Experiential learning : towards a multi-disciplinary perspective

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Experiential Learning:

A Continuing Evolution

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Abstract

Experiential learning (EL) continues to evolve and spread across the globe, influencing and being influenced by incursions into and across numerous fields and disciplines. Problematic issues however still remain concerning definitional and boundary parameters. For some this is not a weakness as the elusive, sometimes insurgent nature of EL resists homogenising processes. This paper in addressing these issues, sketches out a range of forces that have influenced the evolutionary processes, including the identification of the major tides and smaller undercurrents. The paper concludes by introducing substantive evolutionary shifts that highlight a new fluidity for EL, a form of 'revisionary postmodernism' that embraces rather than rejects preceding ideas.

Experiential Learning: A Continuing Evolution

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COMPLEX AND INTERDISCIPLINARY: MORE THAN THE OUTDOORS

The term 'experiential learning' is in a continuous state of evolution as it spreads across the globe: in common usage it has been variously appropriated, constructed and re-constructed (Usher & Edwards, 1994). The very creation of the term implies something special, as different from other forms of learning. Experiential learning is said to have potential not only to liberate or emancipate, but to domesticate and oppress (Usher, 2009). Experiential learning (EL) has a lexicon of meanings, with foundational roots in many fields and disciplines: complex and multidimensional, the term is particularly influenced by the ever changing understanding of the human experience of learning.

Experience and learning are sub-component terms that embrace not only practical everyday issues but also a diverse range of philosophical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological explanations (Hager, 1999). Experience and learning are closely inter-twined and so in many respects they mean the same thing: EL learning might be considered a tautology. EL is further problematized by boundary incursions from overlapping fields such as experiential education, environmental education, adventure education and outdoor education. Boundary disputes surface between EL and experiential education (EE): some writers argue that EL is a sub-field of experiential education, possibly even redundant (Smith et al., 2011). A counter position is that learning is much broader: in a phylogenetic sense it precedes human language, and expands beyond education.

EL is a term with escalating ideologies and problematic boundaries. Ironically a core issue that arises from definitional disputes concerns the

extent to which EL might embrace life itself (Fenwick, 2003, p. 87) suggesting that the concept has moved on to the point where the 'distinction between experience and non-experience becomes absurd' (Fenwick, 2003, p. ix). This all suggests that for this fluid term any search for unanimity might prove impossible: 'one set of meanings of it is the meanings of all those who have contributed to the literature' (Moon, 2004, p. 107) and 'views of experiential learning differ widely' (Moon, 2004, p. 110) within and across disciplines.

THE SIGNPOST AND THE JOURNEY: THE DOCTRINE AND THE WISDOM?

EL always involves a direct encounter with experience, and is therefore always involves a site of struggle (Usher, 2009). Experience and learning are not static phenomenon, but shifting, multi-phasic and subject to continuous reflective reconstructions. Indeed no matter how hard we try to homogenise slippery concepts such as experience and learning, there will always be parts that elude the human grasp. In accommodating this conceptual fluidity Michelson suggests there is a fruitful incoherence to experiential learning, with roots in alternative practice, and 'liberatory precisely because it is unstable and provisional, because it is collective and not individual, because it always contains an insurgent element that resists categorisation and management' (1999, p. 142). This may partially explain why EL is positioned as 'central to the theory and practice of adult education in the postmodern moment' (Usher, 2009, p. 169). EL has thus resisted categorisation and labelling. This bequeaths benefits and difficulties: Eastern sages suggest that difficulties arise when inherent complexity confuses the signposts with the journey, and that we need to understand that the 'learning doctrine is not the same as practicing the wisdom the doctrine is intended to teach' (Stevenson, 2000, p. 17).

A BRIEF LINEAGE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Partly because of a long lineage and evolving multi-disciplinary reconstructions, EL is not easily defined, and it has no unified theory. Interestingly Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives on learning from experience emerged at a similar time. Ancient Greek philosophical contributions are said to have given rise to the 'West's first conceptual notion of experience' (Roberts, 2012, p. 17), and that Aristotle was the 'progenitor of experiential learning cycle' (Stonehouse, Alison, & Carr, 2011, p. 18). The well-known Confucian aphorism however beginning with I hear I forget, underpins the classical 'Tell Show Do' Cone of Experience

triangle developed by Dale in the 1940s. In the 1930s US educationalist John Dewey made a significant contribution (see Hunt, 1995). Rogers, applying therapeutic principles in the 60s and 70s, developed a humanistic, learner-centred focus for learning that still remains a strong influence today (see Smith & Knapp, 2011). In the 80s a significant appraisal of the multiplicity of meanings of EL was made and the notion of 'Four Distinct Villages' was derived from the global community that had gathered at a first major conference of EL practitioners (Weil & McGill, 1989). The work of Kolb emerged in 1984, with the creation of the now ubiquitous experiential learning cycle, and Cell published Learning to Learn from Experience (1984). Said to be the 'decade of emotions' (Sadler-Smith, 2008, p. 272), the 1990s witnessed important critical sociological perspectives from writers such as Usher & Edwards (1994) & Michelson (1999). By the mid-nineties EL covered very diverse perspectives across a wide variety of disciplines and fields, including traditional education, alternative education, outdoor-adventure education, career education, special education, therapy, social and cultural work, organisational development, teambuilding and corporate training. At the end of the 20th century the scope and diversity of EL had broadened even further with professionals from many fields outside the traditions of education continuing to examine experiential theory and practice. During this time central assumptions underpinning EL were being articulated: Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) positioned (1) experience as the foundation of, and the stimulus for, learning; (2) learners as actively constructing their own experience; (3) learning as a holistic process; (4) learning as socially and culturally constructed; and (5) learning as influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs. Also in this period a body of literature emerged exploring what Roberts (2012) refers to as 'neo-experiential'; the focus was on experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999) and the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), with EL moving into events management (Berridge, 2012) and even accounting education (Dellaportas & Hassall, 2013).

STRONG TIDES WITH SMALLER UNDERCURRENTS.

EL has to be understood as situated in, and interacting with, the dominant theories of human learning at any one time. At the beginning of 20th century behaviouralist and ethological studies were substantive. These were followed by cognitivist contributions, then humanist perspectives and finally, towards the end of 20th century, social constructivist viewpoints. These episodic developments had no hard and fast boundaries in reality, and they were significantly influenced by

numerous smaller undercurrents. This persistent search for more complete understandings indicates a continuous deficit, with emergent new thinking suggesting further change. In this same manner EL appears to be moving towards greater fluidity, holism and complexity, with undercurrents pointing towards a repositioning, within an ecological trajectory, to a new revisionary postmodernism. This brief illustration is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: A brief and simplified history of theories of cognition.

Time Period		1900-1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000
HUMAN LEARNING THEORIES	B	BEHAVIOURAL (ethology, animal focus)						
		C	COGNITIVE (computational brain)					
			H	HUMANIST (empathetic/nurturing)				
				S	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION of knowledge (social interaction)			
		Embracing preceding ideas. E					Rich ECOLOGICAL (complexity) Revisionary postmodernism.	

SIGNS OF CHANGE: AN EMERGING UNANIMITY OF THE CORE NEGLECTED AREAS

Experience and learning have occupied a central position in philosophical deliberations about being and knowing for centuries. Bhaskar suggests that 'for most of its recognised history, the philosophy of the human sciences has been dominated by dichotomies and dualisms' (1998, p. xiii). A fundamental disconnectedness exists creating:

> interlocking system of overlapping dualisms that guide our thought and actions in environmentally significant ways; and these include civilised/wild, modern/primitive, culture/nature, mind/body, and so on. In each case, the first term of each pair represents a preferred state or entity, whereas the second indicates something that we try to distance ourselves from, composing a value system that gives the impression of being based on 'factual' distinctions. (Kidner, 2001, p. 10).

These issues continue to be problematic for EL. In exploring a sociology of nature, Macnaghton and Urry (1997) contend that social scientists should decipher the social implications of the fact that nature has always been elaborately entangled and fundamentally bound up with the social. However a cultural filter presents the 'world' as synonymous with 'social', 'experience' synonymous with 'environment' as though 'they were the same wherever one happens to be' (Pepper, 1984, p. 6). Benton and Redclift similarly critically examine the heritage of social theory in relation to the natural environment arguing that sociology has made a slender contribution to the study of the environment, because:

> culture, meaning, consciousness and intentional agency differentiated the human from the animal, and effectively stemmed the ambitions of biological explanation…..In one move the opposition between nature and culture (or society) made room for social sciences as autonomous disciplines distinct from the natural sciences, and undercut what were widely seen as the unacceptable moral and political implications of biological

determinism. (Benton and Redclift, 1994, p. 3).

The tension between the natural and social sciences problematizes the advancement of EL.

AFTER SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: WHAT NEXT?

Social constructivist explanations of human agency and free will became hegemonic. Biological determinism surfaced as a negative reaction to scientism (Hager, 1999), and gave rise to blind spots in our understanding of the human condition. However over the last three to four decades constructivist and postmodernist interpretations of EL have sought to "search out and experiment with narratives that expand the range of understanding, voice, and the storied variations in human experience" (Lincoln and Guba, 2003, p. 285), albeit within a dismantling of grand narratives. Postmodern readings of EL were through the lenses of power, commodification, freedom and responsibility, so that people became 'wide awake' (as advocated by Maxine Green, in Frank, 2011, p. 65).

At the beginning of the 21st century further calls for change were gathering momentum around the globe. Kidner (2001) opens up a debate about psychology's betrayal of the natural world. He called for an integration of nature and psyche, and a reconfiguration of selfhood that is not solely constructed by discourse, and argues that nature is 'prior to human existence or activity – historically, ontologically, and materially' – and is a condition of social life rather than a consequence of it' (2001, p. 20). In outdoor education, Nicol (2003a, p.115) calls for a new 'ecological ontology', suggesting greater "interconnectedness and interdisciplinarity, drawing on both the social and natural sciences" (Nicol, 2003b, p.16). Unifying calls from Loynes (2002), Payne (2002), Beringer and Martin (2003), Friese, Hendee, and Kizinger (1998), and Burns (1998) all voice concern about the homocentric splitting and elevation of the learner from the more substantive 'pedagogy' of experience. Payne (2002, p. 19) argues for a reconciliation of the inner and outer world experiences as worthy or pursuing for critical outdoor learning, recommending a "sorely needed reparation of first, human-environment, second, community/society-land/sea/town/cityscapes, and, third, culture-nature relations". Stewart (2003, p. 311) similarly notes that the challenge facing ELis the acquisition of a new multi-disciplinary understanding of terms like "environment/nature, experience and place". Pepper (1984) likewise provides an important

historical, philosophical and ideological contribution to this debate, arguing that the deeper experience of place has largely been ignored in education, including outdoor education. A comprehensive review of recent developments in outdoor education in Singapore similarly calls for a new environmental awareness, a new ecology of thinking (Ho, 2014).

Hager (1999, p. 71) argues that "with the decline of the fortunes of the scientific approach in the late twentieth century, scientism seems to have been replaced by 'discursivism' as its mirror image. Whereas scientism is the extreme view that all genuine understanding is scientific, then discursivism is the equally disputable view that language is the key to all understanding". However following the linguistic turn the corporeal (re)turn (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011), and new concerns about disembodiment surfaced due to a 'concentration on talk and reflection' (Fenwick, 2003, p. 63). Burr (2003, p. 197) acknowledges that aspects of experience are difficult to translate into thought or language, and so suggests that "we should regard such forms of experience and expression as 'extra discursive', i.e. existing in a realm outside of language and discourse". From a critical feminist perspective Michelson (1998, p. 218) notes the ambivalent relationship of EL to this rejection of the body as a site of knowledge; she refers to the dualisms of skill-knowledge, reflection-experience and theory-practice as "versions of the mind-body split and the privileging of mind over body", suggesting the theoretical underpinnings of EL are "socially over-determined" (op cit, p. 227). Recent work by Gallagher (2005) uncovers valuable insights from neuroscience to shed further light on how the body shapes the mind.

Established constructivist theories tend to simplify the complexity of the external world to 'raw materials' upon which knowledge is socially constructed. Illeris (2002, p. 119) similarly discounts nature, claiming that it is difficult to find "untouched nature", and so the "material is under submission to the more dominant social". Environmental[1] and feminist literatures are often critical of such homocentric misrepresentations[2]. The concern then is the extent to which the experience of being a human and belonging in the more- than- human world is fully embraced.

Boler (1999) expresses concern over the splitting and privileging of the rational over the affective, explained to an extent by the inadequacy of the spoken and written word when describing movement, or emotionally laden events that move

us (see Sheets-Johnstone, 2009). In the sense of an outdoor experience this is particularly well illustrated by Kull (2008) in attempting to articulate the experience of solitude for a PhD thesis. Living for a year in a remote area of Patagonia the tension between 'education' and 'learning' surfaces through his struggle between experience and discourse:

> In conceptualising, organising, and thinking about these sensory impressions, the immediacy of experience can easily be lost. It requires patience and practice to soften this habitual activity by over and over *letting go of thought and analysis* to simply stay with the swirl of sound just as it is without trying to do anything with it. (Kull, 2008, p. 279, italics added).

Kull focuses on experience by not thinking too much. He recommends staying with the sensing-observing-feeling dynamic. He remarks how at one stage he tried to capture, in writing, other significant experiences, but gave up, as, in his words: 'there is no dance between word and world. What I see and feel begs a sensuous tango, but my words march static and stiff in lines across the page' (Kull, 2008, p. 184). Words fall into line, one word after another, in restrictive linearity. The one dimensional form of written and spoken word now creates a new site of struggle for humans: the discursive form labours in an attempt to formulate human experience. It limits the human potential.

TOWARDS HOLISM: REVISIONARY POSTMODERNISM

Constructivist Gergen (1999, p. 138) suggests we may be "on the verge of a major transformation in our way of conceptualising ourselves." For Gergen it is important that we transcend what he calls the privileging of the social, and expand the concept of relational to include the non-social, and particularly the natural environment. This he argues will come about by spanning areas of enquiry such as physics, biology, neurology, economics, meteorology, and psychology. 'Ecologists' and 'complexitivists' focus on these interrelationships, and the way sub-systems are intertwined with larger more complex systems. The relational expansion moves from the minute "integrities (e.g. organs and cells) which are themselves subsystems of larger systems, with their own particular integrities (e.g. family, a community, a society) so that each of us is, all-at-once, a collective of wholes, a whole, and a part of a whole" (Davis & Sumara, 1997, p. 110). Enactivisim for example (Davis and Sumara, 1997,

p.110) is a theory of cognition that applies ecological metaphors to draw attention to the fact that 'both cognizing agent and everything with which it is associated are in constant flux, each adapting to the other in the same way that the environment evolves simultaneously with the species that inhabit it'.

These developments signpost what Sterling (2003) calls a revisionary postmodernism, a participatory worldview stance, which takes us beyond homocentric interpretations to present further opportunities for holistic expansion and interpretation, so that all contributing perspectives from a very diverse range of fields and disciplines are acknowledged and embraced. In this way all contributions move our understanding forward; a new way of thinking about ELis called for whereby "meaning and mystery are restored to human experience (of learning), so that the world is again experienced as a sacred place" (Reason, 1994, p. 10, quoted in Sterling, 2003, p. 36). In exploring of the temporal and spatial multi-disciplinary lineage of experiential learning, the emerging participatory worldview will now be elaborated upon.

Sterling explores whole systems thinking in education as a basis for paradigm change. Sterling suggests a "revisionary or constructive postmodernism and ecological thinking as an emergent social paradigm that allows Western thinking and culture to both subsume and go beyond the limits of modernism and deconstructionism, towards a more holistic alternative" (Sterling, 2003, pg 34). He argues for more integrative way of seeing the world, and a shift away from reductionism towards holism. Strong social constructivism suggests idealism to the point that there is no independent reality other than that created in the mind. Sterling suggests relationalism, or a panexperientialist view that acknowledges ecological realism that is fundamental to environmentalism, but fully acknowledges the role of perception, and of language, emphasised by idealists and constructivists.

These alternative metaphors, of 'ecologism', as whole systems thinking, and postmodern ecological worldview, embrace environmental/sustainability issues beyond the social into the more-than-human world where 'other' views (behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, constructivist) are neither abandoned nor ignored, rather incorporated within a larger emerging

framework of meaning and understanding, using both/and/or thinking.

Other significant scholars are calling for such an ecological worldview. In a substantive and seminal text on qualitative research Lincoln and Guba (2003, p. 286 italics added) in a section called a 'glimpse of the future', suggest "we stand at the threshold of a history marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmantic controversies, and new textual forms…..(and that) we may also be entering an age of greater spirituality….with an emphasis on enquiry that reflects ecological values…… whilst promoting freedom and self-determination, with reflexivity that respects communal forms of living that are not Western". Thus in the second edition, Lincoln and Guba create a new fifth paradigm called 'participative', adding to positivism, postpostivism, critical theory, and constructivism.

Similar calls appear in various guises, as 'co-evolutionary' (Norgaard, 1994), a 'living systems' approach (Elgin, 1997) and a 'postmodern ecological worldview' (Zweers, 2000). Jackson (2011), who underpins his thinking about lifewide learning with experiential learning, similarly calls for an ecological perspective that might transform education towards more organic approaches. This increased sophistication of understanding has not been paralleled by correspondingly complex modelling: simplistic models (e.g. Dale, 1969 and Kolb, 1984) continue to dominate the literature.

CONCLUSION
This paper briefly explores a rich, multi-disciplinary body of literature to suggest how the wisdom of the EL doctrine might be best understood and adopted. A contextual backcloth of episodic, hegemonic understanding of human learning that has influenced the evolution of EL is exposed. Smaller undercurrents, that move EL beyond constructivism into a new revisionary postmodern interpretation point towards a new ecological complexity, are also identified. It is likely that our understanding of this complex relational connectivity will be fundamental to a greater understanding of EL in the 21st century.

Notes

1. See for example the 20th century philosophical work on *ecosophy* (or ecophilosophy) a term coined by Naess (1995), the Norwegian philosopher, that questions the evolutionary view that 'man' is at the top.

2. For example the feminist literature expressing concerns about the lack of attention given to *emotion* and learning (Boler, 1999) and the *body* and learning (Michelson, 1998).

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