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ABSTRACT

Analysis of recent literature on experiential education provides material for a model for learning experiences in experiential education. The model is constructed from six interconnected and overlapping parts, ranging from the profoundly foundational to the more specifically tactical. First, the learning experience attends to the human condition. Second, the learning experience transcends the boundaries of academic or other disciplines. Third, learning experiences are rich in group interaction while simultaneously promoting autonomy and independence of individuals. Fourth, the learning experience is risk-laden. Fifth, the experience involves a 3-part learning sequence: readiness, action/performance, and reflection. The final characteristic of a learning experience is the high degree of concreteness or reality of the action phase. A university English course called "Self-Reliance in a Technological Society" provides a check on the model. In the course, students read and discussed a variety of literature on self-reliance, while simultaneously buying, renovating, and selling a small house; all six critical ingredients of the model were present in the course. (MH)

THE ANATOMY OF A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Two of the current major undertakings of students of experiential education are to define the field and identify its foundations. The tasks are pressing, not because practitioners are unsure of themselves, but because of the need to convince others, especially administrators and academics, of the value of what we do. There have been many contributors along these lines in recent years and it is in the hope of moving toward synthesis that this paper is added to the dialogue.

What follows, then, is an attempt to pull together a number of recent writings on the nature and origins of experiential education. The literature is extensive, but it will not be reviewed exhaustively at this time. Rather, a model for experiential education will be offered, based on the literature and on my own work as an experiential teacher. Then, we will consider one particular instance of experiential education to see how well the model fits.

Three pieces of recent literature have made distinct contributions to the task. Researchers from the Northwest Regional Education Laboratories (Druian, 1980) sought common features in three different experiential education settings. They identified thirty-three essential elements and most of them are found in the model below. From another quarter, the paper of Donaldson and Vinson (1979), in outlining the work of William James, set out eleven "principles" of experiential education. Most of these also are reflected in the model. Finally, it seems important to acknowledge the contribution of Laura Joplin (1981) who provided a model of the cyclical nature of experiential teaching together with a set of characteristics. Again, there are many connections with my work.

THE MODEL

The specific activities which can be found under the general heading of experiential education are diverse in the extreme. Our task is to find what structural and intentional characteristics are common to activities like rock climbing, visiting an invalid, sweeping the floor in a foundry and interviewing a dress-maker when performed in an educational context. In a similar way, the personalities and characters of experiential educators are as diverse and as multi-coloured as humanity itself. What common threads and practices can be found in their work?

It seems to me that the anatomy of a learning experience can be constructed by building a model from six interconnected and somewhat overlapping parts. (It is assumed that the outcome of the experience is authentic, memorable learning, through the learner's committment and responsibility, whatever the specific nature of the activity or the peculiar personality of the teacher). In the model, I have tried to establish a kind of hierarchy from the more profoundly foundational to the more specifically tactical. But each part is a critical contributor to the whole.

First, a learning experience attends to the human condition. This applies to learners and teachers and indeed to all the others touched by the process. A learning experience is sensitive to the needs of the people involved, not only for elementary biological requirements, but for higher needs like personal growth and the realization of potential. It is no wonder that experiential educators cite Abraham Maslow so frequently. An emphasis on holism is characteristic of this humane aspect of experiential learning. There, the need to "fit it all together" and to

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be totally involved are recognized. There is also a strong trend to recognize that human beings are creatures who function through metaphor and myth, through symbol and spirituality. Such elements are an increasingly common component of experiential learning. In this connection, Tony Richards (1981) has written about the call to the hero quest and Delores LaChapelle (1974) has championed the profound value of ritual as a way of learning. This aspect of experiential education deserves further attention, particularly in the light of lessons to be learned from the knowledge of our nature being developed by evolutionary and anthropological studies (Barash 1980, Cousineau 1979). The attention paid by experiential educators to the human condition is the single most profound and most typical characteristic of experiential learning.

In keeping with this view, nine of the thirty-three essential elements found in experiential programs (Druian, 1980) fall in the category of attending to the human condition. James (1980) says of Kurt Hahn that he "instilled a pervasive culture of aspiration." And similarly, holism is listed by Donaldson and Vinson (1979) and Joplin (1981).

The second structural feature of the model is that a learning experience transcends the boundaries of the academic (or other) disciplines. This feature is in keeping the characteristic of holism mentioned earlier. A learning experience typically appeals to several intellectual domains and includes affective impact, too. "Sticky ends" are often left so that learners integrate the new learning into the totality of their beings. All of this is not quite the same as interdisciplinary studies where several disciplines may be brought to bear on a problem. Rather,

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the discipline boundaries may not even be acknowledged, and the integration involved is largely performed and controlled by the learner.

The presence of an ultradisciplinary character in a learning experience is supported by pragmatic philosophy (Donaldson, 1979) and by the Druian survey.

The third part in the anatomy of a learning experience is a paradox. Learning experiences are rich in group interaction while simultaneously promoting autonomy and independence of individuals. Experiential education owes a debt to Kurt Hahn for showing us how to embrace paradoxes and turn them to good account (James, 1980). A learning experience seems to contain within it the recognition that each person must be able to act and think alone as well as in groups. And that self-knowledge, and self-control are enhanced through appropriate group interactions. This component has not received much explicit attention in the literature, although its presence is implicit in many places and is widely practiced (Druian, 1980).

The fourth characteristic is that a learning experience is risk laden. This is so pervasive a quality that I would venture the hypothesis that there is no learning without an element of risk involved. Druian's group list five essential elements that involve risk in experiential learning. Crosby (1981) says in her definition of experiential education that the learner's "involvement is maximized if the student has something that matters to him at stake.". Typically, the risk component is associated with adventure programs (Cousineau, 1979) to such an extent that we may fail to see its presence as a critical component in any learning experience. For example, students run the risk of

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vulnerability through self-disclosure each time they participate openly in a class. There is an element of risk involved in expressing your own independent views publicly. Clearly the element of risk is an important, if somewhat unrecognized, component of even "safe" experiential activities. There is likely a strong connection between the presence of risk elements in experiential learning and the apparently universal human need for heroics -- what Cousineau has called the "quest for zest".

The fifth structure in the anatomy of a learning experience is a three-parted learning sequence. Joplin's interesting model of this sequence describes five components, but only three are on the main sequential line. They are a readiness stage which establishes the framework and context for learning followed by an action or performance stage in which the actual experience happens and in turn followed by a reflection stage in which learners try to make sense of previous events. The cycle is ongoing with internal turbulence from stage to stage and with the debriefing phase leading perhaps imperceptibly into the next cycle. Such a three-parted cycle was found in the Druian survey and its existence has been well known in laboratory-based science education (Cotton, 1970) and through Dewey's proposition that a cyclical "Scientific method" be applied to experience (Adams 1981).

The final characteristic of a learning experience is the high degree of concreteness or reality of the action phase. It has been pointed out that there is a spectrum of vicariousness in experience (Gibbons, 1980). Unfortunately, we have no English word to express exactly the opposite of vicarious. Thus non-vicarious experiences are variously termed "real" (Druian, 1980), "concrete" (Kraft, 1981), "direct" (Joplin 1981), "learning by doing" (McClure, 1977), "hands-on" and the like. But the point is that one's ex-

perience can range from being a very passive witness of second hand images to being actively and energetically involved with the events themselves. While it is recognized that learning might emerge from any point along the continuum, it seems the sense of the field that the more nearly direct the experience, the greater is the educational pay-off. Thus a learning experience in Native American Studies is more likely to have students helping excavate a prehistoric site as the action phase than to have them listen to their teacher tell it the way it was.

In summary then, I claim that any learning experience contains six critical parts. It attends to the human condition in a broad sense. It transcends discipline boundaries and promotes both group co-operation and individual autonomy. It is risk-laden and contains a three-parted learning sequence of which the central part is always as concrete as possible.

A CASE IN POINT

What happens to the model when it is used as a check list to examine an actual program? Peter Beidler's delightful account of his once-only university English course called "Self-Reliance in a Technological Society" provided a valuable and interesting check (Beidler, 1980).

In the course, the students read and discussed a variety of literature on the theme of self-reliance while simultaneously buying, renovating and selling a small house. Most of the work was done by the students themselves. The description of the course and the extracts from students' journals allow us to look for the anatomy of experiential learning in the flesh, so to speak.

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That the course attended to the human condition is evident throughout the description. The need that everyone has for a measure of independence in a technologically dependent society was the prime motivator. One of the goals of the course was to impel students to examine their attitudes to the natures of physical and intellectual labour. Indeed the whole thrust of the course was to involve students in a multi-faceted energetic and demanding set of activities which would call up physical strength, moral courage and intellectual pursuit. In short it was maturing and holistic.

Beidler's course offered remarkable instances of integration across disciplines. Here the study of literature was utterly intertwined with planning and performing building construction. The use of ideas, the use of tools and materials and the use of self were woven together into a unique structure of experiential learning through which students explored "the connection between imaginative literature and practical doing". One of the goals of the course was to let the humanities and the sciences exist together without compartments and to encourage the flow, within students, of links and connections.

The course was risk-laden from its inception. There were risks for the students, the instructor, the department and the university. There were financial risks, dangers of inadequate enrolment, risks of physical injury on the renovation site, risks of academic failure, to name a few. Interestingly, the course was heavily over-subscribed, perhaps an indication of the desire of students to have challenges set before them. Another of Beidler's goals was to set up a task that had at least a hope of accomplishment, but which the students would think was impossible. In fact, he rejected several potential projects on the grounds that they were too easy, too sure to be completed. His success in correctly gauging the risk factor

was reflected in the excerpts from the student journals -- alternating between the euphoria of high optimism and the grinding concern of doubt and fear.

Group interaction was an important part of the course work, for this was the forum for dealing with practical planning for the renovations and for discussing the pieces of literature. The journal extracts showed both the impact of the group work and the growth of sturdy independence. This was especially noticeable as the students became less and less dependent on the professor at the construction site and as conflicts surfaced and were resolved. The maturing of both group and indivuals was revealed in the decision of the class to overrule certain of the professor's preferences. The course was about self-reliance, but not at the expense of relationships with others.

It is less clear from Beidler's account that a three-parted cycle was in operation. There are strong hints that such was the case. The renovation work was done in three-hour "labs", three each week. One presumes that regular class sessions were also held weekly. This would provide for the pulses of planning, action and discussion called for by the model. It would also ensure that the practical work and the study of the literature proceeded together.

Finally, the program obviously had a high degree of concreteness in the performance by the students of much of the work and management of the renovation. It is perhaps more subtle, and more profound too, to recognize that the reading and discussion of the literature was given increased authenticity by its practical context. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is likely to mean more to readers

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who at the same time are building a canoe for their own journey than it would mean to readers snugly settled down with no immanent problems of excellence to solve. Thus the course provided real experience both in the physical and the intellectual domains.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to model the critical ingredients that go to make up a learning experience. The model is generally supported by the relevant literature and seems to make prima facie sense. There is more, though to be said, expecially in unpacking what it means to attend to the human condition. It will also be noted that nothing has been said about that educational bête noir, evaluation. The problem can not be ducked, but it must not be allowed to become the tail that wags the dog. Interestingly, Beidler's description of his course was silent on the question of evaluation, although the quotations from the student journals spoke volumes about the learnings that had occurred. And finally, it is stunning to realize that Beidler did not and would not repeat the course. For him, as it should be for us all, "life is for beating tracks not for following them". And a learning experience ought to be a slice of life.

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