

## *The Axiological Dimensions of Experiential Education*

*Keane Richards*

*October 8, 2014*

***“Axiology.* The study of the nature, types, and criteria of values and of value judgments especially in ethics.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.***

***“Experiential.* Relating to, derived from, or providing experience.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.***

***“Education.* 1. The action or process of teaching someone especially in a school, college, or university. 2. The knowledge, skill, and understanding that you get from attending a school, college, or university. 3. A field of study that deals with the methods and problems of teaching.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.***

If we are to discuss what the axiological dimensions of Experiential Education are, then first we must define experiential education.

### **Defining Experiential Education**

Taken from its root words, “experiential education” means simply “education, through experience.” This statement at first misleads, and is the reason why so many people have a puzzled face when I say I am pursuing a degree in experiential education. Isn’t all education an experience, anyway? Indeed, education philosopher John Dewey – on whose theories many contemporary experiential education tenets are based – said, “It is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom was not a place in which pupils had experiences.”<sup>1</sup> The difference is in the category of experience.

Is an experience educative or mis-educative? Positive or negative? Active or passive? Building on old ideas, delving into new ones, or simply restating known facts? What is the difference between the experience of a typical high school student sitting and listening to her English instructor, versus J.K Rowling beginning piecing together chapters of her first novel? What about a physics college student reading

---

<sup>1</sup> The Philosophy of John Dewey. Edited by John McDermott. *University of Chicago Press*, 1981. p. 507. All page numbers hereafter refer to this citation.

about forces, versus an Outward Bound student learning directional pull while setting up a top-rope anchor on a rock-climbing site?

In evaluating experiences, categories abound. I separate experience here in two ways: 1) by the degree of involvement of the learner; and 2) by the educative value of the experience. This is not to say there are other aspects of experience that are not important, but that these two are critical to differentiating it into practical groups.

### ***The degree of the involvement of the learner***

How often have we said, “Wow, what an experience!” after we’ve been completely immersed in – completely lived – something? It could be doing something voluntary, like skiing down the side of a mountain; or completely involuntary, like arriving on the scene of an accident. You are completely there and present, using all of your faculties. And this type of experience is not dependent on an emotional or adrenal reaction. Haven’t we had that same feeling of awe after listening to a great lecture, fascinated to learn more? Or reading a powerful novel? Even – (outdoor educators cringe here) watching a great movie?

We can sit passively “experiencing” the world. We do it all the time. We sit drumming our fingers at home, awaiting the pot of rice to boil, wondering what to “do,” because it feels – though we are “experiencing” already – like we aren’t “doing” anything. We can sit at school passively “experiencing” the world also – tuning in, then tuning out, because scientists now know that our focus for listening to information we’re not truly interested in is only around 15 minutes.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, when we look at experience this way, it is the complete use of all our senses and attention that defines degree of experience. For when we’re reading a great book, we’re not

---

<sup>2</sup> “The ‘Change Up’ in lectures.” *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*. Vol. 5, no. 2.

just using our eyes. We can feel like we're Buck in *Call of the Wild*, tasting the blood, hearing the dogs bark, feeling the pain of a fight.

Of course, the reason experiences bring about such involvement is to a large extent dependent on the individual. We can pretend to create education where all will be grabbed, as if hooked, immersed instantly in fascination. But in reality, we must recognize the importance of choice, and responsibility of the learner – but we'll go into more detail on this later.

### ***The quality of experience***

For educational purposes, Dewey categorized experience in degree of quality: "Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. The first is obvious and easy to judge. The *effect* of an experience is not borne on its face. It sets a problem to the educator.... Hence the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences."<sup>3</sup>

What kind of experiences are those that live on fruitfully and creatively? Dewey believed it to be a matter of growth. But growth alone was not satisfactory; one could grow intellectually (for instance, to be a smarter burglar) and miss growing morally. "'Growth' is not enough; we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends.... when and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing."<sup>4</sup> In other words, truly educational experiences must be those that inspire one to learn more, not only in one field, but in others as well.

---

<sup>3</sup> p. 508

<sup>4</sup> p. 514

Importantly the term experiential education was coined in response to a traditional system of education. The descriptor “experiential” is only added because we believe that in the traditional system there is not a high level of involvement by the learner, and the learning certainly does not promote growth as Dewey described. Without this “non experiential” status quo of education, there can be no “experiential” education. Indeed, one experiential educator I talked with said that he hopes there is one day no need for the term “experiential” education – only education, and education done right.

“Experiential Education,” then, implies not the misnomer education through experiences, but education in which experiences involve the learner to the greatest extent and promote the growth of learning.

### ***Other definitions of Experiential Education***

The Association of Experiential Education defines experiential education a bit differently: “Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people’s capacity to contribute to their communities.” My first impression is that AEE’s last job was writing bills for Congress. I question any definition as unwieldy and complex as this one, for it implies that the idea of experiential education is extremely complex, when the reverse is true.

My second thought is to summarize: *experiential education is a philosophy...in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection....*” Lets take the first part, “direct experience.” It was John Dewey who mentioned that experience could be defined as “direct” and “indirect.” Direct experience is the learner experiencing an idea for herself; indirect experience is learning about an experience through another. Reading a book about pull forces is an indirect experience. So is listening to a show about the Iraq war on NPR news.

Setting up rock anchors and learning about physics is a direct experience, as is traveling to Iraq as a student journalist to follow around a convey of US soldiers. So direct experience is getting out there and “doing it.” Indirect experience is learning about it through someone else.

The second part, “focused reflection,” might also be taken from John Dewey. Dewey believed that reflecting about *what* was learned was very important. Without reflection, the learner can’t truly realize the worth of the experience. For instance, we can partake in a fun activity where we try to form a rope into a circle blindfolded. Without proper reflection, this can merely be a fun waste of time. (How was your communication? How did being blind affect this? Who stood up as a leader? Did they utilize everyone’s ideas? Who didn’t speak up but had an idea?)

So is our definition, or AEE’s more accurate?

AEE’s definition is that experiential education involves direct experience and focused reflection, and to quote their website, that “anyone who teaches through direct experience” is an experiential educator. I am of the opinion that because “experiential education” involves the word “education,” any definition of experiential education must be holistic. It must cover all of the worthwhile approaches to teaching and learning. One cannot hope to educate our kids only through focusing on one aspect of their learning. For this reason their definition falls short. An entire education system focusing only on “direct experience” is too limiting. Shall we no longer read? Listen to NPR? Attend great lectures? Direct experience is incredibly valuable, and certainly underused in our current system, but we cannot ignore the incredible utility of indirect experience.

Of course, one might argue that the AEE term only implies that experiential education *uses* direct experience (and focused reflection) *at times*, not that it uses it 100% of the time. For example we could look at education in types: listening, watching, reading, and doing. The “doing” part, AEE might argue, is the one

component lacking in approaches to traditional education. We can read, and listen, and watch, but until we “do,” we can’t completely understand. I agree; but I think that our approaches to the reading, watching, and listening are just as important. We can’t just focus on the doing – adding that in, while keeping the other approaches the same – and expect to come up with a holistic education system.

If we’re thinking about creating a holistic system, I believe thinking of experiential education as increasing the involvement of the learner – in their indirect experiences as well – while ensuring those experiences are promoting growth is the only practical definition. Importantly, this definition could be applied to any and all methods of teaching and learning.

## **The critical components of Experiential Education**

Given that experiential education is the idea of involving the learner as much as possible in educational experiences, what are its critical tenets?

### ***A holistic approach to the learner***

First, experiential education must have a holistic approach. I am using the term “holistic” differently here than in saying education must have a holistic *definition*. A holistic educational approach means teaching the *whole* learner – not just their brain. This is vital, because to involve someone as much as possible, an education system must make room for everything: one’s strengths, weaknesses, core beliefs, biases, spiritual leanings, and much more. It must see the connection between the mind and body: a holistic educational system fails when it graduates students with a deep understanding of subjects, yet who are obese and die at age 50 of heart disease. Similarly, rather than see religion as taboo in education, we must embrace a person’s value system, making room for discussing with others to understand and appreciate diverse views. In the sense of growth, we must grow *as people*. Our

experiences in education should promote the desire to learn and to become better in all areas, physically, intellectually, and ethically.

### ***Inquiry and Discovery***

Secondly, experiential education must be based on the principles of *inquiry* and *discovery*. *Inquiry* refers to allowing one the right to inquire - fostering one's natural curiosity. Many experiential educators are horrified by research showing how sharp a drop in curiosity youth display as they get older, especially once they enter high school. We should remain fascinated by the world as we get older; there is always more to learn, great things to do, better people to become. Any system of education hoping to involve and grow the learner as much as possible must foster the inquiring mind, allowing it choice in learning, and to delve into material as deep as it wishes.

Educators also have a responsibility to expand the student's horizons, to ensure they are exposed to opportunities for fascination they might not yet see, and to push the student to achieve more, to dig deeper, and to become better. But this can only happen if a students' sense of inquiry is first fostered and not destroyed.

*Discovery* refers to allowing a student to realize things, to figure them out, rather than being handed the facts on a platter. The fascination with the unknown can only occur if there is an unknown. Learning is not a simple industrial process; we cannot merely instill knowledge into people as if they are cans waiting to be packed. That corrupts and destroys, as we witness with our present system today.

Dewey referred to the idea of unknowing as the "indeterminate situation."<sup>5</sup> Situations can be seen as known (determinate) or unknown (indeterminate). The indeterminate situation is when a problem occurs that demands new knowledge. It

---

<sup>5</sup> p. 226.

can be as simple as realizing one doesn't know a detail and then looking it up on an iPhone; or it can be as complex as having a car fail and not know how to fix it, spending hours reading and tinkering to replace a part. And it can only occur if the experience was structured such that the learner *desires* to know; without the desire to know, there is only an unknown, and not an indeterminate situation. If we allow students the luxury (and pain) of the indeterminate situation, the sense of inquiry will be fostered and true discovery can happen.

Importantly, we must refrain from the natural desire to *present* knowledge. It may be that the facts are known to someone else; but until then, it is a new world being explored for the first time, just as we stumble upon a place we have never been before and are drawn forth unexplainably, to satisfy the desire to make the unknown known. As Dewey said, "We sometimes talk as if 'original research' were a peculiar prerogative of scientists or at least of advanced students. But all thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is looking for."<sup>6</sup>

And to truly discover, it is likely the learner will have to engage in direct experience. In this way, AEE's definition of Experiential Education puts the cart before the horse. For direct experience is a critical component to making discovery happen. But discovery can (and usually does) happen with direct experience being *only a part of* the learning process.

### ***Analysis (reflection)***

Finally, experiential education must involve *analysis*. This is the part that involves the learner in ways they might not even know, and is imperative for growth. Once we have discovered, it is stereotypically human to feel an "a-ha!" moment but not truly understand the implications of the discovery. Important revelations are

---

<sup>6</sup> p. 502



missed and connections into other fields remain unseen. It is the responsibility of any education system ensuring maximum involvement and growth of the learner to push to the deepest understanding of the discovered. This responsibility to the learner ensures they are exposed to other fascinations they might have missed, and that they are growing holistically as people. For instance, imagine a student who was raised in a prejudiced household and discovers the great deeds of Martin Luther King, Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela. Is it not our duty to analyze with them the implications on their system of beliefs? On how they treat others? On understanding themselves? Analysis – including analysis of oneself – is critical to a holistic system of education.

## **Conclusion**

The holistic component of education is completely lacking in traditional education, and sadly in many “experiential” schools as well. I know a renowned project-based school in which students spend at most a half-hour every couple of days doing physical activity as part of the curriculum. We should allow and encourage exercise, getting students outside and developing their bodies, for multiple hours each day. Meanwhile, students must be getting to know themselves morally, connecting their education with their spiritual values and beliefs. We must have time to develop relationships between educators and learners, so that educators truly know their students’ strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned before, education must focus not just on intellectual growth but on physical and ethical growth as well.

It is no mistake that inquiry, discovery and analysis mirror John Dewey’s *pattern of inquiry*. Dewey stated his steps were 1) the indeterminate situation; 2) the institution of a problem (meaning the considering of the indeterminate situation); and 3) the determination of a problem-solution.<sup>7</sup> Within these components, Dewey

---

<sup>7</sup> pp. 229-230

outlines a process involving inquiry, discovery, and analysis. But Dewey himself was not the origin of the method: this was already an established scientific practice.

The scientific method starts with a question – an unknown. We first research and observe, then pose a possible solution to the problem (hypothesis). Then we experiment and observe to gain evidence as to the hypothesis's truth. Finally we analyze the results – was it true or not? Where do we go from here? I argue that the scientific method has been around for thousands of years – it is simply a logical process of thinking. But it cannot be applied to education unless we foster students' curiosity and allow them to take responsibility for much of their own learning; our responsibility as educators is not instilling knowledge or ideas, but allowing them to be discovered.