What is "experiential learning"?

As a field of practice experiential learning is vast. If we look at the range we see everything from farming to conflict resolution; from assessment to youth development; from practical skill training to theoretical models; and from personal growth to workplace training and development. All are labelled experiential learning - all are presented as being part of the experiential learning family.

What then counts as experiential learning? For some people it is all of education - for others it is narrowed down to a specific practice or curriculum model. The vast array of educational activities using the term experiential learning can be seen in Jane Henry's work.

(Henry, Jane (1989) "Meaning and practice in Experiential Learning" in Susan Weil and Ian McGill (eds) Making Sense of experiential learning, SRHE & OU Press, Milton Keynes, 1989, pp. 29-33. (In this chapter Henry presents a more complex diagram of experiential learning methods which are all grouped under the diagram used in this paper.)

Another useful categorization of the field of experiential learning was developed out of the work of the First International Conference on Experiential Learning in London in 1987.

"Experiential learning refers to a spectrum of meanings, practices and ideologies which emerge out of the work and commitments of policy makers, educators, trainers, change agents, and 'ordinary' people all over the world. They see 'experiential learning' - with different meanings - as relevant to the challenges they currently face: in their lives, in education, in institutions, in commerce and industry, in communities, and in society as a whole. Across such diversity, however, we discern four emphases for experiential learning. Each emphasis forms the basis for a cluster of interrelated ideas and concerns ... We have chosen to refer to these clusters of people and ideas as 'villages' ... we see the four villages as follows:

- Village One is concerned particularly with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience as the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training opportunities, and professional bodies.
- Village Two focuses on experiential learning as the basis for bringing about change in the structures, purposes and curricula of post-secondary education.
- Village Three emphasizes experiential learning as the basis for group consciousness raising, community action and social change.
- Village Four is concerned with personal growth and development and experiential learning approaches that increase "self-awareness and group effectiveness"

(Quote from Susan W Weil and Ian McGill, "A Framework for making sense of Experiential Learning" in Making Sense of Experiential Learning, Susan S Weil and Ian McGill (eds), SRHE/OU Press, Milton Keynes, 1989, p. 3. This book contains an edited selection of the papers presented at the First International Conference on Experiential Learning in 1987.)

Experiential Learning as a "learning model"

In terms of learning, experiential learning can be described as a process by which the experience of the learner is reflected upon, and from this emerge new insights or learnings.

David Kolb developed the most established model of experiential learning. In his model the process begins with an experience ("concrete experience"), followed by reflection ("reflective observation"). The reflection is then assimilated into a theory ("abstract conceptualization") and finally these new (or reformulated) hypotheses are tested in new situations ("active experimentation"). The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests new concepts and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualization.
(David Kolb, et al, Organizational psychology: an experiential approach, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1971)

Most models of experiential learning are cyclical and have three basic phases: an experience or problem situation; a reflective phase within which the learner examines the experience and draws learnings from that reflection; and a testing phase within which the new integrated insights or learnings are applied to a new problem situation or experience.

Experiential learning can therefore be defined in terms of a learning model "which begins with the experience followed by reflection, discussion, analysis and evaluation of the experience. The assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims, ambitions and expectations. From these processes come the insights, the discoveries, and understanding. The pieces fall into place, and the experience takes on added meaning in relation to other experiences. All this is then conceptualized, synthesized and integrated into the individual's system of constructs which he imposes on the world, through which he views, perceives, categorizes, evaluates and seeks experience." (Albert Wight, "Participative education and the inevitable revolution" in Journal of Creative Behaviour, Vol 4, No 4, Fall 1970, pp. 234-282.)

Saul Alinsky in his work on training community organizers, discusses the way in which people react to life as "a series of happenings which pass through their systems undigested" and he concludes that "happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized". (Saul Alinsky, Rules for radicals, Random House, New York, 1972)

The theoretical work done on experiential learning has established it as a method of learning which is useful to both educators and learners. This methodology helps learners to develop capacities to reflect on experience and appropriate significance through such reflection.

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