

Theories of Adult Learning
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This paper will analyse and critically evaluate the experiential theory of adult learning, examined in module 2 of unit EESV340, from the perspectives of different theorists. I will also present and justify my own perspective and indicate how this would influence my lesson planning.

There appears to be three main schools of thought on experiential learning theory from which to analyse it; situated and action theory traditions, phenomenological traditions and critical theory traditions. I will analyse and evaluate experiential theory from the perspectives of theorists whose philosophies align with these three traditions.

John Dewey (as cited in UCDavis, n.d.), a philosopher and psychologist, is regarded as the father of experiential education; his philosophies influenced the progressive education movement and laid the foundations for future theorists. Carl Rogers (as cited in UCDavis, n.d.), a psychologist, saw experiential learning [EL] as addressing the needs and the wants of the learner, he viewed EL as equivalent to personal change and growth, his philosophies influenced the humanistic education movement. More recently, David Kolb (as cited in UCDavis, n.d.), an educational theorist with an interest in social change, developed a well known model of EL that conceptualises the process of the EL cycle. Many other theorists, such as Jarvis (2004), have since used Kolb's model and expanded upon it to explain their own theories.

Dewey is considered the most significant and influential educational theorist, he was among the first to conceive of education as being a lifelong process. Problem solving and experience were key concepts of his educational philosophy, he believed that education must

engage with and enlarge experience (Burns, 2002). Jarvis (2004) suggests the desire to learn is a fundamental human need as it facilitates the process of comprehending the world in which we live and adapting ourselves to it. Dewey (1938, as cited in DECS, 2005) believed education should emphasise learning as a process that integrates life experiences, advocating immersion in the experience itself, he was concerned with the relationship between experience, interaction and reflection that enabled learners to resolve internal conflicts and adapt ideas to stimulate learning and create and apply knowledge. The implication of this to my own teaching practice can perhaps best be summed up with the thoughts of educational psychologist David Ausubel “The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach accordingly.” (as cited in Shulman, 1999, chap. 3, para 4.).

Dewey saw significance in the subjective nature of experience as it relates to individual uniqueness in the background of the participants, their personality, and their learning style. He believed that present experience is created by past experience interacting with the present situation “It is the teacher's responsibility to structure and organize a series of experiences which positively influence each individual's potential future experiences [Dewey, 1938/1997]” (Neill, 2004, para. 4). One of the criticisms of Dewey’s theories is that he believed the dominant experience was habitual, and that reflective experience only occurred when habitual experience was contradicted (Oxendine, Robinson & Willson, 2004). I believe the strength of his theory lays in the significance given to contextualised past experience and the role it plays in the learning process.

For me the implication here is to find ways to link planned learning activities to the learners past experiences in order to facilitate the process of meaning making. One way of

doing so would be to use dialogue and scaffolding to assist learners in reaching zones of proximal development. Engeström (1994) refers to Vygotsky when he discusses guiding learners to a common or higher levels of comprehension and understanding by engaging in an indeterminate discourse, what Vygotsky terms reaching the zone of proximal development. Dewey's philosophies seem consistent with the perspective of situated and action theory traditions that stress the importance of socio-historical roots and cultural activity in analysis of experience (Fenwick, n.d.).

Rogers philosophies place emphasis on self-actualisation of the learner, he sees the goal of education as developing the whole person. He depicts EL as "something that is personally and emotionally meaningful as well as cognitively relevant." (Burns, 2002, p.242). Education is seen as a foundation for personal development and growth, with emphasis on locus of control to the learner, learning is self directed and self evaluated (Huitt, 2001).

Rogers believes teachers should facilitate only, that self experience, self-discovery and learning to learn are important. He believes learning to be primarily based upon experiences that offer "direct confrontation with practical, social, personal or research problems" (UCDavis, n.d. chap. 3). Critics suggest that his approach to learning can lead to person-centredness and that a propensity to create selfish individuals (Thinkers on education, n.d.). I believe the strength of his theory lays in his belief that learning and education develops the whole individual.

The implication to my teaching practice is the significance of being aware of the developmental stages of learners and the importance of teaching with developmental intentions when planning EL activities (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000). Roger's

philosophies seem consistent with the perspective of phenomenological traditions that place emphasis on emotional states and analysis of the learner's way of communicating, thinking, acting and observing (Fenwick, n.d.).

Kolb views learning as a process and as such he developed a four part cyclic model of EL. Kolb argues that learning follows a pattern that can be divided into four stages: Concrete experience, Reflective observation, Abstract conceptualisation, Active experimentation. Kolb suggests learning can begin anywhere in the cycle, not just with concrete experience (Jarvis, 2004). Kolb's work draws on the influence of Dewey, among other theorists. Critics believe that Kolb's learning cycle does not appear to take in to account the social aspect of learning or the role groups can play in the learning process (Oxendine, Robinson & Willson, 2004). Rogers points out that "learning includes goals, purposes, intentions, choice and decision-making, and it is not at all clear where these elements fit into the learning cycle." (Rogers, 1996, p. 108, as cited in Kelly, 1997). I believe the strength of Kolb's model lays in its ability to "help educators recognise that learners vary in how they respond to each of the modes in the cycle, and in how they grasp and transform their experiences and observations" (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000).

The implications I see for Kolb's learning cycle in my teaching practice is that it highlights the relevance and importance of creating EL activities applicable to each area of his learning model, given that learners can enter and make meaning of learning at any stage in the cycle.

Before concluding, I feel the work of Paulo Freire cannot go unmentioned. Freire's work emphasised the importance of dialogue, he placed significant importance on developing

consciousness in order to transform the learner's reality and he believed education should be situated in the lived experience of learners. Freire argues that "the point of education must be to illuminate reality, to unmask how domination works" (Rethinking schools, 2002, para 1). Freire's philosophies seem consistent with the perspectives of critical theory traditions that emphasise critical self-reflection as a central element of development, the aim being to correct political and social factors that may limit learning (Fenwick, n.d.).

In conclusion the formulation of my own perspective on experiential theory is informed by an eclectic mix of what I believe to be the strengths inherent in the perspectives of the theorists discussed. I believe teaching to be, above all, humanistic in nature and resonate with Jarvis' (2004) view that teaching is a moral activity. My philosophies align with Rogers in that I contend with the view of education as enhancing growth and development of the individual and believe the essence of learning to be meaning. I see value in Dewey's work in regard to enhancing democracy through education and individual effectiveness in society and community and find Kolb's learning cycle a useful conceptual tool that I can utilise in framing appropriate EL activities. I admire the idealistic and somewhat complex philosophies of Freire.

"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand" [Confucius circa 450 BC]. (as cited in Oxendine, C., Robinson, J., & Willson, G. 2004, para. 3)

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