience and naming the oppressions one has suffered, as a step toward personal emancipation and possibly taking action for change. However, others argue there has been a shift, that experiential learning is itself becoming institutionalized and developing its own orthodoxies (some of these, such as Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, are discussed in chapter 2). As Griffin (1992) claims:

We are witnessing the transformation of experiential learning from a progressive educational movement towards reconstruction as an object of institutional policy and professional good practice. As such, it is being incorporated or absorbed into the formal system of educational provision. (p. 31)

In an attempt to reconcile various positions and search for the “essences” of adult experiential learning, Malinen (2000) presents a comparison of the theories of Malcolm Knowles, David Kolb, Jack Mezirow, Reg Revans (discussed in chapter 3), and Donald Schön. She states:

Adult experiential learning is a complex, vague and ambiguous phenomenon, which is still inadequately defined, conceptually suspect—and even poorly researched ... on the other hand, its theoretical and philosophical foundations are fragmented and confusing There are too many interpretations and priorities among the theorists and practitioners that no single, clear definition of these foundations could be constructed. (p. 15)

Amidst this apparent ambivalence, the questions for adult education that continue to be debated are, What is the nature of the intersection between individual(s), situation, social relationships, and knowing? Is there a legitimate role for an educator in this process? If so, what purposes should guide this role?

Categorizing Different Views of Experiential Learning

It should be clear by now that there are different schools of thought regarding the nature of experiential learning. Järvinen (1998) categorizes these as three main perspectives:

1. What may be called the *phenomenological tradition* of Boud and his associates and Schön analyzes emotional states, suggesting that reflection begins by analyzing the learner's way of observing, communicating, thinking, and acting.
2. The *critical theory tradition* of Habermas, Mezirow, and Freire views critical self-reflection as a central element of adult learning and development, with the aim of experiential learning being to correct political and social factors that limit a learner's development.
3. The *situated and action theory traditions* of situated cognition and enactivism (explained in chapter 3) stress the role of cultural action and its analysis, criticizing those who divorce the concept of experience from its socio-historical roots.

Each of these three views offers a different way to understand the nature of experience and its relation to learning. All three rest on particular assumptions about what knowledge is, how it is constructed, how to view knowers, and how knowers are related to their contexts. These assumptions are expanded in chapter 3. In terms of the practice of adult education itself in the area of experiential learning, Warner Weil and McGill (1989) have distinguished four different forms of educational practice that they call “villages”:

1. **Accrediting learning derived from experience for purpose of entry to educational progression or employment.** This is variously called Assessment of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). For educators gathered in this “village,” reflection is about recording and assessing experience. The first model was the U.S. GI Bill of 1946, which dealt with returning World War II veterans who wanted their experience credited in order to enter university, so it was assessed using traditional university course materials.
2. **Using experiential learning to challenge higher and continuing education schools and curriculum.** Deriving from the progressive tradition of Dewey, educators help learners unveil their hidden untapped knowledge through reflection on life experience.
3. **Focusing on social change.** In this radical tradition, educators help learners see outside their private world of reflection and become aware of the broader sociocultural dynamics and history shaping both their life experience and their ways of reflecting on it.
4. **Focusing on individual development.** From a humanist perspective, educators in this village encourage learners’ reflection for personal growth, taking responsibility for one’s self-learning.

The organizing principle governing the division of practice into these villages is the purpose of the educator in terms of desired outcomes for the learner. The villages do not distinguish between ways of actually conceptualizing experience and the process of cognition or “learning” entangled within it. Saddington (1998) builds on Warner Weil and McGill’s (1989) four villages of educational purpose to show how different dimensions of experiential learning come together with adult education practice. Saddington works from three basic orientations of educational practice to examine different dimensions of experiential learning:

1. **Progressive**, focusing on the individuals’ responsibility toward their society and viewing education as a problem-solving instrument of social and political reform.
2. **Humanist**, focusing on the learner at the center of a process of discovery and self-actualization, in a drive toward personal enrichment, integration, and psychological development.
3. **Radical**, focusing on societal and individual liberation through questioning and reinterpreting the very cultural assumptions of experience, and moving to action for transformation.

	Progressive	Humanist	Radical
<i>Social problem taken most seriously</i>	Social change	Personal meaningfulness	Oppression
<i>Underlying theory of social development</i>	Reform	Self-actualization	Social transformation
<i>Best metaphor for educational practice</i>	Problem solving	Personal growth	Empowerment
<i>Key value</i>	Democracy	Acceptance	Freedom
<i>What counts as "knowledge"?</i>	Judgment and the ability to act	Wholeness	Praxis (reflective thought and action)
<i>The educator's task</i>	Guiding	Support	Conscientization
<i>How an educated person is described</i>	Responsible	Integrated	Liberated
<i>Role of the learner's life experience</i>	A source of learning and inseparable from knowledge	The source of knowledge and the content of curriculum	Basic to understanding societal contexts and the source of knowledge
<i>Types of experience mainly used</i>	Structured	Personal focus	Self in society
<i>Villages at work</i>	1 & 2	1 & 4	3

Source: Saddington (1998), p. 134

This chart is useful to illustrate how important dimensions such as the type and role of experience in the learner's life are understood differently in various educational orientations. Educators might find they can situate their personal understanding and practice of experiential learning with these distinctions.

However, all three orientations and four villages that Saddington works with presume the same basic conceptualization of experiential learning: an independent learner, cognitively reflecting on concrete experience to construct new understandings, perhaps with the assistance of an educator, toward some social goal of progress or improvement. As explained in chapter 3, this is only one of many alternative conceptions of the actual pro-

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cess of experiential learning. However, very different perspectives have emerged, each arguing a distinct way of understanding the nature of experience. These perspectives are presented in chapters 2 and 3.

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter invites readers to consider two primary questions:

*What is the nature of the intersection between individual(s), situation, and knowing?
and, Is there a legitimate role for an educator in this process?*

This chapter shows the rise of focus on experiential learning in adult education as both a philosophy and a technique, usually focusing on the relationships between an individual, his or her reflective processes, and something called concrete experience. Different approaches to experiential learning in adult education are presented to help readers understand the strongest themes that have emerged historically in experiential learning as practice, including Warner Weil and McGill's concept of four villages and Saddington's classification of experiential learning according to progressive, humanist, and radical educational orientations. The discussion shows that although useful, these conceptions all assume the presence of an educator in adults' learning from experience. Furthermore, all assume that learning happens through cognitive reflection, experience can be considered like a bounded object, and an individual "learner" can be separated from his or her experience to process knowledge from that experience. The discussion then provides a brief overview of complex dimensions that call into question simplistic understandings of the relation between experience, human beings, and knowledge. These dimensions include individuals' purposes, modes of interpretation and engagement in experience, understandings of self and subjectivity, the relation between individuals and their contexts, and dimensions of gender, culture, class, and so forth that fundamentally structure how experience and knowledge are understood. Finally, the discussion outlines some educational practices and raises questions about the political implications of an educator's presence in an adult's experience.