

Experience and Participation: Relating Theories of Learning

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This paper explores the relationships between experiential education and other holistic theories of education including constructivism, social constructionism and cultural discourses. Situated learning is introduced because it provides a comprehensive theorization of learning as participation situated in the context of community practice. Thus situated learning affords a telling comparison with experiential education and provides conceptual structures which may support the further development of experiential education. The exploration of other learning theories broadly related to experiential education results in the identification of lacunae, or gaps, within experiential education. These lacunae exist specifically within the theory of learning in experiential education. The consequence of this is that the learning process in experiential education requires further theorization.

Keywords: Learning, Participation, Situated learning, Context, Practice

The primary aim of this paper is to continue the task of analyzing and advancing experiential education,¹ a task that has been conducted in this journal since its inception. Notwithstanding the pioneering work of many who have reached beyond previous limits in this exploration in recent times (e.g., Carver, 1996; DeLay, 1996; Haskell, 1999; Hutchison & Bosacki, 2000; Itin, 1999; Lindsay & Ewert, 1999), one area that could benefit from further examination is the relationship between experiential education and other theories of learning. The initial challenge is to locate experiential education amongst the vast range of other theories of learning. The task then involves an exposition of those theories of learning which bear a closer resemblance to experiential education, always cognizant of the opportunity to learn more about experiential education, especially its weaknesses, by under-

standing the issues of learning confronted through these other theories.

Of especial interest is situated learning. It is a learning theory that provides those involved in experiential education with much to ponder. Situated learning shifts the analytic focus from "the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 43). Situated learning accounts for the intricate part context plays in learning. It is a point often made in discourses of experiential education, but one which has not tended to influence the dominant theories of learning in experiential education.

Meeting the Relations: Constructivism, Social Constructionism, and Cultural Discourses of Learning

When approaching a study of learning theories it is easy to be overwhelmed by the vast array of possibilities offered. An important strategy that can be used in order to overcome some of this difficulty is to perceive some structure or classification within which different learning theories can be compared and contrasted. Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2000) provide a useful classification for just such a purpose which creates two cate-

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gories of learning theories, based on two broad philosophies: those that are best described via a machine metaphor (which they call complicated), and those that embrace an organic metaphor (which they call complex). Using a machine metaphor to describe learning implies that learning is a simple cause and effect process. It is *mechanical*. Structuring curricula using competencies provides a good example of the pedagogical expression of this metaphor. Davis and his colleagues include within this category behaviorist and mentalist theories of learning. An organic metaphor is much more *holistic* in character and implies that understandings of learning must incorporate the phenomenon in its entirety. It is analogous to the processes of adaptation and evolution. In this way "learning is coming to be understood as a participation in the world, a co-evolution of knower and known that transforms both" (Davis et al., 2000, p. 64). Taken in its entirety, this metaphor moves beyond much of mainstream education as it is conducted in schools, because it requires theorization of the relationship between learner and the school within the learning process (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999).

Assuming the legitimacy of these two broad categories, the task becomes locating experiential education among them. The strength of experiential education is founded upon its theorizing of the "intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 20). This results in the oft-cited theory of learning in experiential education that encompasses "learning by doing combined with reflection" (Priest & Gass, 1997, p. 136). The goal of education, for Dewey, encompassed "being able to understand and use our experience" (Crosby, 1981, p. 14). Kolb provides a perceptively simple yet conceptually complex definition of experiential education as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). These are but a few of the definitions or descriptions of experiential education that have been documented by theorists and practitioners. Equally important, underlying the myriad opinions on the processes of experiential education, is an *imperative to adapt, to evolve, and to learn* via our experience.

This thematic understanding of experiential education is supported by other work in the field in which the general trend is towards describing experiential education as a holistic form of education (e.g., Carver, 1996; Hutchison & Bosacki, 2000; Itin, 1999). If a classification of experiential education in this way is acceptable, then it may be further implied that experiential education has a relationship with those other learning theories described by Davis and his colleagues founded in a holistic philosophy: constructivism, social constructionism, and cultural discourses.²

Constructivism

Connections between experiential education and constructivism are clearly made in the experiential education literature (e.g., Carver, 1996; DeLay, 1996; Hutchison & Bosacki, 2000). Constructivism espouses the notion that "the learner's basis of meaning is found in his or her direct experience with a dynamic and responsive world," and that "we can only form concepts through our bodily actions" (Davis et al., 2000, p. 65). The historical roots of constructivism reside in Piaget's understanding of knowledge formation and his concept of equilibration (Fosnot, 1996), a genesis also relevant to experiential education theory (Kolb, 1984). According to Fosnot, Piaget theorized that "new experiences sometimes foster contradictions to our present understandings, making them insufficient and thus perturbing and disequilibrating the structure, causing us to accommodate" (Fosnot, p. 13). Learning from the perspective of constructivism is a process of active adaptation, an idea clearly encompassed in experiential education theory (Crosby, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Priest & Gass, 1997).

Social Constructionism

One limitation of constructivism is that it views learning as a process that applies specifically to the individual person: it is ensconced in the realm of psychology. The salient nature of this limitation is revealed when the possibility of a small group of people learning through their social interaction as a collective is considered, aptly described as *social constructionism*. Social constructionism broadens basic individualistic constructivist understandings of learning, professing that "collectives of persons are capable of actions and understandings that transcend the capabilities of the individuals on their own" (Davis et al., 2000, p. 68). This is a crucial expansion and acknowledges that the system involved in learning is not located purely within individuals, but also encompasses the social world as it exists (e.g., everyday educational settings "as pairs of students, teacher-learner interactions, and classroom groupings," Davis et al., p. 67). Learning is not solely individual, rather, it "is always collective: embedded in, enabled by, and constrained by the social phenomenon of language; caught up in layers of history and tradition; confined by well established boundaries of acceptability" (Davis et al., p. 67).

Prominent in the theoretical foundations of social constructionism is the work of Vygotsky who claimed that, "relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163). These relations structure Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development" (p. 84-91), which is that gap between what a learner can learn on his/her own and what he/she can learn with guidance or through collabora-

tion. We can see that learning involves more than an individual person trying to make sense of the world in isolation. It extends "beyond the skin." The social situation is of important consequence.

Cultural Discourses

While social constructionism views learning as located within the small group, cultural discourses broaden the scope further to embrace learning that occurs at the level of the wider society, thus enabling an understanding of how knowledge is created beyond the individual or small group. Although culture does differ in subtle ways amongst different subgroups within a society, overall, there is a level at which some continuity exists and at which these subtle differences contribute to a larger whole. Culture represents knowledge at the societal level. In effect "individual knowing, collective knowledge, and culture become three nested, self-similar levels of one phenomenon" (Davis et al., 2000, p. 70). This permits understandings of learning that encompass the shift from "the individual's efforts to shape an understanding of the world to the manners in which the world shapes the understanding of the individual" (Davis et al., p. 70). Culture is a central aspect of the context within which both the individual and the small group are situated with respect to learning. It encourages the learner(s) to adapt and evolve while, itself, changes over time in subtle ways in response to the actions of the individuals and small groups.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development can be interpreted at the level of society as the "distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in...everyday actions" (Engeström, 1987, p. 174). In other words, while culture is sometimes viewed as an unchanging monolithic entity, there is an important transformative dimension present.

Relative Problems

Constructivism, social constructionism, and cultural discourses provide a structure within a holistic educational philosophy that allows a deeper analysis of experiential education. It is not the aim to conflate experiential education with any of these other theories. Rather, learning through experience occurs at the level of both the individual (constructivism), the small group (social constructionism), and culture (cultural discourses), an advance on those experiential education theories based purely within constructivism which assume learning as primarily the premise of the individual (e.g., Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981). The social nature of the experience is well understood in the practice of experiential education. Less well understood is the social constructionist character of many aspects of experiential educa-

tion. The formal reflective strategies commonly used in experiential education, such as group debriefs and reviews, (which are usually distinguished from the experience, *per se*) as well many of the more informal aspects of group dynamics, all function in social constructionist terms.

The process of active adaptation, of learning, is identified as being located within a social and cultural world. The importance of this context to learning, which is often stated generally but not theorized, is clearly implicated as foundational. Cultural discourses highlight the need for experiential education to attend more diligently to issues of context, especially in the way it is theorized in models of learning in experiential education. Experience occurs in context; it is situated—a sentiment that Dewey supported when he said, "experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience; it is constantly fed from these springs" (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 40).

Meeting a Fellow Traveller: Situated Learning

Situated learning provides a more tangible application of these other theories of learning, affording a more detailed structure which assists in the task of analyzing experiential education. It grew, in large part, from the body of work by Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (e.g., 1962, 1978), which was further developed by educational theorists, particularly in the United States. Central to this process was the seminal work of Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning can be categorized as holistic, and it has a deep-rooted affinity with social constructionism while also encompassing aspects of cultural discourses. It regards learners as active participants within a social and cultural world that influences, and is influenced by them, as they continue to adapt, to evolve, and to learn. This idea is not foreign to the field of experiential education: "Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had" (Dewey, 1938/1963, p. 39). Of prime importance in situated learning is the conceptualization of the intimate connection between participation and the social and cultural world within which that participation occurs, a viewpoint often missed in many models of learning in experiential education. Lave and Wenger (1991) begin their approach to theorizing this connection through their refinement of the notion of participation in their concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*. This concept attempts to draw attention to the process of moving from being a newcomer among a group of other practitioners "toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (Lave & Wenger, p. 29).

Legitimate peripheral participation is understandably a complex concept that requires clarification of its nuances in order to avoid distortions of the meaning intended. The temptation is to dissect the concept into three separate notions resulting in "a set of three contrasting pairs: legitimate versus illegitimate; peripheral versus central; participation versus nonparticipation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35)." But this is not the aim of Lave and Wenger. They "intend for the concept to be taken as a whole. Each of its aspects is indispensable in defining the others and cannot be considered in isolation" (Lave & Wenger, p. 35). When viewed in its complexity it reveals "a landscape—shapes, degrees, textures—of community membership" (Lave & Wenger, p. 35).

Legitimate peripheral participation communicates that "the required learning takes place not so much through the reification of a curriculum as through modified forms of participation that are structured to open practice to nonmembers" (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). While some reference to the context within which participation occurs is made, more detail is required concerning the social and cultural world in order to more fully reveal the characteristics of this connection. Lave and Wenger (1991) provide this through their concept of *community of practice*. "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time, and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, p. 98). This concept provides the anchor, steadfastly situating legitimate peripheral participation in the socio-cultural world.

The descriptions of these two concepts reveal the dynamic and complex interplay between learner(s) and context, another version of the sociological conundrum of agent and structure (Archer, 1995). Inherent in relationships of this type is that neither part can be defined fully without reference to the other—the distinction between part and whole is difficult to make. Legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice are co-determined. This is representative of the notion of being-in-the-world (as opposed to the creation of either one merged concept or two isolated concepts), thus calling into play the existential phenomenologies of Heidegger (1953/1996), and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968). In short, both learners and context are inseparable parts of the phenomenon of learning.

Evidently, the focus in situated learning is on participation rather than experience, *per se*. The highlighting of participation results in a more forceful connection with the world as interconnected communities of practice. Dewey himself supported the importance of participation as connecting the learner and the world, saying that "if the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation" (Dewey,

1916/1944, p. 338). This sentiment is also apparent in the work of Lave who claims that "participation in everyday life may be thought of as a process of changing understanding in practice, that is, as learning" (Lave, 1993, p. 6). Participation and learning are thus equated in a defined way, as experience and education have been (Dewey, 1938/1963).

Problems at Home

The connection between learning and participation highlights two major issues for models of learning in experiential education. In many of these models (e.g., Kolb, 1984) learning has been equated with a stepwise process in which an internalized reflection follows concrete experience resulting in an adaptation revealed in further experience. We step out of experience to reflect and process, then we step back in. Experience exists as a memory to be processed via reflection. These models have strongly influenced pedagogy resulting in the programming of separate tasks: the doing and then the formal reflecting followed by more doing. In this sense, learning in experiential education could be placed within a more mechanistic category of learning theories. Its holistic nature, which we intuitively understand, is not made manifest. In other words, experience and reflection are viewed as such individual "tasks" that they can only be informed by psychology—both sociological and ecological perspectives struggle to find space in models of learning in experiential education. Theories of learning in experiential education lack an "embeddedness" in the world (Hutchinson & Bosacki, 2000).

A by-product of this understanding of learning as an individual and internal process results in the creation of the concept of transfer in order to attempt to deal with the circulation of knowledge in society. This is a concept that does "not acknowledge the fundamental imprint of interested parties, multiple activities, and different goals and circumstances, on what constitutes 'knowing' on a given occasion or across a multitude of events" (Lave, 1993, p. 13). Haskell acknowledges that this transfer "has a social and cultural dimension" which has "not been widely recognized" (Haskell, 2001, p. 136). Transfer, commonly conceived, assumes that knowledge is held in the minds of individuals and thus eminently transportable, rather than being closely bound with all aspects of context. Situated learning highlights the context in which learning takes place—the community of practice—incorporating all aspects of this community and its practice. Experience itself is often commonly understood as knowledge held in context—we have experience *in* something, we participate *in* something. These "somethings" are related to contexts. Transfer cannot be understood apart from the recognition of the importance of context to learning.

Situated learning is able to more fully account for learning as a process that involves more than the individual as learner, revealing the vast gulf between many expressions of experiential education as learning *theory* and experiential education as *practice*. While many theoretical understandings of learning in experiential education focus on the individual and the ways in which he or she constructs understandings of the world internally, the language of the practice of experiential education is replete with references to social interaction and culture. This is especially evident in those areas of education that emphasize experiential processes, such as outdoor education and adventure education (e.g., Gair, 1997; Priest, 1986). Situated learning provides the concepts and theory that support this practice.

Getting to Know You: Learning as Experience and as Participation

As Lave and Wenger (1991) assert, the ultimate aim of legitimate peripheral participation is eventual full participation. Individuals "move from being at the fringes of a community to engaging in more centralized performances in that community" (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p. 437). The central aspect of situated learning is this movement towards a more developed participation. At the center of experiential education is adaptive experience, moving towards future improved experiences via a process which combines experience and reflection. Intrinsic to both of these processes are the questions of who is influencing them and to what ends they are directed. Embedded within these questions are the issues of teaching, power and ethics. Each of these issues is complex and reveals nuances within the learning theories of experiential education and situated learning. These issues revolve around the similarities and differences that exist between understandings of learning as experience and as participation, and highlight what can be learned via their juxtaposition.

Teaching

In any broad discussion of learning the issue of pedagogy must arise, leading to the question of the place of the teacher in the learning process. When learning is viewed holistically, teaching becomes a much more complex concept than it appears in a mechanical model. Learning may be conceived as "*dependent on but not determined by teaching*" (Davis et al., 2000, p. 64). Situated learning "decenters" the teacher by moving "the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community's learning resources" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 94). No longer is the teacher a person of authority imparting knowledge as information. The teachers in this process are other participants in the community of practice. Learning is

viewed as a form of *enculturation* in a community of practice, an acknowledgement that "the activities of many communities are unfathomable, unless they are viewed from within the culture" (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 33). Every experience of the learner is educative in some way.

Carver (1996) has applied this understanding of pedagogy to experiential education, describing the role of the teacher in a formally educative context as one who "cultivates environments...for learning" (p. 11). Carver's use of the concept of *cultivation* provides an excellent metaphor as it incorporates notions of growth and creativity. It does not have the technical or authoritative baggage that terms such as design or plan have in educational discourse. The term cultivation itself has its roots in the Latin *cultura* (Heidegger, 1971, p. 147), with the term culture, according to Dewey, meaning "something cultivated, something ripened" (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 121). In a formal educational setting the teacher manages this process of enculturation and the inherent tensions that exist within a community of practice as a result of people continually learning and changing. Situated learning helps us to see that the formal teacher is also part of the community of practice, and that he or she shares the teaching role with all the other participants in this community. Experiential education highlights the role that the teacher plays in structuring the learning situation, including all those aspects that the teacher can influence which impact upon the experience.

Power

The pathway through legitimate peripheral participation to full participation gives rise to concerns about the issue of power in this process. This raises questions about political structures and the level to which democratic practices exist in communities of practice (Hay, 1996). Participation is intertwined with politics. The issue of power and its relation to pedagogy is clearly dealt with in the work of Freire (1970), whose work has been well referenced within experiential education literature (e.g., Itin, 1999). Freire juxtaposes a more traditional "banking" style pedagogy, with a pedagogy that values the experiences of the learners. Knowledge understood as constructed through experience is impacted by democracy as it values the experiences of the learner as educative. Democracy is also fundamental to situated learning because learning, leading to full participation, is dependent upon access.

Democracy, although a seemingly simple concept, has many facets, some of which support learning via participation and experience more fully than others. Governmental processes that rely on citizens electing representatives to determine policy and action on issues are not as democratic as processes that involve citizens

themselves in decision-making about these issues, such as referenda.³ This more involved form of democracy has been called *participatory democracy* (Barber, 1984). Participatory democracy supports a maximum level of participation for individuals in political affairs. To enable participation, and thus learning, political structures must be democratic, and ideally they should involve participatory democracy. This applies as equally to the classroom as to larger political arenas. The concepts structuring situated learning help to further our understanding of power and politics as they relate to experiential education.

Ethics

When the issue of enculturation is considered in any holistic educational philosophy a fundamental question emerges: What is being cultivated? To answer this question it is necessary to explore issues of morals, values, spirituality and ethics—all of those seemingly subjective issues that are a part of any learning situation. These issues are present in the experiential education literature to the extent that they represent a prominent theme, gathered under the areas of adventure therapy, service-learning, outdoor education, and environmental education (Beringer, 2000; Haluza-Delay, 2000; Long, 2001; Smith, Strand & Bunting, 2002). These issues are central to any holistic understanding of participation and experience in these communities of practice.

One way of approaching this exploration is to focus on what is identified as *good*. This is because “the good life” is teleological: Everything we do is directed, consciously or subconsciously, towards its attainment (Aristotle, 1980, 1995; Tuan, 1986). Culture plays an important part in how the question of what is good is understood in any community (Tuan). An understanding of what is being cultivated in any particular community of practice is thus founded upon the relationship among the various interpretations of what is good, as held by those individuals, small groups, and the wider society, which constitute and impact upon the community of practice.⁴

Emergent from within this philosophical question is the more practical ethical question, “How are we to live?”—a question which seems to have much more relevance in discussions of legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice than those of the more individualistic notions of reflection and concrete experience (Singer, 1993). Dewey made reference to its importance by saying that “the only ultimate value which can be set up is just the process of living itself” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 240). This question was clearly broached in the work of Hahn whose educational philosophy embraced “the morally responsible man [sic] ... who is committed to the idea of the good and to justice

and who regards professional skill as a part of his task as a citizen in society” (Röhrs, 1970, p. 134). Questioning how we are to live forms an essential aspect of the practice of experiential education, notably in outdoor education and adventure education:

Most days, for example, involve a “debriefing” session around dinnertime when we talk about the day. Part of this will be narrowly practical. Who has blisters? How is everyone doing? Who has what questions? But it is also an occasion for reflection on ethical matters. The specifics, naturally, vary enormously, but the general pattern is to ask what happened today from which we can learn something about how to live. (Johnson & Frederickson, 2000, p. 47)

This citation reveals the importance of discussion in any community of practice. Determining how we are to live impacts upon the ethics of discussion itself as a process, as exemplified in discourse ethics (Chambers, 1995; Habermas, 1990).

Addressing the question of how to live is a central driving force in much of the practice of experiential education because of its holistic philosophy. This critical nature of experiential education can help to inform situated learning which can be perceived as promoting the *status quo*. There are, of course, examples of experiential education practice that exist which do not overtly dwell on issues of such magnitude, however underlying any more specific educational aims in a situation in which learning is conceived as experiential are these fundamental issues. What is being cultivated is given by way of an answer to the question of how we are to live. And any answer to this question cannot be separated from the context, the situation, the community of practice in which it is being asked.

Getting Together

Teaching, power and ethics are issues of a contextual nature that are of utmost importance for learners and learning. They highlight the importance of a theorization of context, of the learner, and of the relationship between them, for any theory of learning that is founded upon participation and experience. Experience, participation, reflection, community of practice: The theoretical structures of situated learning complement those of experiential education and vice-versa, assisting in the development of a better understanding of the learning situation. We can accommodate participation as experience. The challenge becomes recognizing experience as participation.

Conclusion

Investigation of other theories of learning creates windows into the world of experiential education that are, as yet, barely opened. By reflecting on those learning theories that could be described as close cousins of exper-

riential education, much has been revealed about its "personality." Constructivism, social constructionism, and cultural discourses provide a structure that enables the scope of the learning enterprise theorized within experiential education to be more completely analyzed.

Situated learning can also be described as closely allied to experiential education. It provides further insight into those aspects of experiential education that have yet to be fully theorized. The view of experiential education provided through situated learning, via the context of learning (as community of practice), and the activity of learning (as legitimate peripheral participation), is invaluable as it theorizes possibilities for learning in experiential education beyond the way it is often modeled as an internalized process. Understandings of learning in experiential education need to be advanced in order to encompass the practice of experiential education, which is based very firmly in the social and cultural world. Experiential education requires further theorization of the relationship between reflection and concrete experience, beyond the basic fact of the existence of this relation. The sociological and ecological aspects of learning need to be incorporated into the learning theory of experiential education, extending the current psychological focus. And more work is called for to expand the existing models of learning in experiential education in order to incorporate these ideas, many of which have only been, at best, introduced in this paper. The theoretical concepts of situated learning may be of importance in these tasks. These concepts help to provide the intersubjective "we" that connects self and world in the

trinity: "I – we – world."

These are not easy challenges. A benchmark for the level of difficulty involved is the many years that philosophers have been occupied with the relationship between experience and reflection. However, as challenges, they provide a suitable direction for further exploration, and many chances to expand our understanding.

Notes

- ¹ In an effort to avoid confusion, the term experiential education has been used throughout this paper rather than a combination of experiential learning and experiential education (Itin, 1999). When experiential learning is the focus then "learning in experiential education" or a similar phrase will be used.
- ² Within this classification of learning theories associated with a holistic educational philosophy, Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000) also include critical discourses in the same category as cultural discourses. Mention of critical theory was omitted from this paper in order to reduce the level of complexity. Davis et al. (2000) also include ecological theories in this classification, a level beyond cultural discourses, which encompasses phenomena such as the *Gaia* hypothesis. Again, this category has been omitted from this paper in order to reduce complexity.
- ³ Even referenda rely on elected representatives making decisions about the wording of questions.
- ⁴ Understandings of what is good in life can obviously be manipulated. This manipulation is an inherent aspect of consumer capitalism, implicating the marketing industry in the charades designed to keep us striving for a materialistic vision of the good life (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Schor, 1998).

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