

Reflections on Experience & Education

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Abstract

This paper is written as a response to John Dewey's *Experience & Education*. While Dewey's brief book was written more than 70 years ago, its relevance to today's educators is undeniable. What follows are my thoughts elicited by Dewey's commentary, specifically relating to the importance of considering experience and the matter of control in formal education.

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The initial review of this assignment in the syllabus was the first time I had heard of John Dewey, and I had no idea how many surprises I had in store. When I ordered the *Experience & Education*, I was surprised at its cost (\$3.99), and when it arrived, I was surprised at its size (also diminutive). Further, when I opened the book, I was surprised that I'd be reading a book almost as old as my mother, who is an octogenarian. Fortunately, the surprises did not stop there. The lessons uncovered in those 91 pages were surprising in their relevance to today's education issues. The focus of this paper is my reaction to Dewey's comments on issues of freedom and control and how the learners' past experiences affect the learning process.

Prior experiences

As happens with the intake of any new information, my filters were firmly in place when I first read *Experience & Education*. However, it wasn't until the second reading that I realized that the word 'experience' was on almost every page. Further, Dewey repeatedly made the connection between the lenses through which a learner meets information and how that same learner processes that detail (Experience, 1938). Of course, my observations of this theory have varied depending on which side of the desk I was sitting.

As a student

I was always an attentive student, but I can't say I connected with the material until well into my college career. It is important to consider that I went to night school for many years, and I was at least 35 before taking the class that generated this impact. The subject was, as I recall, Medieval History. The course included a survey of religion

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in that era, and some of the activities of the early church as described in that course were disturbing. I had just converted to Catholicism, and had not yet heard of multiple (simultaneous) popes, wars and political intrigue. This series of lectures, unsettling though they were, served as a catalyst to examine my beliefs, and why I held them. My religious frame of mind and recent conversion forced an emotional reaction to this new information. As a result, the readings had more meaning, and perhaps a *different* meaning than the other students in that class. As mentioned by Dewey (1938), “Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences” (p.27). This means that my religious education before the Medieval History class framed what was received in that class, and that *those* lectures later framed subsequent religious education and thought processes.

As a trainer

The class I've taught that generates the most visceral response is Identity Theft. This workshop explores the ways thieves can access personal information to the detriment of the individual. It further offers preventive measures that can be taken to combat thieves' efforts. In every presentation there are participants who have had a credit card used unlawfully, their computers hacked or similar unpleasant experiences.

Participants as victims make effective sounding boards for the balance of the class, relating their stories, their reactions, their results. There is no substitute for personal testimonies from the rank and file to ramp up the energy, emotion and participation in a session. This prior learning is a huge boost for the instructor, as what a student “...has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (Dewey, 1938, p.

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44), and these students invariably are eager to share, thus enriching the workshop experience for all.

Adult Education and Training Concepts

It occurs to me that education is like controversial political issues, such as illegal immigration. There are many opinions, but we cannot come to a consensus on an approach that works for all. That, and greater minds than mine have been talking about it for generations. Even in our class alone, we've run the gamut between textbooks from 1938 and 2010, in addition to our discussion posts this semester.

Text

Until this class, I had never heard of the constructivist theory, but it is related to experience. Kasworm (2010) explains that, "...development can be likened to lifelong processes of acquiring increasingly effective perpetual lenses" (p. 54). This is the same point that is made by Dewey (1938) when he instructs educators to start with the "...experience learners already have" (p.74). I do not believe he's referring only to their reading level, for example, but rather their frame of reference, as this changes the story they hear, as it did for me in my Medieval History class.

Since each of us has a lens, it is important for me to remember that learners in my classes may require examples that are more varied than what I've been using. If their experiences have been vastly different from mine, the tried and true examples I use may not be that true for them. Perhaps I need to expand my repertoire and do knowledge checks more frequently to make sure that those who are unwilling to ask questions have, indeed, absorbed the information.

Discussions

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Another interesting parallel is Dewey's (1938) mention, in a sideways manner, of informal learning, as he describes the failure of traditional education approach to see that learners absorb more during a course of study than the topic at hand. He goes on to elaborate:

Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. (1938, p. 48)

This concept meshes nicely with our discussion of informal learning, which our class unanimously (as far as I can tell) agrees is a significant part of every adult's learning experience. As Robert Grounds mentioned in his December 2, 2014 post, "The importance [of informal learning] is the ability to build educational life experiences that allow the learner to connect past experiences with present and/or future educational experiences." Making that connection expands the knowledge acquired and makes the learners' world bigger. It could be that learning is addictive. It was for me. Once I developed a taste for expanding my knowledge base, the need to know more grew exponentially.

None of this can happen before the learner allows it, however, and the educator also enters into the freedom-control dynamic.

Historical summary

In Laurie Browning's paper on the Highlander Folk School and the Citizenship Schools, she mentions the latitude given the students in dictating "what was taught in the classroom, drawing from the issues in their lives" (as cited by Browning, 2014, p. 4).

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Without the ability to make a connection between their lives and their learning, the struggle to read would have been even more difficult than it was. This is yet another example of experience coming into play, and illustrates Dewey's (1938) many comments made regarding the relevance of the learner's background to the material being presented. It also reinforces the need to connect the dots for learners by using sports or local news or agency best practices to drive home a point. This is why teaching is so incredibly difficult. It's like Thanksgiving dinner. It takes ten times as long to prepare it as it does for all of it to disappear off the rarely used china.

Another issue is freedom and control. At the time Horton began to conceive his plan to educate African-Americans, they had already been freed from slavery for over 60 years, yet they were mostly illiterate. The path to literacy was arduous, and few completed the process. This was each individual's decision. Each one made the choice, and many of them chose to study, primarily lured by the prospect of gaining the right to vote. This was the carrot that swayed their commitment to the effort (as cited by Browning, 2014).

Dewey (1938) has much to say about freedom, contrasting the relative values of external and internal control. He emphasizes that freedom from the bonds exerted by another person isn't the end of the story, however, but rather that the freedom is valuable insofar as it is used to exert power:

For freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to

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select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 63-64)

The opportunity to be free is maximized only by unleashing the intellectual side. The educator cannot control whether the learner moves in that direction, but it is the “teacher’s business” (Dewey, 1938, p. 71) to make sure the learner is given guidance. This is not a limitation of freedom, but more akin to showing someone how to use a map. This is how I view showing learners how to navigate insurance forms. Once they know the pattern the creators use in constructing these forms, they can self-direct their learning going forward, to whatever degree they choose. That said, I have to understand that I won’t always be able to transfer knowledge, as some learners will not allow it.

Dewey’s book is primarily targeting educators of children, and one wouldn’t normally contemplate a child’s lack of physical freedom. Nonetheless, most of his comments are easily applied to the education of adults. This tracks with his somewhat unorthodox (for that time) treatment of children as adults. This is not to say that he would allow them the same latitude, but rather that their experiences should be considered, and that their input into methods might benefit the learning process.

Dewey further encourages educators to share the wisdom of “wider experience” and to have an “idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning” (1938, p. 37-38). Without this knowledge the educator will not be able effectively engage the learner. I can relate to this easily, as my classes always include brief introductions by the participants, conducted primarily to enable me to frame my comments according to the need in the room, as well as the experience level.

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Along the lines of control, Dewey uses the example of a parent controlling the activities of an infant, feeding it when the parent deems necessary, and keeping it from harm (1938, p. 41). The actions of the parents are not punitive, removing freedom, but rather steering the life of someone whose experience level is subordinate to theirs. The same justification can be applied in the classroom. I'm with Dewey on this. The suggestions in some of our discussions (Methods class, I believe) that a democratic classroom is the route to go mystify me. I understand the needs of the learners should be considered, in method, in delivery, maybe even to some degree in class rules. However, in the final analysis, it is the instructor's classroom, and that's the person that controls the goals and is responsible for outcomes. I'd personally prefer a benevolent dictatorship to a democracy when it comes to training environments.

Summary

Reading and reflecting on Experience & Education has served a number of purposes. It has reinforced much of what I've learned this semester on adult learning, which is odd, since adult learning is not the book's target. Dewey's message speaks to the universal issues educators face, notwithstanding the age of the learners. The book is a classic, as its tenets are timeless:

- Recognize the place from which the learner begins. This is important not only because it dictates the starting point, but also because it frames the picture to be painted.
- Hold learners accountable. They are responsible for their intellectual growth.
- Consider learners' long-term learning goals first; short-term needs are subordinate
- Direct learners' paths; share your wisdom.

Apart from the lessons that can be gleaned, Dewey's comments validate the complexity of the dilemmas educators face. His work has endured, not because he has

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all the answers, but because he raises issues that do not change, and asks questions to which the answers vary with the situation. Change is constant, as Dewey reminds us:

“... all experience is an arch where thro’

Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35)

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