

## **Experiential Education for Change**

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*After a career as an experiential and adventure educator, Rick was one of the co-founders and is the current chair of the PhD program in Sustainability Education. As a deep ecologist and ecopsychologist, he seeks to integrate experiences in nature with ways to bring these insights and perspectives into our daily lives and institutions.*

What sustainability pedagogy means in practice is creating learning environments that are student-centered, experientially-based, collaboratively-focused, and directed towards potential transformative change in individuals and organizations. When students are fully engaged in the learning process and responsible for the form and content of their learning, the focus shifts from the teacher to the student, empowering change and innovative thinking. This approach is exemplified by such programs as MAP, the Outward Bound-inspired expeditionary learning schools, and even high performance teams in corporations. Various methods and strategies have been developed to stimulate and facilitate creation of such healthy, high-functioning learning systems. The teacher (or leader) becomes the mentor and coach, supporting the evolution of the learning process to more independence and autonomy.

Many versions and models for this process have been developed. As a pedagogical approach, experiential education seeks to explore the process and mechanisms through which we learn about our place in the world and how we develop the skills, values, attitudes, and strategies to understand and manage our interaction with our environment and other living beings. It reaches across disciplines and examines how we learn through direct experience that is deliberately processed, assimilated, and applied to new situations in a process of continuous learning that grows upon itself in stages of increased complexity. This is a developmental process that begins in infancy and continues throughout our individual and collective lives in organizations, communities, cultures, and nations. It is also a study of how humans absorb, process, assimilate, and apply new learning in a variety of circumstances that vary widely and require the creation of new strategies and insights into the learning endeavor. It is not static but constantly evolving and seeking new information and understanding. Many studies of this process have been carried out over the years. (Knowles, 1980, 1989; Kolb, 1984; Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995; Merriam, 1999, 2001; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000)

In the academic world, experience is enlightened and understood through theory and research that provides a framework for such understanding. It is essential in this domain that research into different themes, issues, and topics be monitored and reviewed by faculty, advisors, and peers. The direct involvement of the student in diverse learning environments—in communities, schools, clinics, or the natural world—provides a vehicle for exploration and experimentation. In experientially-focused study, students are encouraged to seek out unique learning situations that challenge their assumptions, expand their perspectives, and demand insight and rigor, in order to extract meaning and value from that experience.

This implies a direct connection with the natural world. Nature is the ultimate and most immediate learning environment. (Bateson, 1979; Capra 1982, 1991, 1996, 2002) Modern science proposes that patterns and forms in nature are both a product of our evolution and an expression of our vision and foresight that helps to create the structures and processes necessary for our survival. This is the constructivist approach (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) that human and natural forms are inextricably interwoven, involved in manifesting our reality, and that knowledge of each is essential for our future survivability and sustainability as a species. Without such patterns and forms, the content of our

experience is meaningless; without direct experience and content, our forms are empty and devoid of meaning and usefulness.

To take this one step further, approaching human experience from an internal and external perspective, in both individual and collective contexts, is essential to provide a full picture of how we experience the world. (Wilber 1995, 1997, 2000) This entails attention to our internal awareness as well as our experience of the world, consideration of our individual needs as well as those of larger society. Such an integral approach provides us with the most diverse, comprehensive information we need to make everyday decisions. In this context, theory without application serves little end; application without evidence of validity is potentially dangerous. This complicates the learning process and accentuates the hands-on need for exploring our environment. There is such a breadth of subjects and such a range of learning needs and styles that to assume one size fits all denies the way the world really works. As Ken Wilber says, there are no views or approaches that are 100% wrong. While there are patterns in nature and archetypes in human behavior, there is also incredible variety and diversity in both domains.

To separate one's learning from nature (direct experience) is to separate one's self from the very context (environment) in which we learn and to which this learning must apply. To see only one pattern or perspective, to credit only one style or approach, is to miss a view of the whole, and profoundly limit the depth and scope of one's experience. To hear only one voice or follow only one muse is to miss this variety and diversity. To learn experientially implies a constant give-and-take or dialogue with our environment and others, an openness to new knowledge and multiple perspectives, that can transform what we know and our ways of knowing. This is the nature of learning from experience.

There is a whole body of literature and practice that defines the field of experiential education which is Prescott College's primary modus operandi. This does not specify theory or define practice but rather presents guidelines for the journey or process of learning. In one expression (Itin, 1999), this process is defined as:

Experiential education is a holistic philosophy, where carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis, are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results, through actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, constructing meaning, and integrating previously developed knowledge. Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically in an uncertain environment where the learner may experience success, failure, adventure, and risk taking. The learning usually involves interaction between learners, learner and educator, and learner and environment. It challenges the learner to explore issues of values, relationship, diversity, inclusion, and community. The educator's primary roles include selecting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, facilitating the learning process, guiding reflection, and providing the necessary information. The results of the learning form the basis of future experience and learning. (p. 93)

Sustainability Education, by its very nature, is experiential education (and vice versa), inviting learners to move through the same experiencing, application, and reflection process that one must be able to alter one's perceptions and challenge one's assumptions. It just must be informed by theory and practice, tested by application in the field, and critically reviewed for its viability and truth. Does it achieve the goals intended and does it lead to a more sustainable world?

Itin, Christian M. (1999). Reasserting the philosophy of experiential education as a vehicle for change in the 21st century. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 22(2), 91-98.