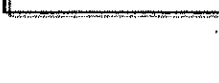
Foundations of Experiential Education



National Society for Experiential Education

learning in action

Foundations of Experiential Education

December 1997 NSEE Foundations Document Committee

This document grew out of conversations on the mission of NSEE that took place at a strategic planning meeting of the NSEE Board of Directors in March of 1997. An ad hoc committee of board members (Gail Albert, Art Chickering, Janet Eyler, Freyda Lazarus, Keith Morton, and Ed Zlotkowski) and staff (Mark Andrew Clark and Holly Ivel) formed and drafted a document that we hope describes the common ground on which NSEE members, and so the organization, stand. We present the product of that committee as a living document: it is a starting point for talking about the assumptions we bring when defining Experiential Education. We anticipate that it will need to be formally reviewed and perhaps rewritten every few years so that it continues to reflect the thinking of NSEE members.

At present, the document has been reviewed by board members, used in draft form with 40 participants at a pre-conference workshop at the 1997 National Conference, and circulated with a dozen representative readers. Special Interest Group and Network chairs are being asked to read it carefully and to solicit feedback; and it is posted on NSEE's website (www.nsee.org).

We are anticipating that this document will be used in a number of ways: to initiate discussions, to introduce people to experiential education and perhaps to advocate for experiential education in a number of local and national arenas. No doubt, supporting documents will need to be developed if it is to be used effectively.

We therefore invite your feedback, in the form of criticism, questions, comments, and stories. Please send this feedback directly to NSEE.

Thank you.
Keith Morton, editor

Introduction

This document is written for NSEE members. It aims to suggest a platform on which we can stand, a basis for developing some shared language and agreed upon fundamentals. We hope it will suggest conceptual frameworks and language which can be adapted for diverse audiences: students, parents, teachers, professors, school and college administrators, student affairs professionals, business and community partners, state and federal legislators, and policy makers.

To these ends we lead off with definitions. We then signal key arenas which provide supporting theoretical frameworks and research results. Basic components and processes of Experiential Education, practical payoffs for persons and for institutions, and implications for practice follow. We close by addressing some myths and misconceptions, and some questions often raised by others not yet well informed about or experienced with Experiential Education and experiential learning.

Experiential Education: What It Is (and How It Got That Way)

Experiential education is essentially an educational philosophy first developed in the late nineteenth century and has since been articulated in a variety of fields including cooperative education, internships, outdoor education, organizational development and training, and service- learning.

The essence of Experiential Education was captured by the philosopher John Dewey, who argued that "Events are present and operative anyway; what concerns us is their meaning." Experience happens; it is unavoidable. The problem for teachers and students is how to make meaning out of our experience. In its purest forms, Experiential Education is inductive, beginning with "raw" experience that is processed through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, usable knowledge.

It is important to note that Dewey articulated his "Theory of Experience" as a critique of "traditional education." Traditional, classroom-based education, he argued, developed in response to the demands of urban industrial capitalism. It is based on the dualisms of mind and body, mind and world, and on deductive logic that works from the general to the particular. It assumes the ignorance of the learner and the wisdom and authority of the teacher and is premised on belief in bodies of knowledge or "disciplines" that the student should acquire.

While Dewey was careful to acknowledge the utility, power, and cultural primacy of this approach, he argued that traditional education was

inherently undemocratic, since it is hierarchically structured, divorces subjective from objective ways of knowing, and separates experience from learning. Thus, there is a "small-d" democratic assumption embedded in Experiential Education; its logic is intended to be holistic and integrative, based on the process of making meaning out of experience.

The idea that experience, learning, and development are interconnected has provided a jumping off point for various forms of Experiential Education. In the 1940s, the organizational theorist Kurt Lewin argued that personal and organizational development resulted from the ability of an individual or a group to set goals, theorize about prior experience, experiment with that theory in their work, and revise their goals and theories based on the results of their experience. "There is nothing so practical," he concluded, "as a good theory." Today, Experiential Education principles are widely adopted in organizational development and training, especially in the areas of creative problem solving, team building, and conflict resolution. These principles are also central in outdoor education, apprenticeship and internship programs, and educational programs that employ laboratory or other experimental formats.

Paulo Freire and David Kolb have made use of Dewey's basic insights in more recent years, Freire in the context of adult education and social justice, Kolb in the context of lifelong learning and organizational development. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Freire recognized that education was a way for oppressed people to claim power, and in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* called for "problem-posing" education, in which "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process, in transformation." Kolb made the process even more explicit: "Learning," he suggested in his groundbreaking *Experiential Learning*, "is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Dewey, Lewin, Freire, and Kolb all suggest that a goal of Experiential Education is that we learn how to transform experience into knowledge, that we use this knowledge for our individual and collective development.

The emergence of Experiential Education has paralleled the growth of cognitive and developmental psychology, youth development, and adult education, all of which assume, as psychologist Carol Gilligan has said, that intellectual and moral growth "represent attempts to order and make coherent the unfolding experiences and perceptions, the changing wishes and realities of everyday life." What links the developmental theories of Gilligan and Jean Piaget, William Perry and Lawrence Kohlberg is the insight that cognitive and moral development is a product of how we make meaning of

our experience in the world. More recent studies by Kegan (the evolving self) and Belenky, *et al.* (women's ways of knowing) regarding the importance of context in learning continue this line of inquiry.

Critics dislike this "process" orientation, which challenges the idea that knowledge is fixed, that morals are absolute. And yet, as Perry has pointed out, experiential theory argues that because we must act in the world, we have to commit ourselves to certain beliefs, propositions or provisional truths. We must be willing to test regularly these commitments against our experience and in the many communities which both support and judge us.

Experiential Education, in other words, differs from much of traditional education in maintaining that knowledge is individually and communally constructed by people as they reflect on the world around them. Experiential Education rejects the Platonic assumption that truth is independent of knowing, that information can be "learned" apart from understanding, mastery, and application. In short, Experiential Education replaces the dualisms of experience and knowledge, mind and body with an emphasis on a unifying process of communication, what the philosopher William Godwin called "sincere conversation, " and what Freire more recently called "dialogue . . . the encounter between [persons], mediated by the world, in order to name the world." Dialogue might be described as an ongoing conversation about how our experience of the world can be most accurately and usefully interpreted. One value of community is that it provides a place in which this dialogue can take place. It is this process of dialogue, most commonly referred to as "reflection," which unifies experience and knowledge, mind and body, individual and community. This cycle of experience and reflection grounds all forms of Experiential Education.

Most recently, neurological research has described the human brain as a mass of interconnected neurons. "Every sensation we receive," Arthur Chickering has noted, "every move we make, every emotion we feel, every thought we think, every word we speak involves a network of those interconnections. The fundamental thing we need to do, to achieve learning that lasts, is connect the new learning with one of those pre-existing networks." Testing ideas in action--Experiential Education--is among the most powerful means available for connecting new learning to the existing neurological networks. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman documents the ways in which prior experience conditions our responses to current experiences--offering physiological evidence that we learn from experience and must pay attention to the design of experiences for our students.

What Counts as Experience and the Responsibility of the Educator

Experiential Education can be understood more concretely by asking what constitutes an "experience." Noting that not "all experiences are genuinely or equally educative," Dewey argued that educative experiences could be judged by whether or not:

- the individual grew, or would grow, intellectually and morally;
- the larger community benefitted from the learning over the long haul;
- the "situation" (Dewey's word for a discrete episode of experience) resulted in conditions leading to further growth, such as arousing curiosity and strengthening initiative, desire, and purpose.

The responsibility of the educator, Dewey also pointed out, is to create the conditions for experiences that would result in this kind of growth, a responsibility that required:

- knowledge of the "students";
- understanding of the types of experience that could help them learn;
- the ability to anticipate and respond to the particular "situations" that developed as an experience unfolded.

The unifying process that is central to Experiential Education can make it difficult to categorize the various types: internships, field experiences, service-learning, cooperative education, outdoor education. Broadly speaking, the "competing" motives of skill development, vocational preparation, service, content knowledge, and values or spiritual development are not, in fact, competing. Tension among them is a part of what creates the cognitive dissonance that motivates learning.

Nevertheless, Dewey argued that we must think of "experience" broadly enough that the "result is a plan for deciding upon subject matter, upon methods of instruction and discipline, and upon material equipment and social organization of the school." At the "macro" level, in other words, Experiential Education generates a logic that drives student/teacher relationships, priorities, timelines, resource allocation, and decision making processes.

Formal attention to this logic has led to the various "fields" of Experiential Education--outdoor education, service-learning, cooperative education, internships. Each type of experience suits students with particular purposes; each designs a type of experience suited to its purpose; and each anticipates and responds to the questions and problems that its type of experience generates. Each "field," such as it is, is defined by a type of experience, and its best practice is derived from the accumulation of working knowledge derived from that experience.

Since Dewey first made his ideas widely known in the 1910s, Experiential Education has surged and subsided in waves of interest. It is present in the creation of federal programs combining work and study, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s; in the creation of vocational education programs (which Dewey opposed as artificially separating liberal and applied studies); in the emergence of programs such as Outward Bound and later the Peace Corps; and in the assumptions undergirding the blossoming of internship, community service, and cooperative education programs established in the 1960s and early 70s. Finally, Experiential Education is central in the current resurgence of federal and school interest in "service-learning" and "school-to-work" programs. The importance of experience in learning is also evident in the emergence of portfolio assessment of students and in the assessment of methods that have evolved for assessing learning from prior experience.

Best Practice

"It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience," Dewey noted. "Everything depends upon the quality of the experience." The basic elements contributing to "the quality of the experience" are generally referred to as "principles of good practice." These principles apply to all forms of Experiential Education. While they have gone by various names over the years, these principles are Intention, Authenticity, Planning, Clarity, Orientation and Training, Monitoring and Assessment, Reflection, Continuous Improvement, Evaluation and, finally, Acknowledgement.

In designing an Experiential Education "situation," the learning facilitator must first ask, "What specific learning and knowledge do I intend to result from this situation?" The answers to this question guide all subsequent choices and will not limit the possible learning outcomes individual learners may derive from the activity. They will, however, ensure that the *Intention* to the learning areas will be part of the experience that results.

The value of experiential learning rests in its capacity to provide an opportunity for testing previously learned facts and theories, revising assumptions, and deriving new and first hand knowledge. This kind of knowledge is best achieved and retained in a situation that is grounded in *Authenticity* rather than one that is simulated or simply relays someone else's experience. In an authentic experience, the learner recognizes that learning is relevant and that her/his own knowledge gives her/his power to affect her/his world.

Effective experiences will engage the learners in *Planning* at a very early stage. The planning process itself provides powerful learning opportunities in areas like decision making, team work, communication, and problem solving that transcend content-based or curricular goals. If the activity involves community partners, they too must be involved in the planning. This ensures the authenticity of the experience, that the activity has realistic objectives and is useful. It also ensures that they understand the learning goals of the students and the program or curriculum, and that all parties share reciprocal goals.

Once the activity is defined, *Clarity* is a critical factor and can be achieved only through regular and committed communication. Expectations and responsibilities of the teacher, the learner and the community partner, workplace or recipient of service must be clear, and these must be defined by all involved. The learner should be actively involved in setting and clearly articulating her/his own learning and personal development goals, strategies, and outcome measures. Since the possible outcomes of experiential learning are not limited to, and often expand far beyond those first specified, protocols must be defined to permit flexibility without losing the structure and clarity of the initially defined outcomes. This can be achieved with tools that include a work plan or contract that defines *expectations, responsibilities, timelines*, and *projected outcomes*, and a letter of agreement or commitment among all partners to the experience that acknowledges responsibilities and defines *protocols and procedures* to be used in situations that might arise. Authentic experiences that take place within or outside the classroom need to be preceded by a thorough *Orientation* that provides the background, conceptual information, and basic skills that will be required to participate effectively in the situation. Factual information related to the issues that will be addressed during the experience, information about the workplace or community setting where the experience will take place, and activities designed to help learners understand behavioral expectations and their own preconceptions of the world of experience they are about to enter should all be included. Once orientation is complete, ongoing *Training and Mentoring* need to occur to refine the skills needed to accomplish the experiential tasks. Through this process learners come to recognize learning as a life-long, rather than a finite process.

Monitoring and Assessment of experiential learning are ongoing processes that are integrally linked to the original goals and intentions that defined the experience in the first place. When the elements of experiential learning have been followed, the criteria that drive monitoring and assessment have been well-defined during the planning process, and each party understands his or her particular role, what outcomes are expected, what the

outcome measures are, who will be administering them and when they will occur. Furthermore, when the learner has her/himself been involved in defining the learning contract, self assessment against a known set of standards is expected. In addition, the learning facilitator, the learning community, and the experience itself should each be measured regularly against the expectations and goals set forth in the planning documents. The feedback needs to be communicated among all parties and factored back into the ongoing planning process according to the protocols set forth in advance. Thus monitoring and assessment become not tools of final judgment, but tools of *Continuous Improvement.*

Reflection is another critical factor in the discovery and internalization of knowledge. While the word "reflection" is derived from roots that mean "to look back over," it should actually begin at the start of the process and be integral to all phases of the activity itself. It is not something to be saved for the end. Reflection is part of the process of defining the activity, as the learner connects the learning intentions with the projected activity; it enters the planning process as options are weighed, and it is central to defining and clarifying the learner's goals. It is exercised as all persons involved examine their preconceptions during orientation, a step that is essential to recognizing how one has changed and grown as a result of any experience. Reflection enables learners to examine their actions and learning against the outcome measures they established and to use feedback provided to strengthen or alter the process for continuous improvement. Beyond these integrated reflection opportunities, learners should be offered a variety of structured and unstructured activities that support reflection to insure that intended and more serendipitous learning goals are addressed. Journals, daily logs, simulations, small group discussions, and focused conversation are all common tools of reflection.

Like reflection, *Evaluation* is inseparable from the intended outcomes of the learning experience. Outcomes, in order to be evaluated, must be measurable. When an experience is based on an assumption that learning will derive from it, it is necessary to create a rubric for defining what has been accomplished. Evaluation is also integral to monitoring and assessment and should be ongoing, not reserved for the end of the activity alone. For instance, questions such as, were the predicted learning outcomes the actual ones achieved?' or was the community or workplace outcome the one originally expected?' must be addressed. Evaluation should result not only in yes or no answers, but should also analyze "why?" in order to serve the goals of continuous improvement and ongoing reflection. Increasingly, evaluation is conducted with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, mixing aggregate data gathered in statistically sound ways with narrative

and descriptive data gathered through interviews, focus groups, and observation.

The final element that should contribute to any experiential activity is *Acknowledgment* or recognition. Knowledge and learning are good causes for celebration, and a capstone event and documentation are important for closure. Like reflection, acknowledgment is an important part of the entire process and should not be done only at the end. Acknowledgment gives learners an opportunity for defining, implementing, and assessing their practice and learning. It comes in constructive and critical feedback; it comes in shared reflection and hearing or seeing one's ideas taken into account and being responded to by others; and it comes in the self-recognition that "I have learned something that matters, used it to accomplish something. I will remember it because it matters and what I've accomplished."

Common Misconceptions

If Experiential Education has been around for nearly one hundred years, and if it is such a good thing, why isn't it standard practice today? Critics commonly offer the following challenges. We offer the following responses.

It isn't rigorous. It is true that Experiential Education doesn't begin with a body of knowledge, but rather with the experiences, curiosities and questions of its students. Knowing one's students is a demanding process. "It is harder to find out the background of the experience of individuals," Dewey recognized, "and harder to find out just how the subject matters already contained in that experience shall be directed so as to lead out to larger and better organized fields." When it is done with integrity, however, Experiential Education approaches employ the tools of close, careful observation; critical thinking and dialogue; and ethical experimentation. In order to succeed, learners ask questions and link themselves to the legacies--scholarly and creative written work, folklore, communities of learning--that can help them make good decisions and take useful action. Like any type of education, this can be done well or badly, with or without attention and care. A more likely cause for the perception that Experiential Education is not rigorous is that by placing more responsibility on the shoulders of students, it is more readily evident when those students are not engaged for one reason or another. There is no place for an apathetic person to hide when it is his or her responsibility to act and construct actively new knowledge.

It's too much about feelings and not enough about content or ideas. Another way to look at this question is to ask why affective and subjective ways of knowing are so distanced from formal and objective ways of knowing in traditional education. People act in and experience the world in both ways, simultaneously. The goal of Experiential Education is to teach and learn as whole persons. Not that one way of knowing is better or worse than the other, but rather that it makes little sense to compartmentalize them. The goal is to become aware equally of the world, and of one's self, and the constant interaction between the two. If anything, Experiential Education demands that we pay even greater attention to the problems of how we know what we know and why we know what we know, in ways that traditional education usually doesn't offer.

It's disorganized and chaotic. A more accurate charge would be that it often *appears* disorganized and chaotic. Experiential Education can be messy and nonlinear. It can require tearing things apart before rebuilding them. The social and physiological truths appear to be that people interpret and apply order to all experience. This is a nonlinear, recursive process. In addition to representing disorder, chaos represents pure potential--it is what calls us to make meaning. More often, when teachers observe that Experiential Education is chaotic, they really mean that they fear they will have less control. It is actually a question of where you want control to reside in the relationships formed among students and teachers. Another way of responding to this challenge is to note that the methods of teaching contain a "hidden curriculum," and that we must be sure that this hidden curriculum matches the explicit curriculum. For example, if people are in rows, must raise their hands before speaking, and have little or no authority in determining either the direction of their learning or their grade, how can someone teach them about what it means to live in a democratic society?

It is time consuming and/or expensive. Experiential Education is time consuming, especially at the beginning of a new process. It often requires discussions and agreements among several individuals or organizations. It can be expensive, although it doesn't have to be. More often, what people are saying when they level this challenge at Experiential Education is that it takes time away from the activities associated with traditional forms of education-- lectures, for example. Lectures and other forms of "telling" do have their place in a curriculum, but they are simply one method among many, and when they are overused, they are very inefficient. Experiential Education, because it attempts to teach holistically, can take longer to get rolling, but it is increasingly efficient over time. Also, some critics believe that "activities" take time away from studying the various "disciplines," such as mathematics, writing, social studies or science. From the point of view of Experiential Education, the challenge is to rethink the problem as one of constructing "situations" for students which require problem solving that draws on the knowledge base of the disciplines.

It exposes students to too much risk. Experiential Education can be risky: doing a high ropes course, venturing into a new organization or community, opening up fundamental beliefs to scrutiny all have risks associated with them. What educators often mean when raising the issue of risk is that they don't have enough control over the environment of their students. The goal is not to give up control, but to practice "due diligence"--create an environment with a level of risk calculated to allow for short term failures and long-term successes. Success, in these terms, includes the mental, physical, and emotional health of all involved. Minimally, the maxim "do no harm" should be followed by everyone. One of the challenges for those involved in Experiential Education is distinguishing between discomfort and risk. Assumptions, stereotypes, and/or expectations can all cause discomfort where no real risk is involved. Such discomfort is real, however, and should never be taken lightly. Experiential Education takes the idea of "no pain, no gain" one step further by observing that "gain" comes not from pain itself, (pain is a sign of stress), but from what happens afterwards--the reknitting of muscles, ideas, values, or relationships. This attitude is captured in Piaget's concept of "optimal distance," and in the work of others which recognizes that achieving a new level of skill or insight (a point of "equilibrium") is likely to require a period of transition or dissonance. In various ways, these theorists suggest that the goal is to create opportunities that stretch us without breaking us. Experiential educators must therefore be adept at creating opportunities for optimal dissonance and intentional in establishing opportunities for new equilibrium to be established.

Practical Payoffs

When one turns to the question of "why?" two answers come to mind. Educational psychologists indicate, in general, that the more active our learning, the more we retain. Indeed, for some learners, only the opportunity to participate in hands-on learning leads to commitment to the learning process. By insisting that abstract intellectual exchange is the only way to demonstrate academic ability, we may be preventing thousands of students from both discovering and demonstrating their potential.

A second answer follows closely upon the first: when one looks at the learning style preferences of the present generation of students, one finds concrete, socially contextual learning the preferred mode. In other words, the point just made about the generic benefits of Experiential Education possesses special relevance for today's learners, many of whom finish high school or enter college with little confidence in their ability to excel in the traditional classroom or with a workplace bias towards concrete, practical

problem solving. Insofar as they encounter an educational delivery system foreign to their psychological needs, they will find themselves dividing their attention between the learning they need and the system that fails to facilitate their learning.

Why Experiential Education Is Important Today

Many historians and futurists see the present as an age of major social change. Often, this change is explained as the result of a transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based society. In other words, what will matter most in the new century is not the ability to mass manufacture goods but the ability to create new kinds of knowledge. Such a shift clearly has enormous implications for education. It means, for example, that schools, colleges, and universities can no longer afford the luxury of graduating students ill-prepared for a demanding, constantly changing workplace. If knowledge is now becoming the very coin of the realm, those institutions that fail to deliver may find themselves facing empty classrooms. Education as an age-specific rite of passage, as an essentially ritualistic certification, will necessarily give way to a much more vigorously monitored, much more carefully assessed investment.

Hence, the agenda for education is to develop the most flexible, most responsive set of pedagogical strategies available. In such a time of radical readjustment, Experiential Education offers itself as an option no educational institution can afford to ignore. Indeed, when parents, students, and instructors were recently surveyed as to how the liberal arts could be made more effective, the number one response is that they should offer more internship opportunities. Noted educational thinkers like Ernest Boyer and Lee Shulman have expressed similar views.

For Boyer, Shulman, and many others, the old antagonisms between "pure" learning and "vocational" learning, between the development of higher thinking abilities and the acquirement of practical skills is an anachronism we should abandon as quickly as possible. In a highly competitive global market, our society can no longer afford to cultivate minds untested by and indifferent to concrete practical problems. In the dialogue between theory and practice that lies at the heart of Experiential Education, we find a proven approach for moving both our educational system and our society into a prosperous 21st century.

References

Belenky, M. F., et al. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, mind and voice.* New York: Basic Books.

Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America.* New York: Harper and Row.

Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate.* Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Chickering, A. W. & Schlossberg, N. (1995). *Getting the most out of college.* New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Chickering, A. W. & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Dewey, J. (1938; 1963). *Experience and education.* New York: MacMillan Publishing Company.

Dewey, J. (1925; 1981). "Experience and nature." In *John Dewey: The later works.* Vol. 1. J.A .Boydson, Ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Godwin, W. (1798; 1976). *Enquiry concerning political justice.* Baltimore: Penguin Books.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence.* New York: Bantam Books.

Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problems and processes in human development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development. Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages.* New York: Harper Collins.

Lewin, K. (1952). "Group decisions and social change." In G.E. Swanson, et al. Eds. *Readings in Social Psychology.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Morton, N. (1985). *The journey is home.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Perry, W. G. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme.* Troy, MO: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Shulman, L. S. & Keisler, E. R. (1966). *Learning by discovery: A critical appraisal.* Chicago: Rand McNally.

National Society for Experiential Education
3509 Haworth Drive
Suite 207
Raleigh, NC 27609
(919) 787-3263
www.nsee.org

Published with assistance from the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island.