

Katherine Hale

Dewey Personal Reflection Paper

I began this semester concerned with learning about the mechanics of teaching adults. I am ending this semester with a much broader perspective of adult learning as a process and adult education as a field, with a history and a role in social justice. While there will no doubt be best practices to learn in the future, I am coming to understand that these are just the “tip of the iceberg” that is adult education. John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* (1938), our assignments and discussions in this Adult Education course and my experience in the Processes and Methods course have helped me to see adult learning as a process based in experience, develop my teaching philosophy, and understand the importance of the learning community.

Education as a Process Based in Experience

The thing that struck me most about Dewey’s *Experience and Education* is its lasting relevance. Dewey wrote his book in 1938; seventy-five years later, we continue to struggle with many of the same issues, foremost of which is what it means to educate.

Education, for both children and adults, is far too often teacher-centered, with relatively little concern for learners’ needs and experiences. Generally, those who are older, wiser and more experienced dictate curriculums with little or no input from learners. This imposes a sort of unnatural standardization to the learning experience and yields more to memorization than true learning or education. Dewey notes that those who have more experience can and should provide valuable guidance to learners (1938, p.71); however, without relation to learners’ prior experiences, learners cannot fully connect with the content. Learners only truly learn when they are able to build upon their past experiences in a meaningful way.

Dewey's ideas about the nature of education being based in experience speak to me, perhaps, because of my background in health education, which is something that our class touched on during week 11, with Stephanie Winsborrow's review (2013) of Chapter 27 from the *Handbook of Adult and Continued Learning* (2010, pp. 295-303). In health education, it is critical—sometimes even a matter of life and death—that learners comprehend and can apply health information such as how to take medications, foods to avoid and other self-care instructions. If that information is provided to a sick patient in the same medical jargon that it is provided to a medical resident, the patient may only understand bits and pieces, if any, of it. In contrast, when the information is presented in a manner that relates to what the patient already knows, he or she is much more likely to grasp and be able to apply it.

One very simple but personal example of this principle comes from my time writing materials for the American Kidney Fund. Most people lack a thorough understanding of what their kidneys do. People may understand that their kidneys make urine, but the filtering function of the kidneys, and the implication of the lack of this function for those with kidney disease, is unclear to many. One way that we, at the American Kidney Fund, would explain the concept of the kidneys as a filter was through the analogy of a colander. I often told people that their kidneys worked like a colander, keeping some things in their body while letting other things drain out. Most adults have had the experience of draining something through a colander, and building on this experience as a foundation, they are better able to learn how their kidneys function and the significance of kidney disease.

I have heard of countless examples in which health information was presented to learners in a way that was too unfamiliar for them to grasp. In many such cases, it is our failure, as educators, to relate content to learners' experiences in a way that they can understand. I believe that this is a contributing factor in many health disparities, and after reading Dewey's *Experience and Education*, I

understand how the failure to directly relate learning to learners' past experiences is a significant problem in education overall.

Teaching Philosophy

In helping me understand learning as a process that is necessarily based in experience, Dewey's *Experience and Education* has also helped me further develop my teaching philosophy. One of the assignments in my Processes and Methods course was to write a paper discussing my teaching philosophy. The Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory (as cited in Galbraith, 2004, pp. 59-74) aligned me most closely with Dewey's Progressive Philosophy, about which I read a brief description. Next, I read about Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1997), and the concept of transformative learning resonated a little more strongly with me. This was before I read *Experience and Education*.

I cannot say that my teaching philosophy has changed entirely from that of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to Dewey's Progressive Philosophy; however, I feel that I now have a more thorough understanding of the two and that my teaching philosophy is evolving into one that balances the ideas of both.

As I stated in my Philosophy of Teaching paper (2013), I agree with Mezirow's (1997) assertions that each learner sees the world through his or her own lens or frame of reference (p. 5) and that learning occurs when a learner reflects upon and modifies the assumptions upon which that frame of reference is built (p. 7). Mezirow (1997) states, "To facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions," (p. 10). While this is true, Transformative Learning Theory fails to place enough emphasis on the role of experience in learning and the educator's duty to relate to learners' prior experiences when teaching. I especially appreciated the practical aspects of Progressive Philosophy that Dewey (1938) presented, including the considerations and planning involved in teaching (p. 40, p. 58), how an educator can guide learners

without imposing his or her own desires upon them (p. 71), and even suggestions for how to organize subject matter (p. 82).

Relating again to the Adult Education course, two of my classmates' projects, in particular, and the ensuing discussions stand out to me in having further illustrated Dewey's ideas and helping to shape my teaching philosophy. The first project was Hayley Williams's historical topic review on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. While Paulo Freire may more commonly be associated with the Radical Philosophy in adult education (Elias and Merriam, as cited in Zinn, 2004, p. 74), I see ties between Freire's emphasis on understanding and respecting learners' diverse backgrounds and Dewey's views on the importance of "meeting learners where they are" in regards to their past experiences. The second project was Angela Belitskus's agency visit to Gravity Salon. The Salon seems to exemplify many of Dewey's ideas, as it balances formal and informal learning, focusing on experience through on-the-job training, and tailoring training to meet employees' needs. Learning how this institution has implemented the principles of the Progressive Philosophy has convinced me that the application of Dewey's ideas is feasible.

Importance of the Learning Community

In reading Dewey's *Experience and Education* and in going through both the Adult Education and Processes and Methods courses this semester, I have been struck by the importance of the learning community. Dewey (1938) describes in many instances throughout his book that both the educator and learners make up the learning community. The educator is not separate from the learners in this community, and decisions are made based upon the betterment of the learning community. This idea contrasts the manner in which most of my schooling took place, even, in many cases, through my undergraduate courses. I feel fortunate to be able to state that the concept of a true learning

community has been exemplified in my two courses this semester, and my learning experience has been undoubtedly richer as a result.

I appreciate Dewey's discussion of the learning community, including its members and generally how it functions; however, *Experience and Education* fails to offer many practical suggestions for creating and fostering a learning community. My courses this semester have helped to fill this gap. In my Processes and Methods course, we learned about the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching, which includes such components as establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing meaning and engendering competence (Wlodkowski, 2004, p. 145). This, the discussion of establishing inclusion in particular, served as my first real academic introduction to the sense of a learning community. What I did not realize at the time was that our Adult Education class had already established a thriving learning community, the foundation of which was laid in our discussion of the paper, "The TAO of Conversation," by Michael Kahn (1995).

Kahn's paper (1995) discussed a "barn-raising" strategy for class discussions, in which learners build upon each other's ideas, and the discussion, including any problems posed, belong to the group rather than any one individual. This set the stage for rich "barn-raising" discussions each week in the Adult Education class, and I believe the principles were carried over by many students to the Processes and Methods class as well. Having such healthy learning communities in both classes enabled learners and educators alike to share thoughts and stories freely, allowing us to learn from one another's experiences and enhancing the learning experience overall. These are the sorts of learning communities I imagine Dewey would have intended.

In Summary

John Dewey's *Experience and Education*, paired with the assignments and discussions of my Adult Education and Processes and Methods courses, has helped me gain a better understanding of

learning as a process, further develop my teaching philosophy and understand some of the principles, like community, that must be in place to foster true education. I will continue to reflect upon these ideas and experiences as I proceed through the remainder of my coursework in the Adult Education and Training program, and I will certainly refer back to what I have learned this semester as I strive to create meaningful learning experiences and communities in the future.

References

- Belitskus, A. (2013, December 3). Gravity Salon: An Examination of Informal Learning. [Post to online discussion board]
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & Education*. New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Galbraith, M. W. (2004). *Adult learning methods: A guide for effective instruction (3rd ed.)*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.
- Hale, K. (2013, October 13). Philosophy of Teaching.
- Kahn, M. (1995). *The TAO of Conversation*. New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Kasworm, C. E., Rose, A. D., & Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2010). *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (2010 ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74*, 5-12.
- Williams, H. (2013, October 9). Pedagogy of the Oppressed-Paulo Freire. [Post to online discussion board]
- Winsborrow, S. (2013, November 6). AET Topic Review Chapter 27 Adult Education for Health and Wellness. [Post to online discussion board]
- Wlodkowski, R. J. (2004). Creating motivating learning environments. In M. W. (Ed.), *Adult Learning Methods: A Guide for Effective Instruction (3rd ed.)* (pp. 141-164). Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.
- Zinn, L. M. (2004). Exploring your philosophical orientation. In M. W. Galbraith, *Adult Learning Methods: A guide for effective instruction (3rd ed.)* (pp. 39-74). Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.