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What Do We Actually Mean by Experiential Learning?

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The concept of "experiential learning" is used in a wide range of connections and situations with a different meaning and content. It is the aim of this article to try to find a common definition or demarcation of the concept. First, some earlier attempts are examined. However, they are not found satisfactory, and it is claimed that to come closer to an appropriate definition, it is necessary to relate to a comprehensive and contemporary general understanding of learning and from this to try and discern which kinds of learning could be termed experiential and which could not. The article then attempts to perform this task and concludes by suggesting a definition or formulation characterizing some important features of experiential learning seen in contrast to nonexperiential learning.

Keywords: experiential learning; learning theory; learning definition

For at least two decades, the concept of *experiential learning* has been the main source of inspiration for many people in dealing with and understanding learning and education. Nevertheless, no generally accepted definition of the concept exists and it seems to be used in a lot of different ways. For example, in primary and secondary school, experiential learning can refer to excursions, projects and the like, but it can also imply that the teacher tries to involve the students' experiences from outside school. In adult education the concept is usually related to the recognition and application of students' prior informal learning. And in relation to workplace learning it is very much about learning by doing instead of learning by courses and studies. The common feature seems to be that experiential learning is in some sort of opposition to what might be called school learning or learning from being taught.

Indeed, as a reference to what is meant by experiential learning, we still very often use David Kolb's book from 1984 with this title. But actually, Kolb came to the conclusion that all learning is experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, p. 38), making this reference rather meaningless or empty. If we mean anything at all

in talking about experiential learning and not just learning, it is obvious that there must also be some learning that is not experiential.

Three other sources are also frequently used as references, and I shall briefly examine them here.

One important source is the work of John Dewey (to which Kolb also referred), especially his book titled *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938). However, Dewey did not use the expression "experiential learning," and his understanding of experience was in general very broad and in line with the common everyday understanding of the word. What was important to Dewey was the quality of experiences, "to discriminate between experiences that are worth while educationally and those that are not" (Dewey, 1938, p. 33), and in this connection he stressed two important principles: the principle of *continuity,* meaning that a valuable experience must be connected to past experience and have consequences for future experience, and the principle of *interaction,* meaning that a valuable experience is linked to a transaction between an individual and his or her environment. I think that these two principles could be considered as demands that must be met for learning to be spoken of as experiential. But they can hardly serve as a satisfactory definition of the concept.

Another important source is to be found in the book *Making Sense of Experiential Learning*, edited by Susan Warner Weil and Ian McGill and presenting a selection of significant articles from the first ICEL (International Consortium for Experiential Learning) Conference in 1987 (Weil & McGill, 1989a). In their opening article, the editors try to distinguish four "emphases," each of which "forms the basis for a cluster of interrelated ideas and concerns," and they speak of these clusters as the four "villages" of experiential learning (Weil & McGill, 1989b, p. 3). Village 1 is about what has later been termed "acknowledgement of prior experiential learning." Village 2 focuses on experiential learning as the basis for change in postschool education. Village 3 has to do with community action and social change, and Village 4 is concerned with personal growth and development. So this source tries to map out what in practice is discussed and considered as experiential learning rather than trying to define the concept.

Finally, the Australian adult educator David Boud has also tried to unravel the concept of experiential learning. In an article in the above-mentioned book he summarizes his understanding in three different ways. Primarily, he points to three dimensions that are typical of all activities that refer to the concept of experiential learning, namely "learner control," the learner's "involvement of self," and some "correspondence of learning environment to real environment." Moreover, he also points to four approaches to adult education where experiential learning has functioned as a way of liberating learning activities from traditional ties: "freedom from distraction" (teaching technology, especially in vocational education), "freedom as learners" (self-directed learning), "freedom to learn" (student-centered education), and "freedom through learning" (critical pedagogics and social action). Finally, Boud identifies three

teaching approaches within experiential learning, namely "the individual-centered approach," "the group-centered approach," and "the project-centered approach" (Boud, 1989). Whereas the two first set of characteristics, like Dewey's principles, may help define what experiential learning is and is not, the last set of concepts, like Weil's and McGill's villages, deals with the use of the experiential learning approach.

Thus, from my very brief survey it is possible to conclude that to be labeled experiential, learning processes and outcomes must be part of processes of continuity and interaction, they must, at least to some extent, be learner controlled and involve the learner's self, and there must be some correspondence of the learning environment to real environment. Furthermore, the learning should be characterized by freedom from distraction and have some degree of self-direction, it should be student centered, and it should make possible some kind of liberation or emancipation of the learner. Finally, such learning can be applied and involved in a very broad range of educational connections.

However, these statements cannot really be accepted as more than indicators of what experiential learning is about. They do not form what could be called a definition or demarcation of the concept, and it is still difficult to see the difference between experiential learning and other kinds of learning. This situation is also mirrored in the almost unlimited use of the concept of experiential learning in very many and very different connections.

I therefore think that it is important to somehow come closer to a definition of the concept. It is my claim that to do so it is necessary to relate to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of learning in general, and then on this basis to discuss which learning is experiential and which is not.

This is, of course, a very demanding task to set up, and it will not be possible to do it properly in the form of an article. But in the following I shall try to outline some main points of an appropriate understanding of learning, building on my book *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (Illeris, 2002), some later articles in which I have elaborated some features of this book (Illeris, 2003b, 2005), and some of the ideas from a new book on the subject, which was published in Danish in March 2006 and hopefully will soon be available in English.

The Three Dimensions of Learning

In my book, I try to develop a comprehensive and contemporary theory or framework of learning. I do so by going through a broad range of different theories of and approaches to learning, extracting what I find of value for a general overall understanding, adding my own insights from more than 30 years dealing with the topic in theory and practice, and trying to build up a structure or pattern of the totality. The resulting framework has three parts dealing with what I call the learning dimensions, the learning typology, and barriers toward learning.

The most fundamental assumption of the learning theory is that all learning includes two essentially different types of process: an external interaction

process between the learner and his or her social, cultural, and material environment, and an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition in which new impulses are connected with the results of prior learning.

The criteria of the interaction process are of a social and societal character, that is, they are determined by time and place. The individual is in interaction with an environment that includes other people, a specific culture, technology, and so on, which are characterized by their time and society. In the late modern globalized world, this is all mixed up in a giant and rapidly changing hotchpotch that offers unlimited, and to a great extent also unstructured, possibilities for learning. Hence, the often formulated need for learning to learn, that is creating a personal structure or a value system to sort out what is worth learning from what is not. This is also the background for understandings such as those of the social constructionists, focusing on the needs, difficulties, and prevalence of this interaction process in late modernity (e.g., Gergen, 1994).

But no matter how dominant and imperative the interaction process has become, in learning there is also always a process of individual acquisition in which the impulses from the interaction are incorporated. As discussed by such scholars as Piaget (e.g., 1952) and Ausubel (1968), the core of this process is that the new impressions are connected with the results of prior learning in a way that influences both. Thus, the outcome of the individual acquisition process is always dependent on what has already been acquired, and ultimately the criteria of this process are of a biological nature and determined by the extensive, but not infinite, possibilities of the human brain and central nervous system to cope with, structure, retain and create meaning and abilities out of impressions as perceived by our senses.

However, learning, thinking, remembering, understanding, and similar functions are not just cognitive or content matters, although they have generally been conceived of as such by traditional learning psychology. Whether the frame of reference is common sense, Freudian psychology, modern management, or brand new results of brain research, there is lots of evidence that all such functions are also inseparably connected with emotions and motivation. The Austrian American psychologist Hans Furth (1987), by combining the findings and theories of Piaget and Freud, has unraveled how cognition and emotions during the preschool years gradually separate as distinctive but never isolated functions, and the Portuguese American neurologist Antonio Damasio (1994) has explained how this works in our brain and what disastrous consequences it has when the connections between the two are cut by damage to the brain, even when neither of the functions in themselves have been affected. Thus, the acquisition process also necessarily always has both a cognitive and an emotional side, or more broadly spoken: a *content* and an *incentive* side.

Consequently, all learning always includes three dimensions: the content dimension of knowledge, understandings, skills, abilities, attitudes and the like, the incentive dimension of emotion, feelings, motivation and volition, and
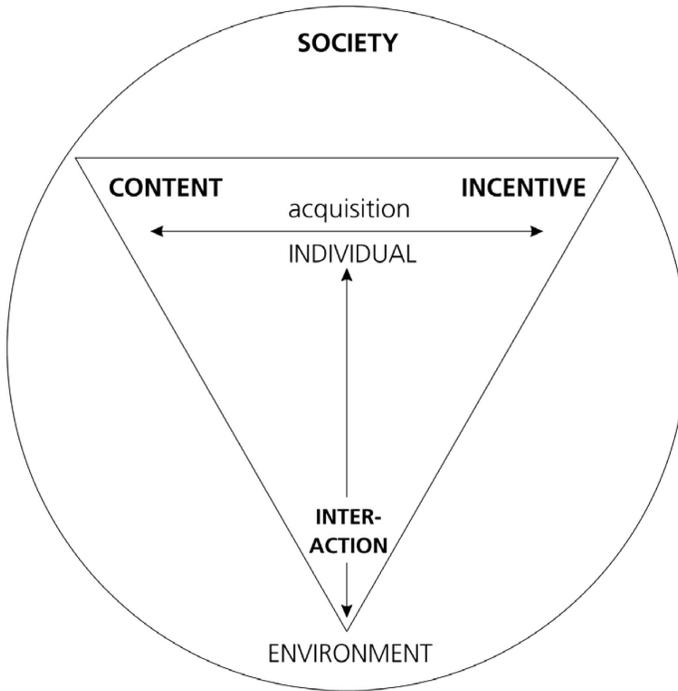
FIGURE 1:   Learning Processes and Dimensions

the social dimension of interaction, communication and cooperation—all of which are embedded in a societally situated context. The learning processes and dimensions may be illustrated by Figure 1.

Different Types of Learning

Another fundamental aspect of learning theory has to do with the different character and scope of different types of learning processes. There are many different typologies, including, for instance, as some of the better known, Robert Gagné's eight kinds of learning, based mainly on American behaviorist learning psychology (Gagné, 1970), and Gregory Bateson's system theory based on learning levels 0-IV (Bateson, 1972). However, I have chosen to specify four types of learning on the basis of Piaget's conception of mental schemes (Piaget, 1952; Flavell, 1963), because these learning types can be explained in relation to the character of the acquisition process as outlined above.

As already mentioned, the acquisition process implies a linking between new impulses and the results of prior learning. These results cannot be thought

of as merely an unstructured mass of knowledge, emotions, abilities, and so on. Actually, one of Piaget's most basic assumptions is that to learn something means to mentally structure something, that is, to incorporate it in a mental scheme. From modern brain research we know that such schemes have the character of dispositions to reactivate specific electric circuits between brain cells that represent the content and incentives in question (Damasio, 1994). Piaget used the term *schemes* in relation to knowledge and understandings. In relation to emotions, social abilities, and other capacities of a less exact nature, I have suggested mental *patterns* as a more adequate term (Illeris, 2002).

When a scheme or pattern is established, according to the Danish psychologist Thomas Nissen (1970), this is a case of the learning type which he called *cumulation,* a kind of mechanical learning, establishing an isolated formation characterized by a form of automation that means that it can only be recalled and applied in situations mentally similar to the learning context. This is, for instance, how learning by conditioning functions.

The most common type of learning is, however, *assimilation,* or learning by addition, meaning that the new impulse is linked to a scheme or pattern already established in such a manner that it is relatively easy to recall and apply when one is mentally oriented toward the field in question.

But sometimes situations occur where we receive impulses that are difficult to immediately relate to any existing scheme or pattern. This can then take place by *accommodation* or transcendent learning, implying that one breaks down (parts of) an existing scheme or pattern and transforms it so that the new situation can be linked in. Thus, one relinquishes and reconstructs something, a process that can be experienced as something demanding and even painful. The result can be recalled and applied in many different, relevant contexts.

Finally, there is also a far-reaching type of learning implying what could be termed personality development and characterized by simultaneous restructuring in the content, the incentive and the interaction dimensions. This typically occurs as the result of a crisis-like situation caused by challenges experienced as urgent and unavoidable. Such processes have traditionally not been conceived of as learning, but they are well known in the field of psychotherapy. However, in psychology it has gradually been realized that these processes may also be understood as the most far-reaching type of learning that changes the organization of the learner's self, identity, meaning perspectives or whatever terms have been used (e.g., Rogers, 1951; Engeström, 1987; Mezirow, 1991). I have chosen to use Jack Mezirow's concept of *transformation* or transformative learning for this type of learning.

It is, however, important to stress that when using the framework of four fundamental learning types that I have sketched here—cumulation, assimilation, accommodation, and transformation—it must be understood that although these learning types are very different in their scope and complexity, none of them can be said to be better or more valuable than the others, as it is

precisely the capacity to practice all four learning types that makes the learning of our species so supreme, and the more complex types of learning always presuppose that other and more basic learning has provided the preconditions that make them possible.

Barriers Toward Learning

Up to now I have been dealing with what happens when somebody learns something, and this is obviously what learning theory primarily is about. But certainly this is not always the case, and it should be just as important to deal with what happens when somebody in a learning situation does not learn anything or learns something that is insufficient or quite different from what is intended.

Therefore I have also taken up the question of what happens when intended learning does not occur. And empirically together with some of my colleagues I have worked intensively with this question in connection with a 3-year study of adult education from the perspective of the learners, dealing with various types of education for low-skilled or unemployed adults in Denmark (Illeris, 2003a), and later in another 3-year project on learning in working life (Illeris et al., 2004).

There may, of course, be an unlimited number of individual and situational reasons for nonlearning (which I use as a general and overall term for all kinds of not learning, insufficient learning, distorted learning, unintended learning, and the like). To establish some kind of structure in the field, I shall take my point of departure in the three learning dimensions that I set up earlier in this article: the content, the incentive, and the interaction dimension. However, it must be stressed that this is only a point of departure. It is one of my core understandings that all learning includes each of the three dimensions. But when it comes to nonlearning, it is not about processes that are fulfilled but about processes that are blocked or derailed, partially or totally. So in this case, the dimensions can be used to separate different kinds of nonlearning in relation to the types of barriers and the dimensions in which they are mainly rooted. But at the same time, it must be acknowledged that they more or less impact all the dimensions of the process, that different kinds of mental barriers often work together, and that it is only analytically that the main kinds of reasons for nonlearning can be kept apart.

In the content dimension, barriers to intended learning will be about what is generally seen as content that is not acquired, grasped or taken in as intended. In general, I use the term *mislearning,* implying that for some reason the impulse or message does not come through correctly, resulting in erroneous learning or nonlearning. The reasons for this may be, for instance, a lack of involvement or concentration, a lack of necessary prior learning to understand the message, or it may be because of inadequate communication or teaching. Behind such reasons there may again be other mentally or socially

more deeply rooted causes. But when it is a case of more or less pure mis-learning, the main consequences are in the content dimension: The learner does not acquire what he or she wants or is supposed to learn.

However, the barriers to learning may also be rooted mainly in the incentive dimension. If so, it will typically be a case of some kind of mental *defense*. Freud has described such defense mechanisms as personal inhibitions, such as for instance repression of impulses that are personally unbearable and therefore must be banished to the unconscious domain from where they can influence the experience and behavior of the learner in all sorts of uncontrolled ways.

In our late modern society, these types of personal defense mechanism have certainly not disappeared; we all have such barriers. But they seem—at least in the educational field—to have been surpassed by other, more general and societally rooted types.

One of these we are all subject to, and we must be so to maintain our mental balance. It is a defense against the overwhelming number and complexity of impulses and influences that everybody is exposed to today. Nobody is able to take all this in—to try to do so would lead directly into insanity, and therefore we have all out of necessity built up a semiautomatic defense system—described by the German social psychologist Thomas Leithäuser (1976) as our *everyday consciousness*—that either rejects or distorts the majority of impulses, preferably, of course, those that we dislike or are less interested in, but often also those that we might profit from but do not immediately categorize as worth dealing with.

Other related "new" types of defense mechanisms are against the radically increased number of changes in life conditions that we are exposed to, the feeling of powerlessness that we often experience when authorities encroach on life conditions we have built on or feel right, or the kind of *identity defense* we react with when our situation changes fundamentally because of conditions on which we have no influence—as for instance when people suddenly become unemployed, not because they have not been good enough but because outside "circumstances" make their employer move their workplace to another part of the world or give up the activity or because new technology takes over.

Finally, nonlearning may be rooted in the interaction dimension. In this case, it is typically a matter of mental *resistance,* which may often be combined with and difficult to separate from defense but in its essence is a very different function. Because defense is something that is there in advance of an event that might result in learning, resistance is active nonacceptance and objection. This can be inappropriate and annoying in many situations but nevertheless constitutes symptoms of strong personal forces and engagement. By means of resistance, for example, decisive development and recognition of one's own opinions, potentials, and limitations can take place. Therefore resistance has the potential of leading to very important learning processes, albeit

often of other kinds than what the message or intention has been. Both for the individual and for our common culture and society, the most important steps forward are often released when someone resists accepting the usual way of doing and understanding something.

Experiential and Nonexperiential Learning

Historically, it is obvious that the concept of experiential learning and Dewey's emphasis on experience as a signifier of valuable learning are rooted in the contrast—of which we all have an immediate feeling—between the rich and versatile learning of significant life events and the often boring and limited syllabus learning of traditional schooling.

If this contrast is related to the three learning dimensions as outlined above, it is easy to see that traditional syllabus learning is predominantly related to or aimed at the content dimension, whereas important life learning includes significant learning in all three learning dimensions. And if we return to the concept of experience, it is also obvious that an important experience includes content, incentive, and interaction learning.

Thus, one could easily jump to the conclusion that experiential learning could be defined as learning that includes all of the three learning dimensions. However, such a conclusion would be much too simple, and actually it was a main point of the framework that all learning has these three dimensions. Motivations and emotions are involved in even the most traditional and boring school learning, and although they may be of a negative and restricting nature, they will definitely influence both the learning process and the outcome. Likewise, school learning is also a kind of interaction, and both the "how" and the "who" of the interaction will influence the learning.

Therefore, in relation to the learning dimensions, the significance of experiential learning is not that all three dimensions are involved but how they are involved and the kind of attention they are given. As a contribution to a definition of experiential learning I therefore propose the following:

> Experiential learning can be understood as learning in which the learning dimensions of content, incentive, and interaction are involved in a subjectively balanced and substantial way.

It is obvious that this is not a precise definition as there are no criteria to decide what is "balanced" and what is "substantial." But as I see it, this is quite reasonable because it would give a false impression if a definite limit were drawn between what is experiential and what is nonexperiential learning. There is a gradual transition, and the important thing is to state what the essential features of this transition are. So in this matter, I am in line with Dewey

when he points to the quality and value of experiences as decisive criteria. The difference is that Dewey's criteria are ethical in nature, whereas I try to establish criteria that are of a more subjective (and thereby also experiential) kind.

Seen in relation to the learning typology I have outlined, there is apparently again an easy and clear conclusion that could be drawn: Is it not so that experiential learning is more or less identical with accommodative and transformative learning in which there is a change or reconstruction of the learners understanding and attitude, and nonexperiential learning is the same as cumulative and assimilative learning in which presented content is just accepted and adopted?

But again, no, this is not the case. Accommodative and even transformative learning may occur as a result of quite traditional teaching or even reading a newspaper or a book, and on the other hand even strong experiences may lead to assimilative and, in the first years of life, probably to cumulative learning also.

However, it would be quite reasonable in this area to establish a rule of thumb, stating,

> The more complex the type of individual acquisition is, the more likely it is that the learning could be characterized as experiential.

In this case also, the formulation indicates that we have to do with a gradual transition between experiential and nonexperiential learning, and in relation to the learning typology the criterion is the complexity of the acquisition in relation to the individual mental schemes and patterns. And again, it is something that cannot be measured but that is related to subjective experience and, in some cases, also to objectively visible changes in behavior, attitudes, and the like.

Finally, it is obvious that in the area of barriers toward learning all kinds of defense are of a prohibitive nature and therefore will tend to prevent or hinder experiential learning. On the other hand, resistance toward learning is only performed when the learner is provoked so much that a mobilization of energy to resist takes place—which will almost inevitably mean that the learning will be of the kind we term as experiential.

In this area, it is therefore easy to formulate the following rule:

> Defense against learning tends to prohibit experiential learning, whereas resistance toward learning tends to trigger experiential learning (which often will be in opposition to the intended learning).

As can be seen, I have also here chosen a rather imprecise formulation—because experience has taught me that in the area of learning, and especially of learning barriers, the degree of complexity is so high that one should be cautious about very categorical expressions.

Conclusion

In this article I have set out to find a definition or demarcation of the concept of experiential learning on the basis of a general learning theory or framework. The result can be summed up as follows:

> Experiential learning can primarily be understood as learning in which the learning dimensions of content, incentive, and interaction are involved in a subjectively balanced and substantial way. In addition, the more complex the type of individual acquisition, the more likely we would be to characterize the learning as experiential. Furthermore, defense against learning tends to prohibit experiential learning, whereas resistance toward learning tends to trigger experiential learning (which will often be in opposition to the intended learning).

At the outset of the article I briefly examined some earlier attempts to define or characterize experiential learning, and I found that these attempts could not "really be accepted as more than indicators of what experiential learning is about." It is up to the reader to decide whether my formulation provides a better bid. It is clearly not an exact definition, and I have explicitly desisted from this in acknowledgement of the fact that learning is such a complex matter that formulations that are too categorical should be avoided.

In my own understanding, my formulation has the advantage of referring to an elaborated comprehensive theory or framework of learning in general. Instead of referring to more or less philosophical discussions of the meaning of the word "experiential" it points to the necessity of considering the connection between the learner and the content that is or should be learned. What kind of prior learning has the learner been through in relation to the learning area in question? What kind of interest and motivation is involved—does the learner subjectively want and/or need to learn what is intended? What kind of activity is likely to make the learner engage himself or herself in the topic or ability the learning is about?

After all, experience is a very subjective matter, and learning cannot be termed as or have the qualities of being experiential if the learner is not in a situation in which he or she is ready and willing to learn. This is also why there is—or should be—a close connection between experiential learning and Human Resource Development: Personal development is not triggered by any learning. For instance, learning factual knowledge, however important it might be, does not usually imply personal development. The crucial point is how the learner subjectively relates to the learning situation and the learning content—does it, or does it not, provide a message or an offer that is subjectively experienced as being of interest and importance?

We cannot refer to "experiential learning" without realizing that ultimately experience is a subjective matter. The proposed definition tries to include this basic understanding and specify important features of what it means in relation to learning.

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