



Experiential learning and its facilitation

John Fowler *

DeMontfort University, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Charles Frears Campus, 266 London Road, Leicester LE2 1RQ, United Kingdom

Accepted 31 July 2007

KEYWORDS

Nurse education;
Experiential learning;
Facilitation;
Coaching

Summary An analysis of the concept of experiential learning indicates that it is the product of reflection upon experience, with the nature of the reflection and the quality of the experience, being significant to the overall learning. The outcomes of experiential learning appear to be diverse; ranging from the acquisition of a new skill or personal development through to social consciousness raising. A framework for experiential learning is produced which identifies factors that facilitate learning and those which act as barriers. The relationship between the facilitation of learning and coaching is identified.

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Introduction

By the early 1980s the concept of 'experiential learning' became an acknowledged term within education (Warner Weil and McGill, 1989a; Hobbs, 1987). Mezirow (1981, 1998) and Freire (1972) stressed that at the heart of all learning lies the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflection of experience. Kolb (1984) introduced what has now become a well established 'experiential learning cycle'. Experiential learning initially acknowledged the non-institutional aspect of learning and offered a more pragmatic approach to learning. In subsequent years a plethora of literature appeared under the heading of experiential

learning but there is little underpinning structure to the components of experiential learning.

What is experiential learning?—a conceptual analysis

Dewey (1938), who was probably one of the most significant and influential educators of his time, founded an educational movement based, at least in part, on the concept of, 'experience plus reflection equals learning'. This was the foundation of what came to be termed 'progressive education', in that it challenged the traditional teacher centred system of the time. Despite the somewhat mixed reception and criticism that progressive education received over the years, the concept of experience plus reflection equalling learning, has become well established in educational literature (Jarvis, 2004).

* Tel.: +44 0 116 201 3899.

E-mail address: jcfowler@dmu.ac.uk

It is here that the origins of experiential learning can be seen, with Dewey's recognition of the importance of experience and reflection in learning.

In relation to nurse education [Burnard \(1991\)](#) a lecturer and prolific author on teaching about relationships within nursing, summarised experiential learning as: 'learning by doing, which involves reflection and is an active rather than a passive learning process'. Whilst useful, this view does appear to limit experiential learning to the immediate context of the learner. Other usages of experiential learning appear to have a far wider socio political perspective to them ([Criticos, 1989](#)). [McGill and Warner Weis \(1989\)](#) attempted to provide a definition that incorporated a wide range of interpretations:

"The process whereby people engage in direct encounter, then purposefully reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential learning therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone" [McGill and Warner Weis \(1989, p. 248\)](#)

Whilst this is useful, in that a single definition focuses thought, ideas and allows comparisons to be made, any such definition of what has become an umbrella term immediately limits some of the variety of applications of experiential learning that exist ([Moon, 2004](#)). There is in addition an international perspective; European usage tends to focus on group based human relation type activities, whilst Americans tend to use it to describe work and field based placements outside educational institutions, whereas in Australia both perspectives seem to be acknowledged ([Boud, 1989](#)).

In an attempt to incorporate the variety of experiential learning practices that were being presented to the 'First International Conference on Experiential Learning' [Warner Weil and McGill \(1989b\)](#) produced a typology as a means of ordering papers presented to the conference. The conference acknowledged that experiential learning referred to a spectrum of meanings, practices and ideologies that involved not only teachers but policy makers, change agents and 'ordinary' people all over the world. They subsequently identified four clusters of interrelated ideas and termed them 'villages'.

- Village one was concerned with validating prior experiential learning as a means of creating new routes into higher education, employment and professional bodies.

- Village two focused on the role that experiential learning might have in post-secondary education.
- Village three acknowledged the way that experiential learning could be used in community action and raising group consciousness.
- Village four was concerned with the effect of experiential learning on the individual in terms of self-awareness and personal development ([Warner Weil and McGill, 1989b](#)).

In a similar way and in an attempt to develop a conceptual understanding of experiential learning, [Cohen Boud and Walker \(2000\)](#) developed five propositions concerning experiential learning. They identified that experience is the foundation of and stimulus for learning, learners actively learn, in a holistic way, which is socially and culturally constructed and influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs. The outcome of learning, subsequent to the ideas contained within these propositions and within the four villages, is that experiential learning has the potential to result in: self growth, ranging from the individual to communities, and aspects of professional, life and academic education. Thus, the application and subsequent implications of experiential learning appear far more widespread and profound than might be conjured by the relatively simple Deweyan concept of 'experience plus reflection equals learning' ([Dewey, 1938](#)). In particular, how can experiential learning proponents claim its effects on social action and raising community consciousness?

From a Freirian ([Freire, 1972](#)) and Illichian ([Illich, 1971](#)) perspective the focus that experiential learning puts on an individual's experience rather than the learning institution's (and hence the government or state) is highly significant. For when the locus of control of what is learnt lies with the individual, then the potential for the challenge of social norms becomes a reality, a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' change agent. These are considerable claims not only for 'learning' in its everyday sense, but for social action as a result of experiential learning. This is a potential Freirian/Illichian outcome of experiential learning as proposed by the categorisation within 'village three', of raising group consciousness and community action. Is the combination of experience and reflection really that powerful? Dewey discusses the nature of the experience stressing that it not just any experience that has the potential for learning; it is in Dewey's terms the 'quality' of the experience that provides a measure of its educational significance. Quality is described by Dewey as a union of the 'continuity', which he describes

as the bringing together of the before and after of the experience on events and the 'interaction' of the internal and external factors of the experience. Thus, experience is not just a simple matter of exposure to an event; there is an element of the experience needing to become internalised and positioned in relation to existing knowledge and experiences.

Reflection is the other factor in Dewey's equation of 'experience plus reflection equals learning'. Whilst Dewey (1938) acknowledged the significance of reflection the focus within his writings was on the experience and how to harness its potential, reflection appeared to Dewey to be a more natural process that occurs in periods of quietness whilst focussing on the activity.

"There should be brief intervals of quiet reflection provided for even the young. But they are periods of genuine reflection only when they follow times of more overt action and are used to organise what has been gained in the periods of activity" (Dewey, 1938, p. 63).

Kolb (1984) believes that learning comes about by the 'grasping' of experience, what he terms, 'prehension' and the subsequent 'transformation' of that experience. Initially, this is by 'reflective observation', to make sense of and organise the experience and subsequently via 'active experimentation'. Kolb proposes that the two dimensions of 'prehension' and 'transformation' each contain dialectically opposed adaptive orientations and it is the resolution of the conflict between these orientations that results in learning. The grasping or 'prehension' dimension is at one extreme that of a concrete experience and at the other, an abstract comprehension. Thus reflection, for Kolb, is far from the passive 'quietness' suggested by Dewey. It is an active transformational process seeking to resolve internal conflict between the two intersecting continuums. Kolb represents these ideas pictorially by the use of his learning cycle and much of the reworking and application of Kolb's idea focuses on the cyclical nature of the interactions and often misses the internal dynamic forces relating to the dialectically opposed adaptive orientations. In the 1980s and 90's, there appeared a considerable volume of literature on the subject of reflection as a subject in its own right (SchÖn, 1983; Mezirow, 1998; Moon, 1999). However, with the exception of Moon (2004) little connection was made to the earlier work of reflection within the context of experiential learning (Moon, 2004, 81.).

Both Dewey and Kolb would appear to agree that experiential learning is the product of reflection

upon experience, with the nature of the reflection and the quality of the experience, being significant to the overall learning.

Another dimension is added by Steinaker and Bell (1979), particularly to the experience factor in the equation. Steinaker and Bell developed the idea of a taxonomy of experiential learning in which the learner becomes increasingly immersed in the learning experience; moving from exposure, through participation, identification, internalisation and finally dissemination. Whereas other authors depict experience as a single all or nothing event, Steinaker and Bell envisage a taxonomy or ongoing and deepening involvement with the experience. They see their work complementing the cognitive (Bloom et al., 1964), affective (Krathwohl et al., 1968) and psychomotor (Harrow, 1972; Simpson, 1966) taxonomies, acting as a 'gestalt', bringing together and synthesising the various categories, arguing that experiential learning is about the total experience. Steinaker and Bell add two important factors to the meaning of experiential learning. Firstly, is the gestalt or holistic perspective of learning, the bringing together of knowledge, skills and attitudes with the concept of holistic teaching. Secondly, is the idea that an experience happens at different and progressive levels. Whereas Dewey and Kolb in particular acknowledge the cyclical and ongoing nature of the experience and the fact that what is learnt is fed back into the experience, which is again reflected upon; they do not seem to acknowledge the taxonomy perspective of different levels of deepening experience as do Steinaker and Bell.

Reflection, for Steinaker and Bell (1979) has a particular significance at the identification stage, rather than a continuous process. This is an interesting perspective which adds a quantitative dimension to the nature and act of reflection. A number of authors in the 1990s began to distinguish between levels of depth in reflection (Hatton and Smith, 1995; Moon, 2004). However, they seemed to make the assumption that 'no reflection' is associated with 'surface learning' whilst 'critical reflection' is associated with 'deep learning'. They do not seem to acknowledge that the stage or level of reflection may be associated with the level of exposure to the experience; in essence, that there may be an inappropriate time for reflection and an appropriate time. If the two taxonomies, reflection and experience are combined, then there exists a potential strategy or framework for experiential learning (see Fig. 1).

For Steinaker and Bell (1979) it is at the identification stage that the learner begins to reflect and

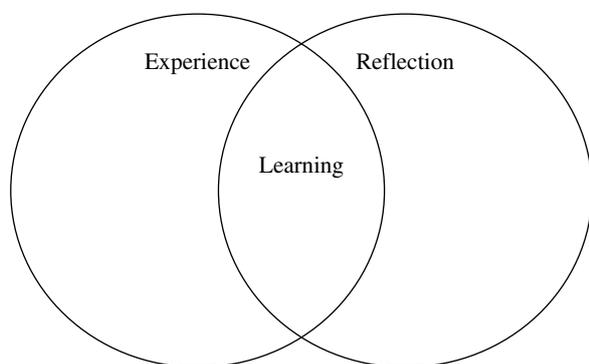


Figure 1 Experiential learning.

internalise what they are learning and it begins to become part of their own values, rather than an external skill or aspect of knowledge that they are mimicking. The authors own research would support this idea of reflection not being a continuous process and in particular that some learners appeared reluctant to enter into a learning relationship which required reflection (Fowler and Chevannes, 1998).

What then constitutes experiential learning? The outcomes of experiential learning appear to be diverse; ranging from the acquisition of a new skill or personal development through to social consciousness raising. However, at the heart of experiential learning lies the Deweyian concept, that it is the combination of experience plus reflection that results in learning. Subsequent authors have indicated that the quality and nature of both the experience and the reflection will have significant implications for the learning. Despite there being 20 years since the publication of Kolb's classical work, there appears to have been little innovative development in the theory or application of experiential learning. The more significant developments have been in the recognition of the importance of corporate bodies becoming 'learning organisations' not just at an individual level (Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996; Pedler et al., 1997). A number of recently published educational textbooks (both nursing education and general education) contain details of experiential learning approaches based upon Kolb's original work of the 1980's (Quinn, 2000; Nicklin and Kenworthy, 2003; Illeris, 2002; Jarvis, 2004). There is thus a considerable body of knowledge and experience, which acknowledge the significant learning that occurs as a result of reflection upon experience but little in the way underpinning structure as to how that occurs or how as a teacher can facilitate that learning.

A framework for experiential learning

It is surmised that experiential learning is a philosophy of learning which encompasses the traditional learning theories but emphasises that the source of the learning material can be from experience, as opposed to the more traditional view of classrooms and lectures. In terms of a learning theory, it is not a reductionalist theory as none of the literature attempts to identify what specific bit of the experience it is that stimulates learning, nor of how the brain processes it. It is however a learning theory which is holistic in nature - which the author would define as (Fowler, 2006b),

'Experiential learning is the learning which results from the coming together of experience, of a certain quality, with meaningful reflection'.

A simple representation of this is shown in Fig. 1.

If the notion of the 'quality' of experience and 'meaningful' reflection, as identified within the definition, are added to the diagram using criteria previously developed by the author: that of : degree of involvement of the student with the experience, the subject relevance of the experience, whether the experience is task or patient centred and the tools used to aid reflection, the students activity and the planned or 'ad hoc' nature of the reflection (Fowler, 2003; Fowler, 2006a,b), then the diagram becomes more complex, as follows, see Fig. 2.

Experiential learning is dependent upon both experience and reflection. If the experience is of limited quality and the reflection is also limited then the experiential learning is also limited (represented as smaller circles) see Fig. 3:

If the person's experience is of 'good quality', but the reflection is limited, then the learning will also be limited, see Fig. 4:

Likewise, if the person reflects in a meaningful way, but the experience is limited, then an equally limited experiential learning will be achieved, see Fig. 5:

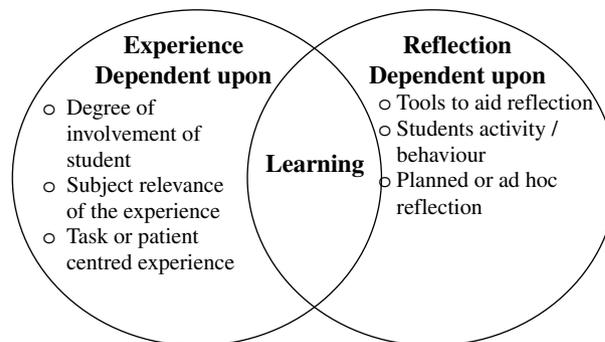


Figure 2 Experiential learning.

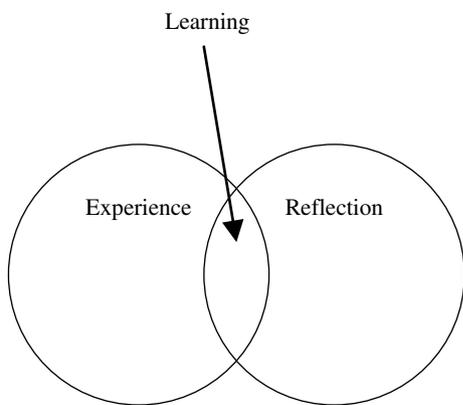


Figure 3 Limited experiential learning.

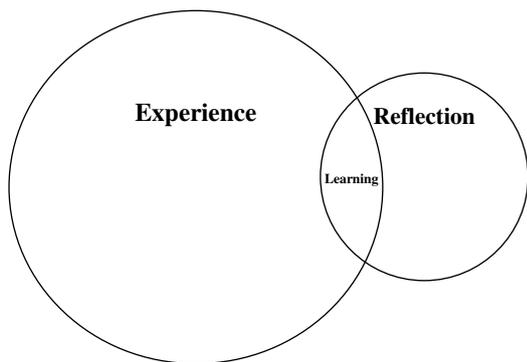


Figure 4 Limited reflection in experiential learning.

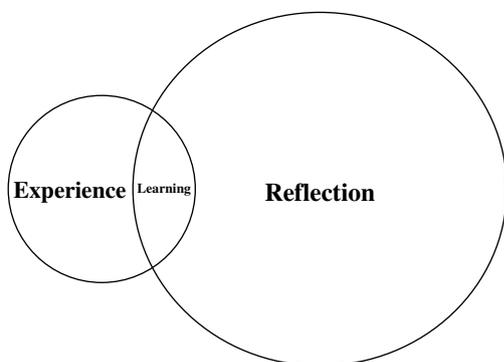


Figure 5 Limited experience in experiential learning.

It is not just the presence of experience and reflection, but the meaningful interaction or overlap of the two. Factors that facilitate the interaction will enhance learning. This is typified by the teaching style associated with experiential learning, that of 'facilitating' learning (Burnard, 1996; Jarvis, 2004.101). However, interaction is not only facilitated by a 'teacher' other 'factors' that facilitate the interaction of experience and reflection could be generated either by the student or by a 3rd person. Thus facilitation may be prompted by:

- deliberate external intervention of the teacher
- deliberate action of the student
- random involvement of a third party.

Factors that facilitate experiential learning:

- The deliberate external intervention of a 'teacher' with the specific intention of providing an experience be it real or vicarious, and then prompting reflective questions, thoughts and action. Thus, the teacher is the external motivator or energy source encouraging the interaction of the students experience and reflection.
- The deliberate action of the student to combine experience and reflection, which is internally driven by the student's own inner motivation.
- The random involvement of a third party or action which causes the experience and reflection to interact. In the practice of nursing this may be a patient asking the nurse a question about a procedure that the nurse is doing to them, which may cause the nurse to think and reflect on any number of levels. Alternatively, the nurse may be asked to produce a report on some aspect of the working environment (for example, bed occupancy or dependency analysis) and this again causes the nurse to reflect on practice in a different and deeper way than 'ordinary' practice demanded.

A prediction that can be made from this model concerns not only what promotes the interaction of experience and reflection, but what may prevent the interaction e.g. 'barriers' to interaction. It is hypothesised that barriers may prevent the interaction of experience and reflection, keeping them separated, thus reducing the experiential learning, see Fig. 6:

Factors which prevent or are barriers to learning can be seen as those which prevent the experience and reflection interacting. Thus, the experience may be happening, and the person has the ability and prompts for reflection to occur, but the two are not brought together.

Barriers to experiential learning

- Competing priorities in the mind of the nurse. In the clinical area, a nurse may have arranged a clinical supervision session with her supervisor, but time constraints, busyness of the ward or complexity of her clinical workload may drain the energy that would otherwise be used to bring reflection and experience together.

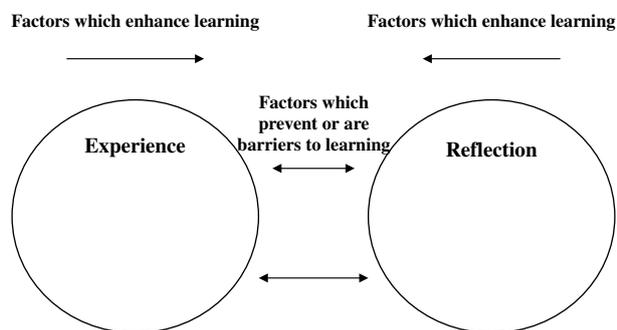


Figure 6 Factors influencing experiential learning.

- Internal energy is drained possibly due to personal or social problems. The interaction of experience and reflection requires internal, personal energy. Unlike rote learning and simple absorption of knowledge, experiential learning requires 'the holistic involvement of the student' (Boud and Pascoe, 1978) and this requires personal energy. For some people, at some points in their lives, all of their personal energy is required to function at a survival level. There are obvious overlaps here with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and self actualisation (Maslow, 1954; Maslow, 1968). Thus, anything which drains this internal energy will act as a barrier to the person bringing together experience and reflection.
- Active resistance on the part of the person to bring together the experience and the reflection. Many subjects within the nursing curriculum are not emotionally neutral. Examples of these are: reactions to death, dying and pain, the needs of different cultures, racism, spiritual beliefs etc. If a person has strong 'fundamentalist' beliefs or preconceptions on a subject, then they may be unwilling to reflect upon an experience that may be outside their belief structure. This is a complex psychological argument which is not the subject of this paper, but is worthy of further study.

Coaching and experiential learning

It is hypothesised that the breaking down of any of these barriers would enable experience and reflection to interact and thus enhance learning. The author would propose that this is a far more interventionist form of 'teaching' than the facilitation mode of encouraging the coming together of reflection and experience. It is proposed that this barrier breaking or interventionist mode is that which forms the 'teaching' principles used by coaches. A coach seeks to refocus the person's priorities, remotivate when necessary, and break

down any resistance to learning (Thomas, 1995). This is an interesting prediction arising from the experiential learning framework developed in this paper, as it provides a theoretical basis for a relationship between the facilitation of learning and coaching.

Summary of the framework

The framework above proposes that if experience of a certain quality is reflected upon in a meaningful way, then learning is enhanced. The quality of the experience is dependent upon the degree of involvement of the student, the relevance of the subject matter and whether the subject is task or patient based. The meaningfulness of the reflection is dependent upon the tools used to aid reflection, the ad hoc or planned nature of the activity and the behaviour of the learner in the reflective process. The interaction of the experience with reflection is dependent upon forces that will encourage interaction such as external intervention of a teacher, internal motivation of the learner or a random act from a third party. Barriers to the interaction of the experience and reflection may be competing priorities in the mind of the learner, lack of internal energy or active resistance.

Nursing is a practice based profession. All pre registration nursing courses and the majority of professionally validated post registration programmes, require the student to spend half of the course in practice (NMC, 2004). Once qualified the majority of nurses work as practising clinicians. Experiential learning is an experience based learning theory and as such fits congruently with the philosophy and structure of nurse education.

'We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future' Dewey (1938, p. 49)

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