Experiential Learning

THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Table of Content

Experiential Learning: Theory to Practice

Classrooms today have evolved into entities that extend well beyond the traditional four walls of the brick and mortar variety. As we continue to expand our ideas and pedagogy around effective learning, it is important to examine the history of learning theories as well. There are many theories out there to probe such as Lev Vygotsky's Theory of Social Development, Jean Piaget's Genetic Epistemology, Jerome Bruner's Constructivism or John Seely Brown's Cognitive Apprenticeship. But for the purposes of this paper and my future teaching practices, I chose to explore the Experiential Learning theory. (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010)

Experiential Learning

Definition

Experiential learning is essentially learning by doing or learning from experience. In order for students to develop new skills, attitudes or new ways of thinking, they must first immerse themselves in an experience and then reflect on that experience. To expand even further, experiential learning must comprise of certain characteristics in the execution for it to actually be deemed as experiential learning.

"It is a series of working principles, all of which are equally important or must be present to varying degrees at some time during experiential learning. These principles are required no matter what activity the student is engaged in or where the learning takes place." (Schwartz, 2012)

There are several ways to ensure an activity or method can be identified as experiential learning:

- There should be a balance between content and process (experiential activities and theory).
- Safe space for students to work through exploration and discovery process.

- Engagement of activities relevant and personally meaningful to students.
- Make real-world connections and encourage students to see the big picture
- Reflect on their own learning
- Lead students to create emotional investments to the learning
- Analyze and re-examine values
- Make connections and understand relationships to self, teacher and the environment
- Learn outside of one's comfort zone (ie: physical or social environment) (Schwartz, 2012)

It is important to stress that experiential learning is student-centered; students are in the driver seat and are in control of their own learning. "The characteristic of continuity reinforces the perspective that the individual learner must be viewed as the key design element." (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010)

History of

John Dewey is credited with being a leading theorist of experiential learning dating back to the late 1800s. He emphasized the notion that everything occurs within a social environment. This includes knowledge which derives as a result of people interacting and communicating with each other through experiences. Hence, students learning experiences should take place within a nurturing and social learning environment. (Roberts, 2003) Dewey also discussed other elements of experiential learning. He envisioned collaborative student experiences, active participation, instructor in the role of facilitator and experiences unique to each learner. Dewey believed that the purpose of education was for learners to be reflective, creative and responsible in their development as critical thinkers. (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010)

Context of Application

Existing Teaching Practices

Experiential learning is very much applicable to my current teaching practices as an elementary school teacher. As part of our Internationally Baccalaureate (IB) program at my school, many of the

characteristics (listed earlier) of an experiential learning activity are naturally practiced. For example, students engage in inquiry-based learning. They are given an IB theme, they are encouraged to ask questions centered around the theme and central idea, then they are given the opportunity to investigate and follow their own line of inquiry through research. This is connected to the experiential principle of them engaging in activities that are personally meaningful to them. It is student-centered as they are the architects of their own learning and discovery. I also serve more as a facilitator than as a brick and mortar teacher. IB students reflect on their learning throughout the process, both individually and with their peers.

Application to Online Learning

When examining any learning theory, it is important to discuss its application to online or distance learning. It is crucial because "today, a third of American children regularly use computer tablets, while over 40% use smartphones and 53% regularly use laptops in their home." (Pearcy, 2014) This is evidence of technology advancements impacting the way we imagine our education. We must provide students with opportunities to engage in effective experiential experiences. This can be achieved through many methods. I would like to emphasize through the online application, peer interaction, instructors acting as facilitators during the process and inspiring learners to be reflective practitioners.

Peer Interaction

According to experiential learning theorist, John Dewey's work, "the characteristic of interaction reinforces the importance of dialogue and communication and engagement in learning." (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010) Learners must be able to develop their own understanding. Their ability and willingness to

do this increases when a safe environment is provided for students to connect. This encourages meaningful discussions and collaboration with others. Furthermore, "asynchronous online courses leads students to be more dependent on one another and thus results in greater collaboration. According to constructivism, this makes the online environment conducive to enhanced learning." (Crawford-Ferre, 2012)

Teacher as Facilitator

One of the proven researched-based strategies for effective online practices, and good teaching in general, is that instructors serve in the capacity of facilitators as opposed to lecturers. Experiential learning supports this method of instruction. Online faculty must "eschew the sage on the stage orientation to teaching" and adopt the "more modern guide on the side approach." (Kurzman, 2013) Student to teacher interaction is just as important as student to student engagement. According to John Dewey, "learning is based on discovery guided by mentoring rather than on the transmission of information." (Kurzman, 2013) Online teachers can increase their effectiveness as instructors by serving as guides. It allows the student to be the teacher, gain more information and it encourages participation on the student part.

Reflective Practitioners

Reflection is key to successful experiential experiences that engages students in critical thinking. Reflective practices inspires critical thinking because "an individual learner can extract learning from distinct concrete experience through a process of cognitive reflection that is best undertaken separate from the experience." (Jordi, 2011) Reflecting on their experiences allow learners to connect on a much deeper level to what they are doing. It also enables them to adjust their actions, learn from their mistakes and become better problem solvers. Examples of experiential activities and methods are project-based,

inquiry-based and problem-based learning. All require high levels of active engagement and require critical thinking throughout the process of doing. Requiring learners to engage in reflective practices at the conclusion of their experiences creates reflective practitioners.

Conclusion

The experiential learning theory has been around in the educational system since the early 1900s. It was highly advocated by educator and philosopher, John Dewey. Other educators and philosophers have drawn from John Dewey's work to modernize the term. It centers around the thought that education should be a democracy; students are in control of their own discovery and essentially, they learn by doing. Experiential learning theory abandons the notion of the traditional sage on the stage method of teaching as being effective. Instead, it embraces the guide on the side approach. This lends itself well to learners participating in acquiring knowledge through peer interaction and first-hand experiences. As a future online educator, by applying the experiential learning theory to my practice, my learners will engage in purposeful real-world experiences that will drive them to become productive problem solvers who are globally competitive.

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