What’s All the Fuss About (Experiential Education)?

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Faculty members at Simon Fraser University (SFU) are often encouraged to undertake a new stance or approach in their teaching practices. One of the more recent ones is ‘experiential education.’ Responding to faculty concerns about how ‘experiential education’ is being deployed at SFU, we undertook to write this short paper for FASS faculty in particular. We begin from the premise that it is useful to differentiate among modes of instruction and learning, so that we avoid not just misunderstanding one another, but also avoid misapplying scholarship on teaching and learning, and avoid rewarding and/or censuring instructors for the design of their learning opportunities without proper attention to the depth, intention and disciplinary appropriateness of those exercises.

Part of the difficulty with discussing experiential education is that it eludes a precise or pithy definition. Over the last century, the term has been and used in a range of settings for a variety of purposes. Here, we do not want to put forward a hegemonic definition; rather we want to argue for the need to discuss, deliberately and explicitly, how the term is put to use at SFU. The definition put forward by the Experiential Education Project reads: “Experiential education is the strategic, active engagement of students in opportunities to learn through doing, and reflection on those activities, which empowers them to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical endeavours in a multitude of settings inside and outside of the classroom.” While this definition begins a discussion about experiential education, we assert it lacks historical and theoretical depth. And this definition matters, as it has been used to “count” - both literally and figuratively - what qualifies as experiential education at SFU.

Experiential learning as a term with an accepted set of defining characteristics has its genesis with the early 20th century philosopher, John Dewey. “At the core of Dewey’s thinking was an understanding that education was not simply the transmission of facts but the education of the entire person for participation in a democratic society” (Itin, 1999). In other words, education was seen as a central preparation for participation in a community.

Dewey’s understanding of community is robust - indeed it is directly involved in realizing the highest aspiration of human society. According to Professor Meg Holden, to Dewey, achieving community involved ensuring the existence of an engaged, enriching public sphere of life fit for the conduct of democracy. The ability to constitute a community meant that one had the skills and habits needed to do many specific things: articulate one’s

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2 See: www.sfu.ca/experiential for details of the current “Experiential Education Project.”
values and interests in the context of broader public interests and values; act on behalf of groups larger than one's self, one's family, and one's kinship groups; engage individuals and groups very different from one's self and holding interests very different from one's own; argue, communicate, compromise, and find common purpose with others; and, quite importantly, engage with some of these diverse others in learning more about how to achieve common interests and improve life conditions and prospects together (what he called the community of inquiry). Dewey saw an important role for academics here; he sought to bring the tools of academic research and reflection to the widest spectrum of society because he believed it wasn't just or efficient that decision-making and action outside the academy occurred largely in the absence of these critical and reflexive practices. Thus, Dewey conceived an 'experiential' approach to education as a lifelong endeavor to cultivating dynamic interactions among self, culture and community. Crucially, this required time, rigour, the inclusion of criteria, reflections, and highly purposive actions for both students and teachers (Dewey, 1938).

Of course, Dewey's first formulations have undergone significant revision and complication since his 1916 work *Democracy and Education* and his 1938 publication of *Experience and Education*. Over the following decades, experiential education or experiential learning have come to be associated with a variety of methods, techniques, and interpretations that “move away from.... purely cognitive activities to those which actively use experiences (previous or newly provoked), work with them to draw learning from them, and locate them in specific contexts (either authentic or contrived)” (Boud, 2005, pg 244). Thus ‘experience’ has come to mean exposure of learners to novel environments in which critical assessment of information and behaviour – and reflection upon learners’ own actions/reactions - form an essential aspect of the intended learning. But we need to be mindful: the presence of the novel environment itself does not constitute the ‘experiential’ aspect of the education. Rather, within courses, this can occur in terms of course content, but also in the very norms of the classroom itself. For example, strains of experiential education such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux 1989) and feminist and anti-racist pedagogies (Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 2000; Tisdell, 1993) call attention to, and critique, hegemonic structures of power and privilege at work not just in the classroom, but also in the embodied lives of students and teachers. This kind of teaching and thinking can have far-reaching consequences – exactly as Dewey intended.

Dewey's ideas have also been picked up within the practices of adult education. A vital part of this field, experiential learning has been long understood by adult educators to focus on the experience of the learner as “a prime source and stimulus for learning” (Boud, 2005, pg 243; Fenwick, 2000; Kolb 1984). In this way, it has been used to advocate for the merit of using prior learning gained in informal settings to explicitly enable reflection, critical thinking and the transfer of learning between domains; to encourage students towards a greater interaction with, and a broader understanding of, the wider world; and
to develop a greater sense of social responsibility. In institutions that recognize prior learning, so-called ‘non-traditional’ students may also be awarded credit for this learning to facilitate access or advanced standing to enroll in academic programs.

It troubles us that SFU’s work to date on experiential learning doesn’t appear to draw from the traditions noted, nor recognize FASS’ excellent teaching as authentically experiential. Instead what has been highlighted so far seems to conflate experiential education with ‘learning by doing,’ and blurs it also with such diverse practices as cooperative education, service learning, adventure education, active learning, and problem-based learning. (For example, a glance at the experiential education website identifies the following projects: co-op, semester in dialogue, study abroad, fieldschools, leadership programs, peer programs, workstudy, community based learning courses, practicums, volunteering, and “learning through doing in personally and professionally meaningful ways”). We think such conflations can be pedagogically dangerous. As Jay Roberts points out, “the taken for granted sense that we all know what we mean when we evoke the power of experience in the educational process needs to be unveiled” (2012, pg 2). Furthermore, the power of experience is powerful; students (and others) may wish their subjective/affective responses to an experience should function as a primary, or even sole, measure of its educational merit - but this is a far cry from the more substantive community-building articulated by Dewey and generations of other educators.

This stands in sharp contrast to what we have observed - that many FASS teachers embrace the high standards set within actual traditions of experiential education in their courses. Virtually all of the Cormack nominees for excellence in teaching, as well as FASS’ disproportionately large share of university and external teaching awards evidence this further. All these teachers, and all the others that we work with, do so through cultivating critical thinking in courses, evoking student empathy and insight across contexts, and nurturing in students the habits of mind, skills, and academic tools of research and reflection needed in the world of practices outside the university. They mentor students’ abilities to partake in scholarly activity and link debates within and beyond scholarship. These classroom activities also serve an essential role as a scaffold towards more thoughtful and ethically informed engagements with the world. And these are highly purposive enterprises: as one FASS professor has noted, “bringing students into the world of practices before they are equipped with skills and tools belittles the value of this need for more effective, more inclusive communities of inquiry and as such forgoes our democratic responsibility as educators.”

Based upon our experience, we observe that much of what takes place in FASS courses - including inside conventional classrooms - is arguably, and even exquisitely, experiential. In many FASS courses, students are challenged to write or present to academic and non-academic audiences, or apply a theory to complex news, events, or
debates of the day, or argue about a situation from a marginalized perspective, or debate how a film-maker creates impressions via incomplete information, or engage deeply in the environments typical of the discipline (such as library archives, labs, or stats databases). In such exchanges, students and teachers wrestle with new information, contexts, vantages and interpretations with rigour and criteria. Rather than simply self-report experiences as valuable, students commit to, and execute, products that demonstrate neural, moral, and/or conceptual shifts. These classrooms and courses are rich, memorable, transformative and educationally provocative. We therefore feel to be categorized within SFU’s current definition as insufficiently experiential is both untrue and unfortunate.

Moreover, we feel this categorization is doubly problematic, in that these allegedly non-experiential activities not only align with Dewey’s traditions, but also can be far more effective for learning-centered practice than course designs that appear more experiential when ‘doing’ occurs at the expense of reflection. For example, as reported to us by many faculty and students, when undergraduate students, in an attempt to complete ‘research-driven experiential learning’ opportunities are required, within 13 weeks, to learn about course content as well as conceive of research projects, propose and satisfy ethics approval requirements, undertake their projects, analyze their data, and complete a presentation or report, they often report being logistically overwhelmed more than reflectively engaged.

We have some additional concerns as well. Several scholars have focused on the ‘neo-experiential’ movements that assure administrators and students that ‘learning by doing’ can be seamlessly incorporated into existing educational structures (Giroux, 1989; Itin, 1999; Roberts, 2012). But how appropriate is that (especially at SFU), given the priority institutionally placed on disciplinary forms of knowledge-making? Experience in learning is not disconnected to ways of knowing, investigating, claiming, analyzing and communicating. Additionally, if the transfer of knowledge to different contexts and to [Dewey’s] “individuals and groups very different from one's self and holding interests very different from one’s own” is what matters, clearly these transfers are all deeply inflected by discourses and traditions which do differ by discipline and by different communities of practice; the knowledge required for working in social service agencies differs markedly from that needed for working in schools, or rural sites, or within archives, museums, and multinational organizations, etc.

We appreciate the importance of ‘proving’ the value of university education to students, parents, and governments. We understand that teaching in adventurous and/or non-traditional venues, and meeting up with non-academics can offer impressive images for SFU, and exciting opportunities for students. However, we are cautious about the prizeing of teaching environments that pivot on individual, affective student responses as determining factors of educational value. We are concerned that the cost and privileging of such (exclusive) versions of courses will prohibit their uptake by most of SFU’s students,
and direct funding away from pedagogically-sound practices. And we remain concerned that these courses tacitly promote a self-actualizing, individual- prioritizing brand of education as the preferred form of preparation for developing into engaged and critically astute citizens – a violation of Dewey’s intentions and several decades’ worth of research on experiential learning. We thus find troubling this emphasis on promotion of the appearance of dynamic education, especially when accompanied by an implicit dismissal of teaching practices which have proven they do equip graduates with the skills and habits of mind to become literate, compassionate, curious, articulate, and active citizens.

So, in conclusion, let us be clear: we feel strongly that a number of pedagogical techniques - including creating discussions, setting up small group activities, prompting innovative writing and presentations, introducing variable audiences and contexts for making student work public, introducing multiple media into classrooms, etc. – can (and even arguably should) be designed into courses with the intention of working across a range of learning preferences and responding to the physiological restrictions of human attention and motivation. We know, and celebrate, the vast body of scholarship on teaching and learning that supports the inclusion of active, participatory learning opportunities as means of deepening student knowledge, inviting student participation and promoting lasting knowledge retention and skill development (Barr and Tang, 1995; Biggs, 2007; Mazur, 1997). Similarly, we recognize the value of co-operative education, practicums and volunteer experience for honing professional skills. However, we stress ‘learning by doing’ in these contexts can take place in a bound space and time that may be divorced from reflection, whereas experiential education as a deeper practice necessitates contextualizing, valuing of existing knowledge and prioritizing reflection on experience.

SFU is uniquely positioned to shape the debates on meaningful experiential learning. As our institution continues to articulate the intention of undergraduate and graduate education, it has the opportunity to promote educational approaches that value the disruption of hegemonic norms, and the investment of resources in educational practices that contribute to lifelong civic involvement. In that light, we urge careful use of the terms we choose to describe our pedagogical aspirations. To counter the risk of depoliticizing experiential education, and the risk of fostering confusion and skepticism by instructors, we advocate a clearer naming of the goals of ‘learning by doing,’ and call for a for a richer, more sincere and more thoughtful community conversation about the role of experiential education at SFU.


