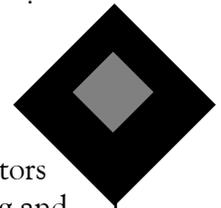


Concluding Comments



A careful comparison of theoretical frames is needed to help researchers and educators better understand and name the various processes occurring as experiential learning and constitute their own roles relative to these processes in moral, sensitive ways. The perspectives highlighted in this monograph may help interrupt dominant views of experiential learning as reflective knowledge construction and may open spaces for dialogue between situative and enactivist, constructivist, critical, and psychoanalytic voices. These perspectives can also move us toward developing more robust theoretical tools for experiential learning that integrate themes within the issues of reflection, interference, participation, power, and co-emergence as they are raised by different perspectives. Meanwhile, comparative examination of different perspectives can enlighten and raise new questions for each perspective, as well as help researchers, theorists, and educators situate and think carefully about beliefs of experience and learning underpinning their own practice.

Producing a synthesis of these five perspectives in terms of their implications for educators is perhaps impossible and theoretically unsound.¹ Each view enfolds a different understanding of the positioning of educators, learners, and learning and of the relationship between the theory of learning and the practice of teaching. Alternatively, one might try transcendence to a domain of theoretical “eclecticism,” which as Wilson and Myers (2000) argue, is most often the stance of the practitioner:

Practitioners tend to be opportunistic with respect to different theoretical conceptions: they might try viewing a problem from one theoretical perspective, then another, and compare results. This stance might be termed “grab-bag” but we prefer to think of it as problem- or practitioner-centered. People, rather than ideologies, are in control. The needs of the situation rise above the dictates of rules, models, or even standard values. (p. 248)

However, even this view of a single actor choosing to “apply” particular ideas to actions according to the demands of the immediate context is itself located within one perspective, the situative view, which others might reject as unadvisable, impossible, or theoretically inaccurate as a representation of what that actor may think he or she is doing. Indeed, certain streams of constructivism would question the cognitive possibility of “paradigm hopping.” And certain theories of epistemology would not accept the theoretical assumption that perspectives derived from fundamentally disparate worldviews can ever be integrated or even adequately represented side by side as they are presented here.

These are all issues of boundaries. As Edwards (1998b) has shown, the boundaries separating knowledge are drawn through an exercise of power, demarcating who and what is included or excluded. But Edwards goes on to argue that boundaries are also dynamic and increasingly permeable; through complex interplay and various kinds of boundary crossings and translation through social micro-practices, they are continually

¹Some have argued that systems theory/complexity theory in fact does synthesize the other positions, which, in its view, are unnecessarily fragmenting.

Concluding Comments

enacted and renegotiated. New identities, new practices, and new hybrids of meaning are opening in this continuous boundary differentiation/ redifferentiation.

So, now that these five different views of experiential learning have been bounded as distinct categories for purposes of some clarification, further research and dialogue should proceed to disrupt these boundaries. The classificatory dimensions used in this monograph require critique, examining their current influences in theory construction about cognition and experience and experimenting with alternate ways of understanding and representing learning perspectives. There are many possible readings and combinations of themes within perspectives. For example, perspectives sharing a subject-centered philosophy of consciousness (reflection and some emancipatory views of resistance) can be counterpoised to conceptions that decenter the subject (participation, co-emergence and poststructural perspectives of resistance). Enactivism resonates with psychoanalytic theory on some dimensions and situated cognition on others. Wilson and Myers (2000) argue that situated cognition actually embeds fundamental premises of early behaviorist theory, and Wilson (1993) shows its alliance with critical theory. Some streams of critical cultural theory align with constructivist notions of cognition, others with psychoanalytic or poststructural theories.

The further challenge is to examine the omissions, links, and blurrings among these perspectives to locate points where they already agree or where they may complement one another. More in-depth comparison should identify and probe, with careful analysis of terms and conditions, points of complete disagreement or incommensurability. These points of controversy may help us choose the most imminent questions for further inquiry into the nature of experiential learning. Then discussion should open exploration of the movements within and between the perspectives, examining the contradictory currents, the mutual influences, and the relationship of different perspectives to broader sociocultural movements in thought.

The phenomenon of “experiential learning” itself needs to be continually challenged and unraveled. Why has it become such a popular domain for adult education? Why have its boundaries expanded dangerously to subjugate almost any kind of experience, public or private, performative or introspective, individual or collective? In the current discourses of lifelong learning, experiential learning has been linked ubiquitously to industrial purposes and economic imperatives. Critics such as those represented throughout this monograph have argued loudly against this reification and regulation of experiential learning as some sort of endless human capital project, in which adult educators become the servants of a global market machine. Educators instead need to keep puncturing the boundaries, refusing to accept too quickly a category of pedagogical practice called experiential learning. Our further research and practice as educators must continue to critically examine its discursive power, its historical claims in knowledge production, and the interests invested in it.

In contexts of adult education, research might explore further implications for adult educational practice within different perspectives of experiential learning as represented here. More pressing, perhaps, is to question the very premise of inserting educators and

their various baggage of pedagogical forms and demands into the phenomenon called experiential learning. As this monograph shows, adult educators could be accused of having engaged in highly coercive and regulatory practices under the banner of experiential learning. What sort of praxis is morally justifiable, within what limits, and informed by what understandings of experiential learning? We should continue the dialogue about experiential learning in educational practice, allowing thoughtful interrogation among and blurring between various orientations, without dissolving into a trendy mix of technique.

Finally and most important, we must never stop questioning our own personal motives and intentions in engaging that which we decide to call others' experiential learning, regardless of the theoretical perspective we choose to frame our practice. Are we attempting to manage experience? How do we presume to understand others' "experience," and under what rationale do we insert ourselves into others' experience? To what ends, and for whose interests, ultimately? How do we understand our own implications in our work with others?

This monograph has avoided ethical arbitration of the responses to these questions. The responsibility falls to the reader to consider carefully just what he or she is attempting to do through educational practice and why. Ultimately, this continual questioning of practice, along with continual experimenting, sense-making and struggling, is what this document aims to support.

Concluding Comments