



## Experiential Learnings Revised

*Lee Herman and Alan Mandell*

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*But first, are you experienced?  
Have you ever been experienced?  
Well, I have*

Jimi Hendrix, "Are You Experienced?"

### Abstract

The proposition is challenged that experience and learning are separate. It is argued that all experience is necessarily learning, and that any object of experience may disclose unlimited learnings in both extent and profundity. The implications of these claims are examined for teaching and learning, for the openness of the academy and for social justice.

## Introduction

Experience is often contrasted with learning. The distinction roughly means that the former is passive and the latter, active: "Experience" has to do with the receptivity of the senses and the recording capability of perception. "Learning," on the other hand, includes activities, such as concept formation, intellection, and reasoning. Experience may be the raw material of learning, but it is the active capabilities of mind that make experience understandable. The distinction between experience and learning often indicates a hierarchy, with precedence generally given to the latter. True enough, sometimes experience is privileged, as when we refer to the foolishness of youth having been wizened by experience. But certainly in the academic world, learning is the superior thing and is sharply distinguished from mere experience. Even in those rarer situations in which experience is seen as academically important, relevant and rich, it is still assumed that one needs to do something intellectual to it for experience to attain the status of learning. Thus, at colleges such as ours, which prides itself on taking experience seriously and provides the opportunity for students to have their experiential learning assessed for college credit, we nonetheless insist to our students, as we help them to prepare for those assessments, that: "You do not get any credit at all for your experience but for what you learned from it." Indeed, the history of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the modern university can be described as an effort to protect learning from experience by criteria and means of assessment that translate experience into learning. In other words, in the very process of academically recognizing experiential learning, experience becomes official learning by ceasing to be experience.

The thesis of this essay is that the phrase "experiential learning" is redundant. That is, we assert that every experience, no matter how humble, is a cognitive achievement: learning is a necessary condition of every experience. We do not mean to say that every experience is college level learning. However, we do believe that some important understandings about learning itself and education follow from appreciating the intellectual abundance inherent in the simplest experience of anything at all. One of those understandings has to do with the relationship between experience, social justice, and the conditions of human flourishing. At

the end of this essay, we will explain that relationship.

This is a time when PLA is a growing activity and topic of discussion in many colleges and universities. The venues of discussion have not only extended to literally thousands of academic institutions around the globe, but to state, provincial and national governments, and to international policy bodies that are working on educational, economic and human resource development. (Mandell and Travers, 2012). The contemporary world holds an international “alphabet soup of acronyms for PLA” (Michelson and Mandell, 2004: 3-4). All of these important planning activities and decisions rest on assumptions about what learning really is, and what it is not. Therefore, we believe that it is worthwhile to carefully consider at a most basic level what these things are that we call “learning” and “experience.”

## The Separation of Experience and Learning

We teach at a college where, from its origins, “experience” was seen as a legitimate source of learning. Empire State College was one of the original members of a consortium of institutions, eventually called the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning that, in 1973, not only recognized the academic significance of experience but put in place procedures and policies to assess it as part of a university curriculum (Gamson, 1989: 29-30). It was assumed that adults seeking a college degree came to us with rich and important learning acquired outside the classroom. They were not regarded as empty vessels, but as having acquired knowledge at home, in their communities and in workplaces – through “learning projects” — every bit as sophisticated as the learning acquired from books and professors (Tough, 1971). Thus, the university took on a new role: not only to help students acquire new knowledge but to recognize what they tacitly or explicitly already knew. (On tacit knowledge, see Polanyi, 1966/2009.) The recognition of prior learning became PLA/RPL, a distinct, legitimate way of defining learning. Eventually, PLA/RPL policies, procedures and programs that originated with just a few colleges now extend worldwide.

But even with such legitimating recognition of experiential learning, great pains were taken from the start to distinguish between experience and learning. Indeed, CAEL’s first “standard” says: “Credit or its equivalent should awarded only for learning, and not for experience” (Fiddler, *et al.*, 2006: xi). That first principle is then emphasized:

This standard is both the most important and the most frequently violated quality assurance rule in the assessment field. It is easier to quantify experience than it is to measure learning. But experience is an *input* and learning is an *outcome*: credit awards must be based on the latter (Fiddler *et al.*, p. 14).

There was real fear, personal and institutional, that unless this distinction were strongly made, the legitimacy of these non-traditional colleges and programs would be destroyed. Much effort was made to find ways of evaluation that dissected out the learning from the experience — not to mention the equally strenuous task of precisely distinguishing college level learning from its inferior forms. These efforts were often very complex: For example, were there certain kinds of experience, such as profound but very personal experiences, that ought to have no standing as sources of college level learning? The questioning is of course completely legitimate. But we could also ask if the same intense scrutiny were applied to every course in a college catalog, would they all pass muster?

Thus, for example, if a focus on “theory” is held, as it often, to be a necessary condition of any learning that attains college level, what is to be said about such common practice-centered courses as “College Chorus,” “Introduction to Conversational Spanish,” “Physical Education,” “Student Teaching,” “Human Service Field Work,” “Dance Technique 1 and 2,” “Internship in Accounting Practices,” “Field Course in Technology Ventures,” “Political Campaigning Internship,” and “Basket Weaving”? We end the list with Basket Weaving because that subject was once mocked as the quintessential example of a sometime college course that self-evidently deserved no such status.

In effect, the solidity of PLA/RPL policy statements separating experience and learning is deceptive. The intellectual precision and coherence underlying such statements is weak and unsettled. After more than 40 years of discussion, practice and expansion, the grounding of experiential learning in sharp distinction between learning and experience persists even while there is turbulent debate about what sorts of learning occurring outside the traditional classroom get counted as truly “academic.”

Despite the intellectual messiness of sustaining a sharp distinction between experience and learning, PLA/RPL policies and procedures try to hold on to it in constructing ways of

academically accommodating this type of learning. They range on a continuum from most closed to most open.

There are four standard positions on college creditable PLA/RPL. The most conventional version is an institutionally administered and completely standardized exam of content. That is, a student claims to have somehow learned outside a classroom, the content of a particular course: Introduction to Psychology, Survey of American History, Calculus II. The student is given a standardized exam; if a passing score is achieved, the student gets the credit for the course. A second version is a "course match" model. The students are required to match what they believe they have learned outside the classroom to the official description of a pre-existing course. They are then given the opportunity to demonstrate by a variety of means that they have acquired at least a minimal threshold of learning about each of the topics covered in that course. A third version of PLA /RPL focuses on pre-identified rubrics, outcomes or competencies that are supposed to be fulfilled or achieved beyond the detailed content of any particular course. Students can demonstrate their learning about those things by writing essays, being interviewed and/or taking exams. The final version of PLA/RPL evaluation is the portfolio model. It claims that individual learning is possible outside the classroom but its contours and content cannot be preset. In other words, the academically creditable learning achieved need not correspond to a pre-existing course title or description.

These approaches to evaluating learning acquired outside the classroom are long-standing even if they are still debated. Today, colleges and students encounter a vast sea of free or nearly for-free learning opportunities, which despite the exuberance and technological sophistication of these learning "objects" raise all the customary questions: What's learning, is it college level, how should be assessed, and into what curriculum might fit?

The poster child for these is the Massive Open Online Course or "MOOC." MOOCs began in the spirit of people forming their own intellectual communities around things they wanted to learn. Stephen Downes and George Siemens are early MOOC developers and theorists of what they call "connectivism." Downes clearly describes the heart of all this open learning activity as follows:

... the course is free and open. There are no fees, no barriers of any kind, to participation. We encourage people to register so they receive the course newsletter, but it's not required. Everything is freely available online and people can browse to their heart's content. Participants contribute as much or as little as they like. (Downes' blog description of his MOOC on "Connectivism" [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-downes/connectivism-and-connecti\\_b\\_804653.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-downes/connectivism-and-connecti_b_804653.html))

MOOCs are a contemporary example of Tough's "learning projects" in the age of the World Wide Web. Tough, Downes, Siemens and others see a world of extra-curricular learnings happening everywhere, about anything, and in all kinds of ways. Clearly, they embrace it with zest, including its anarchic spirit. The possibilities of these experiential earnings—MOOCs and PLAs—are endless and almost literally beyond comprehension. How is an academic to make sense of them? It's no wonder that if such learning is to be taken as academically creditable in and of itself, order must be imposed. As Shakespeare's Ulysses wisely observed:

O, when degree is shaked,  
Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,  
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?

*Troilus and Cressida*, Act I, Scene 3

[http://shakespeare.mit.edu/troilus\\_cressida/troilus\\_cressida.1.3.html](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/troilus_cressida/troilus_cressida.1.3.html)

Of course, there are always good and bad motivations for imposing such order. We would all go insane if there were no order whatsoever. But we need to be cautious. Ulysses, after all, is a ruthless schemer, a truly cold-blooded pragmatist. Organization is never an end in itself. We, therefore, should not assume that the terms of reference we use to impose academic order, such as "course" and "credit hour," have a kind of final authority. They do not represent some measurable "atom" of knowledge – the real and not further divisible thing in itself. (On the credit hour as a historical construction, see Laitinen, 2012.) We want to argue that the core of any learning experience, whether it happens in or outside of school, by reading a book, managing a food bank, or carefully looking at a farmyard scene, is always the same. The reason why the effort to make a sharp, hard distinction between

experience and learning always has messy results is that it is not true. We assert that all learning is experience, and the converse as well, that all experience, even at its most humble level, is learning. Therefore, we say that the phrase “experiential learning” is redundant.

## The Experience of Everyday Objects as Learning

When we assert that “experiential learning” is redundant, we do not intend to remove it from English usage. Rather, we are trying to point to the idea that any experience of anything inherently involves significant cognitive activity. Every conscious experience of a discrete, coherent entity is a recognition. And, that recognition is a cognitive achievement — in other words, it is learning. Keep in mind, we are not only referring to college level learning. Rather, wanting to get down to basics, we include even the experience of the most everyday objects.

We recognize the hand we see as our own or the face of a new friend. We hear a siren and know there is an emergency. Through the open window of a swiftly passing car, we hear a brief second or two of music: it is Neil Young’s “Helpless.” We unerringly recognize the smell of a flower; it was yellow, though we do not know its name. The same is true of the working understandings we have of everyday ideas: Even without knowing the technically precise definitions, we have learned what a “body” or a “triangle” is, and learn easily enough their diverse instances and usages. And, thus, we recognize bodies of water, bodies of work and thought, the bodies of humans and other animals. A slice of pizza we know to be triangular despite its rounded edge, as is an anatomically molded bicycle seat; and we know as well that when we see a triangle on an organizational chart, we are seeing a hierarchy.

Simple objects of everyday experience are not confined to physical things or ideas associated with them. They also include matters of considerable emotional and moral weight. For example, we recognize courage and cowardice, generosity and meanness, joy and sorrow, serenity and anxiety, respect and contempt. These recognitions represent learning. These include even the apprehension of our own ideas. Those mental objects of experience, which we often take for granted, having become the stuff of our assumptions and habitual ways of organizing the world — they, too, are cognitive achievements. And we recognize that they are achievements when we are confronted with problems, questions, and criticism. Then, we find ourselves in a situation where what we take for granted doesn’t hold. We find ourselves thrown back, trying to understand what we had thought self-evident, namely, what it is we really mean and why we think it so. When we go back to reconsider or revise an idea, we therefore re-discover that the original version must have been a learning in the first place, namely something intellectually achieved.

Our ideas are not received or given; they are learned. Thus, objects of experience range from our consciousness of the simplest things to the apprehension of our feelings and ideas. At every moment along this continuum of experiences, there is learning.

## From Ordinary to Exalted Objects of Experience

Experiencing something in particular, means paying attention. We look up into the night sky; we note points of light called stars. We continue to look and we notice that as our eyes become more accustomed to the darkness, that the number of stars increases. If we are lucky enough to be somewhere with little light pollution, we get the sense that the longer we look, the more stars continue to appear, and, this sense also contains the feeling that this multiplicity is without end. We are filled with awe at the grandeur of the heavens. We also can experience an overwhelming curiosity to find out what is out there. At the simplest level, our experiential learning is little more than paying attention. At its most sophisticated, these complex but coherent experiences are the beginnings of science, worship, and art. The scientist gazes at the night sky and, impelled by curiosity, seeks physical and mathematical explanations for what is there. The believer, viewing the same sky, glimpses signs of a divine presence that animates the cosmos. The artist holds and savors the beauty of that same starry night, and creates a new object to behold. It is essential to remember that all of these experiences depend ultimately on paying attention to something in particular.

Prolonged attention and curiosity yields whole fields of learning and creation. We can

imagine an astronomer staring intently at the data comprising an x-ray photograph sequence suggesting the wobble of an impossibly distant star. And we can imagine her wondering if the mathematical variations indicating that wobble can be explained by the presence a planet, possibly an Earth-like planet that neither she nor any of her descendants are ever likely to see. Nonetheless, she is learning and increasing our understanding of the physical universe. Maybe her professional curiosity began decades before when she looked into the night sky and wondered if we were alone in the universe and if somewhere among all those stars some inhabited planet existed out there.

A spiritually inclined person, attending as carefully and sensitively to the starry night as a scientist or artist, may well experience dread, reverence and wonder at the immensity of the heavens, and so be inspired to evoke a supreme deity who far exceeds our understanding yet assures us that the otherwise incomprehensible immensity out there is a cosmos — coherent, sound and benevolent:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
And the firmament showeth His handiwork;  
Day unto day uttereth speech,  
And night unto night revealeth knowledge;  
There is not speech, there are no words,  
Neither is there voice heard.  
The law of the Lord is perfect,  
Restoring the soul

(Psalm of David, Psalm 19)

And what did Van Gogh see when he looked to the heavens from his room in the asylum at Saint Remy in 1889? Did he see the swirls of magnificent blues? Did he see the night sky in motion? Did the colors of the stars and moon really blaze that intensely to his eyes? And how many of us have experienced in its immediacy the night sky as he might have? Whatever Van Gogh actually saw in the night sky when he painted *Starry Night*, we do know, at least, that his rendering of that experience beckons us to learn to see the night sky in a way we could not have imagined ourselves.

Our purpose in offering these examples of ordinary and exalted experiences is to demonstrate that in the mundane and seemingly simple act of attending to what is before us we achieve the recognitions we call experience. In those moments reside the possibilities of science, of religious belief, of art. What are the grounds of these possibilities?

## Apprehending a Particular Object of Experience

Immanuel Kant provides an epistemological basis for appreciating the cognitive achievement in any experience, whether of an ordinary or an exalted object. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant demonstrates what's involved in the merest conscious apprehension of any individual object of experience. It could be the whole night sky. But it could also be the slimmest childhood memory of a single distant star, a memory that for some reason then evokes some sweet melancholy. Even those small, fleeting moments necessarily depend, Kant demonstrates, upon complex cognitive operations. From them issue perceptions (both internal and external), which are unified in a well-defined consciousness of something in particular. In other words, the product of this cognitive work is experience (Kant, A66/B91-A226/B274).

Moreover, Kant summarizes the results of his analysis thus: The basic principles at play in the construction of experience are absolutely necessary conditions for human beings to be conscious of both their own individual existence and also of the existence of any particular thing in a world external to themselves (Kant, A226/B274-A234/B287). Even with an inner experience intense with sensation and emotion, our conscious discrete attention to something in particular requires cognitive activity. This, at its most basic level, is how we know what we perceive and what we feel. When we make the simplest identifying assertion — “This is a cup. That is a leaf. The sun is warm today. I feel happy.” — our minds are at work. These very simple identifications are intellectual achievements. Usually we don't feel them as that. These simple experiences of things and inner states often seem to come up passively. We often feel as though such objects were given. The cup, the leaf, the sun's warmth, our happiness emerge in our consciousness as if we were mere recipients and observers of the objects of our experience.

This is not the case.

Far from being passive, our barest observations involve our immediate but complex awareness of ourselves (so-called apperception) apprehending something other than our own otherwise empty subjectivity. "I see a barn," includes at once the recognition of the thing we see and the recognition of the "I" that sees it. In our consciousness of anything, we are also and always aware of ourselves as the Cartesian "thing that thinks" (*Meditation 2*). The importance of human attention to the particular cannot be overestimated. Absent the capacity to attend to the particular, there is no human experience. Simply to be conscious that "this is" and "I am" is an intellectual acquisition. Simply to know something as distinct at that moment from all other things and selves is learning. In other words, we make our experience, and in doing so, we construct a world populated by intelligible objects, including other things, other people, and ourselves.

## Savoring the Particular

One may or may not follow or agree with Kant's complex analysis of the composition of any experience. No matter, a similar view of the intelligible wonderment of any particular object is evoked by the William Carlos Williams poem, *The Red Wheel Barrow* (1923). It is remarkable in this context that this poem is a simple, compelling evocation of a completely ordinary object of experience.

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens.

(<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537>)

Williams divides the poem into discrete ordinary objects: a red wheelbarrow, rain, water, white chickens. The poem is laid out on the page so as to atomize and fix our attention to these things one at a time, separately and in combination. Indeed, just as Kant would have it, we integrate an array of details in a simple, coherent barnyard scene. Thus, the poem stimulates us to compose in our visual imagination a wet red wheelbarrow with chickens standing nearby. No experience could be more ordinary; yet, Williams forcefully asserts, none could be more important. What Williams evokes as a precious imaginative moment, Kant demonstrates to be an essential cognitive achievement. The two are one and the same. Kant and Williams are helping us appreciate paying attention to anything (and thus everything) in particular. This is experience.

When we use the phrase, "an experience" or "an object of experience," our meaning includes, of course, the experience of discrete physical objects in the world: a red wheelbarrow, a white chicken, a coffee cup, a tree, a star. But we also mean other kinds of objects. As we described above, some of these can be internal, such as emotions, and they can be complex but coherent external occurrences. For example, we overhear two acquaintances conversing in an amiable or perhaps an angry way. That's an experience of "an object." The experience of an object can also include complex physical and social phenomena; for example, a traffic jam, a football play, a painting we love, such as "Starry Night." But an object of experience can also be internal; for example, the consciousness of desire, savoring a drink of water or a piece of fruit, a moment of sadness. As we have described above, a fully coherent experience can be formed from any complex realization, both cognitive and emotional, internal and social. Every moment in the whole vast repertoire of human experiences is a moment of learning.

To return now to *The Red Wheelbarrow*, we can offer a response to the claim made by the poem. What is the "so much" that depends upon the red wheelbarrow? Our response is this: The experience of any particular, however humble, is learning. The possibility of understanding anything more depends on achieving those particular learnings. In this way, every small learning moment is precious. Every particular is precious. Imagine the contrary. What would we be, what would the world be, if this were not true? Remove "red"; remove color. Remove chickens; remove animals. Remove rain and water. Remove wheelbarrow; remove tools. Remove the possibility of multiple objects standing in some relationship to each other in space and time. Our consciousness would be inchoate, "a

blooming buzzing confusion" as William James described the raw stream of an infant's consciousness (p. 488, 1890/1981). Indeed, it is doubtful we would even have a faint awareness of self that persisted, the same self, from one moment to the next. In other words, we would not recognize ourselves. The explanation of Williams' assertion that "so much depends" on this or that, is that indeed everything and everyone, the very intelligibility of the world, depends on our being able to pay attention to a wet red wheelbarrow, white chickens standing alongside.

William Carlos Williams has invited us into a world in which there are infinite, precious particulars to draw our attention – a world of endless wonders. How is this possible? How is such a multitudinous world possible? How is it possible for human beings to pay sufficient attention to and understand what's in this world?

## Particulars without End

We can try to respond to these hard to grasp abstract questions at a common sense level, by using *The Red Wheelbarrow* poem. It's obvious there is much more to be said and asked of the red wheelbarrow. Put back all the particulars about it we removed just above. Regarding the red wheelbarrow, we might ask: Why is it red? Just how red is it? Why is it left standing, apparently after a recent rain, among the farm animals? How did such tools come to be in the first place? Why, in our day of automated agriculture, is it still used? The questions and the topics pertinent to the red wheelbarrow could go on and on in Williams' world of precious particulars without end.

Potentially, all the questions and topics of learning matter all of the time. The specific topic of learning that becomes important at any particular time depends on what one's interests and purposes happen to be, as Dewey explained more than a century ago. (See *Democracy and Education*, Chapter Eight "Aims in Education" and elsewhere.) Those interests will vary with each person. Considering Williams' barnyard scene, one person might be interested in the history of tools and technology, while another might wonder about the particular breed of white chickens feeding by the wheelbarrow. An artist involved in the controversy over whether moderns have lost visual access to a "true red" might be musing on just what shade of red the poet had in mind when he was writing his poem. But an anthropologist thinking about the set of symbols and associations clustered around the color red in American culture, might ask, "Does the red of the wheelbarrow represent in traditional American farm life something like prosperity, when in so many other contexts red warns of danger?" Indeed, an entirely urban school child might be puzzled that an implement that has something to do with growing food should be colored ambulance or stoplight red. But of course, these different kinds of curiosity are not idiosyncratic. Each individual is situated with others in multiple historical, social and cultural contexts. This is what Bourdieu means by *habitus*, our "matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions," our "durable dispositions" (1977, p. 83, 85). Each of these contexts is historically contingent, a powerful yet provisional construction. We have no godlike vantage point from which one could say that there is any end to their extent and variety. Had William Carlos Williams lived long enough and traveled far enough, he could never have used up the material available for what would be an infinite series of barnyard poems. There are always other contexts and particulars, which will beckon our attention and curiosity.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant helps us understand why, fundamentally and necessarily, our learning goes on and on, and our knowledge is never complete. To claim to know the whole of something is an ambition beyond human capacity to fulfill. Kant's argument implies that doing so would mean to know, for any object of experience, an endless amount of information: The object's beginnings, ends, boundaries, and its totality of parts and relations with all other things, however remote, through all time, in every possible detail and from every possible perspective. To know everything about anything requires that we learn literally everything about everything. "Everything" is commonly called "the world" or "the universe." If we imagine that we could experience the universe as a whole, we would then have to concede that it, too, contains an endless multiplicity of objects of experience. The supply of possible things to experience is inexhaustible. Therefore, to know all about something amounts to a claim of omniscience. Our reason ineluctably drives us to conceive and seek to fill this totality with a corresponding object of experience. But, bounded by our mortality and inevitable accidents of birth and circumstance, and dependent on the sustenance of data limited in space, time, memory and imagination, we cannot experience such a complete totality and know it to be so. We can have intimations but not the thing itself. Indeed, as Kant demonstrates, should we happen to come upon such an absolute entity, we could not realize that we had done so (Kant, A293/B249 ff.; A405/B432-A443/B471; A516/B544-A567). By prudent custom and belief,

we reserve omniscience to divinity, whose perceivable presence in our world we must take on faith rather than know through the necessarily limited powers of human understanding and reason (A615/B643-A619/B647).

Kant leaves us a world in which we cannot sate our desire to know, even the things we most yearn to know, such as our ultimate origins and fate, and whether or not the universe might be animated with some supreme intelligent and beneficent spirit. He helps us see that we experience nothing that is not further divisible and cannot be added to. We experience nothing either in its absolute simplicity or in the totality of its connections to other things. Perhaps then, the endless delight and curiosity we can take in the innumerable particulars offered us by William Carlos Williams is a good enough compensation. Indeed, as we have been arguing in this essay, the recognition of anything in particular is not only a cognitive achievement, it is also deeply precious. When we give due attention to anything in particular, we learn and also we wonder: We achieve some knowledge; moreover, we achieve the delighted understanding that we do not yet know all about the thing of which we know something, and that we have so much more to learn.

We go back to *The Red Wheelbarrow* in this essay because “so much depends...” opens up two crucial meanings of experiential learning. Our appreciation of apprehending a red wheelbarrow or any other object of experience is just that: We can cognize particular things for what they are. But it also means that along with this firm, true grasp of something in particular, there is more to discover and learn, always. This endlessly incomplete state of our learning denies us godlike knowledge. Nonetheless, our frustration is endlessly tempted by the yearning for the absolute, the true “theory of everything.” We are always afforded wonder. In other words, every experience not only contains learning achieved but also points toward learning still to come. Experience overflows — a useful and joyful kind of redundancy.

## Teaching and Learning

What does all this have to do with academic teaching and learning? What implications follow from understanding that the amount and depth of learning that can be pulled out of any experienced object is unlimited? Any educator who asks a student a question is asking at bare minimum for a report on that person's experience. The experience could be the familiar academic one of reading a book, or any of the experiences typically evaluated for PLA/RPL: A student's dozen years managing a business, working as a human services caseworker, or playing trombone in a professional jazz ensemble. Whatever we ask will call for the student to report on his/her experience. The pedagogical implication of our effort to explain that every experience is a cognitive achievement means that way down deep there is no essential difference between experiences commonly labeled “academic” and those that are not. Therefore, there should be no object of experience presumptively excluded from consideration as a source of significant learning. Moreover, because of the unlimited extent and depth of learning available from anything, every object of experience can therefore become a potential source of college level learning.

From this point of view, it makes sense that the standard curriculum is never finished or fixed: The faculty in any given discipline are always adjusting the contents of curricula. They are always creating new topics or courses, and shelving old ones no longer deemed important. That is, in the sense of the phrase we have been developing, they are always creating new “objects of experiential learning” (i.e., new topics of study) and discarding other ones. In other words, the faculty have been learning from their own experiences, learning that will never be completed. Because of the unlimited nature of the cognitive possibilities any experience and because the supply of possible experiences is, for the same reason, unlimited, the possibilities for the academic assessment of non-academic or “extra-curricular” experiences are also endless.

Of course, the academy will necessarily limit what gets counted as learning and what does not. That is, each institution will make its own curricular policies. The alternative, after all, is chaos. Nonetheless, it is equally necessary to remember that these order-making decisions, including decisions about PLA/RPL, are simply pragmatic. In other words, they are necessarily partial and provisional attempts to temporarily organize knowledge and learning (Herman and Mandell, 2004: 26-27). To put it bluntly, it is critical that we not confuse a curriculum with the whole truth about the matter. Realizing that every experience is a cognitive achievement can help us appreciate this provisionality and also help us academically accommodate the potency of our students' experiences.

Once PLA/RPL policies are opened to discovering all possible sources of college level

learning, three virtues come to life in the academy: The academy's repertoire of learning is increased by the experiences of students who offer topics (i.e., experiential objects) the faculty had not previously known very well or even at all. The students' experiences actually increase the academy's fund of knowledge. Second, students necessarily have a voice in selecting, describing and naming the learning to be considered for assessment. And third, the faculty must collaborate with students in discovering and explicating their learning experiences. In this process, both students and faculty become learners together. Thus, the academy becomes wiser, more accessible and fairer.

## Learning and Justice

Why is it that the academy becomes fairer if students and faculty become learners together? Collaborative learning implies a developing equality between two or more people – all the more so when student and professor begin with the assumption that they are far apart in a hierarchy of intellect. This converging equality has a political resonance. It reminds us that the academy is not merely a tool; it is also a polity. It exists as a community dedicated to developing the capabilities of all the learners within. Moreover, if any object of experience is potent with learning, surely those who nurture learning are therefore obliged to recognize that potency. Indeed, as Nussbaum and Sen argue, every human capability is susceptible to greater or less development (Nussbaum, 2000, 70 ff.; Sen, 2005). Furthermore, many, if not all, the capabilities they identify (their lists are slightly different) explicitly require or imply the engagement of a conscious human mind. In other words, the development of human capability requires the learning we have argued is necessarily present in any experience. Thus, the more welcoming the academy is to people diverse in their experiences, the more will the capabilities of those students develop, and the more will the academy itself flourish. In this way, the open university becomes a model for an open society.

The epistemology of experiential learning calls for a democratic and reciprocally respectful spirit among all learners – students, faculty, citizens. It also expects something more: We have argued, with some help from philosophy and poetry, that every experiential object is worthy of attention and that the more lavish the attention, the more wonder will be afforded the person who shows such care. In this way, everything in the world becomes cherishable. If a rain glazed red wheelbarrow is worthy of this intellectual respect, then can any less be expected of the regard a teacher gives to a student?

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**Lee Herman** works at Empire State College/State University of New York. E-mail:  
[Lee.Herman@esc.edu](mailto:Lee.Herman@esc.edu)

**Alan Mandell** works at Empire State College/State University of New York. E-mail:  
[Alan.Mandell@esc.edu](mailto:Alan.Mandell@esc.edu)

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