Experiential Education

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Introduction

Experiential education is a broad term referring to educational approaches that emphasize first-hand participation by learners in a diverse range of activities typically occurring outside of a classroom, but usually under pedagogical supervision. Experiential education generally espouses a constructivist epistemology focusing on interactions between the individual, the task(s), and the learning environment. Constructivist models of experiential education emphasize the learning process and promote reflection on that process, with a view to abstraction and future experiences (Fenwick 2001). Experiential education differs from vocational training and community organizing in its prioritization of subject area mastery, social-emotional growth, communication and teamwork skills, and self-awareness as key outcomes of interest. It also differs from open-learning approaches that characterize informal environments, which downplay pedagogical intervention in favor of individual autonomy and self-direction.

Experiential education is often characterized as an alternative to traditional or didactic education, a theme that is evident throughout the literature – both explicitly and implicitly and both philosophically and practically. A number of philosophical bases for experiential education have been referenced in what has become a vast and heteroglossic literature. John Dewey is commonly understood to be the chief conceptual architect of experiential education although it is possible to recognize many other figures as foundational. For example, Plato and Aristotle can also be regarded as proponents for an experiential approach to learning (see Plato’s Republic). One book lists 33 separate thinkers ranging from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Paolo Freire, to Martin Buber, to Emile Durkheim, to Maria Montessori as having influenced experiential education (Smith and Knapp 2011). The range of thinkers represented as “foundational” in such texts indicates why the philosophical and theoretical basis of experiential education is regarded as eclectic.

We discuss four main philosophical and theoretical influences, both to establish some common foundations and to orient readers to the divergence of thinking that exists in the literature. These are (1) concepts from classical Greek philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle; (2) continental philosophy (as opposed to analytical) with particular reference to Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and their focus on...
being, authenticity, and perception; (3) Dewey’s pragmatic conception of experience; and (4) human relations training workshops, which spawned the schematic models of experiential learning that have dominated thinking and practice over the past 40 years. We conclude that there is significant room for future interpretation and analysis through a range of theoretical and philosophical perspectives and opportunities for work to bring theoretical and philosophical clarity to an area that is, at best, unclear and somewhat confused.

**Philosophical Conceptions**

*Classic Greek philosophy.* There are a number of historical antecedents to experiential education dating to classical Greek philosophers. Plato’s Socratic method was informed by the concept of *elenchus*, characterized as a way of asking questions that encourages increased awareness and nurtures a spirit of enquiry. This approach departs considerably from the traditional role of the teacher as imparting wisdom and instead prompts student discovery. Aristotle’s conceptions of *telos* (often translated as purpose), *Eudaimonia* (human flourishing or happiness), and *Ergon* (or being) also shape beliefs about the power of first-hand immersion in projects that have some “real-world” impact. Aristotle was also concerned with developing good citizens through virtuous behavior, which helps to develop virtuous habits and thinking. Virtue, for Aristotle, is about a mean between two extremes such as cowardice and courage – virtuous people strike a balance between the two. That balance changes in different circumstances and finding the balance is a function of *phronesis*. Accordingly from an Aristotelian perspective, “experiential education” can promote the crucial Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*, which is often translated to practical wisdom or practical judgment.

These classical roots have found expression in current models of experiential learning. For example, *phronesis* is concerned with both actions and feelings and requires reflection on experiences and then application in future situations – this could be regarded an early form of experiential learning, which constructivists such as Kolb (1984) popularized in schematic models in the 1970s (although Aristotle never used the phrase). German educator Kurt Hahn (1886–1974) was also significantly influenced by Plato, particularly the mutual incorporation of philosophical (intellectual) and physical development. Plato’s influence can be seen in Hahn’s four pillars: *physical activity, skill, ethic of service, and expedition*, all of which combined to nurture citizens who contribute to civic society. These pillars undergird a number of Hahnian legacy institutions such as Outward Bound, the Duke of Edinburgh International Award, Round Square Schools, and United World Colleges.

*Continental philosophy.* This term is typically used to refer to philosophical movements such as phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and poststructuralism. Key philosophers of phenomenology such as Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty were all concerned with understanding perception and experience in some way. Of particular relevance to experiential education is the work of Merleau-Ponty concerned with the constitution of meaning in human experiences and Heidegger on *being* (existence), what it is to be human (*dasien*), and authenticity – truthfulness. While it is impossible to do justice to these philosophers in this space (see entries elsewhere in this Encyclopedia), our purpose is twofold: to point to the connections to experiential education and acknowledge their useful and under explored conceptions which can aid understanding and inform future theory and practice. For example, many people working in experiential education are drawn to the idea that their work is concerned with helping people to explore humanity and what it means to be human and to live an authentic existence, even though they may not be familiar with continental philosophy.

*Deweyan pragmatism.* John Dewey is also regarded as a foundational figure not just to the theorizing and philosophy of experiential education, but also its practice. Dewey proposed that learning was most engaging and meaningful when it is based on an indeterminate problem that learners are concerned with solving or addressing
The problem requires students to develop plans and experiment with those plans to varying degrees and then commit to action. Following action of some kind, reflection and abstraction lead to addressing future problems. Canonical experiential learning model interpretations of Dewey (e.g., Kolb 1984) tend to emphasize action, student engagement, and the importance of taking personal responsibility for learning. Dewey’s principles of continuity and interaction are also of relevance to experiential education: the importance of each experience building and developing previous experiences and providing foundations for future experiences, alongside interaction of “internal” world with the “external” world and the meaning making processes associated with learning (in this respect Dewey is brought close to Piaget’s concepts of assimilation and accommodation). These features can be seen as hallmarks of high-quality experiential learning.

The extent to which contemporary models and practices reflect Dewey’s ideas is contested, however. Critics argue that “experience” has always been a major category for curricular thinking dating back to the origins of formal schooling, and Dewey was critical of most of the ways it was being interpreted and implemented (Kliebard 1995). Indeed, near the end of his life he abandoned the term in favor of “culture” (Dewey n.d./1981). Dewey’s own notion of experience is notoriously complicated, as it represented an order of conceptions that were intended to provide an entire basis for democratic schooling based on first-hand involvement in activities designed to replicate historical forms of economic production and societal organization (Fallace 2008; Quay and Seaman 2013). Kliebard (1995) thus argues that Dewey’s ideas are often reduced to a “pitiful caricature, such as learning by doing” (p. 27). Nonetheless, Dewey’s work remains a rich source of ideas for future practice and scholarship.

**Other Key Concepts and Considerations**

*Human relations training and the “workshop” method.* Models of experiential learning that have influenced practice since the 1970s, and align with the constructivist perspective (Fenwick 2001), are derived from mid-century human relations training workshops. For example, Kurt Lewin, Kenneth Benne, Ronald Lippitt, and Leland Bradford organized a training for community leaders in Connecticut in 1946, which incorporated sociological research with small discussion groups aiming to address religious and racial conflicts. Participants became interested in discussing their interpersonal interactions with the researchers, and they serendipitously spawned “T-Groups” which formed the basis for encounter groups and other similar personal growth trainings through the 1970s.

*Experiential learning cycles.* David Kolb expanded on the original Lewinian trainings, in particular T-Groups, to create his “experiential learning cycle” (1984). In this model, someone in a position of pedagogical authority conducts an activity of some type – a simulation exercise, a service project, an outdoor excursion – then leads a discussion in which participants are led to extract meaning and propose some implications for their future conduct. This pattern is often repeated over the course of an educational program, with each one of these cycles feeding reciprocally into the next. Such experiential learning models are pedagogically useful, but are increasingly receiving criticism for their emphasis on individual cognition without adequate consideration of context (Fenwick 2001) and for failing to specify the historical conditions of their origin.

**Common Themes**

With this cursory backdrop in mind, it is possible to identify four themes running through the literature on experiential education which can be beneficial in appraising claims about the relationship between theory and practice:

1. Experiential education tends to conceive of learning and the learner as the starting point for any educative experience in contrast to knowledge per se. This emphasis is often
related to constructivist traditions and a range of different philosophers.

2. The relationship between the educator and learner is concerned with supporting and facilitating learning rather than the achievement of objectives which are prescribed by a government/school authority/school/teacher without learner involvement. This normally involves a facilitative posture by the educator, rather than a more traditional “teacher” or “instructor” role.

3. Experiential education is concerned with an exploration of being and authenticity where success is focused on becoming more human and stimulating a journey of personal development.

4. Experiential education is mainly concerned with the development of personal knowledge and understanding often emerging from interactions occurring in the immediate small group context, rather than conceived a priori at the outset of a pedagogical intervention.

By highlighting four themes listed above, experiential education can be expressed in a wide diversity of contexts. See entries on service learning, outdoor education, environment-related education, and critical and social justice pedagogies in practice. Regardless of these outlets, it tends to have a number of core features.

**Problem solving.** A further attribute of experiential education is engaging students in “real-world problems,” characterized by variability and uncertainty, and requiring active involvement to be solved or addressed. The role of the educator normally involves establishing parameters for problem identification and facilitation of the aforementioned learning process than teaching of content. Thus, the relation of the educator to the student and the problem are fundamentally different to more traditional or didactic approaches to education, in which subject matter content plays a prominent role. Thus, the role of the experiential educator is to create an environment for students to learn and to guide them in identifying problems and jointly finding ways to address them. The experiential educator assists learners in both designing (as the architects) and constructing (as the builders) learning experiences.

**Social change.** Historically it is possible to trace traditions of experiential education that are primarily concerned with social reform through personal transformation. This was a main premise in human relations training groups through the 1970s and also in the character education movement that influenced some outdoor education organizations such as Outward Bound (Kurt Hahn) and National Outdoor Leadership School (Paul Petzoldt). Experiential education in these contexts and similar often involves emotionally intense, immersive small group experiences often in wilderness or remote settings. In such contexts the focus is often on reflecting on the small group experiences, observations of group and individual behaviors and articulation of individual learning among the group. “Change” at the level of the individual and small group is believed to be the mechanism of social change at a wider scale, although some programs include content about diversity and social justice more explicitly.

**Criticisms of experiential education.** Critiques of experiential education typically focus on three main areas, which might be useful in steering future philosophical and empirical research and development. First, the high staff-student ratios that are often needed for meaningful, rather than tokenistic, experiential education coupled with the need for time are rarely available in structured, formal settings. There are considerable structural and systemic challenges for “scaling up” experiential education in mainstream (public) education.

Second, experiential education is often criticized for lacking curriculum content and corresponding difficulties in assessment and measuring performance. This criticism cuts two ways: First, the inability to clearly situate academic content as central to the learning process has been attacked as being anti-intellectual and politically regressive (Paterson 2008). Second, even the most effective examples of experiential education are poorly fitted to the testing culture in education and the need to demonstrate attainment of pupils and, more widely, schools. The timing and specificity of the testing systems in many Western countries prioritize narrow demonstrations of content.
mastery over, for example, moral education, citizenship, and character development despite growing evidence of twenty-first century societies’ need for young people who have matured in these respects. Therefore, there seems to be a persistent tension between the benefits of remaining apart from or commingling with “mainstream” reform efforts regardless of whether that be conceptualized as education or youth development movements.

*Experiential education as practices.* In light of these ambiguous foundations, scholars have found it useful to demarcate regions of practice informed by conceptions of experiential learning. For example, Wurdinger and Rudolph (2009) identified five different conceptions of experiential learning: project-based learning, problem-based learning, service learning, place-based education, and active learning. Saddington (2000) refers to four “villages,” or conceptual approaches, within experiential learning:

1. Village One is concerned with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience as the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training opportunities, and professional bodies.
2. Village Two focuses on experiential learning as the basis for bringing about change in the structures, purposes, and curricula of post-secondary education.
3. Village Three emphasizes experiential learning as the basis for group consciousness raising, community action, and social change.
4. Village Four is concerned with personal growth and development and experiential learning approaches that increase self-awareness and group effectiveness.

In light of this, experiential education might be usefully conceived as philosophically eclectic and diverse in realization. The philosophical eclecticism provides expansive opportunities for research and development within specific traditions but also for working between traditions and schools of thought to transcend boundaries and develop new insights or conceptualizations. Practically speaking, educators wishing to argue for an “experiential” approach can make use of the field’s eclecticism to justify their pedagogical choices. This kind of conceptual opportunism seems inevitable given the range of ideas contained in the literature. Scholars and researchers enjoy similarly wide latitude as they introduce new perspectives to investigate issues concerning them; even their approaches will likely vary based on the problem at hand, methodological choices, and one’s scholarly audience.

*Conclusion.* The phrase experiential education refers to a range of pedagogical approaches that are justified by and understood through numerous philosophical and theoretical foundations. “Experience” has troubled philosophers for centuries, and the concept’s ambiguity reverberates in efforts to apply it educationally. Constructivist perspectives have provided a useful anchor, directing attention to the learning process and the design of learning environments. Future scholarship is now needed to expand beyond constructivism, particularly in the areas of theory and philosophy, history, and sociocultural context. While empirical work will no doubt contribute to progressing understanding the “heavy lifting” work falls to philosophers and more conceptual work. The wide range of educational thinkers noted above provide tradition for looking across disciplines and thinkers to progress conceptualizations and raise questions for debate. Contemporary and ancient philosophers provide huge potential for future research which can draw on thinking beyond the dominance of white male Western authors.

**Cross-References**

- Authenticity
- Continental Philosophy
- Dasien
- Dewey
- Environmental Learning
- Experiential Learning
- Friere
- Hahn
- Heidegger
- Internships/Work Placements
- Kolb
- Merleau-Ponty
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References


