LESSON 10

Teaching Dewey's Experience and Education Experientially

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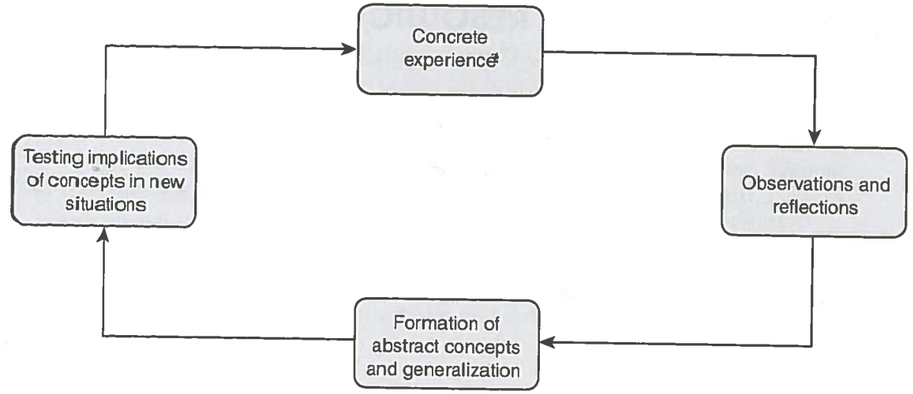
This lesson plan introduces learners to some of the experiential education theory found in John Dewey's seminal book *Experience and Education*. Key concepts from the book are taught experientially, with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle used as the framework for this mixed-methods approach (lecture, experience, and guided discussion) to teaching about experiential education theory.

Background

According to the Association for Experiential Education (AEE 2004), experiential education is both a philosophy and a methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. Central to this definition is the distinction between experiential education as methodology and as philosophy. This distinction suggests that there is a difference between experiential learning and experiential education.

Clifford Knapp, a prominent experiential educator, helps to highlight the difference between experiential learning and experiential education. Knapp (1992) explains that experiential learning consists of four distinct segments: "(a) active student involvement in a meaningful and challenging experience, (b) reflection upon the experience individually and in a group, (c) the development of new knowledge about the world, and (d) application of this knowledge to a new situation" (pp. 36-37). Figure 10.1 helps to illustrate the experiential learning cycle.

This cycle helps to illustrate how experience, reflection, new knowledge, and application can be employed as a way of teaching experientially. Many experiential educational initiatives are based on this learning cycle. Experiential education employs both methodology (experiential way of teaching) and philosophy as part of the educative process. Experiential education as philosophy implies that there is an intended aim toward which the experiential learning process is directed.



▶ **FIGURE 10.1** Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

Many of my own early experiences in learning about experiential education theory both as a student and as a professor, were rooted in learning about the theory presented within the book, including the experiential continuum, student-centered teaching and learning, freedom of experience, and educative and miseducative experiences, among others. Dewey is often cited as one of the founding fathers of experiential education, and much of the early work of the progressivists laid the groundwork for our present-day understanding of experiential education theory (Breunig 2005).

That said, many experiential educators learn and teach about experiential and alternative pedagogies but have done so fairly traditionally through lecture and some discussion. My own knowledge about some of the key theoretical concepts in *Experience and Education* (Dewey 1938), one of the seminal books related to experiential education theory, and other experiential education theory was acquired through a fairly traditional teaching methodology that was predominantly didactic. When I started to teach Dewey's book myself, I initially replicated my own experiences with this method of learning, employing lecture as a means to transmit aspects of the key knowledge found within the book. But students did not always "get it," because many outdoor recreation students are predominantly bodily-kinesthetic learners rather than visual or auditory learners. There is a different, more involving approach to teaching experiential education theory—one that employs a mixed methodological approach to teaching and learning experiential education theory.

Dewey's *Experience and Education* can be learned through an experiential approach that is more "in sync" with the theory being taught and that appeals to the primarily bodily-kinesthetic learning style of students. This can occur while one heeds Dewey's (1938) advice not to reject the old in reaching for the new. In other words, we can combine mini-lecture, experiential activities, and guided discussion as a means to teach about experiential education theory. In this sense, we bring the theories of experiential education into congruence with experiential teaching practices as they relate to *Experience and Education*.

LESSON 10

RESOURCES

Association for Experiential Education. 2004. What is experiential education? www.aee.org (accessed February 23, 2004).

Breunig, M. 2005. Experiential education and its potential as a vehicle for social change. *Academic Exchange Extra,* 4:1-15.

Dewey, J. 1938. *Experience and education*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Knapp, C. 1992. *Lasting lessons: A teacher's guide to reflecting on experience.* Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

Kolb, D.A. 1984. *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lesson Plan

PURPOSE

To introduce students to some of the experiential education theory in Dewey's seminal book, *Experience and Education.* The goal is to acquaint students with this theory using an experiential methodology that appeals to the bodily-kinesthetic learning style of many outdoor recreation students.

OBJECTIVES

As a result of this lesson students will be able to . . .

1. *Cognitive and psychomotor:* develop and teach a lesson, using experiential processes, about Dewey's theory as explained in *Experience and Education.*
2. *Cognitive and psychomotor:* discuss and correctly describe at least three key elements of Dewey's theory.
3. *Cognitive:* develop their own classroom strategies to teach experiential education theory as a result of their own participation in an experiential process of learning theory.

DURATION

80 minutes

GROUP SIZE

15 to 25

LOCATION

Indoor space with room to move

EQUIPMENT

- One retired dynamic climbing rope
- Shoelaces or cordelette (one per person)
- Flip chart paper and markers
- PowerPoint projector

RISK MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

None

LESSON 10

STUDENT PREPARATION

- Students should have already learned about Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and be able to identify and define the four components of the cycle (experience, observation and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing implications in new settings) in addition to a fifth (added) component (preparation). See slide 2 of the PowerPoint presentation.
- Students should also have an understanding of the three learning styles: auditory, visual, and bodily-kinesthetic.
- Students should read Dewey's *Experience and Education* prior to the lesson and prepare a written reading response for the day of the lesson, highlighting some of the key concepts in the book and defining some of the specialized vocabulary in this lesson.

INSTRUCTOR PREPARATION

None

LESSON CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Review Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (see slide 2 of PowerPoint presentation on the CD-ROM). Ask students if they have impressions, comments, or questions about *Experience and Education.* Answer initial questions if there are any. Inform students that the day's lesson will take an experiential approach to learning elements of the theory contained within the book.

Activity 1: Graffiti Walk

Have students write on the flip chart paper, or the chalkboard, some of the key theoretical concepts presented in Dewey's *Experience and Education.* Explain that this is a graffiti walk and that they should try to cover the paper or board with as many concepts as possible.

Circle those concepts that are most relevant, in your view, to experiential education and those that the lesson will focus on. Mention that it is not possible to cover all of the topics. This lesson focuses on the following key theoretical concepts: overt action, rules and social control, impulse and desire, freedom, movement or activity as a means but not an end, and educative versus mis-educative experiences.

Define miseducative and educative experiences (slide 3) and emphasize that this is a central theme throughout Dewey's book.

Activity 2: Overt Action

Have students divide up into pairs. Ask one of the students in each pair to take a shoelace or piece of cordelette. Ask the other student to write down on a piece of paper how he or she would instruct someone verbally about how to tie an overhand knot. Then, without using any demonstration, this second student reads the directions to the first student, asking that person to follow the directions exactly as given. Ask students to show their results.

Now have students reverse roles and ask the student who just wrote the directions to take the shoelace or cordelette. Ask the student who just tied the overhand knot to use any form of communication he or she chooses (demonstration, verbal communication, drawing, etc.) to inform the other student about how to tie an overhand knot. Ask students to show their results.

In most cases, the demonstration method, overt action, will produce better results than verbal instructions alone. Explain what the term *overt action* means (Dewey 1938) and provide a definition (slide 4 from the PowerPoint presentation).

Explain how Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle provides one rationale for the use of overt action. This cycle is an important tool to use when one is designing lesson plans and when one is teaching. Explain that when students were able to tie the overhand knot by using some experience alongside some observation and demonstration, overt action, the results of the knot-tying activity were more positive than with the method of knowledge transmission, simple verbal instructions, used in the first round of knot tying. Invite further questions and comments.

Point out that desks, books, and pens and paper are all examples of what Dewey refers to as *objective conditions*, and refer back to this term on the graffiti walk board. Explain that in many ways these objective conditions help provide some of the minimum necessary structure (Dewey 1938) that is so central to learning. Also emphasize that the objective conditions may inhibit learning because while they may to some extent enable the passive, quiet behavior so often valued in schools, they may also inhibit students' freedom (Dewey 1938). Explain that overt action and freedom are valued aspects of experiential and adventure education but may be less valued by traditional pedagogies that favor the transmission of knowledge and visual and auditory learning styles over the bodily-kinesthetic learning style.

Activity 3: Educative Experience

Move to an open space and provide students with a dynamic climbing rope. Tell them to do something with it, with the reminder that they cannot do something that will be harmful either emotionally or physically to any member of the group. Tell them that they have 5 minutes. It is likely that there will be a period of chaos, and within the 5-minute time frame the students may organize themselves and actually do something or may not.

Ask whether overt action, giving them a climbing rope and encouraging them to do something with it, was educative for them. It is likely that most will say no, but some may say yes. Ask what they learned. Ask if the activity could have been more educative.

Lead into a discussion about impulse and desire. Mention that sometimes overt action is how students' natural impulses and desires find expression. According to Dewey, not all overt action, not all impulses and desires, are educative. Some may be miseducative. Dewey (p. 64) suggests that the ideal aim of education is creation of the power of self-control over students' natural impulses and desires. Students develop self-control when an instructor uses her greater maturity of experience to provide minimum necessary structure (often in the form of objective conditions) to facilitate an experience for students that combines some structure and some freedom (often in the form of overt action) to design educative experiences.

Mention that designing experiences with the "right" amount of minimum necessary structure is no easy task, and draw parallels between Dewey's conclusions about this and instructing wilderness trips. More freedom, overt action, may actually inhibit learning or educative experiences, resulting in a higher level of risk both in learning and in instructing trips. If students and trip participants are always afraid or the environment is always chaotic or unpredictable, experiences may actually be less educative or even mis-educative.

Dewey (1938) emphasized that educative experiences cannot be either/or. They must combine objective conditions and overt action. He suggests that the experiential continuum (see slide 5) is one way to achieve this combination. More recently, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle has helped to frame this idea. Together these resources provide educators with a means to consider how to plan lessons or how to instruct trips. Slide 5 lists the components of the experiential learning cycle alongside the experiential continuum in parentheses.

CLOSURE

- If time allows, have students form small groups and try to design a lesson plan or plan a trip using the experiential continuum or the experiential learning cycle. Using slide 5, provide students with a sample lesson to illustrate. For example, Brock University, where I teach, is located on the Niagara Escarpment, and we have the Bruce Trail running through campus. To teach students about the geology of the area, I tell them that the Niagara Escarpment is a World Biosphere Reserve (the preparation stage of the cycle). At the escarpment we examine the layers of rock and make observations about the nature of the escarpment (the experience stage of the cycle). We then reflect (the next stage of the cycle) on the unique qualities of this area, and next discuss the implications for ways of preserving the area (formation of abstract concepts and generalizations). Students are then encouraged to consider how their individual actions can affect the nature of this particular area and any area in which they may live or travel. Students are asked to identify what they can do to help protect fragile areas (testing implications in new settings).
- If time is too short to do the first suggested closure activity, ask students to discuss some of the implications of the experiential continuum or the experiential learning cycle for their own learning and future teaching experiences. How could they use these ideas in practice? What resonates with them? How do the experiential continuum and the experiential learning cycle address various learning styles? How does the experiential learning cycle address some of Dewey's concerns as explained in *Experience and Education*? Depending on the group of students, the instructor may have to ask additional questions or use various prompts to help students make these connections. Remind students of some of the concepts that were presented during the lesson and some of the other concepts within Dewey's book that also relate to experiential and adventure education (slide 6).
- Another possible closure activity is to have students do the graffiti walk again, seeing if they have additional comments or insights about the concepts as compared to what they learned from the first walk. The relevant PowerPoint slides can be used to reinforce Dewey and Kolb.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

- Ask each small group from the final discussion, just described, to record their responses and to report them back to the class. Or, ask them to actively apply one of the concepts that they have learned to an upcoming experience and then report back to the class, either orally or in writing.
- A quiz can be given on some of the key theoretical concepts.
- Ask students to design lesson plans, as a graded assignment, using the experiential continuum and experiential learning cycle framework.