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Experiential learning in informal educational settings

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This special issue of the *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning* explores ways in which we can conceptualise, study and document experiential learning in education in diverse national contexts, across varying ages, from school to university pre-service students, within multilingual and multi-religious educational settings. Taking a global perspective, this compilation includes articles from four different continents: Europe, Asia, Australia, and North America. Its main focus is on how experiential learning interacts and functions in the contexts of both formal and informal educational settings, and on the implications which follow from our particular conceptions of experiential learning for the fields of both formal and informal education. The articles in this special issue also consider the relevance of experiential learning in the postmodern, globalised world, especially in relation to multiculturalism, ethnic and religious diversity, as well as discussing how it can meet the needs of social justice and equity.

Experiential *learning* is "a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experiences" (Jacobs 1999, p. 51). It relates to the learner who undergoes what David Kolb (1984) has described as "the transformation of experience" (p. 38). On the other hand, Experiential *education*, as defined by the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), encompasses the educator as well as the learner and is "a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills,

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clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" (AEE n.d.).

More than 70 years ago, John Dewey, in his book *Experience and Education* (Dewey 1963 [1938]), already analysed the importance of experience to the learning process. Experiential learning provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in acquiring skills and knowledge. Students can thus move away from being recipients of information to being active learners. Dewey refers to an "experiential continuum" through which one experience generates another experience (ibid., p. 17). He concludes:

> [T]he central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences (ibid., p. 45).

A primary responsibility of educators is not only to be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience, but also to recognise that experience should lead to growth. According to Dewey, experiences are preplanned educational devices which consciously and intentionally utilise the potential embedded within the social and physical surroundings of the individual to enhance specific educational ends meant to construct and deconstruct the individual's worldview, value system and moral code.

More recent research has also demonstrated the importance of experiential learning in assisting different learners from minority groups in order to meet social justice and equity needs. It can also foster a strong learning identity, required by the rapidly changing globalised world. In his book *What happens when students are in the minority: Experiences that impact human performance,* Charles Hutchinson (2009) presents various case studies. These studies demonstrate how important minority learning experiences can be for educators, and how they can transfer these experiences into the classroom environment. For example, a teacher commented on the fact that her African-American students needed physical activity to assist them in their learning. Through the application of experiential learning techniques they were able to participate in and enjoy their lessons more. Alice Kolb and David Kolb (2009) argue that it is also important to develop a "learning identity" and that, unlike a teacher-dominated classroom, problem solving education using experiential learning techniques empowers this.

Thus, fostering and strengthening experiential learning is an important issue for teaching and learning. Some would argue that it is the overriding issue in our global, postmodern world. But what definitions of experiential learning inform the research and practice of educators?

This special issue includes conceptual, empirical and programmatic research on the topic of "Experiential learning in informal educational settings". The contributions help to build a broad and nuanced understanding of experiential learning in diverse geographical locations and educational settings – what it means, how it is fostered, how it can be studied, how experiential learning relates to other educational goals such as literacy (in the sense of interpretive knowledge), social activism, equity, meeting the needs of minority groups, religious practice, how different aspects of identity (such as linguistic, gender-specific, cultural, religious,

political) relate to one another and what this implies for education and informal education.

The difference between *educational experience* and *experiential learning*

Dewey developed the concept that students of all ages are not a *tabula rasa* [a blank slate], that is they enter the classroom with knowledge from their prior experiences, and can draw on that knowledge for their metacognition. Therefore, according to Dewey, the role of the educator is to draw on this past knowledge in order to create an educational experience. In addition, Dewey argued that: "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Or, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (Dewey 1963 [1938], p. 17). Moreover, students can enter the teaching and learning situation with predispositions which are negative in terms of experiential learning. For example, K.H. (Ina) ter Avest, in her article included in this issue, discusses how "the verbal process of reflection" is not part of the background of the descendants of migrant workers, so that they "remain imprisoned in their own culture-related narrative".

It can be difficult for students to grasp that there can be multiple causes for an historical event. Drawing on students' own personal *experience* can lead to a better understanding of this complexity. For example, we (the guest editors) know about a teacher who, in teaching about the causes of World War I, first asked the high school students to give an example from their own lives as to when they had quarrelled with their parents, and to analyse the cause or causes of this conflict. In most cases, the students came up with a number of causes. This discussion, drawing on the students' life experience, then assisted them in gaining an understanding of the complex causes of World War I.

With *experiential learning in informal educational settings*, the situation can be different, because in this case, the educator may create a situational experience which the student has not encountered in her/his life. Through creating these experiences, the student can come to a better understanding, and thus learning is facilitated. This approach is illustrated by a number of the articles in this special issue, including the article by Ina ter Avest, as will be discussed below.

While the concept of *educational experiences* was first introduced by Dewey in 1938, it has subsequently been dealt with in depth in the literature. However, the concept of *experiential education*, that is creating new experiences and engagement for the students through innovative pedagogy, is a more recent theoretical construct, which has only been clearly defined since the turn of the 20th century.

Definitions of an informal educational setting

There is a strong scholarly debate about the differences between *experiential education* and *informal education*. A variety of terms have been used to apply to informal education, including *extra-curricular activities, non-formal education, co-curricular activities* and *allied activities*. Scholars have distinguished between three

different forms of learning: *formal learning*, within school classroom settings; *informal education*, as a "lifelong process" of ongoing learning through exposure to different experiences; and *non-formal education*, which relates to organised educational activities outside of the formal, school framework (Dave 1976; La Belle 1981, 1982). In this special issue, we are taking the approach that *experiential education* refers to a specific pedagogy, which can take place in formal, informal and non-formal settings and contexts.

Reuven Kahane (1997, 2004) was the first renowned scholar to delineate the eight elements of experiential education, which he calls "codes of behaviour" within formal, informal and non-formal settings. These include: "voluntarism" (free choice), "multiplexity" (wide spectrum of activities), "symmetry" (balanced relationships without a hierarchy), "dualism" (expressing contesting views), "moratorium" (postponement of commitments), "modularity" (eclectic construction of activities), "expressive instrumentalism" (activities performed both for their own sake and as stepping stones towards the achievement of future goals) and "pragmatic symbolism" (ascribing meaning to symbols) (Kahane 1997, pp. 23–30), and the integration of experiential and instrumental activities, enabling a meaningful educational encounter, as discussed in our own article included in this issue.

In their overview of informal education, Shlomi Romi and Mirjam Schmida (2009) stress the educational advantages of non-formal education, that is education outside of the formal classroom. As they elaborate, this involves drawing on free choice and individual decision-making involving a democratic process, which is more relevant to education in the postmodern era. This is the main focus of our special issue.

Overview of articles in this issue

The six articles in this special issue indicate that topics relating to experiential learning have global relevance, and their authors include scholars dealing with concepts which are pertinent to education across the world. The articles also span the age groups from schooling to later stages of teacher and adult education, indicating a lifelong process which involves both formal, informal and non-formal educational settings as defined above.

We begin with *David Zyngier*'s article, entitled "How experiential learning in an informal setting promotes class equity and social and economic justice for children from 'communities at promise': An Australian perspective". Instead of the more usual expression "at risk", Zyngier prefers the more positive "at promise" (coined by professor of Culture, Society and Education Beth Blue Swadener). Focusing on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the pilot study Zyngier presents of an after-school programme was carried out in two state-run primary schools in the Southern Metropolitan region of Melbourne, where many students come from single-parent, working-class, refugee or recent migrant families. The programme seeks to engage the community at a range of levels: from the school principal, teachers, the students themselves and their parents to volunteer high school students and university volunteers who are pre-service teachers in professional placement.

Zyngier provides an excellent theoretical background, drawing on the literature relevant to all the key aspects of the study, particularly with regard to engaging pedagogies which promote achievement, equity, social justice, school–community partnerships and social capital. The evidence collected from the findings of the pilot study and the concluding discussion confirm the success of this programme, which also provides a model of experiential learning for other disadvantaged communities. The programme reflects all the elements of experiential learning, including choice, active participation and involvement, and empowering the students.

Enabling students to interact with their cultural and religious background, so that they can build a strong identity and connection to their community, is another important issue for educators. Our own jointly authored article, entitled "Experiential learning and values education at a school youth camp: Maintaining Jewish culture and heritage", examines how annual experiential camps within the Jewish day school system in Australia initiate students through immersion into an authentic Jewish life away from their normal, secular environment. We observed two philosophical approaches: one focused more on socialisation, with immersion into experience, and the other on education, with immersion into Jewish knowledge. Our findings revealed that some educators aim to "transmit" knowledge through "evoking", with the students involved in active learning (Dewey 1963 [1938]); others focus more on "acquiring" through transmission. Experiential learning activities were found to be more meaningful and powerful if they combined both approaches, which lead to growth (Dewey 1963 [1938]).

The next contribution, entitled "Encountering the past in the present: An exploratory study of educational heritage tourism", brings in a different perspective. *Magdalena Gross* and *Ari Kelman* investigate an innovative programme for Polish second-generation North American university students, of both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, the main element of which is a specially designed trip to Poland. This programme is based on an experiential approach, combining formal lectures, interactive walking tours and meetings with various players in contemporary Poland, whilst exploring the country's past history and the Holocaust. The authors draw on David Kolb and Ronald Fry's four-step schema (Kolb and Fry 1975), demonstrating how the educational heritage programme relates to these steps through the fact that all participants embarked on the trip voluntarily; demonstrated an ability to reflect on their experiences; were able to conceptualise; and created new knowledge from the experience. The importance of affective learning, stressed by Kolb et al. in a later publication (1999) as an important element in experiential learning, is also confirmed by participants' positive comments on the affective elements of the programme. The authors found that the programme influenced the participants' sense of Polish identity – in the majority of cases in a positive manner, although they also report on the critical voices mainly amongst the Jewish participants; it impacted on their understanding of their family history; and helped them to create a better comprehension of the parameters of Polish history. Thus, overall, the authors' findings were positive in terms of the role of experiential learning in this programme.

Examining a different cultural framework in her article entitled "'I experienced freedom within the frame of my own narrative': The contribution of psychodrama

techniques to experiential learning in teacher training", *K.H. (Ina) ter Avest* addresses a key issue relating to the acculturation and integration of "second-generation" descendants of migrant workers who came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. from Turkey and Morocco). She discusses how students from that background who are enrolled in a teacher education programme face challenges in taking a critical approach to critical situations in their professional life as a teacher. She demonstrates how experiential learning can assist them in overcoming these challenges. She discusses psychodrama as an experiential approach, before presenting the specific case study of Rafaëla, who is an ambitious Dutch-Moroccan student on her way to becoming a teacher. Ter Avest, through her detailed discussion of this case study demonstrating the use of psychodrama to create a more reflective approach in the student, effectively illustrates the theoretical approach in her article. Her findings and recommendations are very relevant for contemporary society and education.

In his article entitled "'I find it odd that people have to highlight other people's differences – even when there are none': Experiential learning and interculturality in teacher education", *Fred Dervin* deals with an important issue of prejudice and stereotypes. He demonstrates how individual experiences can foster a better understanding of difference in order to promote interculturality within a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual teacher education programme in Finland. His article draws on both interculturality and experiential learning, and uses discourse analysis of students' personal narratives of their own experiences before the start of the programme. He illustrates how often fairly small cultural differences can create dissonance between people of different ethnic backgrounds. The aim of this study is to encourage the trainee teachers to reflect on their personal experiences and to draw on these to develop a better understanding of the cultural differences among their students in the classroom.

The final contribution to this special issue is an article by the late *Régis Machart* who sadly passed away in September 2016. He is sorely missed by his colleagues and his family. We are very grateful to his colleagues Fred Dervin and Joseph Goh for helping us see this article through production so that it could be published as a tribute to Régis Machart. This article, entitled "The implementation of industrial training in tertiary education in Malaysia: Objectives, realisations and outputs in the case of foreign language students", highlights another perspective of experiential learning by analysing the introduction of "industrial training" or *Latihan Industri* (LI) for Malaysian university students. It examines the value of such an experiential programme, as well as the conditions necessary for it to succeed. The article outlines the challenges of higher education and the difficulties graduates face in finding suitable employment in Malaysia, a situation which resulted in the introduction of the LI programme. The first cohort of students to undergo this training in the academic year 2011–2012 had to provide a final report in which they were asked to evaluate their experiences. Machart's careful content analysis of a sample of four students' final reports highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the LI programme. He demonstrates the particular importance of participating companies offering support and mentoring for their trainees, rather than using them to fill a vacancy in the company or leaving them to cope on their own. In the

discussion of one of the students' training, Machart stresses that she was able to learn effectively during her placement, because "she received proper guidance and assistance from her supervisor". This article illustrates that experiential learning can only be successful if it constitutes a carefully structured experience.

In conclusion, experiential learning transfers abstract teaching and learning into more meaningful learning situations. It changes the role of the teacher from being a transmitter of knowledge to being a facilitator of knowledge acquisition, thus enabling a more systematic, effective learning outcome. It includes the elements of choice, voluntarism and informality (Kahane 1997) to encourage active student learning. Experiential learning can, thus, provide a holistic approach to education, thereby meeting the authentic needs of diverse student groups, including disadvantaged students, students from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds and students with different religious and ethnic requirements. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, it can also meet the needs of different age groups, from schools to university preservice to community groups across different geographical settings.

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