Theory for Practice: A Framework for Thinking About Experiential Education

Rebecca Carver

The purpose of this article is to present a lens for looking at experiential education that allows us to view it as a comprehensive entity without getting overwhelmed by the complexity of its interwoven parts. Theory of experiential education has been developed in several areas including philosophy, psychology, and sociology (Warren et al., 1995). The framework that I present draws on these disciplines as well as anthropology, cognitive science, and research on education reform. It belongs to no one camp. It is grounded in the wisdom that shapes the voices and actions of experiential educators in a broad variety of settings.

The interdisciplinary framework is needed because experiential education is an interdisciplinary field, and if we are to benefit from our collective wisdom, we must be able to share and integrate what has been learned both in different settings and from the perspectives of different traditions. The framework is designed to help people stay focused on topics of experiential education while viewing them from several angles. So, for instance, it could be used to organize thoughts about such topics as “challenge by choice” or “learning communities” in a manner that maintains the coherence of these ideas and points to the interrelatedness of ideas that stem from ethical, psychological, social, educational, political, physical, and legal considerations.

This chapter originally was published in the Journal of Experiential Education, with the following citation:

Where Does This Framework Come From?

The framework is based on field research, a literature review, and consultations with practitioners. The bulk of the field work took place over a period of two years during which I observed programs, reviewed documents, and interviewed participants and staff. Some observations were made from the perspective of an outsider while others were conducted while I was a participant, student, teacher, facilitator, or director of a program. The literature review began with a critical look at writings that specifically address the theory and practice of experiential education. Based on the initial results of this process and the preliminary findings of my field research, I expanded the scope of my literature review to cover topics in other fields that appeared to be relevant. As an example, I included literature on constructivism and constructivist education after it became apparent that a significant part of experiential education is the participant process of collectively constructing knowledge.

At the 1994 International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education, I held a session that served as a place for checking the validity of my model. Approximately 25 participants generated lists of what they believed to form the essence of experiential education. They were then shown my framework and asked to critically assess its validity. Other than suggestions for minor changes (such as making more explicit what I had not shown in the diagram), feedback was positive.

How This Paper Is Organized

The goal of this paper is to introduce a conceptual framework that can (a) serve practitioners as a basis for developing formative evaluations, (b) shed light on connections between a variety of experiential education programs that on the surface appear to have little in common, and (c) allow theorists to locate their work and that of their colleagues in a context that facilitates communication across disciplines.

The remainder of this paper is divided into sections that respectively address the following questions: What is experiential education? What are the pedagogical principles? What is the nature of student experience? What is the role of the teacher? How does this fit together to form a framework for looking at experiential education? How can we use this framework?

What Is Experiential Education?

Quite simply, experiential education is education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students’ experiences by integrating them into the curriculum. Experience involves any combination of senses (i.e., touch,
smell, hearing, sight, taste), emotions (e.g., pleasure, excitement, anxiety, fear, hurt, empathy, attachment), physical condition (e.g., temperature, strength, energy level), and cognition (e.g., constructing knowledge, establishing beliefs, solving problems).

Experiential education is holistic in the sense that it addresses students in their entirety—as thinking, feeling, physical, emotional, spiritual, and social beings. Students are viewed as valuable resources for their own education, the education of others, and the well-being of the communities of which they are members. Although formal educators become senior members of learning communities, students share in the process of teaching, and teachers actively continue to learn from their experiences with the group.

Since the teacher is a guide, she needs to have a map of the terrain in order to be effective and not risk putting the group in unnecessary danger. The terrain includes the social dynamics of the group; the physical, emotional, and psychological conditions of group members; the level of development that the group and its members have obtained (socially, physically, academically, etc.); the nature and condition of the environment; its location (geographic, political, or otherwise); and the resources available to the group. A gifted educator can show the group how it can use the experiences of its members to build tools and vehicles for meeting challenges that lead toward personal and social responsibility, self-confidence, self-reliance, interdependence, and individual satisfaction.

There are several types of experiential education including (but not limited to):

- Wilderness-based adventure travel, ropes courses, and initiatives
- Job-training internships and apprenticeships
- Survival training and rescue training
- Service learning and programs focused on advocacy
- Art education and production
- Media production (newspapers, television, radio)
- Academic-oriented programs
- Community-based support programs (with a primary goal of providing youth with a safe environment and stable support system for day-to-day living; life skills)
- Early education programs
- T-groups (training groups; interpersonal dynamics workshops)

The purpose for listing the above categories is to show the breadth of experiential education opportunities, and to get people starting to think—or at least wonder—about the kinship among categories that may on the surface seem unrelated to one another. The common elements that underlie their differences are at the core of what experiential education is all about.
Pedagogy

When I started looking for the salient features of experiential education, the first characteristics that came to mind were pedagogical principles that are commonly employed.

Effective educators try to choose methods of teaching that are appropriate for specific situations, taking into consideration the goals of the educational experience, the nature of the content that is going to be covered, and the learning styles of students. So, although there are pedagogical principles that are common among experiential education programs and that are believed by practitioners to be central to the “experiential” method of teaching, the list is not comprehensive and there is no formula for how and when to combine these principles with each other or other forms of teaching.

Having said that, the following four pedagogical principles stand out as salient features of experiential education:

■ **Authenticity**: Activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives. Rewards are naturally occurring and directly affect the experience of the student (e.g. personal satisfaction) Students can identify reasons for participating in activities. Assessment is formative. The programs provide meaningful experiences within the context of the students' outlook on life.

■ **Active learning**: Students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process of learning. These activities are used to address social, physical, and emotional as well as cognitive development. The difference between mentally active learning and passive learning is that the former requires students to internalize the thought processes necessary for problem solving—searching for explanations, figuring out ways of understanding, using imagination and being creative—whereas the latter involves accepting what is said and remembering it, so it can be repeated later.

■ **Drawing on student experience**: Students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena, events, human nature, etc. by thinking about what they have experienced (e.g., what happened to them, how they felt, how they reacted, what resulted, what they observed). Educators create activities that provide opportunities for students to experience what it is like to interact with specific situations. They draw both on experiences students bring with them to a program and those that are shared by participants in the program.

■ **Providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity**: Students develop habits, memories, skills, and knowledge that will be useful to them in the future. The formal process of getting students to reflect on their participation in activities or to reflect on their potential roles as community members is meant to make these experiences relevant to their future endeavors.
Teachers facilitate processes in which students participate in the construction of knowledge.\(^2\) There may be times when teachers share their expertise with students, but unlike a model of education where students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge, students in experiential education programs are treated as active participants in their own education. They are encouraged to take the initiative to seek and learn from the expertise of those around them.\(^3\)

**Student Experience**

Values shape the goals of educational programs, and the goals in turn affect the experiences of students. Experiential education programs tend to value caring, compassion, communication, critical thinking, respect for self and others, individuality, and responsibility. Responsibility includes enabling people to respond, and creating a culture in which they hold each other and themselves accountable. Caring and compassion involve attending to the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being of oneself and others, as well as attending to other aspects of one’s environment.

The sub-goals of experiential education programs usually fall into three categories. Student experience can be understood in terms of development along the interrelated dimensions that respectively correspond with these categories of sub-goals. The dimensions, described below are: Agency, Belonging, and Competence.\(^4\) Together, changes along these dimensions—the ABC of student experience—are at the heart of what students experience during a program and how it affects them (see Table 1).

**The Role of the Teacher**

A great deal has already been said about the role of the teacher. The teacher uses the pedagogical principles and attends to the experiences of students as described above.

Since student experience results from interactions between the students and their environments (Dewey, 1938), the role of the teacher is to cultivate environments in which students can develop ABC.\(^5\) Cultivating an environment involves establishing and nurturing the development of a physical and social context for learning. Teachers introduce resources into the learning environment and make decisions about how resources are perceived,

---

\(^2\) See Duffy and Jonassen (1992) for an introduction to ‘Constructivism.’

\(^3\) See Rogoff (1994) for information about Learning Communities and learning as participation.

\(^4\) These are closely related to dimensions identified by Connell and Wellborn (1991) as essential to the development of a healthy self-concept.

\(^5\) If you only read one piece of literature on experiential education, I suggest *Experience and Education* by John Dewey (1938).
### Table 1. The ABC of Student Experience

| A | “A” represents the developing of students' personal **agency**—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities; increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity. |
| B | “B” refers to developing and maintaining a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of **belonging**—see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability; learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole. |
| C | “C” stands for competence, referring to the development of student **competence** (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a wide variety of areas (cognitive, physical, musical, social, etc.). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned. |

Distributed, and utilized. In addition to physical resources, these include time, space, authority, language, reputation, etc.

Teachers, as senior members of learning communities, are role models and influence the experiences of students by the way they react, respond, and take action in the combination of settings in which they are viewed by students. In addition to modeling behavior, their responses to student behavior affect student experience.

It should also be noted that since the teacher is also a student, the development of Agency, Belonging, and Competence among teachers is part of the healthy functioning of an organization devoted to experiential education.

### A Framework for Thinking About Experiential Education

First, let me summarize what has been said above. Experiential education promotes the development of student agency, belonging, and competence by introducing resources and behaviors that allow for active learning, drawing on student experience, authenticity, and connecting lessons to the future in a learning environment that usually values caring, compassion, responsibility, accountability, individuality, creativity, and critical thinking.

Figure 1 is a drawing of the framework. Student experience, viewed as both a process and an outcome, is at its center. Student experience is located in the context of a learning environment that is characterized by the nature of the student experience, program characteristics,
Learning Environment

Program Characteristics
- Active Learning
- Authenticity
- Connection to Future
- Drawing on Experience
- Other Pedagogies
- Goal of Positive Socialization

Characteristics of the Setting
- Resources & Behaviors (includes: behaviors modeled and language used to describe the environment)

Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

and more general characteristics of the environment. Program characteristics include both the pedagogical principles that are commonly employed and the goal of “positive socialization,” which refers to a process of doing what is in the best interest of both the individual participants and the communities of which they are members. Values, such as those listed above (e.g., compassion and critical thinking), guide decisions about this process. The values also guide decisions about the use of resources and behaviors in cultivating the learning environment.

The Utility of the Framework

The framework is primarily a tool for organizing and communicating ideas about program development and evaluation with colleagues. The framework is not an evaluation instrument and it does not provide a recipe for developing programs. It does provide a structure for thinking about overarching goals, specific objectives, activities, qualifications of staff, selection of students, expectations for student experience, and potential changes for programs and organizations.
My recommendation to program staff interested in using this framework is to start by brainstorming a list of features that you consider to be most salient for the program in question. These features can include goals, values, activities, outcomes ... anything you can think of. Next, try to make a list of values that are associated with the program including any values that came up in the brainstorming session but also any other values that come to mind. Try to be specific. If creativity is valued, for instance, ask what is meant by “creativity.” Set aside the list of values for future reference. Now, draw a copy of Figure 1 on a big piece of paper. Return to the list of features that you have identified as salient and see where they fit on the framework. Use the framework as a map for locating the features and investigating how they relate to one another. Think about the aspects of ABC that are a focus for your program. Are they in sync with the values that you’ve identified? What pedagogical principles do you have in place? Are there any pedagogical principles that are over- or under-utilized? How do your decisions about pedagogical principles, resources, and behaviors affect the development of ABC? Thoughtfully answering the above questions can be the start of a formative evaluation and process of program development.

The framework provides a way to look at the whole picture but it does not give a lot of detail about any of the concepts that collectively constitute its substance. At the start, I suggest using your common sense, relying on your experience, and sharing with each other what your perceptions are of the various concepts and how they interact with each other in your setting. When you are ready to look more precisely at what is known about specific topics, consult references and people that can help you learn how the elements on which you choose to focus fit into the broader contexts of categories in which they fall. For instance, if you decide to (a) identify the types of competence that participants develop, (b) establish objectives for what you would like them to accomplish in these areas, and (c) devise mechanisms for assessing whether or not these competencies are developed, you might want to learn about multiple intelligences theory (see Gardner, 1993) and/or empowerment evaluation (see Fetterman et. al., 1996). On the other hand, if you are interested in focusing on how to strengthen the effectiveness of instructors, you might begin by looking at their use of pedagogical principles, resources (including themselves, each other, time, space, authority, language, and tradition), and characteristic behaviors (responses to a variety of situations including both the mundane and the most challenging), then establish what research might be helpful to support your program development. Keep in mind that we live in an era of information overload and there are a multitude of directions in which you can go as part of a search for better understanding the concepts in the framework. An outside consultant may be able to help you identify some of the possibilities so you can more easily decide which would be most fruitful to explore.
A second way that the framework can be used is to help build alliances among practitioners whose work may, on the surface, seem to be unrelated. It turns out that some of the same challenges faced by preschool teachers are faced by college professors, and some of the fundamental goals of art teachers are shared by rock-climbing instructors, but it can be difficult to identify the common ground. The framework provides a structure and vocabulary for opening dialogues. It can be used to help people articulate the underlying features of programs in terms of the ABC goals of student experience, the pedagogical principles employed, how values affect decisions about resources, staff behavior, and what is desirable for a learning environment. Doing so allows practitioners from different fields to learn from each other, see their own work from a broader perspective, understand how they can support each other’s efforts, and/or work together to accomplish shared goals.

The framework can also be used to hold up a window through which practitioners and theorists can look together at their work and the work of others. It seems that every well-established group of experiential education programs (such as service learning or wilderness therapy) has its own culture in which vocabulary is selected for framing discussions about experiential education. Similarly, theory rooted in the tradition of academic disciplines is focused and limited by boundaries that pertain to the specific fields in which the theories emerge. So, it is often as if the psychologist, philosopher, and anthropologist are sitting in the same house but looking at the world through three separate windows. Sometimes there is overlap in what they see but their perspectives are different. The framework illustrated as Figure 1 is designed to provide a window for practitioners of all kinds of experiential education and theorists from all disciplines to use so we can see how their ideas fit together. That should make visible the interactions among theories and practices, which in turn can increase or challenge the clarity of each person’s perspective.

This window, like any other, is limited by its framework, but this framework is based on the common elements of a wide range of experiential education programs as understood from the perspectives of participants, staff, evaluators, advocates, and theorists from several disciplines. It may always be a work in progress. Constructive criticism is welcome.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the contributions of Mindy Carver and Michael Pease who each provided several hours of thoughtful consultation. I also want to thank those who participated in the 1994 AEE International Conference session titled “What is Experiential Education?” and the many people who have either read and commented on my work, shared in provocative conversation that pushed my thinking forward, and/or allowed me to observe them in action.
References


