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Reflection Plus 4: Classifying Alternate Perspectives in Experiential Learning

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Abstract: This paper presents five theoretical perspectives that can inform experiential learning. A rationale for this typology is outlined briefly, then each perspective is described according to learning dimensions such as view of knowledge, learner, power, and role of educator. A chart summary comparing these perspectives will be distributed at the session.

Introduction: Rationale and Classificatory Method

"Experiential learning" is arguably one of the most significant areas for current research and practice in adult education, and increasingly one of the most problematic. The term "experiential learning" is used variously to designate kinesthetic directed instructional activities in the classroom, non-directed "life experience", special workplace projects interspersed with "critical dialogue" led by a facilitator, learning generated through social action movements, and even team-building adventures in the wilderness. Current theory and practice seems to be dominated by an understanding of experiential learning as reflective construction of meaning, with particular emphasis on "critical reflection" and dialogue. However, alternate perspectives about the nature of human experience, and the relationships among experience, context, mind, and "learning", raise important issues about the assumptions and values of the reflective view. Further inquiry into experiential learning may be assisted by clarifying distinctions among these perspectives.

To this end, this paper offers a typology of five currents of thought which appear to have developed in recent scholarly writing addressing experiential learning. These were selected for discussion here either because of their prominence in recent writing about learning and development, or because they offer an original perspective that may raise helpful questions about existing understandings. The typology is not intended to provide a comprehensive meta-review of experiential learning literature, but to honor and clarify different perspectives so that dialogue among them may continue.

The five currents of thought selected have been given informal titles for purposes of reference in this paper, which should not be understood as formally-designated theory names. These titles include reflection (a constructivist perspective), interference (a psycho-analytic perspective rooted in Freudian tradition), participation (from perspectives of situated cognition), resistance (a critical cultural perspective), and co-emergence (from the 'enactivist' perspective emanating from neuroscience and evolutionary theory). The typology will compare these five perspectives by briefly summarizing their position on each of eight dimensions, then suggesting critiques and questions raised for each perspective by others. The eight dimensions are focus, basic explanatory schemata, view of knowledge, view of relation of knower to object and situation of

knowing, view of learning process, view of learning goals and outcomes, view of the nature of power in experience and knowing, and view of the educator's role, if any in experiential learning. These dimensions are rooted in Greeno's (1997) response to debates about the nature of situated knowing, with additions from learning issues raised in the other perspectives presented here.

Any typology such as this makes compromises to produce a certain clarity. The focus here on a limited number of dimensions eliminates other dimensions which some may consider significant. It also eliminates the ability to examine rich details of the subtleties, differences and interactions among these currents of thought. Such a broad typology may blur important internal differences within each perspective, and build the illusion of static reification of these dynamic perspectives. But these limitations may hopefully be overlooked in face of the potential usefulness of this tool.

1. Reflection (a constructivist perspective)

Reflection on lived experience towards construction of knowledge is the basic premise of the work of Kolb (1984), Boud (1995), Wells (1996), Clark and Merriam (1993), Mezirow (1990), and many other adult educators. In experiential learning, the individual is assumed to be the primary actor in a process of knowledge construction, understanding is viewed as a conscious, rational process, and knowledge is a set of structures stored in memory that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations.

Constructivism has a long and distinguished history (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1966; Wells, 1995) portraying learners as independent constructors of their own knowledge, with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions. Through reflection on experience, a learner is believed to construct a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world. In the field of adult learning Schon (1983, 1987) has been a significant proponent of constructivism, where reflection during and after 'action' is considered an important mental process required to transform experience into knowledge. The educator's role has been described as facilitator or 'animator' (Boud and Miller, 1996) of learning.

Critics such as Britzman (1998), and Sawada (1991) maintain that the reflective constructivist view is simplistic and reductionist. It reifies rational control and mastery, ignores the role of desire in learning, and sidesteps ambivalences, vicissitudes and multiple internal resistances in the learning process. Its view that experience must be processed through reflection clings to binaries drawn between complex blends of reflection/action, doing/learning, implicit/explicit, active/passive, and life experience/instructional experience. From a feminist perspective, Michelson (1996) observes that emphasis on (critical) reflection depersonalizes the learner as an autonomous rational knowledge-making self, disembodied, rising above the dynamics and contingency of experience. The learning process of "reflection" presumes that knowledge is extracted and abstracted from experience by the processing mind. This ignores the possibility that all knowledge is constructed within power-laden social processes, that experience and knowledge are mutually determined, and that experience itself is knowledge-driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings. Further, argues Michelson (1996), the reflective or constructivist view of development denigrates bodily and intuitive experience, advocating retreat into the loftier domains of rational thought from which 'raw' experience can be disciplined and controlled.

2. Interference (a psycho-analytic perspective)

Britzman (1998) interrogates learning theory from psychoanalytic principles developed first by Anna Freud. This perspective views learning as interference of conscious thought by the unconscious, and the 'uncanny' psychic conflicts that result. The general learning process is 'crafting the self through everyday strategies' of coping with and coming to understand what is suggested in these conflicts.

This view suggests that our experiences are a series of psychic events, much of which we repress: anxieties and fears, disruptions and mistakes, vicissitudes of love and hate. The unconscious can't be known directly but its workings constantly interfere with our intentions and our conscious perception of direct experience. These workings constantly 'bother' the ego, producing breaches between acts, thoughts, wishes, and responsibility. Despite the ego's varied and creative defenses against confronting these breaches, the conscious mind is forced to notice random paradoxes and contradictions of experience, and uncanny slips into sudden awareness of difficult truths about the self. These truths are what Britzman (1998) call 'lost subjects', those parts of our selves that we resist, then try to reclaim and want to explore, but are afraid to. We learn by working through the conflicts of all these psychic events. Experiential learning is coming to tolerate one's own conflicting desires, while recovering the selves that are repressed from a terror of full self-knowledge.

Critique from situative perspectives might argue that psychoanalytic theory dwells too strongly on the internal, with insufficient attention paid to the systems that bind the changing human mind and its psychic traumas to its changing contexts. Lave (1988) points out that context is frequently undertheorized as some kind of container into which individuals are dropped. The context may be acknowledged to affect the person but the person is still viewed as an autonomous agent of knowing with his or her own psychic systems, which are still viewed as fundamentally distinct from other contextual systems. Further, the psychoanalytic view seems to assume that learning can take place entirely as a mental process, regardless of patterns of participation in continuously evolving communities. Psychoanalytic views may mistake learning and doing, individuals and the tools and communities of their activities, as separable processes.

3. Participation (a situative perspective)

Situative perspectives (i.e. Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown, Duguid, and Collins, 1989; Rogoff, 1990; Greeno, 1997) theorize how individuals learn to participate in practices in interactional systems. A system is not containable nor clearly separated from any individual actor in it, but is a flow of energy, action and relationships, including the work and learning of its participants. Knowing and learning are defined as engaging in changing processes of human activity in this particular system. In other words, knowledge is not mental structures acquired by the learner, but a process of participation in interaction with systems.

Individuals participate in a system by interacting with the community (with its history, assumptions and cultural values, rules, and patterns of relationship), the tools at hand (including objects, technology, languages and images), and the moment's activity (its purposes, norms, and practical challenges). Knowledge emerges from these elements interacting (Lave and Wenger,

1991). Thus knowing is interminably inventive and entwined with doing. Situated theorists ask, What constitutes meaningful action for a particular individual in a given context? How is the development of knowledge constrained or created by the intersection of several existing practices in a particular space? (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

Learning is "improved participation" in a particular situated activity (Greeno, 1997). Improved participation results partly from becoming more attuned to constraints and affordances of different real work situations. The educator may arrange authentic conditions and activities in which the learners practice participating. When learners attend to how specific properties and relations influence possibilities for acting in one situation, they can more easily transform that activity through interaction with other systems and thus develop ability to participate meaningfully in a wider range of situations (Greeno, 1997).

Some constructivists have criticized the situative perspective for its inability to explain sufficiently to the phenomena of generalization and transfer, as well as its lack of attention to individual intent and layers of self as these influence participation. The critical cultural perspective would challenge its a-political position. Relations and practices related to dimensions of race, class, gender, and other cultural/personal complexities, apparently ignored by situative theorists, determine flows of power which in turn determines different individuals' ability to participate meaningfully in particular practices of systems. Finally, situated perspectives seem silent on the issue of resistance in communities where tools and activities may be unfair or dysfunctional. The situated view assumes that encouraging participation in the existing community is a good thing, and thus provides no tools for judging what is deemed 'good' in a particular situation, or changing the status quo.

4. Resistance (a radical cultural perspective)

Views of experiential learning and pedagogy that entwine knowledge with power and the collective are evident in the work of critical cultural theorists such as Freire, bell hooks, and Giroux (1992), Kellner (1995), feminists such as Hart (1992) and Luke (1990), post-colonialists such as Said (1993) and Spivak (1988), and many others. These writers maintain politics are central to human activity, identity, and meaning. They make explicit and demystify existing moment-to-moment interplays of power, and advocate social reconstruction by seeking more inclusive, generative and integrative alternatives to certain oppressive cultural practices and discourses.

Critical cultural perspectives suggest that experiential learning in a particular cultural space is shaped by the discourses and their semiotics (the signs, codes, and texts) that are most visible and accorded most authority by different groups. These discourses often create dualistic categories such as man/woman, reflection/action, learning/doing, formal/informal which determine unequal distribution of authority and resources. Such dualisms also legitimate certain institutions and exclude others, and generally limit the possibilities of people's identities. Giroux (1992) analyses borders thought to define cultural communities, examining the identity options constructed for people within certain borders and the consequences for those who transgress. Others like Kellner (1995) draw attention to representations of people within cultural discourses and practices. They offer tools for analysing identity categories, looking at who is represented as

Other to the 'norm', and how these representations of Other are used to contain, define, control behavior and relations, explain historical patterns, and position authority and resistance.

Giroux and others (i.e. Edwards and Usher, 1998) are interested in ways location/dislocation functions in people's learning. New spaces for alternative cultural practices and identities are being opened by border crossings and blurrings in this globalized world, where experience may be 'real' or 'virtual'. Post-colonialist writers claim that all of our histories, and therefore our experiences and learning, are entwined in some way with colonization. They examine how dislocation has worked to depersonalize and dislocate colonial subjects, what worlds are being created from these oppressions (Spivak, 1988), what patterns of dissent have resulted (violent, pacifist, and withdrawal) and how dissent and resistance have been created by the very structure of colonial power (Said, 1993). Bhabha (1994) suggests that new hybrid knowledges and spaces are developing from our collective histories of colonial dominance/resistance.

Learning is a process of naming these currents, practices and symbols both to unmask practices of oppression/suppression, and to recover what cultural writers call 'subject positions' that are lost in rigid narrow identity categories. Educators can help make explicit the politics and constraints of cultural sites, both inside and outside learners and at crossings where inside meets outside. Educators can help themselves and others become more aware of how, through their experiential learning, their own natures are constituted, their own positionalities, and their interpretations and responses to difference. Kellner (1995) cautions educators not to suppose a monolithic 'dominant ideology' which is inherently manipulative or evil, and to remember that people are not a mass of passive, homogeneous non-critical victims of a dominant ideology. But within this cautionary frame, the learning goal is liberation and transformation of people's culturally-determined perspectives, so they become empowered to resist oppression, transcend limited cultural rules and images, and assert their own voices. Giroux (1996) writes about pedagogy as opening spaces to discern new futures, craft new identities and seek social alternatives that may be obscured by current dominant ideologies and struggles.

There has been much criticism of emancipatory views of experiential learning. Feminist scholars have shown the repressive potential in any emancipatory efforts (i.e. Ellsworth, 1992). Troubling issues about who presumes enlightenment, and how authentic democratic participation can ever be achieved through existing discourses which favor certain knowledge interests over others, have not been resolved. Britzman's (1998) psychoanalytic view challenges the processes of individual or collective 'critical reflection' as being a highly limited means of coming to self-knowledge. Cultural analysis does not attend sufficiently to the extraordinary significance of desire and the nuance of the unconscious in determining understandings and behaviors developed through experience. Our attempts at achieving deeper awareness by examining experience solely through rational 'critical' thinking are thwarted by the ego's investments in maintaining its own narcissism.

Enactivists and certain situated perspectives of psychology claim to have moved away from viewing power as a primary determinant of systems' evolution. They reject as too deterministic the structural view of a dominant elite subordinating other groups. Sumara and Davis (1997) eschew entirely what they describe as traditional perspectives of domination/oppression as

perpetuating negative views of power. They explain that systems theories of learning place much greater emphasis on mutual affect, collectivity,

and coemergence -- which transcend the limitations and self-perpetuated negative circles created by power/resistance-based critical thinking.

5. Co-Emergence (the 'enactivist' perspective)

Enactivism is a theory explaining the co-emergence of learner and setting (Varela, 1995; Maturana, 1995; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991). This perspective of experiential learning assumes that cognition depends on the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensori-motor capacities embedded in a biological, psychological, cultural context. Enactivists explore how cognition and environment become simultaneously enacted through experiential learning. The first premise is that the systems represented by person and context are inseparable, and the second that change occurs from emerging systems affected by the intentional tinkering of one with the other.

Obviously people make meanings, choose actions, and reflect on these actions as intentional agents within these systems. However, they do so with highly limited observations, especially of themselves and the actual knowledge they express through their own actions, and only partial understandings of the indeterminate system in which they participate. An individual 'lays down a path while walking' (Varela, 1995). There is no residue of knowledge left in one's head that can be represented or transferred to different contexts of action, because knowledge is whatever was expressed in embodied action.

In analysing a process through which a group learned and changed over time, Sumara and Davis (1997) show the usefulness of enactivism as an explanatory tool. They describe how systems of cognition and evolution interacted in spontaneous, adaptable and unpredictable ways that changed both, resulting in 'a continuous enlargement of the space of the possible' (p. 303). In other words, people participate together in what becomes an increasingly complex system. New unpredictable possibilities for thought and action appear continually in the process of inventing the activity, and old choices gradually become no longer viable in the unfolding system dynamics. Knowledge flows as action in this dynamic system. It is not a set of understandings 'constructed' by an individual or collective.

Facilitators may have a role in helping all to understand their involvement, and finding honest ways to record the expanding space and possibilities. Questions of facilitation are offered by Sumara and Davis (1997): How does one trace the various entangled involvements in a particular activity in a complex system, while attending assiduously to one's own involvement as participant? How can the trajectories of movement of particulate actors in relation to the system's objects be understood and recorded in a meaningful way?

Challenge to this view from a critical cultural perspective observes that discussion of experiential learning is inseparable from cultural practices, social relations, images and representations. Perspectives such as enactivism don't address inevitable power relations circulating in human cultural systems. Therefore the influences on patterns of co-emergence exerted by culturally-

determined meaning categories such as gender/race/sexuality/class/religion may be indiscernible from a system-perspective. In addition, neither systems nor situative perspectives appear to attend to the way cultural practices (such as tools of discourse, image, and representation) have been shaped and maintained by dominant groups in the system, and continue to sustain interests of some participants in the system more than others. Further, a systems view like enactivism demands that the interests and identities of individual elements be surrendered to the greater community. Therefore, individuals become vulnerable to a few who manipulate the system's discourses to sustain their own power, ensuring that their experiences become the most valued knowledge in the collective.

Implications for theorizing the nature of experiential learning

A careful comparison of theoretical frames is needed to help researchers and educators better understand and name the various processes occurring as experiential learning, and constitute their own roles relative to these processes in moral, sensitive ways. The perspectives highlighted by this paper may help interrupt dominant views of experiential learning as reflective knowledge construction, and open spaces for dialogue between situative and enactivist, constructivist, critical, and psychoanalytic voices. These perspectives can also move us toward developing more robust theoretical tools for experiential learning that integrate issues of reflection, interference, participation, power, and co-emergence raised by different perspectives. Meanwhile, such comparative examination of different perspectives can enlighten and raise new questions for each perspective, as well as help researchers, theorists, and educators situate and think carefully about beliefs of experience and learning underpinning their own practice.

The further challenge is to examine the links and blurrings among these perspectives, to locate points where they already agree or where they may complement one another. More in-depth comparison should identify and probe, with careful analysis of terms and conditions, points of complete disagreement. These points of controversy may help us choose the most imminent questions for our further inquiry into the nature of experiential learning.

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