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EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

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EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

The distinguishing feature of experience-based learning (or experiential learning1) is that the experience of the learner occupies central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. A key element of experience-based learning (henceforth referred to as EBL) is that learners analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, sometimes both) in order to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience. This review of their experience may lead to further action.

All learning necessarily involves experience of some sort, prior and/or current. However, scrutiny of many contemporary teaching and training practices might lead one to think otherwise. Much of the impetus for EBL has been a reaction against an approach to learning which is overly didactic, teacher controlled and involving a discipline-constrained transmission of knowledge. It supports a more participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners. EBL is of particular interest to adult educators because it encompasses formal learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, lifelong learning, incidental learning and workplace learning.

EBL is based on a set of assumptions about learning from experience. These have been identified by Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) as:

- experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for, learning
- learners actively construct their own experience
- learning is a holistic process
- learning is socially and culturally constructed
- learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

EBL does not lend itself to being reduced to a set of strategies, methods, formulas or recipes. It is possible, however, to recognise within it some features which characterise and distinguish it from other approaches:

i. EBL appears to demand that three factors each be operating, at some level. These are:
   Involvement of the whole person—intellect, feelings and senses. For example, In learning through role-plays and games, the process of playing or acting in these typically involves the intellect, some or other of the senses and a variety of feelings. Learning takes place through all of these.

ii. Recognition and active use of all the learner's relevant life experiences and learning experiences. Where new learning can be related to personal experiences, the

meaning thus derived is likely to be more effectively integrated into the learner's values and understanding.

iii. Continued reflection upon earlier experiences in order to add to and transform them into deeper understanding. This process lasts as long as the learner lives and has access to memory. The quality of reflective thought brought by the learner is of greater significance to the eventual learning outcomes than the nature of the experience itself. `Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.' (Kolb 1984:38)

However, EBL varies in practice according to three possibilities which represent factors that may or not be applicable in a particular instance. These are:

iv. Intentionality of design. Deliberately designed learning events are often referred to as `structured' activities and include simulations, games, role play, visualisations, focus group discussions, sociodrama and hypotheticals.

v. Facilitation. This is the involvement of some other person(s) (teachers, leaders, coaches, therapists). When such persons are involved, the outcomes may be influenced by the degree of skill with which they operate. EBL often assumes relatively equal relationships between facilitator and learner, involves the possibility of negotiation, and gives the learner considerable control and autonomy.

vi. Assessment of learning outcomes; and in the event that assessment takes place, much depends upon by what means, by whom, and for what purpose it is carried out. EBL is often as much concerned with the process as the outcomes of learning, and assessment procedures should accord with this. Assessment tasks congruent with EBL include individual or group projects, critical essays located in the learner's own experience, reading logs, learning journals, negotiated learning contracts, peer assessment and self-assessment. They might include a range of presentation modes other than writing, so as to enable the holism, context and complexity of the learning to be evidenced.

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

EBL is not limited to being a mere `method' or `technique' or even a particular `approach'; it is as wide and deep as education itself. Although there is no single way to identify the process of EBL, there are some criteria which need to be fulfilled if teaching and learning activities are to be labelled `experience-based'.

The most important criterion we start with refers to the `ends' of education—its goals, its purposes, what it is trying to achieve. We follow that with a number of criteria that refer to the `means' of education—how we go about doing things to try to achieve those goals or ends.

First, the end . . .

- The ultimate goal of EBL involves learners' own appropriation of something that is to them personally significant or meaningful (sometimes spoken of in terms of the learning being `true to the lived experience of learners')

Next, the means . . .

- EBL has a primary focus on the nature of learners' personal engagement with phenomena (sometimes described as being more or less directly in touch with the realities being studied)
- Debriefing and reflective thought are employed as essential stages. (experience alone is not necessarily educative)
- There is acknowledgment of the premise that learning invariably involves the whole person (senses and feelings as well as intellect; affect and conation as well as cognition); and that this is associated with perceptions, awareness, sensibilities and values being invoked, representing the full range of attributes of the functioning human being.
- There is recognition of what learners bring to the learning process (informal or formal recognition of prior learning)
- There is a particular ethical stance typically adopted towards learners by those who are their teachers, trainers, leaders or facilitators (involving features such as respect, validation, trust, openness and concern for the well-being of the learner, and both valuing and pursuing the self-directive potential of the learner)..

It is our view that all these criteria are probably *conjointly necessary* before an educational event becomes properly called an experiential learning activity.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

The history of learning through experience follows the history of epistemology itself - the search for the basis of true knowledge. The terms "experience" and "experiment" are etymologically one. [2] In ancient Greek times Aristotle attacked the influential notion Plato had earlier advocated about the value of truth achieved by pure thought alone, uncontaminated by the world. Aristotle (in McKeon 1948:689–690) argued instead that:

> All . . . by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are beloved for themselves . . . With a view to action, experience seems in no respect inferior to art, and men of experience succeed even better than those who have theory without experience.

In the seventeenth century the English philosopher John Locke adopted a similar position. He asked the question, `Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?' to which he answered:

> . . . in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself . . . Experience here must teach me what reason cannot. (Locke in Woozely 1964:89, 339)

In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill wrote of the distinction between formal instruction and self-education, and stressed the virtues of learning a foreign language by living in the country where it is spoken rather than by studying it from books (Houle 1976:27).

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES ON EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING

One of this century's most influential educational thinkers, John Dewey, took up the same theme when he wrote:

> I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely the organic connection between education and personal experience. (Dewey 1939:25).

Dewey continued this argument with `all genuine education comes about through experience [but] . . . not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative'. Current thinking might amplify this and suggest that the learning is likely to be recognised and applied only in so far as the learner actively reflects upon the experience.

Over this century the experiential learning movement has evolved in an eclectic fashion, making its presence felt at all levels of education. Montessori, Hahn and Neill are all remembered as educators of children, but they have nonetheless greatly influenced our understanding of EBL for adults.

The Italian educator Maria Montessori's work can be understood as what we today call EBL. Her method involved imposing nothing but creating an environment in which children learn to think by themselves, through the progressive mastery of their first-hand experiences (Kraft n.d.:10). The tradition of infant schooling with the child as the discoverer constructing his or her own knowledge, and the importance of the environment in facilitating this development, has influenced many aspects of adolescent and adult education.

Kurt Hahn's establishment of the Outward Bound Movement in the UK during the Second World War can be similarly appreciated as an historically significant instance of EBL. Reacting against the formal, remote-from-life German education he had himself received, Hahn saw the experience of adventure itself as a critical educational activity for youth, having profound moral and even political significance. Today's wilderness and adventure training traditions for groups as diverse as corporate managers and unemployed youth derive directly from this early work.

The progressive movement of the '30s in US education is paralleled by the work of A.S. Neill in Summerhill School in the UK. Working from a Freudian position, Neill emphasised the importance of non-repressive environments in releasing the unconscious to develop self-motivated and self-directed students who would never lose the early joy of learning. Alternative schools in Australia, such as Preshill (Victoria) and Currambena (NSW) were greatly influenced by Neill's work and, through their example of what it is possible to achieve by giving students freedom to direct themselves, have in turn influenced mainstream school education.

More recently, our understanding of EBL has been influenced by developmental, cognitive and humanistic psychologies. Jean Piaget's research identified stages in the cognitive development of children (see Chapter 3). Carl Rogers emphasised the role of the teacher as a non-judgmental facilitator whose unconditional positive regard is crucial in enabling students to develop an openness to experience (see Chapter 3). Abraham Maslow suggested preconditions for effective learning which took account of the personal needs of learners and recognised the social context of learning.

Links between third world development issues and EBL are also evident. UNESCO's Faure Report of 1972 was the first fully argued case for the principle of lifelong education, work and leisure. Faure's report envisaged students leaving and returning to studies without penalty at any time, the distinctions between in-school and out-of-school education being eliminated and all education becoming self-education. These are principles situated at the heart of EBL.

A belief in the unity of knowing and doing is not the exclusive property of liberal Western “First World” thinking. It was also central to the teachings of Mao Tse-tung. some of whose works vividly highlight the importance of this relationship.

> All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience . . . human knowledge can in no way be separated from practice . . . practice is higher than [theoretical] knowledge. Whoever wants to know a thing has no way except by coming into contact with it, that is, by living [practising] in its environment . . . practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge . . . such is the dialectical-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and doing. (Mao Tse-tung 1968:8, 7, 20)

In a similar vein, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire stressed the dialectic between action and reflection as the two inescapable aspects of any truly liberating education:

> Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the work is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating `blah'. On the other hand, if action is emphasised exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism . . . Men are not built in silence, but in words, in work, in action-reflection. (Freire 1973:66, 75–76)

David Kolb laid the foundations of much modern experiential education theory. His *Experiential Learning* (1984) has become a foundational text in this area. His experiential learning cycle, greatly influenced by the earlier work of Kurt Lewin, has been widely reproduced and used (see Chapter 3).

John Heron (1989, 1993) has written widely on the role of the facilitator, stressing the power relationships between facilitators and learners. Heron emphasises the importance of facilitators developing an ethical stance which takes account of the often hidden or overlooked manipulative processes that can be part of `neutral' facilitation. Marilyn Peterson's *At Personal Risk* (1992) discusses boundary violations in professional–client relationships which is apposite to many of the issues raised by Heron.

More recently, feminist pedagogy has contributed to our understanding of what constitutes learning and how it may be acquired and facilitated. Work by writers such as Belenky *et al*. (1986) questioned the prevailing wisdom about how women learn and broadened our definition of educational activities to include autobiographical, intuitive, and subjective strategies, encompassing co-counselling, learning pairs and small groups. Australian feminists have contributed to this redefinition. Dale Spender questioned the validity of many accepted truths and the gender-specific (male) evidence on which research findings are often predicated (Spender & Sarah 1980). Until recently, women's experience has been systematically neglected in research and writing in this field.

Attitude and value change is liable to be promoted if authentic experience is used to define and raise awareness of attitudes and values not previously recognised by the holder. Anti-racist work to develop a more inclusive society has found that experiential methods can effect more pervasive change than didactic approaches through addressing the experience of those who act in ways which consciously or unconsciously discriminate against others (Chambers & Pettman 1986; Pettman 1991).

EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING MODELS

We discuss only a few of the many models that have been proposed.

In an early attempt to develop a model, Boud and Pascoe (1978) identified three factors they felt to be fundamental to experiential learning: degree of learner control, degree of correspondence of learning environment to real environment and degree of involvement of self. They declared that significant presence of one dimension would be sufficient to name a program experiential.

David Kolb's development of the Lewinian experiential learning cycle (see Kolb 1984 and Chapter 3) has touched the imagination of many educators as a useful way of explaining the process of experiential learning. The focus is on the felt experience from which learning can be initiated, reviewed, challenged and reconsidered. `Knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner.' (Kolb 1984:27) This is in accord with Dewey's principle that:

> the continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after . . . (Dewey 1938:35 in Kolb 1984:27)

Kolb's view of learning as a continuous process grounded in experience is borne out by many feminist autobiographies (see, for example, Steedman 1986),and also by `new paradigm' research (Reason & Rowan 1981; Reason 1988). Nod Miller (1993) researched her own learning, against the background of the literature review required in a doctoral dissertation. Her unfolding story is illustrative of what Kolb has identified as experiential learning—a holistic, integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition and action.

Susan Weil and Ian McGill (1989) developed a `village' metaphor to categorise the varieties, and the diverse contexts, of EBL. The four `villages' are not mutually exclusive but interact and intersect with each other. Village 1 concerns itself with assessment and accreditation of experiential learning as a means of gaining access to educational institutions, employment and professional bodies. Village 2 sees experiential learning as catalysing change in education. Village 3 is concerned with learning from experience as the core of education for consciousness-raising, community action and social change. Village 4 takes as its focus personal growth and development to increase self-awareness and group effectiveness.

One consistent feature in this literature is the central place of reflection. Boud and Walker (1990:61–80; cf. Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985) developed a model positing three stages of reflection associated with experiential learning activities. See Figure 14.1. The model draws attention to (i.) preparation for experiential events, where it is important to focus on the learner, the learning milieu and the skills and strategies employed in reflection; (ii.) reflection during an experiential activity, with its phases of noticing and intervening; and (iii.) reflection after the event, involving the individual in returning to experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating the experience.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

We start with Australia, the setting most familiar to the authors. There EBL is actively pursued in a variety of contexts. Experiential methods have been particularly productive in the affective domain where attitude recognition prior to change is imperative and where sensitivity and support on facilitators' part is essential. Reflection has been a powerful tool for enabling professionals to acknowledge their own positions and review the ethics and efficacy of their practice.. Areas of

application include personal growth, equal opportunity and affirmative action, HIV/AIDS education and anti-racist education.

The many forms of EBL used in vocational and professional education include internships, work placements, on-the-job training, excursions, adventure and wilderness trips, studios, laboratories, workshops, clinicals, practicums, case study approaches, action research, role plays, hypotheticals, and simulations. Other more subtle, less easily recognisable methods include active learning in lectures, computer simulations, use of realistic models, video-based activities, group discussions and syndicate methods, autobiographical writing, problem-based learning, group work, use of reflective journals and self-directed projects. Action research and action learning are workplace examples of experiential learning in operation.

Workplace implementation of EBL involves the conscious attempt to establish situations which provide learning in a real context or one that is as close to some aspect of the real context as can be designed. A number of would-be `learning organisations' feature active and experience-based approaches for induction, on-the-job training, evaluation and reform with a focus on active involvement. There is a growing awareness that recognition of adult learning cannot be restricted to learning which occurs in formal settings. The development of competency-based training and enterprise agreements which take account of a range of useful skills and learning acquired in workplaces and other settings has enhanced the importance currently being accorded to EBL.

Proponents of EBL have presented a challenge to higher education providers to broaden their perspective on what constitute appropriate standards for entry to university-level learning. The desire to more effectively harness workers' skills and knowledge, and the consequent change in notions of articulation between different levels of education, together with concerns expressed by students about the unproductive relearning of existing knowledge, have led to a major application of EBL in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This approach is well established in other countries, such as the US, the UK, France and Sweden. In Australia, recent nationally agreed university guidelines define learning from experience very broadly to include learning acquired from non-credentialled courses, from workplace learning and from life experience (Cohen *et al*. 1994).

The acknowledgment by government, educational providers and workplaces that RPL is an equity matter, as well as according with training reform agendas (see Chapter 6), legitimises EBL beyond its informal and community roots. This enables the diversity of adult learning settings to be acknowledged and status given to equivalent learning outcomes beyond formal, credentialled instruction. The process of developing learning portfolios, development of assessment methods relevant to the purpose and context of learning, acknowledgment of the learning adults bring from their life and work contexts to new learning situations, and the equity and social justice dimensions underpinning these practices accord fully with many of the widely valued characteristics of EBL.

Implementing EBL in formal education is generally associated with negotiated curricula, and leads to increases in student self-concept, and a greater awareness of the implicit ethical considerations in teaching and learning. EBL has been embraced at many levels in Australian higher education, from whole programs to sections of courses, and through the use of the practicum and internships in university courses and by professional bodies for admission purposes (engineering, teaching, chartered accountancy, nursing, law, medicine). Many professional bodies are collaborating with educational providers to design relevant courses which take account of the experience of their constituency and thus are more cost-efficient. EBL subjects may be studied at Masters level and there is a Graduate Certificate in Experiential Learning offered by one major adult and professional education provider.

The Australian Consortium of Experiential Education (ACEE) provides a network for practitioners of experiential learning and has been instrumental in providing a professional base for developing innovative activities in the EBL field. It publishes the *Australian Journal of Experiential Learning*, containing both theoretical and practical contributions as well as being a clearing house for Australian and international experiential learning activities.

On the world scene, a major biennial International Conference on Experiential Learning has now been held six times, the latest being 1998 in Tampere, Finland. This provides a forum for presenting research and theory developments and demonstrating techniques and methods, but also for highlighting the directions EBL is taking across the world. Over recent conferences it has become evident that EBL is being increasingly understood in terms of a future-oriented project to tackle global educational issues such as those involved in forwarding multiracialism and multiculturalism, respect for the environment, non-aggression and coexistence, and world literacy (see Freire, 1994). Pettman (1996) captures this personal/international connection well:

> Learning about the international, about difference, is learning about the experiences of others who, on the whole, are not where we are, and often have not written their own accounts … connecting these with our own experiences is hard work … the 'international is personal'; … and 'the personal is international'.

DISPUTES AND DILEMMAS

An innovative field of practice like EBL inevitably generates controversy, and the examples below illustrate two faces of this phenomenon. It is probably not coincidental that the contested issue in each case turns on the question of the uncertainty, unpredictability and indeterminacy inherent in learning through experience.

(i) A site of disputation

The essential indeterminacy of what learning *outcomes* an individual's own private experiences and their personal reflection upon this will lead to, underlies the contested territories of both "Independent Studies" and "Work-Based Studies". Independent Studies was first established at NE London Polytechnic under the leadership of Tyrrell Burgess in 1974. Unique degree programs were constructed for each student through negotiation with the institution. The issue which immediately arose, and which remains the object of the major criticisms of such approaches, was how confident one could ever be that any student's own negotiated curriculum would connect coherently with the established disciplines or fields of study, and hence be able to be assessed equitably as "equal" to a program studied along conventional lines (see, eg Robbins, 1988). In a more recent manifestation of this debate, "Work-Based Learning" renders the problem even sharper, since here not only is the curriculum negotiated, but study takes place more or less completely outside the accrediting and responsible institution (and, hence, at some distance from its monitoring and control). The characteristics of Work-Based Learning are, broadly, that:

> Students study for a degree or diploma through activities conducted primarily in their workplace and within topic areas for which there may be no immediate equivalence with university subjects. Learning opportunities arise from the circumstances of normal work; work is the curriculum foundation. One effect of such study is to directly advance the work-enterprise itself; the university, however, is ultimately responsible for any qualification. The system offers unqualified

people already in employment and unable to take time off, to do part-time studies, a chance to become more expert at their job, develop lifelong learning skills, and a qualification for their cv, all through a negotiated curriculum unique to each student. Since employers support such study financially, universities welcome it as an added strand to the diversification of their own funding sources.

Whether such programs can satisfy the general requirements of a university education is clearly a moot point (Boud, 1998). The other side to the controversy is, however, that they may well represent the cutting edge of rapid changes taking place in how the nature of a university education is itself defined.

(ii) A field of dilemmas

These relate to the ethics of facilitating EBL, and here the 'unknown and unpredictable' element lies not so much in the curriculum as in the kinds of experiences learners may be required to undertake, and the (possibly uncomfortable, unwanted, dangerous and/or distressing) effects these may have upon them. Some current practice is premised on the notion that it is acceptable to introduce participants to activities without fully explaining the details or the possible consequences of the activities. Justifications include the idea that to reveal particular outcomes prematurely would fundamentally change the character of the experience, or that it would not be meaningful to provide an account of possible outcomes because it could not be understood independently of the experience. A key challenge for EBL relates to developing ethical standards applying to such situations.

As yet there is no widely accepted code of ethics for EBL, and it is not clear what would constitute acceptable and workable standards for practice. A rigid adherence to the concept of informed consent would inhibit so many modes of learning (experiential or otherwise) that it does not seem likely to provide an appropriate model. However, there are of course situations where informed consent *should* be mandatory to minimise danger that might result if forewarning is not addressed. These include laboratory experiences, field trips and adventure training, as well as activities designed to mislead or trigger anger, fear and other strong emotional responses. There are also legal responsibilities for health, safety and physical welfare involved in some of these activities. Strategies available for dealing with these situations include the use of written learning agreements and the negotiation of explicit ground rules which enable participants to easily opt out of activities when they wish. More effective training of facilitators highlighting ethical issues is also needed.

Ethical concerns are exacerbated in situations where participation is, in effect, mandatory. In some situations, employers' or teachers' strong expectations of participation by individuals in training events or formally assessed courses can lead to outcomes counter to what are desired and antagonise those who participate. Participants can be inappropriately confronted and feel required to reveal aspects of themselves which they regard as occupying the private domain. While there may be formal disclaimers that such activities are not compulsory, participants may believe that they will be disadvantaged in some way (e.g. through lack of access to promotions or assessments) if they refuse to become involved. The implicit power of organisations operates in ways which can undermine the whole basis of EBL. Learners can, consequently, become confused about boundaries between the personal and professional, act in ways which play to an external audience rather than responding to their own needs and interests, or inadvertently disclose aspects of themselves which can cause them continuing embarrassment within the organisation. As EBL becomes more popular and is taken up with enthusiasm in the corporate context, the need for a code of practice in this area becomes more urgent.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that EBL is a distinctive field of educational theory and practice. It is a normative stance towards the entire educational process, whose implications range from the private appropriation of personally significant learning to social transformation and global educational renewal. At the personal level it draws on learners' previous life experience, engages the whole person and stimulates reflection on experience and openness towards new experience and, thence, continuous learning. At the social level it emphasises critical social action and a stance embodying moral accountability and socio-political responsibility.

The roots of EBL lie in both classical philosophy and the work of an eclectic collection of modern thinkers. Various models of EBL exist, and are being applied in a variety of educational and workplace settings in Australia, as elsewhere, using diverse methodologies. Like any field of radical educational practice, EBL generates disputes and dilemmas. Among these are questions about the adequacy of learner-negotiated curricula, the ethics of working with deeply felt experience, and the difficulty of operating within organisational contexts in which there are expectations of learner participation which potentially undermine the learning which is intended.

Notes

1. The terms experience-based learning, experiential learning and learning from experience are used interchangeably in this chapter. While some authors use these terms with slightly different emphases, the similarities between them are far greater than the differences.
2. In writing this overview, the authors are indebted to Richard Kraft (n.d.) for his valuable account of the historical foundations of experiential learning.

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