

## **Experiential learning in the scholarship of teaching and learning**

**Ruth Benander<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract: Experiential learning is making meaning from direct experience. Experiential learning is used in workplace training (Silberman, 2007), and is the theoretical foundation for all practicum and co-op program learning. Supported by findings on expert/novice learning styles (Boshuizen, Bromme, and Gruber, H., 2004), this essay reflects on the practice of experiential learning as a mode of inquiry in the scholarship of teaching and learning. When expert teachers experiment with becoming novice learners, or when professors become students, they can come to personal, enduring insights about the experience of teaching and learning.*

*Keywords: experiential learning, ethnography, faculty development.*

For a faculty member who has been teaching for many years, taking a class as a novice learner can be a valuable form of reflection on the teaching and learning interaction. The scholarship of teaching and learning promotes inquiry into the learning and teaching process, and different disciplines offer alternative ways of making this inquiry. One such alternative is experiential learning. Experiential learning, as comprehensively outlined by Kolb (1984), emphasizes reflection on direct, concrete experience. In the case of teaching and learning, the critical reflection involves the expert teacher being a novice student. Experts negotiate the learning experience differently from novices (Boshuizen, Bromme, and Gruber, 2004; Daly, 1999). A teacher who is an expert in his or her discipline can gain teaching insights from revisiting the novice learner experience.

Much scholarship of teaching and learning employs observation of learning and critical reflection on teaching by those engaged in teaching (Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, and Trigwell, 1999). Another method of inquiry that underlies this scholarship is the experimental method or adaptations of this method to the classroom environment. Experiential learning lends another method of inquiry to observation and experimentation, one that extends self-reflection on teaching and learning from the point of view of the teacher to that of the learner. The shift of perspective allows the observer to see the process of learning through a new community of practice, that of the novice learner.

Experiential learning involves participation and critical reflection on that participation (Kolb, 1984; Shon, 1983). Experiential learning is most often invoked in workplace adult learning, but is also branching out into more formal education venues (Fenwick, 2000; Silberman, 2007). In general terms, experiential learning conceives of the adult learner as participating in an activity, then reflecting on the activity to make generalizations that he or she can then apply in new situations. Critics have also extended the concept to include perception of and participation in power relations, personal motivation, and social processes (Michelson, 1996; Ellsworth, 1997). One of the specific values of experiential learning is the immersion of the participant in the social constructions and cultural expectations specific to the experience (Lave and Wegner, 1991). When a professor becomes a student, and enters into the classroom in that

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of English and Communication, University of Cincinnati Raymond Walters College, 9555 Plainfield Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45236, [ruth.benander@uc.edu](mailto:ruth.benander@uc.edu).

role, the experience will be different from the professor entering the classroom as a researcher to observe.

Part of the qualitative shift of perspective for a professor becoming a student as a way to gain insight into teaching and learning involves the shift from being an expert to being a novice. As experts in their fields, professors forget the confusion of novelty that students experience in classes. It is well documented that novices and experts have different strategies for negotiating problems, and it is insightful to be a novice and re-visit the novice strategies that an expert may have forgotten. Boshuizen, Bromme and Gruber (2004) document these differences at length. They observe, "Experts do not just know more than novices, they also have a different way of structuring their domain-specific knowledge" (p. 6). Experts have a different orientation not only to their subject matter, but also learning about their subject matter. Daley (1999) observes that novices need direction, rely on roles, are overwhelmed and anxious, and their learning is impeded by refusals to provide directions and clear roles. Thus, a professor might be irritated by an anxious student's question, "What do you want in this assignment," while from a novice's point of view, this is an essential question. Daley outlines that experts are self-creative, collaborative, and able to sift out important issues. The expert teacher would like to guide his or her students to this kind of orientation to learning but needs to build up to it. Reminding oneself of what it feels like to be a novice can provide important insight to help create the structured experiences required to help students move out of the novice state. Additionally, it can help professors avoid attributing student behavior to disinterest or incompetence.

A difficulty with reading published accounts of experiential learning is that these accounts can be perceived as idiosyncratic, subjective, and informal. At worst, these accounts can be seen as unethical. An example of a controversial episode of a professor becoming a student is the experience of Cathy Small, who wrote under the pseudonym Rebekah Nathan (2005). Using the participant/observation methodology of anthropology, Cathy Small provides an account of returning to the classroom as a student after many years as a faculty member in her book, *My Freshman Year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*.

When the book was published, it was met with both praise and stiff criticism. The book was praised as an insightful and realistic appraisal of the freshman experience (Donovan, 2008). It was also criticized as ethically suspect. A reviewer for the American Ethnological Society observes that "...she never achieved a student identity and ... the revelation of her "secret" always produced difficulties" (Ethnadmin, 2006, ¶2). The criticism of Small "deceiving" the academic community by shifting roles raises a serious consideration. It is possible that a professor becoming a student can be viewed as suspect by colleagues and students on the home campus. If the goal of the professor is to better understand the experience of being a student, in whatever guise that is possible given the professor's "dual citizenship", then deception is not involved. In fact, it is not necessary that a professor become a student on his or her home campus. A person can become a student in many contexts where the potentially conflicting roles of professor and student do not compete. The important issue is for a person who is an expert in his or her field to become involved in a class where he or she is a novice learner and then reflect on that learning process.

Small (Nathan, 2005) reports a number of observations about student life including the pressures of non-academic activities, the collegial code of silence where student do not speak in class so as not to embarrass their friends, and the pragmatic approach to read on a need-to-read basis. However, Small comments that one of the main lessons she learned was increased compassion for her students. Small asserts that she knew the facts of the situations she became

involved in from her experiences as a faculty member, but not the contextualized reasons for them, not the emotional backdrop of the decisions students made. For example, Small discusses one epiphany she experienced about student reading. She recalls chuckling as a professor put a web address up on the board for a reading assignment that, as a student, she didn't even copy down because she knew she would not be doing that reading as it was not going to be discussed in class. Small reports that she has changed how she assigns readings in her own classes, as a result of her time as a student, by explicitly linking all reading to specific purposes of class discussion and assessments.

Moving from professor to student is a significant change in relationships of social power, but the change from expert to novice is more personally and emotionally affecting. A group of faculty at a mid-western university came together in a faculty learning community to reflect on how becoming beginning music students affected their teaching (Benander and Pettit, 2007). These faculty members commented on the challenge of feeling incompetent, the importance of praise, and the need for structured clarity in exercises to gain the facility to improve. These faculty commented that by reflecting on their experiences and needs as novices in learning a new skill, it helped them change the structure of their introductory courses to make the structure of assignments and activities clearer; to create assignments that helped students move from being dependent on rules to slowly begin to learn to apply principles; and to create activities that would provide experiential background knowledge to be applied in new situations.

Of course these are points that have been made in the pedagogical literature, but as McGlinn (2003) observes, "These [changes in] behaviors don't come when someone else tells the student teacher what is needed; rather they come from the struggle to understand teaching and students' learning. They come from reflection"(p.147). McGlinn may be referring to student teachers in her article, but the observation holds for experienced faculty members as well. Reading an article about structuring assignments for clarity may not result in teaching change as effectively as personally experiencing the novice's confusion when faced with a complicated assignment.

For a professor to reflect on the process of teaching and learning, it may be more practical to find a learning experience outside the academy where the role of "professor as student" is not pertinent. However, it is also possible to engage in experiential learning on one's home campus. If one has a collegial relationship with another instructor, it is possible to join a class as a student. It is not necessary to hide that one is a professor in another department. I have attended foreign language and fine arts courses taught by my colleagues. The experience of taking these classes and becoming part of the group of students trying to understand what is going on has profoundly changed how I structure the classes I teach, how I give feedback on student work, how I design assignments, and how I deal with silence during class discussions.

As a novice student in a foreign language course, I often did not understand how different topics were related to each other. It was very helpful when the professor would explicitly explain why we moved from one topic to the next. I try to make the structure of my own classes very clear with explicit explanations of how the assignments and topics we cover build on each other. Equally explicit feedback was also helpful. As a novice artist, the teacher would quickly indicate what was wrong with my drawing and move on. The instructor's feedback confused me because now I knew what was wrong, but I would have also liked to know how I was supposed to fix it. As I became a more experienced artist, I came to know how to fix problems when the professor identified them. In my own first year classes, I try to use feedback methods that allow for detailed suggestions to help novice students acquire the tools they need to make corrections for

themselves. As a way to continue to guide novices to self-sufficiency, I try to design assignments that build on each other and which allow for continued practice of new skills. Finally, I am very much aware of how silence in a classroom can result from novices not knowing how to answer the question, or not knowing enough to even form a question of their own, but also from a desire not to betray each other by participating. I try to create participation scenarios that allow students to help each other participate, have enough time to answer, or to consult with each other before answering.

The previous examples of professors learning by becoming students demonstrate how experiential learning is not just for students but can be a valuable tool to reflect on teaching and learning. The attempt to shift roles poignantly emphasizes the social power that affects teaching and learning. Participation in the experience of the classroom highlights the emotional backdrop of how students make decisions about their learning. Professors who critically reflect on their own learning experiences may be able to take advantage of the idiosyncratic, subjective, and informal nature of this style of learning to understand how his or her personal style of learning responds to different kinds of teaching. As McGlenn (2003) points out, adult learners do not like to be told what to do, and Boshuizen, Bromme, and Gruber (2004) suggest that experts prefer to use resources and previous experience to inform their practice. The challenge with experiential learning for professors is that it is a calculated risk to give up the capability of the expert and the power of the professor.

The implication of experiential learning as a form of critical reflection for the scholarship of teaching and learning is that it adds another mode of inquiry. More traditional inquiry in teaching and learning involves observing from the position of the professor or as a non-participant. Alternatively, researchers institute interventions and controls to assess the effectiveness of a learning activity. Becoming a participant in the experience of learning, and engaging reflective practice in as a participant in the community of learners, offers insights not available to the other two modes of inquiry. In addition, being a student in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is radically different from what it meant to be a student for many current mid- or late-career faculty members.

It is neither necessary nor advisable to duplicate the experience of Cathy Small to use experiential learning to reflect on one's practice of teaching and learning. The experience of being a learner can be found in many contexts. The greatest change as a result of changing roles often seems to be change of emotional orientation. Faculty who have participated in this role reversal comment that the greatest change was increased compassion for their students (e.g. Nathan, 2005; Benander and Pettit, 2007). Mid-career faculty have long experience with the many reasons why a person can be late for class or miss an assignment. The resulting "compassion fatigue" can sometimes lead to strained relationships with students. Renewing empathy for the novice learning experience can help create more positive interactions with the recurring difficulties instructors must negotiate with their students. It is also refreshing to have a new perspective on learning, assignments, and technology. For example, many instructors only use the instructor view of software like Web-CT or Blackboard. Negotiating assignments and quizzes through the student view of the electronic interface can help one anticipate student challenges.

Instructors who have returned to being students in one context or another, whether it is attending a course in another discipline or learning a new musical instrument, seem to report lasting and deep changes in their teaching as result of their critical reflections on being a learner. Silberman (2007) comments that experiential learning is a "sticky" learning: "when it is done

well, it adheres to you. Participants will usually forget a great presentation, but they often remember a great experience” (p. 4). When experts revisit the experience of being a novice, they may gain insights on how to help their novice students problem solve more like experts. In addition, the recommendations from research in the scholarship of teaching and learning may “stick” and be more readily applied in the classroom, resulting in enduring and real change in individual practice.

### References

Benander, R. and Pettit, R. (2007). When teachers are learners: Case studies in learning outside our discipline from the Over- the-Hill-Band, Association of University Regional Campuses of Ohio Annual Conference, Bowling Green State University, Firelands College, Huron, Ohio.

Boshuizen, H., Bromme, R., and Gruber, H. (2004). Introduction: On the long way from novice to expert and how traveling changes the traveler. In H. Boshuizen, R. Bromme and H. Gruber (Eds.), *Professional learning: Gaps and transitions on the way from novice to expert* (pp. 3-8). Dordrecht, DE: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Daley, B. (1999). Novice to expert: An exploration of how professionals learn. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 49 (4), 133-147.

Donovan, N. (2008). Review of *My Freshman Year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. *Education Book Review*, Retrieved Dec 29, 2008, from <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/corby/reviews/posted/nathan.htm>

Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ethnadmin (1006) Review of *My Freshman Year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. *The American Ethnologist Online*, 33, Retrieved Dec 29, 2008, from <http://aesonline.org/3626>

Fenwick, T. (2000). Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: A review of the five contemporary perspectives on cognition. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50 (4), 243-272.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lave, J. and Wegner, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Martin, E., Benjamin, J., Prosser, M., and Trigwell, K. (1999). Scholarship of Teaching: A study of the approaches of academic staff. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving Student Learning: Improving Student Learning Outcomes* (pp. 326-331). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff learning and Development, Oxford Brookes University.

Benander, R.

Michelson, E. (1996). Usual suspects: Experience, reflection, and the (en)gendering of knowledge. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15 (6), 438-454.

Nathan, R. (2005). *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Schon, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

Silberman, M. (2007). *The Handbook of Experiential Learning*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons.