Experiential Education Contributing to Language Learning

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Abstract

Conventional teaching and training are based mainly on knowledge/skills transfer, but this does not address individual growth and potential particularly well. This is because conventional skills/knowledge transfer usually assumes (wrongly) what the individual needs to learn, and the best way in which they can learn it. Experiential learning is a powerful way to address individual growth and potential, which is commonly a much neglected approach to teaching and developing people of all ages. It is adaptable for individual style, preferences, strengths, direction, etc. As such, it is more likely than conventional prescribed training or teaching to produce positive emotional effects, notably confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of personal value and purpose. This paper offers a historical background of how experiential education has emerged, and how it has been adopted to the field of language education. It focuses on identifying the concept of experiential learning, an experiential learning cycle, its principles and criteria, weaknesses and strengths.

Introduction

The vast majority of teaching and training in education and work continues to be conventional, narrow and highly prescribed not experiential. It is rare that a language-learner learns in isolation; on the contrary, language use is social, requiring learners to adapt not only to a new code for expressing themselves, but also to become aware of new and different cultural expectations, social norms, and practices. Research into the social construction of language, social identity of the language learner, and theories of investment and motivation need to be further explored in the context of experiential learning. Experiential learning, with its emphasis on critical self-reflection, may prove to be a beneficial approach for helping learners to negotiate social meaning and their own shifting identities in a new culture.

Teaching practices derived from experiential philosophy have the potential to give public voice to those who have been marginalized, to empower those who are fearful or shy, and to increase learners' ownership and responsibility for their own learning (Wallerstein, 1983). Practitioners currently involved in teaching ESL can make use of its potential to help students negotiate far more than just the linguistic code. Through adapting experiential learning methods to current ESL teaching situations, teachers can help learners to form positive identities of themselves as successful language- learners and thus perhaps ease the often frustrating task of learning a new language.

It is the teacher's responsibility to structure and organize a series of experiences which positively influence each individual's potential future experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997). In other words, "good experiences" motivate, encourage, and enable students to go on to have more valuable learning experiences, whereas, "poor experiences" tend to lead towards a student closing off from potential positive experiences in the future.

Many ESL classes in English-speaking countries are conducted in the target language, even for beginners. This practice places demands on teachers to devise ways of elucidating meaning and structure, and places heavy demands on students to listen and practice during long periods with no recourse to L1. Teachers may underestimate the challenge that such ESL classes place on learners; one reason why the Structured Language Learning Experience (SLLE) (Birch, 1992; Lowe, 1987) is seen as a valuable tool in teacher training courses.

Teachers who have personal experience of learning where L1 is not the medium of instruction, have, therefore, a much better basis for understanding the real nature of the challenge for their learners.

Despite many calls for study of the complexity of teachers' prior lives in our conception of "experience" (Freeman 1992, 1996, 2002), little attention has been paid to the role of previous language learning experience (Gutierrez Almarza, 1996). Bailey et al. (1996, 2001) are among the few who examine it. However, there is evidence that some teacher educators see L2 experience as valuable material for professional reflection. An SLLE is an encounter with L2 learning that may consist of a single lesson (Weed, 1993; Fister-Stoga & Iwata, 1992) or up to a semester's study (Flowerdew, 1998; Lowe, 1987; Waters et al., 1990; Birch, 1992). It is used as a tool in teacher education programs largely to enable trainees to see the learning process from the perspective of students and to integrate theoretical (received) and experiential knowledge. Birch (1992) outlines the benefits of the program: teachers reflected on culture shock, expectations of teaching styles, the desirable balance of fluency and accuracy, correction, and the use of L1 in class. (For other types of SLLEs incorporating reflection see Bailey et al., 1996; Campbell, 1996; Bell, 1995; McDonough, 2002).

For our purpose here, however, which is to show that L2 experience should be considered an important contributor to teacher knowledge, the literature on SLLEs forms an important justification for further inquiry in teachers' L2 experience. Experiential learning is a well-known model in education. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience." Experienced Based Learning (EBL) is a process in which real world problems are used to help and motivate students to identify, apply, collaborate and communicate their knowledge effectively. Thus, implementation of EBL requires substantial effort on the part of teacher involving new teaching strategies and significant course restructuring. Moreover, coming up with suitable problems and solutions in sufficient detail that still allow for creativity and individuality is time consuming and difficult.

Definition of Experiential Learning

Various terms have been used to label the process of learning from experience. John Dewey (Dewey and Dewey 1915) discussed "learning by doing," while Wolfe and Byrne (1975) used the term "experience-based learning." The term "trial and error" learning is used to explain inductive learning processes. Experiential learning is also referred to to as experiential teaching, or experiential training and development, experience based learning, problem-based learning (PBL) or experiential activities, and other variations of these terms. The AACSB (Association of Advance Colligate Schools of Business) Task Force (1986) used the term "applied experiential learning," combining the learning from the "real-world" situation with the necessary condition of the application of concepts, ideas and theories to the interactive setting. The AACSB Task Force (1986, p. 3) defined applied experiential learning as:

> *A business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty.*

It is hard to argue that experience will not lead to learning under the right conditions. However, it will be argued that the resultant learning can be in error unless care is taken to assure that those conditions occur. Experience perse is, therefore, only the first step in the learning process, and for learning to be drawn from it, the experience must be followed by the vital step of reflection. The ability to reflect on an experience, and on initial reactions to the experience, is the "missing link" that defines the relationship between experience and learning.

Experiential learning is not just 'field work' or 'praxis', which mean connecting of learning to real life situation. It is defined by the inclusion of phases of reflection designed to help the learner relate a current learning experience to past and future experience. Recent approaches to foreign language education emphasize the significance of the *students' own contributions* to their language learning through initiative-taking and active involvement. Students need to take charge of their learning in order to enhance their autonomy as students and language users. This shift in the research has brought an increased interest in the *students themselves* as learners in general and as language learners in particular.

Students need to be facilitated to develop a basic reflective orientation by working on their experiences, beliefs and assumptions of language and learning. (Breen (ed.) 2001; Jaatinen 2001; Johnson 2004; Kaikkonen 2002; Kalaja and Barcelos (eds.) 2003; Kohonen 2001, 2004; Lehtovaara 2001; Little 2001, 2004; Watson-Gegeo 2004; van Lier 2004.) Experiences of language, communication, culture and personal learning processes are essential for foreign language learning – but they need to be processed consciously for learning to take place. Learning requires an explicit awareness and understanding of what it is that needs to be learned (metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness), and why such learning is necessary. Learning is the process of creating new knowledge and understandings through the *transformation of experience.* Reflection plays an important role in this process by providing a bridge between practical experience and theoretical conceptualization. The *experiential learning* is an educational orientation which aims at integrating theoretical and practical elements of learning for a wholeperson approach, emphasizing the significance of experience for learning. The approach is well-known in various settings of informal learning, such as internships in business and service organizations, work and study assignments, clinical experience, international exchange and volunteer programmes, etc. However, the principles and practices can be used both in formal learning(institutional) contexts and in informal learning. Experiential learning techniques include a rich variety of interactive practices whereby the participants have opportunities to learn from their own and each other's experiences, being actively and personally engaged in the process:

- personal journals, diaries
- portfolios
- reflective personal essays and thought questions
- role plays, drama activities
- games and simulations
- personal stories and case studies
- visualizations and imaginative activities
- models, analogies and theory construction
- empathy-taking activities
- story-telling, sharing with others
- discussions and reflection in cooperative groups

All of these contain a common element of learning from immediate experience by engaging the learners in the process as whole persons, both intellectually and emotionally.

Experiential learning involves observing the phenomenon and doing something meaningful with it through an active participation. It emphasizes learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the phenomenon being studied, rather than just watching it or reading, hearing or thinking about it (Kolb 1984; Kohonen 2001). Experiential learning consists of the following four components (Woolfe 1992, 1):

1. *The student is aware of the processes which are taking place, and which are enabling learning to occur.*
2. *The student is involved in a reflective experience which enables him/ her to relate current learning to past, present and future, even if these relationships are felt rather than thought.*
3. *The experience and content are personally significant: what is being learned and how it is being learned have a special importance for the person.*
4. *There is an involvement of the whole self: body, thoughts, feelings and actions, not just of the mind; in other words, the student is engaged as a whole person.*

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning. As pointed out by David Kolb (1984, 21), personal experience gives the "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts". At the same time it also provides" a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process". Experience alone is not, however, a sufficient condition for learning. Experiences also need to be processed consciously by reflecting on them.
The learning model outlined by the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) contains two distinct modes of gaining experience that are related to each other on a continuum: concrete experience (apprehension) and abstract conceptualization (comprehension). In addition, there are also two distinct modes of transforming the experience so that learning is achieved: reflective observation (intension) and active experimentation (extension) (Baker, Jensen, Kolb, 2002).

When these four modes are viewed together, they constitute a four-stage learning cycle that learners go through during the experiential learning process. The learners begin with a concrete experience, which then leads them to observe and reflect on their experience. After this period of reflective observation, the learners then piece their thoughts together to create abstract concepts about what occurred, which will serve as guides for future actions. With these guides in place, the learners actively test what they have constructed leading to new experiences and the renewing of the learning cycle (Baker, Jensen, Kolb, 2002).

An Experiential Learning Cycle

The process of learning often involves five steps:

1. doing something;
2. recalling what happened;
3. reflecting on that;
4. drawing conclusions from the reflection;
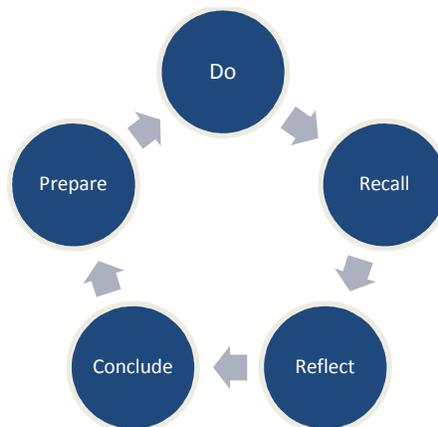5. using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience;

Figure 1. An experiential learning cycle

Again, it is important to distinguish between learning and teaching. Information, feedback, guidance and support from other people may come in at any of the five steps of the cycle, as shown in figure 2, but the essential learning experience in doing the thing yourself.
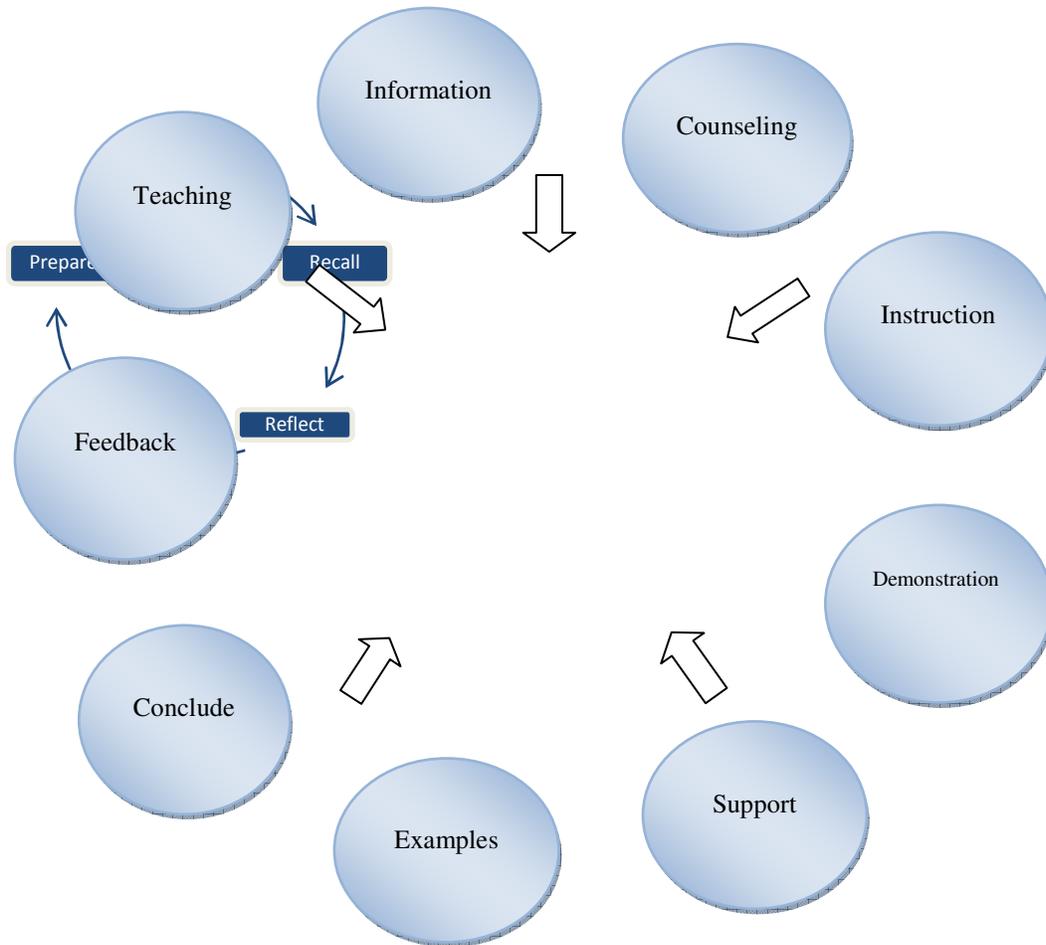
Figure 2. Teaching and the experiential learning cycle

Hoover (1974) made the point that experiential learning involves more than just the cognitive learning generally stressed by management education. In addition to the affective domain mentioned by Rogers, Hoover also stressed the learning of behaviors. In a subsequent paper (Hoover and Whitehead 1975, p. 25), the following definition of experiential learning was given:

> *"Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement".*

Discussion leading to Hoover's definitions used phrases such as "participative," "contact with the environment," "an attempt to combine the processes of learning with the content of learning," and emphasis on "the 'how' as well as the 'what' of the instruction or training."

Comparison of the AACSB definition and that by Hoover and Whitehead shows that neither is comprehensive. Before discussing the components involved in either or both definitions, it will be beneficial to discuss the overall experiential learning task structure proposed by Wolfe and Byrne (1975). They state that experientially-based approaches involve four phases: design, conduct, evaluation, and feedback.

Design. This phase involves the upfront efforts by the instructor to set the stage for the experience. Included in this phase are the specification of learning objectives, the production or selection of activities for participants, the identification of factors affecting student learning, and the creation of a scheme for implementation. Thus, this phase is critical for the "applied" part of the AACSB's applied experiential learning; the theoretical base is laid so that the participant can view the experience in the desired context.

Conduct. This phase involves maintaining and controlling the design. The design phase may include the creation of a timetable for the experience, but the conduct phase involves the altering of the original timetable and activities to sustain a favorable learning environment. The important implication of this phase is that the experience is a structured and closely-monitored one.

Evaluation. To be sure, evaluation is conducted by the instructor. But the emphasis here by Wolfe and Byrne is on the provision of opportunities for students to evaluate the experience. Participants should be able to articulate and demonstrate specific learning gained from the design and conduct of the experience.

Feedback. Wolfe and Byrne point out that feedback should be an almost continuous process from the pre-experience introduction through the final debriefing. Included is the monitoring of the process by the instructor in order to foster positive aspects and eliminate those features that are negative. One possible concern in this phase is whether students should have the opportunity to fail. To the extent that we learn from our errors, the freedom to fail may be encouraged. On the other hand, if the experiential exercise involves a business client (such as in a small business case), failure can affect the business school's reputation negatively.

Learning will be best facilitated when all four phases (design, conduct, evaluation, and feedback) are present and repeated over time.

Concepts and Principles of Experiential Learning
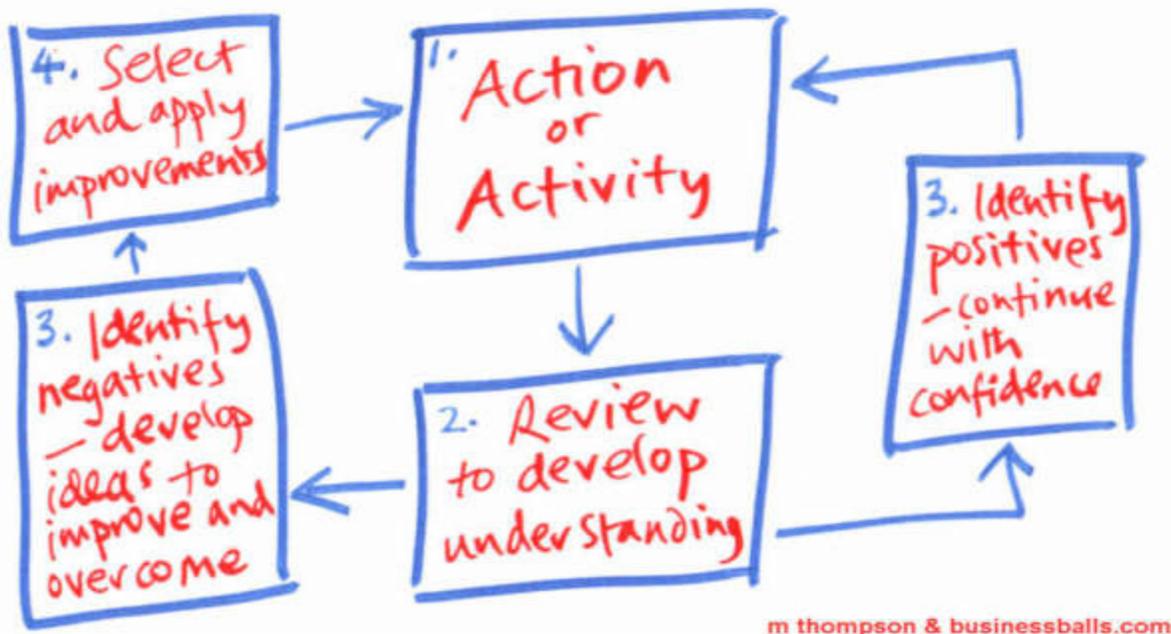
Principles of experiential learning are as the followings:

1. Learner is central
2. Facilitation must be light and subtle
3. Find or create experiential learning opportunities
4. Reactions to experiences vary so don't pre-judge
5. Single events can enable several different learning effects
6. Build confidence before addressing attitudes and behavior
7. The activity must be real and engaging - not based on artificial impact
8. Ensure activities allow adequate and meaningful reviews
9. Carefully reviews of activities are crucial
10. Accentuate the positives

11. Use stimulating questions in reviews, especially for group discussions
12. Resist temptation to give answers - ask questions only
13. Have faith in people's ability to learn for themselves
14. It's about them not you
15. Getting started

A List of Criteria for Experience-Based Learning

Andresen, Boud and Cohen (2000)provide a list of criteria for experience-based learning. The authors state that for a project to be truly experiential, the following attributes are necessary in some combination.

- The goal of experience-based learning involves something personally significant or meaningful to the students.
- Students should be personally engaged.
- Reflective thought and opportunities for students to write or discuss their experiences should be ongoing throughout the process.
- The whole person is involved, meaning not just their intellect but also their senses, their feelings and their personalities.
- Students should be recognized for prior learning they bring into the process.
- Teachers need to establish a sense of trust, respect, openness, and concern for the well-being of the students.

Experiential Philosophy in the Classroom

The underlying philosophy of experiential learning cycle (ELC) models is Deweyian. By Deweyian is meant that Experiential Learning Cycle models emphasize the nature of experience as of fundamental importance and concern in education and training.

A further, Deweyian assumption underlying ELCs is that people learn experientially and that some experiences are educative whilst other experiences are miseducative. All experiences are understood to be continuous, that is, each experience influences each future experience.

Experiential learning has been applied to a wide variety of learning situations, from business teambuilding seminars, to orienteering, to math and science classes. The method is easily adaptable to a wide variety of educational settings, especially to classrooms where project-based and task-based learning already form the core of the curriculum. All classroom activities form a part of student experience. An activity can be done in a group or individually and successfully mined for affective value through questioning techniques and student reflection. The division of the learning process into experiential phases helps sequence the learning activities toward the achievement of the desired learning outcomes.

Experiential learning challenges all learner domains holistically, rather than fragmenting the learning process into cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skill acquisition. Rogers (1969), a staunch proponent of experiential learning, describes this basic philosophy:

> *"It has a quality of personal involvement-the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects being in the learning event. It is self-initiated. Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within. It is pervasive. It makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner".*

Experiential learning encourages personal input, initiative, and self-direction in the learning process. Activities begin with accessing the specific past experiences of students, and then building on these experiences to construct a framework for learning unique to the requirements and learning style of each student. In practice, experience-based, project-based, and task-based learning become experiential when elements of reflection, support, and transfer are added to the basic experience, transforming a simple activity in to an opportunity for learning. Koenderman (2000) provides an experiential model based on these elements, a series of phases that outline the sequencing of classroom activities from the introduction of a topic or theme to the conclusion.

In the *exposure phase* a topic is introduced, and students are given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in this area and to relate the topic to their personal leaning goals; in the *participation phase* the students become personally involved as they participate in an activity, either in the classroom or outside, intended to build on or enhance their previous experience; in the *internalization phase* a debriefing exercise is initiated by the teacher, and the students have the opportunity to reflect on their participation in the activity and discuss potential effects on their future behavior or attitudes; and finally, in the *dissemination or transfer phase* the students apply and present their learning, linking it with the world outside the classroom.

Steps to Integrating Experiential Learning in the Classroom

1. Set up the experience by introducing learners to the topic and covering basic material that the learner must know beforehand (the video in the above scenario as well as discussion).
2. Engage the learner in a realistic experience that provides intrigue as well as depth of involvement (mock trial).
3. Allow for discussion of the experience including the happenings that occurred and how the individuals involved felt (discussion afterwards).
4. The learner will then begin to formulate concepts and hypotheses concerning the experience through discussion as well as individual reflection (discussion afterwards, but also could be done with journaling).
5. Allow the learners to experiment with their newly formed concepts and experiences (interpreting current conflict and conflict resolution scenario).
6. Further reflection on experimentation (discussion, but could also be done through journaling).

Simulations and gaming within instruction also involve direct experience and thus are valid examples of experiential learning. Within game interactions, there are often several cycles presented to the participant. These cycles generally consist of participation by the user, decision making, and a period of analysis. This process coincides greatly with the Experiential Learning Cycle outlined above. In addition, it has been found that simulations which shorten the debriefing period at the end of the game session can diminish their own effectiveness. This means that games which do not allow for appropriate reflection are not as effective as if proper reflection occurs. Thus, it is apparent that the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization portions of simulations and games are vital to learning, which has also been established by the Experiential Learning Theory (Ulrich, 1997).

Yet another application of experiential learning is in the field of e-learning. Specifically, there has been an effort to utilize this model to increase the effectiveness of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) e-learning courses. It was found that many of these courses did not allow for concrete experience and active experimentation due to the fact that the learning processes were based on more traditional learning methods and not capitalizing on the self-directed nature of the learners (Friedman, Watts, Croston, & Durkin, 2002). However, with the use of different technologies such as multimedia resources, web-based discussions, online planners, and creative tasks, e-learning courses could be improved in a manner that would strengthen the entire experiential learning cycle for the learner (Frank, Reich, & Humphreys, 2003).

Criticisms and Weaknesses

Since Kolb created the Experiential Learning Theory and the accompanying learning model, his work has been met with various criticisms about its worth and effectiveness. One of the criticisms of this model is that the concrete experience part of the learning cycle is not appropriately explained in the theory and remains largely unexplored. Another common criticism of the theory that exposes a weakness is that the idea of immediate and concrete experience is problematic and unrealistic (Miettinen, 2000).

Other criticisms of the ELT are that the concepts outlined by Kolb are too ill-defined and open to various interpretations and that the ideas he presents are an eclectic blend of ideas from various theorists that do not fit logically together. Another, perhaps more biting criticism of Kolb's work is that his ELT model is only an attempt to explain the societal benefit of his Learning Styles Inventory and thus may actually be a well derived marketing ploy (Miettinen, 2000). Also, it is believed that the phases in the ELT learning model remain separate and do not connect to each other in any manner (Miettinen, 2000).

However, the most tangible weaknesses of the ELT and the ELT learning model are the vast differences between it and the ideas established by John Dewey, whose beliefs are largely attributed to the establishment of the ELT. Dewey believed that non-reflective experience borne out of habit was the dominant form of experience and that reflective experience only occurred when there were contradictions of the habitual experience. But, in a glaring weakness of the ELT, Kolb does not adequately discuss the role of non-reflective experience in the process of learning (Miettinen, 2000). In addition, Dewey believed that observations of reality and nature were the starting point of knowledge acquisition. Kolb, however, believes that the experience is the starting point of knowledge acquisition and disregards the observations concerning the subjective reality of the learner, another blatant weakness (Miettinen, 2000). A final weakness in the ELT that was noticed is its lack of discussion concerning the social aspect of experience. The ELT learning model focused on the learning process for a single learner and failed to mention how the individual fit into a social group during this process and what role this group may play. Also, there was no discussion on how a social group may gain knowledge through a common experience. Experiential learning is accepted and even promoted in the field of education, as educators have "finally begun to recognize the complexity of the educational process" (Hendricks, 1994, p.1). However, despite acknowledged benefits, experiential methods are still far from being universally accepted by educators themselves. There are several reasons for this, including classroom time constraints, difficulties with assessment, and lack of training in how to meet course outcomes experientially.

Experiential learning requires teachers to take time to encourage reflection. This is not only time-consuming, but requires the creation of a comfortable, relaxed classroom atmosphere and skillful questioning on the part of the facilitator. The results of taking the time required for periods of reflection is not something that can be measured quantitatively. Although "educators ... are giving up the idea that they can dissect, predict, and control learning with technological precision" (Hendricks, 1994, p. I), and although there has been some movement toward more qualitative assessment in certain educational domains, many teachers are still expected to "teach to a test" (Hussin, Nooreiny, & D'Cruz, 2000, p. 1). When time is constrained, administrative support limited, and course outcomes primarily focused in the behavioral domain, teachers find it difficult to try to incorporate experiential teaching method when if they believe in their value.

Experiential leaning also requires teachers to take on a different role in the classroom than the traditional teacher-as-expert. In the classroom they become facilitators, guides, and helpers (Spruck-Wrigley, 1998). Many ESL instructors are already accustomed to this role. However, it often requires a paradigm shift for educators whose training and experiences have been to teach subject content using a teacher-centered approach (Brooks-Harris &Stock-Ward, 1999). Suzanne Roy, a pedagogical consultant for a large school board in Montreal, has done in-service work with teachers to implement experiential learning and portfolio assessment across the subject spectrum. However, experiential learning is not uncontrolled; on the contrary, to be successful it requires the teacher to be prepared and organized before a project begins. The teacher must think through each phase, planning with potential difficulties in mind, yet being creatively open to "teachable moments" (Spruck-Wrigley, 1998). A venue needs to be created for students to share their reflections and feelings about their experiences, both positive and negative, in a nonjudgmental and open environment. In true experiential learning, the teacher-as-facilitator role is central, and the project will succeed "if the teacher can provide the necessary guidance through skillful, astute questions and a receptive, accepting heart and mind" (Oaneway, 1977, p. 7).

Strengths

With all of the criticisms of the Experiential Learning Theory, it may be too easy to overlook its merits in the field of adult education. Each adult has his/her own unique set of experiences and set of learning abilities that he/she feels comfortable utilizing. Kolb's theory accounts for this fact and shows how the learner can utilize his/her experiences and learning strengths in the process of constructing knowledge. Kolb also did a good job of integrating the two dialectical entities into the model to create a complete learning cycle in which the entire learning process can be traced. In addition, Kolb did a great job of showing how the learner can be effective utilizing his/her learning strengths, while at the same time using skills that are underdeveloped to complete the learning cycle.

However, due to the weaknesses of the ELT model as created by Kolb, it is necessary to construct another model, which includes Kolb's beliefs and at the same time confronts the weaknesses that have been found. Below is a representation of a model that could be used for this purpose.

The idea behind this model was to include the observations of the learners' own subjective reality as a starting point for experience. Then, a disruptive experience occurs, which challenges the habitual patterns of the learner. Once the experience has been encountered learners enter a stage of emotion inventory in which they become cognizant of their emotions in reaction to the experience. These emotions then play a role in the next step, which is a stage of reflective observation similar to that outlined by Kolb in his model. After this stage, learners enter a stage of conceptualization and hypothesis formation in which they attempt to piece the information gathered thus far concerning the experience into logical chunks. Once this occurs, learners address the experience in some manner. This may include active experimentation to test a hypothesis. Or, it may also include higher order planning which requires even more in-depth examination of the experience. This stage can lead to two different types of experiences, expected and disruptive, both of which lead to repetition of the learning cycle. The expected experiences include those which can be predicted by the concepts and hypothesis that were established in the learning cycle. Disruptive experiences, on the other hand, include those that conflict with the concepts that were formulated in the experiential process. It is also readily evident in the model that the experiential learning cycle can occur individually or within a social group.

Differences between Experiential Learning and Conventional Training and Teaching

Conventional Training	Experiential Learning
training-centered/focused - theoretical	learner-centered/focused - really doing it
prescribed fixed design and content	flexible open possibilities
for external needs (organization, exams, etc)	for internal growth and discovery
transfers/explains knowledge/skills	develops knowledge/skills/emotions via experience
fixed structured delivery/facilitation	not delivered, minimal facilitation, unstructured
time-bound measurable components (mostly)	not time-bound, more difficult to measure
suitable for groups and fixed outcomes	individually directed, flexible outcomes
Examples: PowerPoint presentations, chalk-and-talk classes, reading, attending lectures, exam study, observation, planning and hypothesizing, theoretical work, unreal role-play.	Examples: learning a physical activity, games and exercises, drama and role-play which becomes real, actually doing the job or task, 'outward bound' activities, teaching others, hobbies, pastimes, passions.

Conclusion and Implications

Learning from experience is a central philosophical and theoretical idea in the field of adult learning. Despite its long tradition and pragmatic richness, however, the idea is not grounded in a systematic theory or model of how we learn from experience and what it is that is learned. The conceptual meaning of the idea of experience-based learning remains illusive and many practitioners are not clear on what specific approaches to use to facilitate this form of learning or when to use them. As a result, for participants in adult education programs, experience-based learning is often more a promise than a reality. According to Wichman (1988), "What is needed now is the development of specific theories of experiential learning and instruction based upon a general philosophy of experiential education" (p. 71). An obviously central component to this theory-building is an attempt to understand how learning from experience occurs and what it is that is learned in the process.

Experiential learning, as far as its central idea is concerned, is not totally new. But it suggests a renewed look at the way teaching and learning get organized in our classrooms. It suggests that the learner must occupy the centre stages of classroom activity and not the teacher. That the approaches which engage students in interdisciplinary exploration, collaborative activity and field based opportunities for experiential learning, reflection and self-examination are used more and more by the teachers.

Experiential learning is participative, interactive, and applied. It allows contact with the environment, and exposure to processes that are highly variable and uncertain. It involves the whole-person; learning takes place on the affective and behavioral dimensions as well as on the cognitive dimension. The experience needs to be structured to some degree; relevant learning objectives need to be specified and the conduct of the experience needs to be monitored. Students need to evaluate the experience in light of theory and in light of their own feelings. Experiential Learning Theory outlines the manner in which learners gain knowledge and understanding through experiences. Though some may debate which steps are present in experiential learning, there is no debate about the worth of experience in learning.

Through experience, learners are able to construct firsthand a sense of understanding of the events going on around them. Educators have begun to harness the power of experience in study abroad courses, field studies, role plays, and numerous computer-based interventions. The future could bring even more applications of this theory, a possibility as exciting for the learner as much as it is the facilitator.

Most often, however, a learner needs some amount of freedom to develop experience-based understanding; likewise in most educational settings, learners need some degree of guidance as well.

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