

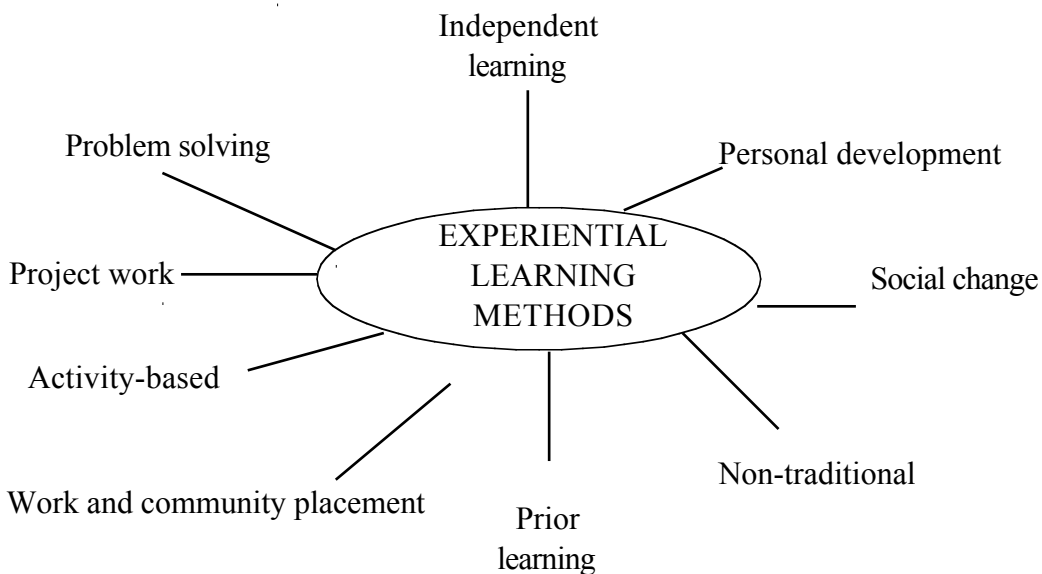
“The nuts and bolts of Experiential Learning”

Tony Saddington

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential Learning as a field of educational practice is vast. If we look at the range we see everything from farming to conflict resolution; from assessment to youth development; from practical skill training to theoretical models; and from personal growth to workplace training and development. All are labelled experiential learning - all are presented as being part of the experiential learning family.

What then counts as experiential learning? For some people it is all of education - for others it is narrowed down to a specific practice or curriculum model. The vast array of educational activities using the term experiential learning can be seen in Jane Henry’s work.¹



Whilst Jane Henry’s diagram is useful to collect and order the wide range of practices, a simpler grouping can be obtained if we use the “four village” model proposed by Susan Weil and Ian McGill². The model of four villages groups the vast range of experiential learning practices into four main sets:

1. The assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning.
2. Experiential learning and change in higher and continuing education.
3. Experiential learning and social change.
4. Personal growth and development.

This model was developed out of the work of the First International Conference on Experiential Learning at Regent’s College in London in July 1987. Delegates came from all over the world to share their views and theories of experiential learning. As we listened to each other we found ourselves asking: *but why do you think that is experiential learning?* We were each caught (trapped) in our own particular version (village) of experiential learning

without realising it. What that conference did was to challenge us to move out of our own village and learn from the practices of others and so enrich our own.

Village one: the assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning.

The practices in this village focus on assessment and accreditation. Here, reflection is about recording (documenting) and assessing the learner's experience. The notion being that learning from prior situations (experience) can be assessed and that that assessment can lead to either access (entry) into Higher Education or to advanced standing (credits or fast tracking). Globally this village goes by many different names³ - APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning), APL (Assessment of Experiential Learning) APA (Assessment of Prior Achievement), PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) and in South Africa "RPL" (Recognition of Prior Learning). The practices used in this village have also spread from education into the world of work and are used for securing jobs and for advancement. In South Africa RPL is one of the key cornerstones of the NQF (National Qualifications Framework).

The driving force behind the development of RPL has been a mix of demographic, economic and social factors along with altruistic concerns amongst practitioners to take seriously the needs and interests of adult learners and to widen access to learning opportunities for reasons of equity. The first example of RPL is found in the United States in the GI Bill of 1946 which dealt with returning World War 2 veterans who wanted their skills recognised by universities. Their prior learning had to conform to, and was evaluated against traditional course material. This village draws heavily on the progressive and humanist adult education traditions which emphasise the importance of experience and life-long learning.

Village two: experiential learning and change in higher and continuing education.

The practices in this village are to do with curriculum innovation. The concepts of learner responsibility, self-directed learning, learner centredness and learning from experience find their expression here in practices which change the traditional teaching situation into a learning environment committed to learning practices which transform the curriculum. The work of John Dewey and more recently David Kolb, David Boud and others bring the learner closer to centre stage as the possessor of hidden and untapped knowledge which is unveiled through a reflective process on personal and life experience. The progressive philosophical tradition of adult education most deeply supports this village. In South Africa new forms of innovation such as Service Learning and Problem Based Learning are examples of this village.

Village three: experiential learning and social change.

The practices in this village are about confronting individuals and groups with the reality of their worlds. This village with its roots in the radical philosophical tradition of adult education and the work of social activists such as Saul Alinsky, is about empowerment and social change. The reflective process cannot just be personal but also needs to take into account the contextual realities. Through this form of reflection (conscientization) individuals become aware of their societal context and are empowered to work to change it. Some of the models used in literacy (adult basic education) in South Africa use this set of practices.

Village four: personal growth and development.

The practices in this village are aimed at the growth and development of the individual through personal reflection on one's self, communication and inter-relationships with others. The humanist tradition of adult education with its focus on the development of the individual (the self) is central with key figures being Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The key notion is one of personal responsibility for one's self and therefore also for one's learning. An example of this form of experiential learning in South Africa is the model used for the training of telephone counsellors in organisations such as LifeLine where the development of the individual is paramount.

Whilst the four village model presents experiential learning as operating in four clear and distinct sets of practices in reality we find that the villages cross over each other. Staying at the level of practice I want now to look at some actual cases in the form of organisations who claim to practise experiential learning. What is apparent is that their presenting face is often simple and uncomplicated, yet their programmes and involvements are complex. An organisation can, for example, be labelled as Village 1 or Village 4, but then you discover that the work they do is actually across the villages and draws on a variety of roots.

Good examples of this are three organisations in the USA: AEE (Association for Experiential Education), NSEE (National Society for Experiential Education) and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning).

1. At first glance AEE is "outward bound" or adventure education (Village 4). Whilst its roots are still firmly planted in this, they now engage in youth service, management development training, peace education and environmental education. AEE currently promotes professional groups in areas such as experience-based training and development, therapeutic adventure, and women in experiential education. Their vision is to be a leading international organisation for the development and application of experiential education principles and methodologies and to promote positive social change - a long way from the initial "outward bound" focus.
2. NSEE has its roots in internships - the practice of sending students out into workplaces or communities to learn (Village 2). Their present work includes many new forms of practice, from cross-cultural education to service learning. In their list of current activities they cover school-to-work transitions, leadership development, co-operative education, career development and even outdoor education.
3. CAEL has its roots in RPL (Village 1) - they call it PLA (Prior Learning Assessment). Now it is involved in workplace education and development; professional development programmes for adult educators; and advocacy work, which aims to foster change in policies affecting adult learners. Whilst still strongly committed to PLA, it has broadened to encompass a diverse set of activities which include support services and development opportunities for educational institutions; professionals in the field of adult education; designing and administering workforce education programmes; developing public policy recommendations related to workforce education and adult learning; and consulting with employers to develop education strategies and learning systems. These are all moves away from simply "assessment" work to curriculum work; education and training;

counselling; quality control for organisations and businesses; project planning and design; and advocacy.

This move from single focus to multi-focus can be seen in many experiential learning organisations. I believe this to be a strength - the more we can draw on the range of practices to be found in the four villages, the more able our organisations will be able to broaden, develop and diversify its own educational practices.

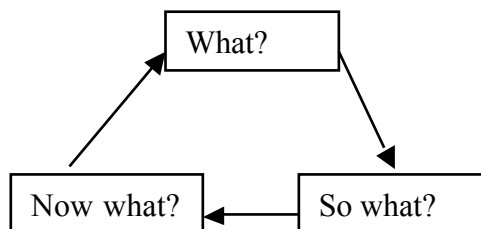
How does Experiential Learning work?

The assumption that we learn from experience is only partly true, in reality we learn through reflection upon our experience. Saul Alinsky in his work on training community organizers discusses the way in which people react to life as "a series of happenings which pass through their systems undigested" and he concludes that "happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized".⁴

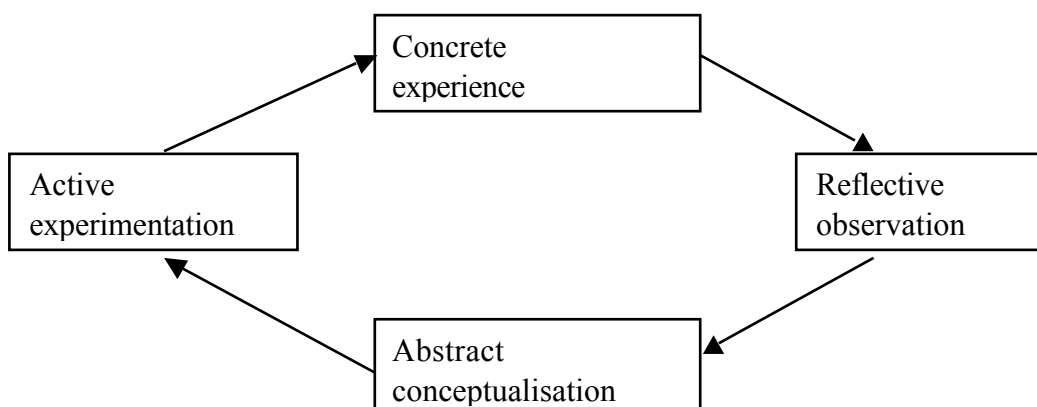
"Experience" in adult education is also seen as providing learners with a "rich resource" to learn from and a base upon which to build new learnings. However for learners to be able to learn from this "rich resource" they need to discover the meaning of their experience and develop skills of inquiry which will enable them to reinterpret and appropriate this experience. This making sense of experience is what Paulo Freire called "critical reflection".⁵

A methodology which encompasses this critical reflection and enables learners to make sense of and learn from their own experience is "Experiential Learning". Experiential learning is a process in which an experience is reflected upon and then translated into concepts which in turn become guidelines for new experiences.

A model which illustrates this very simply is one by Borton⁶:



The most established model of Experiential Learning is the one developed by David Kolb⁷:



This model proposes a process which begins with an experience ("concrete experience"), which is followed by reflection ("reflective observation"). The reflection is then assimilated into a theory ("abstract conceptualisation") and finally these new (or reformulated) hypotheses are tested in new situations ("active experimentation"). The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests new concepts and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualisation.

This learning cycle is similar to Dewey's elaboration of the relationship between thinking and experience: "Thinking includes all of these steps, the sense of a problem, the observation of conditions, the formation and rational elaboration of a suggested conclusion, and the active experimental testing."⁸

Experiential learning can therefore be defined in terms of a learning model "which begins with the experience followed by reflection, discussion, analysis and evaluation of the experience. The assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims, ambitions and expectations. From these processes come the insights, the discoveries, and understanding. The pieces fall into place, and the experience takes on added meaning in relation to other experiences. All this is then conceptualised, synthesised and integrated into the individual's system of constructs which he imposes on the world, through which he views, perceives, categorises, evaluates and seeks experience."⁹

Most models of Experiential Learning have three basic phases: an experience or problem situation; a reflective phase within which the learner examines the experience and draws learnings from that reflection; and a testing phase within which the new insights or learnings, having been integrated with the learner's own conceptual framework, are applied to a new problem situation or experience. As the learner applies these new learnings and again reflects upon them so the learning ultimately becomes internalized.

Reflection in experiential learning is the critical phase, because this is when learning will occur. Experience alone does not lead to learning. The reflective phase which follows the experience is an opportunity for the learners to "recapture their experience think about it, mull it over and evaluate it". In reflection the learner examines both the experience as well as his own conceptual framework. From this can come new perspectives, changes in behaviour, the development of skills and new conceptual frameworks.

A model for reflection proposed by David Boud (et al)¹⁰ highlights three important considerations for reflection in the learning process. Firstly, the experience - the focus of reflection - where it is important that all of the experience is considered. This includes the behaviour, ideas and feelings that were present during the experience itself.

Secondly, there is the reflective process, where the learner recounts the actual experience and attends to any feelings that may have persisted since that experience. This "attending to feelings" is an important part of reflection as it allows the learner then to reconsider rationally the experience in terms of his/her own learning goals and to integrate any new knowledge with his/her already held knowledge. This second aspect of the model ends with an "appropriation of this knowledge into the learner's repertoire of behaviour". This reflective process is the

key part of experiential learning and is an "active process of construction and reconstruction of the individual".

The third aspect, outcomes, is important for reflection as it completes the reflective process by designating the learner's gains. These gains may lead to changes in the learner in terms of "the clarification of an issue, the development of a skill or the resolution of a problem. A new cognitive map may emerge, or a new set of ideas may be identified". It may reaffirm already held beliefs, knowledge, values or behaviour. This closure of reflection allows the learner to move into the testing phase where the new learnings are applied.

So what's new in Experiential Learning?

In the past a lot of attention has been given to the process of reflection. However, this has always been seen as something to be done after the experience has happened. More recent thinking has suggested that we also need to attend to what is happening during the actual experience itself. We need to find ways of promoting learning in the midst of the experience.

David Boud (et al) have suggested several new and important elements for Experiential Learning:

- There is a need to focus on the "preparation" for the actual learning event. The focus on the learner means that we, as educators, need to take into account both the personal foundation of experience (i.e. the history of experience that the individual learner brings to the event) as well as the learner's intent (i.e. why the learner comes to the event). The focus on milieu means being aware of the environment in which the learning will occur, not just the physical setting but also the norms, rules of behaviour, institutional culture and practices, as well as the personal characteristics of the learners and educators. Finally in preparing for the experience we also need to think through the skills and strategies we will employ to enable learners to engage with the event.
- During the experience we need to take more notice of "what the learner perceives ... as taking place; and what the learner contributes to the situation". This is facilitated by the two processes "noticing" and "intervening". "Noticing" is defined as the way in "which the person becomes aware of the milieu, or particular things within it, and uses this for the focus of reflection". "Intervening" is seen as the way in which the learner "takes an initiative in the event ... this may be an attempt to change it ... or to check their understanding of what is occurring".

The theoretical work done on Experiential Learning has established it as a method of learning which is useful to both educators and learners. This methodology helps learners to develop capacities to reflect on experience and appropriate significance through such reflection.

(This article was published in ODdebate, September 2001, Vol 8 No 3 (pp 7-11))

References and footnotes:

- 1 Henry, Jane (1989) "Meaning and practice in Experiential Learning" chapter in Weil, Susan and McGill, Ian (1989) Making Sense of experiential learning, SRHE & Open University Press, Milton Keynes, pp.29-33. (In this chapter Henry presents a more complex diagram of experiential learning methods which are all grouped under the diagram used in this paper.)
- 2 Weil and McGill, op cit. p.3.
- 3 Harris, Judy and Saddington, Tony (1995) The recognition of prior learning (RPL): international models of assessment and their impact on South African education and training practice, Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- 4 Alinsky, Saul, D. (1972) Rules for radicals, Random House, New York
- 5 Freire, Paulo (1978) Pedagogy in progress: the letters to Guinea-Bissau, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, London
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- 7 Kolb, David (1984) Experiential Learning, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA.
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- 9 Wight, Albert (1970) "Participative education and the inevitable revolution" in Journal of Creative Behaviour, Vol 4, No 4, Fall 1970, p. 234-282.

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- 10 Boud, David, Cohen, Ruth and Walker, David (1993) Using experience for learning, SRHE & Open University Press, Milton Keynes, UK.