

John Dewey and Experiential Learning: Developing the theory of youth work

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Abstract

Whilst experiential learning is an increasingly established aspect of youth work practice, in the main it is dominated by a simplistic four stage cycle which is attributed to Kolb (1984). However, it will be demonstrated in this article that this is a misinterpretation of Kolb's theory which results in a limited view of 'experience' within experiential learning. It is argued that not only a deeper understanding of Kolb's original theory is required, but a return must be made to John Dewey, perhaps the architect of experiential learning, to fully comprehend its importance. In so doing, a fuller appreciation of young people's experience is acquired, as well as a wider theoretical basis established for existing youth work practice.

Key words: youth work, experience, learning, Dewey

Experiential learning in youth work

ONE OF THE earliest explicit references to experiential learning in youth work appears in Mark Smith's *Creators Not Consumers* (1980) where he characterises youth work as encompassing this educational practice.

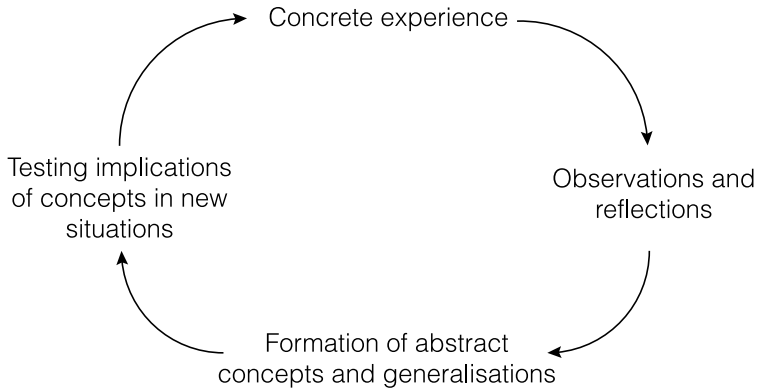
Learning by doing (or experiential learning) is based on three assumptions, that:

1. people learn best when they are personally involved in the learning experience;
2. knowledge has to be discovered by the individual if it is to have any significant meaning to them or make a difference in their behaviour; and
3. a person's commitment to learning is highest when they are free to set their own learning objectives and are able to actively pursue them within a given framework (Smith, 1980: 16).

Smith (1988) as well as Jeffs and Smith (2005), Blacker (2001) and Young (2006) all refer more

explicitly to the common depiction of experiential learning, which is most often referred to as Kolb's four stage model (figure 1). Although Kolb himself refers to this model as Lewin's experiential learning model (1951).

Figure 1: Lewin's experiential learning model (cited in Kolb, 1984: 21).¹



Despite his conversion to informal education from social education as the basis for youth work, Smith (1988) still places a firm emphasis on experiential learning. He cites Houle and suggests:

For many practitioners, informal education is synonymous with a pattern of learning that might be described as experiential, 'education that occurs as a result of direct participation in the events of life' (Houle, 1980: 221). Such a pattern starts with concrete experience, with people doing things. (Smith, 1988: 130).

Smith (1988) continues to maintain that the model proposed by Kolb provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this educational practice. Similarly Blacker (2001), in describing the importance of experiential learning in youth work, refers to the usefulness of Kolb's four stage process, and Young (2006) also locates youth work with this familiar cycle:

Learning [in youth work] is seen as a dynamic process, which leads to action. In other words, to be meaningful, learning needs to be tested in reality. This process is reflected in Kolb's experiential learning cycle. (Young, 2006: 79).

Experiential learning is on the list of specific criteria defining youth work by Tom Wylie, recently retired Chief Executive of the National Youth Agency (NYA) who maintains that:

... youth work is the application in work with adolescents of a form of practice which has three defining characteristics-their personal and social development; the deliberate use of

experiential learning and transformative relationships; and adherence to a set of values (which inter alia puts the interests of young people first). (Wylie, 2008: 54).

In official guidance on youth work from the NYA it is noted that ‘Youth work methods include support for individuals, work with small groups and learning through experience’ (NYA, 2007: 1) and what is referred to as ‘Kolb’s experiential learning cycle’ is also one of the key elements of the ‘pedagogy of educational groupwork’ in Merton and Wylie’s (2002) articulation of a youth work curriculum, which was subsequently incorporated into the policy through the *Transforming Youth Work Strategy* (DfES 2002).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that experiential learning as a simplistic cycle has considerable currency in the field of youth work and it is incorporated into a large number of curriculum documents produced by statutory youth services, for example, Wiltshire (2005), Hampshire (2003), Luton (2003), Cheshire (2005), South Tyneside (2005) and Nottinghamshire (2006). Common to this explicit application is an exclusive emphasis on a four stage cycle of ‘Plan, Do, Reflect and analyse or learn’ (Ord, 2007:68). In practice, the cycle is often simplified even further than that suggested by Kolb and produced simply as ‘do, review, plan’.

Figure 2: Do-Review-Plan: A 3-stage experiential learning cycle (Neill, 2004, online).



Rethinking experiential learning

There is a problem with articulating experiential learning in terms of a simplistic cycle, not least because of how it conceives of experience. In the main Kolb (1984) refers to experience as ‘concrete’. He says ‘...concrete experience focuses on being involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way’ (Kolb, 1984: 68). Following Kolb’s cycle,

youth work often interprets this concrete experience as the provision of activities, or 'doing': providing of experiences (Young, 2006; Blacker, 2001; Smith, 1988; Jeffs and Smith, 2005). So, for example, youth workers would use outdoor activities such as abseiling to provide a challenging experience and reflect on the learning resulting from it. Or they may set young people a teambuilding challenge, and reflect upon how well they undertook it. Experience is therefore something separate, discrete, or additional to the ordinary lives of the young people. Clearly youth work does involve activities (Spence, 2001) and these activities are often provided as a legitimate additional stimulus or vehicle for learning. However, to conceive of experiential learning exclusively and simply as the provision of discrete activities, followed by subsequent reflection upon their impact, misrepresents the educational basis for youth work. More importantly defining 'experience' in learning as something 'other' fundamentally misrepresents experiential learning as Dewey (1897; 1916; 1938) conceived of it.

In their account, Jeffs and Smith (2005) do make some reference to a depth and breadth of understanding of experiential learning beyond the simplistic cycle. For example, they utilise Dewey's suggestion that the 'business of education might be defined as an emancipation and enlargement of experience' (Dewey, 1910: 340 cited in Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 58). They suggest that enlarging experience is as much about the deepening of an understanding of our experiences as it is about building them up, arguing that we 'work with people so that they may have a greater understanding or appreciation of their experiences' (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 59). In so doing, learning by experience is liberating: 'We interpret what is going on and this allows us to be "set free" ' (ibid). Jeffs and Smith (2005) and Blacker (2001) also refer to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) and their three facets of experiential learning: returning to experience, attending to (or connecting with) feelings, and evaluating experiences. In addition they both also refer to the work of Schön (1983) who distinguishes between 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'.

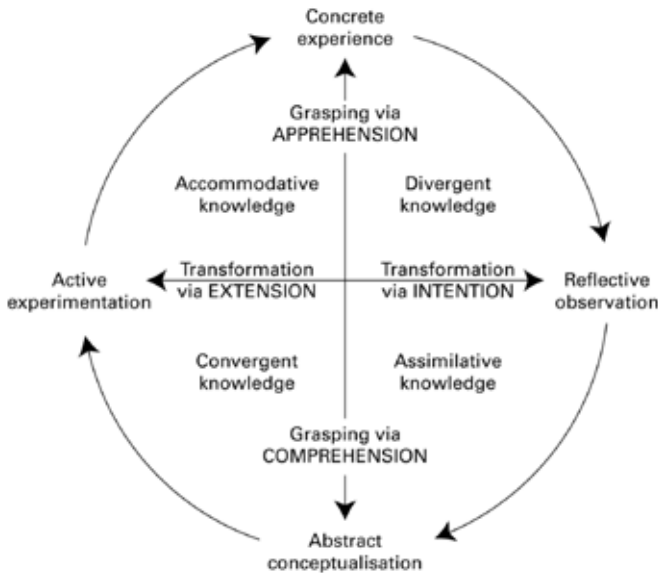
There is also another notable exception in Smith (1994), who does offer a much more informed understanding of Dewey. He acknowledges the important distinction between activity and experience, and notes how: 'conversations with local educators are littered with references to experience... [and] in many respects these are the starting point for workers' efforts' (Smith, 1994:29). Smith offers a less simplistic account of Kolb, for example in his appreciation of Kolb's description of knowledge resulting 'from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it (Smith, 1994: 133). He also acknowledges the importance of situated learning, which Dewey emphasised. However in this text, Smith is focused on the process of local education and an articulation of its 'praxis' as well as a discussion of its wider principles such as fostering democracy. As such he is not primarily concerned with articulating Dewey's notion of experiential learning and by Smith's own admission, the writings of Dewey (as well as that of others) run through the text but are not explicated to any great degree. Rather Dewey's ideas underpin, and are used to elucidate Smith's primary purposes relating to local education. It is also possible that

Smith’s focus on the embedded self, characterised by his belief ‘that we must learn to understand ourselves as social and connected beings’ (Smith, 1994:3), together with his reservations about the concept of an autonomous self, precludes any in-depth analysis of the dynamics of experience, which would inevitably have required a focus on the individual.

Smith’s (1994) is a fairly lone voice and does not undermine the premise of this article that experiential learning in youth work is almost exclusively framed in terms of the simplistic learning cycle attributed to Kolb (1984). Even Jeffs and Smith (2005) regard it as a useful model for conceptualising the process of experiential learning, suggesting that ‘this is a helpful way of looking at the situations we face as educators’ (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 66)² and Smith (1994) commenting on such models suggests that ‘there can be no denying their practical use and influence.’³

It will be argued that it is time to reconsider and move beyond such simplistic cyclical models, in the main because they offer an impoverished conception of experiential learning, but firstly it is important to point out that the learning cycle which predominates is itself a misrepresentation of Kolb (1984). The cycle depicted in figure 1 (above) is not Kolb’s theory of experiential learning. It is a representation of Kurt Lewin’s theory of organisational learning by Kolb (1984). Figure 3 below is Kolb’s representation of experiential learning.

Figure 3: Structural dimensions underlying the process of experiential learning and the resulting basic knowledge forms (Kolb, 1984: 42)



There are important differences between Kolb's representation of experiential learning and the more simplistic cycle, in that the whole inner dimension is omitted from the latter. In part it can be seen that Kolb does conceive of learning by experience in some sense as a progression through a cycle. This is evidenced by the outer circle which progresses from concrete experience through reflection to abstract conceptualisation and further experimentation. Importantly however he also sees experiential learning as a dynamic holistic process which unifies thought and action, as depicted in the inner dimension. Kolb describes this as a 'dialectic' integration of opposing functions. It is this dialectical aspect of learning by experience that the inner circle of Kolb's (1984:29) model of experiential learning specifically refers to. He suggests therefore that: '...all the models ... suggest the idea that learning is by its very nature a conflict filled process' (1984:, p. 30). Furthermore '... experiential learning is also concerned with how these functions are integrated by the person into a holistic adaptive posture toward the world' (1984: 32). He continues, citing Bruner (1966), and claiming that at the heart of the creative process of learning is the 'dialectic' tension between 'abstract detachment' and 'concrete involvement'.

It is not the purpose of this paper to explore in depth of complexities of Kolb's (1984); theory: it is sufficient to evidence that Kolb's theory is at the very least much more than the simplistic simple cycle it is often characterised as being. However it is important to look to the architect of experiential learning, John Dewey, for clarification not least because he is credited by Kolb (1984), as a major influence on his theory.

The inner dimension of Kolb's structure of experiential learning is a direct descendant of Dewey's theory (1916; 1938). For Dewey experience is always a dynamic two-way process. He referred to this process as a 'transaction': 'An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment' (Dewey, 1938: 43). As acknowledged by Garforth, this connection with the environment '...is not unilateral but, as Dewey would say, transactional, for the experient is modified by his environment and the environment by the experient in a constant reciprocal relationship' (Garforth, 1966: 13). Dewey elaborates on this two-way process, suggesting that experience involves both 'trying' and 'undergoing' (Dewey, 1916: 104).

'Trying' refers to the outward expression of intention or action. It is the purposeful engagement of the individual with the environment or in Dewey's words, 'doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like' (ibid). Through action an attempt is made to have an impact on the world. 'Undergoing', the other aspect of the 'transaction' in experience, refers to the consequences of experience on the individual. In turn, in attempting to have an impact, the experience also impacts on us. 'Undergoing' refers to the consequences of the experience for us.

We may choose to clear litter from a local beauty spot, and in so doing the area is visibly improved (a consequence of 'trying') and at the same time we feel good about the deed that has been carried out (a consequence of 'undergoing'). For Dewey experience necessarily contains these two distinct aspects. (Ord, 2009: 498).

Thus, as Dewey suggests:

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness of experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience.

(Dewey, 1916: 104).

Dewey is articulating a particular notion of experience which Garforth again makes clear:

He [Dewey] does not mean by this [experience] the stored up product of the past; nor does he mean simply the immediacy of the experienced present; nor the mere acceptance of environmental impact by a passive recipient; nor does he contrast experience with thought or reason. Experience is continuous from past through present to future; it is not static but dynamic, moving, in process. (Garforth, 1966: 13).

Experience for Dewey is our 'lived' experience. The experience at the heart of experiential learning therefore is not something separate or additional but something which embraces the lives of individuals.

Youth work theorists such as Jeffs and Smith do at times acknowledge this; for example when they describe informal education, and it is assumed youth work, to involve 'learning in life as it is lived' (Jeffs and Smith, 2005:4). Jeffs and Smith's interpretation of experiential learning is however potentially problematic as they seem to equate experiences exclusively with 'exploratory activity', for example when they contrast it with 'giving information' or when 'individuals or groups may only need or want knowledge or advice – not exploration' (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 67). Dewey would be wary of a distinction between experiential learning as specific 'exploratory' activities and formal learning as the transmission of useful and relevant information. Any relevant knowledge or information is 'in some sense' experiential as it relates directly to the lived experience of the individuals concerned (Dewey, 1910; 1916;1938). This confusion about what is meant by 'experience' and 'experiential learning' in Jeffs' and Smith's exploration is further exemplified by their explicit contrast between ideas and experience, and between thoughts and action. They maintain that:

[T]o build theories about an experience we need to draw on a repertoire of ideas and images... Book-learning and teaching can give us access to a range of theories and ways of making sense. In other words we need to recognise that a 'starting point' for a lot of our efforts may not be concrete experience. (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 67).

Dewey would have disregarded such dualistic notions as are implicit in Jeffs' and Smith's separation of 'concrete experience' from 'theories and ideas'. Dewey's 'instrumentalism' (1897; 1910; 1916; 1938) would insist that theories and ideas can only make sense in relation to the lived experience of individuals and communities and as such they necessarily inform and enlarge experience⁴. Thereby thoughts and ideas must be experiential if they are to be meaningful.

For Dewey experience is at the heart of the educational process, indeed education is defined exclusively in terms of the extent to which it develops and reconstructs experience:

The concept of education is a constant reorganising or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative. It reaches that end – the direct transformation of the quality of experience... We thus reach a technical definition of education: It is that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (Dewey, 1916: 59).

Dialectics and 'Meaning' of Experience

As we have seen, an important aspect of this 'reconstruction' of experience and therefore an important basis of experiential learning is an explicit incorporation of Dewey's notions of 'trying' and 'undergoing'. Interestingly a fuller appreciation of Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning also reveals a commitment to this dual aspect of experience and it is this which makes up the inner dimension of his model. Kolb refers to this as a 'dialectic' relationship. Kolb's theory draws on Lewin, Dewey and Piaget and claims that: '... all three models of experiential learning describe conflicts between opposing ways of dealing with the world suggesting that learning results from resolution of these conflicts' (Kolb 1984: 29). According to Kolb, Lewin's model emphasises the basic conflict between concrete experience and abstract concepts and the conflict between observation and action. Kolb suggests that for Dewey, the major dialectic is between the individual's 'moving force', or their desire for action, and on the other hand the need for reflection and adaptation. Piaget's (1951) framework refers specifically to the dual processes, of 'accommodation' of ideas from the external world and 'assimilation' of experience into existing conceptual structures, as the moving forces of cognitive development (Kolb, 1984:29).

Whilst Kolb acknowledges that not all learning results from a resolution of dialectic tensions, he

argues strongly that examples of the most creative and significant aspects of learning are often the direct result of such resolutions. He claims that Freire's (1974) notion of praxis is a similar process:

[I]n Paolo Freire's work the dialectic nature of learning and adaptation is encompassed in this concept of praxis, which he defines as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (1974:36). Central to the concept of praxis is the process of 'naming the world', which is both active – in the sense that naming something transforms it-and reflective-in that our choice of words gives meaning to the world around us. (Kolb, 1984:29).⁵

It is argued that this dialectic process is of direct importance to the process of youth work, and central to understanding experiential learning in its fullest sense:

The dialectics of experience is important in theorizing experiential learning as it places a different emphasis on how we conceive of experiential learning. An example of an application of this dialectical tension of experience in youth work could be illustrated with reference to the experience of young women. Their experience can be seen as a tension between the demand to 'accommodate' themselves to the stereotypical expectations of their gender and femininity, in contrast to the extent to which they conceptualise or 'assimilate' the world as an oppressive environment which restricts their own authentic development irrespective of the environmental demands. Similarly the dialectical tension in peer groups could be characterised by the extent to which young people adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of the group, or free themselves through a process of assimilation of information about the experience of peer groups and peer group pressure. They realise that their desires, beliefs or values run contrary to the expectations of the group; discovering that they actually have a choice to conform or not and that this does not necessarily undermine their relationships with their peers. (Ord, 2007: 71).

Dewey's philosophy of education is often criticised for being too practical; that is, it focuses exclusively on 'the enquiry method' (Dewey, 1900), in which students are concerned with problem-solving (Bantock, 1963: 31). Bantock specifically criticises the pragmatic basis of Dewey's epistemology, claiming that formulating knowledge exclusively within man's (sic) practical engagement with his (sic) immediate environment, both overemphasises the importance of 'problems' in the search for knowledge as well as misrepresenting knowledge itself. However given an appreciation of the dialectics of experience, Dewey's formulation of educative experience, can be seen to be as much about how we understand the world, as it is with acting in it. It is as much about 'meaning making' as it is about a concern with the discovering solutions to 'practical' problems.⁶

Pring (2007) outlines Dewey's (1938) argument in 'Experience and Education':

[T]here is an 'organic connection between education and experience' (1938:25), Education is part of that search for meaning – that trying to make sense... Hence, inquiry is an attempt 'to make sense' but in the light of what other people have concluded in similar circumstances. (Pring, 2007: 65).

Or as Dewey himself puts it: 'his activity shall have meaning to himself' (Dewey, 1900: 23).

Implications for the theory and practice of youth work

An in-depth appreciation of John Dewey's philosophy of experiential education provides a theoretical grounding for youth work that has both credibility and longevity. Youth work would no longer be seen as an educational practice in isolation, creating its own theory, but as an example of an educational practice almost entirely removed from formal education; one that arguably would ultimately be more effective (Pring, 2007; Fairfield, 2011).

A commitment to Dewey provides a theoretical basis for youth work's long held assertion about the importance of the relationship between a youth worker and the young person (Deer Richardson and Wolfe, 2001; Young, 2006; Harrison and Wise, 2005; Davies, 2005; Ord, 2007). Within Dewey's theory one needs to 'get to know' the young people; education is not something that takes place outside their immediate sphere of understanding but must be relevant to it. Education is not separate from the young people's homes and communities (Dewey, 1900), but connections must be made to them. As such the educators would need to get to know and build relationships with the pupils in order to understand their experiences of the world and to work with them on problems they encounter.

Integral to this process for Dewey (1938; 1916; 1900) is the notion of 'interests'. As Pring points out: 'It takes an experienced teacher, therefore, and one who knows the child well, to identify what the interest really is – indeed, to help the young person to recognise the nature of the interest, which is only dimly perceived' (Pring, 2007: 82).⁷ A direct parallel can be drawn between an educational practice which is grounded in both young people's experience and their interests and the long held youth work commitment expressed succinctly in Davies' Manifesto to: 'start where young people are at' (Davies, 2005). No doubt Dewey would concur with this concept. The idea of beginning an educational encounter with an appreciation of what is important, pertinent or relevant to the young people 'there and then' or in the 'here and now' is directly consistent with an attempt to understand and explore their experience. Another of Davies' (2005) principles relates to Dewey's exploration and investigation of experience, asking: 'Is practice concerned with how young people feel and with what they know they can do?' (2005:11). Here again youth work engages directly with the experiential lives of young people.

Dewey's rationale is not one which puts the educator (teacher or youth worker) at the centre of the process, but one that places the child at the centre. Dewey described this as: 'a change or revolution not unlike that introduced by Copernicus' (Dewey, 1900: 34). This is a direct shift from a situation where the focus is on 'the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself' (ibid). Dewey argued that the 'centre of gravity' needs to shift whereby 'he [the learner] is at the centre' (ibid). Dewey is often therefore referred to as a child-centred educationalist (Bantock, 1963; Garforth, 1966; Entwistle, 1970; Woods and Barrow, 2006; Darling, 1994; Pring, 2007); and at times it is easy to see why this conclusion is arrived at. Dewey himself suggested that the starting point should be, in his terms, the 'internal conditions': 'The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education' (Dewey, 1897: 4). However whilst it is clearly the case that Dewey was child centred, in the sense that he requires the educator to take due regard of the desires, interests and inclinations of the learner, this can be overstated. Education, for Dewey, was not 'laissez faire' and at the whim of the individual, or an unregulated permissiveness (Fairfield, 2011). For example he was critical of the erroneous implementation of some of his ideas in the early progressive schools being aghast that, 'Some teachers seem to be afraid even to make suggestions to the members of the group as to what they should do' (Dewey, 1938: 71).

Another important caveat that should be applied to Dewey's 'person centred curriculum' is that he is not denying the 'expert' role of the teacher in the importance of externally provided stimuli by the teacher through a dynamic curriculum, which is relevant, or made relevant, to the lives of the young people. What underpins Dewey's version of the child centred curriculum is however a detailed knowledge and understanding of the young people who are being taught: 'their interests' (Dewey, 1938: 54; 1916: 64). Neither does the person centred curriculum of Dewey deny the importance of what he refers to as the 'objective conditions' (Dewey, 1938: 42-45), which in no small part relate to the external bodies of knowledge.

An understanding of Dewey's conceptualisation of experiential learning (1897; 1900; 1910; 1916; 1938) also raises questions about the separateness of reflection in experiential learning; and therefore its location in a sequential cycle of learning. Dewey (1897; 1916; 1938) was concerned with the adaptation of human beings to the environment, as well as the importance of problem-solving within this adaptation. For Dewey (1910) reflection was fundamental to this process, and at times he did suggest a specific sequence, for example:

Upon examination, each instance reveals, more or less clearly, five logically distinct steps: (i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggesting a possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief. (1910:72).

At other times Dewey made more explicit the role of reflection within problem-solving; for example when utilising the ‘forked road analogy’,⁸ where someone is given ‘two alternatives: he must either blindly or arbitrarily take his course trusting to luck’ (Dewey, 1910:10). Dewey described specifically how reflecting on the two possibilities enables the correct choice to be made: ‘... he wants something in the nature of a signboard or a map, and his reflection is aimed at the discovery of facts that will serve this purpose’ (ibid).

However Dewey often referred to reflection more widely as being synonymous with ‘thinking’. For example:

[R]eflection is turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked ... thoughtfulness means, practically, the same thing ... in speaking of reflection we naturally use the words weigh, ponder, deliberate ... closely related names are scrutiny, examination, consideration, inspection – ... even reason itself.
(Dewey, 1910:57).

At times it is possible to conceive of the role of reflection in experiential learning in a sequential fashion, either following the discovery of a problem, or in Dewey’s words when we are in ‘a state of perplexity, hesitation or doubt’ (Dewey, 1910:8). It could be easy therefore to interpret Dewey as advocating the conceptualisation of experiential learning which emphasises ‘reflection on action’. However, one should be wary of such a formulation. Whilst at times reflection on action is clearly necessary, as in the example of the forked road analogy where one waits and ponders, Dewey’s instrumentalism (1896; 1916; 1917; 1920; 1929) would be critical of a separation of thought and action. He regarded the two as unified by experience, and utilised simultaneously. In this respect Dewey can also be seen as the architect of Schön’s (1983) later work on ‘reflection in action’. Furthermore it is one thing to suggest that reflection can, and sometimes does, occur after a pause or upon completion of an activity, and another to formulate a model which necessitates reflection occurring in this manner. Such a formulation, as we have seen in what is referred to as Kolb’s learning cycle, is a misrepresentation and impoverishment of the holistic nature of experiential education.

Reflective thinking for Dewey was also concerned, as previously indicated, with his emphasis on the importance of ‘re-conceptualisation of experience’, the importance of beliefs. For example, reflective thinking was described by Dewey as an ‘investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief’ (Dewey, 1910: 9). Pring (2007) argues that Dewey is often incorrectly interpreted as being overly concerned with the solving of practical problems. Rather he suggests Dewey should be more widely understood as being concerned with the ‘problems of living’ more generally:

Inquiry is the process that takes place when the person faces a problem. That problem can be of many kinds. Often it is a sense of puzzlement, and the person concerned struggles to make sense. The internal organisation of experience is upset as it were...Education is concerned with providing the experiential capacity to make sense and to overcome the problem or puzzlement. (Pring, 2007: 64-65).

Finally another important commonality between Dewey's formulation of experiential education and the theory of youth work is the role of conversation and dialogue. As Fairfield points out, central to Dewey's theory of experiential education is that 'the spirit of open ended conversation ought to prevail' (Fairfield, 2011: 121). Conversation is also central to youth work, perhaps as best articulated by Jeffs and Smith (2005). Clear parallels exist between Dewey's 'dialogical education [which] recognises the value of uncertainty' (Fairfield, 2011:253) and Jeffs' and Smith's notion of 'going with the flow' (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 33-34). Its importance is at least implicit however in most, if not all, major accounts of the practice of youth work, whether that be in terms of informal, non-formal or social education (Deer Richardson and Wolfe, 2001; Young, 2006; Harrison and Wise, 2005; Davies, 2005; Ord, 2007). It should also perhaps come as no surprise that the most nuanced account of Dewey from Smith (1994) places a particular emphasis on dialogue and in his formulation of local education, he confirms 'conversation is a fundamental activity' (Smith, 1994: 32).

Of course this is an educational process which predates both Jeffs and Smith as well as Dewey, as Fairfield argues:

The model for this art remains Socrates engaged in conversation with the citizens of Athens, the informal and undogmatic mode of enquiry in which all participants and no one, including the educator is above the fray of dialogue. From the educator this art requires skilful guidance of enquiry from a given set of interests towards a broader horizon, the guidance that draws upon a variety of methods. (Fairfield, 2011:46).

A cautionary note

A criticism is often levied at Dewey for his lack of appreciation of power and politics in social life and that he articulated the process of experiential learning without reference to the political context and inequality. Perhaps most notable of these critics is C. Wright Mills who argues:

...it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centred. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of life experience (Wright Mills, 1974: 299).

Wright Mills is highly critical of Dewey and the ‘pragmatists’ who he describes as the ‘... sons of the middle-class rising within these strata into rather comfortable academic professions’ (Wright Mills, 1974: 167). He argues that ‘pragmatism has been the ideology of the Liberal professional man, however much he may have thought about the disadvantaged’ and concludes that their ‘assumptions ... mask the character and shape of political power’ (ibid).

Dewey was undeniably a man of his time, writing at the turn of the previous century in liberal America. Perhaps his philosophy does encapsulate America’s opportunist spirit believing anything to be possible for an individual. Whilst it is arguably the case that Dewey was in part a product of ‘white, middle-class, male America’, Wright Mills fails to appreciate that in many ways Dewey was also ahead of his time. It should be noted in this context that Dewey was a founder member of the ‘National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People’ (NAACP):

Founded Feb. 12., 1909, the NAACP is the nation’s oldest, largest and most widely recognized grassroots-based civil rights organization. Its more than half-million members and supporters throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, campaigning for equal opportunity. (NAACP, 2010).

This clearly demonstrates that whilst issues of oppression, power and politics are not explicit within his philosophy of experiential learning, he himself was very aware of such issues, and was prepared to act in ways which attempt to address them.

Whilst it is ostensibly the case that power and politics are not ‘writ large’ within Dewey’s formulation of experiential learning, neither is it the case that assumptions about power are inconsistent with Dewey’s notion of experiential learning, for the notion of starting from and appreciating the uniqueness of an individual’s experience necessarily, at least implicitly, acknowledges both the diversity of that experience, as well as issues of power which both cut across and in part define that experience. No doubt Dewey would not disagree with Wright Mills’ assumption that ‘... values creep in’ (Wright Mills, 1974: 467). But it is a cautionary note that must be sounded in relation to Dewey’s formulations of experiential learning, that such issues of power and oppression must be more explicitly acknowledged.

Concluding remarks

To conclude I would argue it is clearly apparent that the dominant perspective of experiential learning as a simplistic four stage cycle, attributed to Kolb, 1984 is insufficient as an account of such a process. An appreciation of Dewey’s original ideas about the role of educative experience provides us with a stark contrast. Firstly experience is not something ‘discreet’ or separate, the ‘doing’ of an activity or the provision of an ‘experience’ (or as Kolb, 1984 refers to it: ‘concrete experience’). Dewey

provides us with a richer, less impoverished notion of experience. According to Dewey (1938; 1916) it is always ‘transactional’, that is, our experience is part of what it means to ‘be in the world’, necessarily connecting us with our past, through the present and into the future.⁹ Experience is what it means to live. Allied to this notion is an appreciation by Dewey of the ‘meaning’ of experience. For experience to be educative it must be meaningful, and the educator must have made deliberate attempts to understand the meaning of the experiences of those he is attempting to educate.

Experiential learning, often when it is at its most significant, is also dialectical. Whether this be described in Dewey’s (1916; 1938) terms of ‘trying’ and ‘undergoing’ or in Kolb’s (1984) terms of ‘assimilation’ and ‘accommodation’, learning by experience is a two-way process of engaging with the world. This may be physically or conceptually, trying to change the way things are or how they are perceived to be, and at the same time to ‘suffer or undergo’ the consequences and therefore be changed by the experience. Notwithstanding the fact that experience is always couched in the context of existing power relations, Dewey’s theory of experiential learning would be improved with more explicit acknowledgement of inequality and oppression.

An appreciation of Dewey’s conceptualisation of experiential learning raises important questions about the role and a place of reflection within learning. There is no reason to suspect that reflection is always ‘on action’, it is equally likely to be relevant before or during a particular experience. Even within traditional notions of experiential learning such as taking a youth group abseiling it would be as relevant to reflect on what it means for the participants before undertaking an activity as it would be after the event in order to maximise the learning from that experience. For example the experience of abseiling could be terrifying and counter-productive, be an appropriate level of challenge or be so familiar as to cause indifference. It is time to question the usefulness of the simplistic cycle. Some may argue it has its uses, but it seems to preclude an appreciation of the depth of ‘experience’ itself and therefore experiential learning.

Finally and perhaps most importantly an appreciation of John Dewey’s theory of experiential education gives much needed support to many of the fundamental tenets of youth work, such as the importance of relationships, the role of conversation and why it is essential to ‘start where they are at’ (Davies, 2005).

Notes

1. Lewin (1951) did not depict the learning in this form, this cycle was drawn by Kolb to attempt to illustrate what he thought Lewin was trying to communicate, (Kolb, 1984, p.21).
2. They however admit it is not without its problems, not least that learning is not necessarily sequential, claiming: ‘we should not rely too heavily on the mechanical sequence’ (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 66).

3. Smith (1994) also offers some critical comments about the use of learning cycles.
4. For Dewey thoughts were never abstracted from experience. They always served some function in relation to the lived experience of the individual. Instrumentalism refers to the role or function which thoughts, ideas or feelings have in relation to experience.
5. This point is also emphasized by Smith (1994).
6. Jeffs and Smith (2005) acknowledge this with their reference to ‘exploring and expanding experience’, however this is to some extent undermined by their commitment to the simplistic learning cycle.
7. Smith (1994:29) also acknowledges the importance of interests suggesting that: ‘the concern of the workers I talk to is to move with the questions and interests of the learners’.
8. Blacker (2001) makes reference to this aspect of Dewey’s work, when exploring the role of reflection in youth work practice.
9. This notion of ‘being in the world’ was elaborated later by Heidegger (1927) with his concept of *Dasain* and the development of phenomenology. See Fairfield (2011) for an interesting examination of some of the parallels.

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