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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND THE PERSON

Introduction

There are many different ways a person can learn. They can learn by doing, by sharing, by reading, by thinking, by playing, through pleasure, through sex, through art. All of these ways of learning involve experience. Learning is an experience most of the time. Sometimes we don't notice that we have learned something - but most of the time our learning is conscious and involves experien directly.

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Experiential learning does not mean "*the experience of learning*". It is more than being aware of the outcome of some learning experience. In essence, experiential learning involves these components:

1. Being aware of the processes which are taking place and which are enabling learning to occur;

2. A reflective experience which enables the person to relate current learning to past, present and future, even if these time-relationships are felt rather than thought;

3. Personally significant experience and content - what is being learned and how it is being learned are of especial importance to the person;

4. The learning should involve the person being able to the use of their selves - body, thoughts, feelings, actions - not just their minds.

This description of the conditions for experiential learning stands in stark contrast to the notions of education and learning typically employed in formal, institutionalised educational organisations. For there the concern is more with content than the experience of the person. Indeed, experiential learning is often regarded as a threat to formal education precisely because it involves the attempt to make explicit the nature of learning and the personal benefits of learning experiences.

This point is worth exploring a little further. When I taught in a secondary school, the Headmaster once said to me as we watched 1400 pupils playing in the school grounds - "You're into this self actualisation stuff aren't you Steve . . . well, what chance do you think we'd have in here (the staff room) if all these kids were really self-actualised . . . none whatsoever, Steve, none . . . it's all a sham really". The sham was the nature of learning in the school. As Illich pointed out, schools de-skill and inhibit learning so as to ensure teaching takes place. In short, schools are formal organisations which act to promote social control, maintain the social order (see Paul Willis's book LEARNING TO LABOUR if you doubt this) and transmit established knowledge. Learning (in the sense of experiential learning) is a minor activity reserved for art, drama and (occasionally) careers education. You should note that this does not argue for or against the existence of formal educational institutions - a community of the size of Britain needs some formal structures, not necessarily the ones we now have - but is simply an observation about the way things are.

This collection of papers contains two kinds of material. The first, of which this paper and that by Harry Gray are examples, concern the nature of experiential learning as an experience. They are essentially theoretical. The other type of paper - such as that by "Anne" - reflect on experiences which they regard as experiential learning. The purpose of the collection is to provide some resources for the discussion of experiential learning whilst at the same time raising some issues about its nature and development.

Putting Flesh on the Bones - Learning About Loss

The model of experiential learning advanced above is a little abstract. Let's make it a little more concrete. Recently I experienced the death of a close relative. This death coincided with some writing I was involved with which concerned the nature

of loss. This writing focussed upon a particular model of loss reactions which I briefly state here. The person experiencing the loss is said to pass through a grief-work process. This process involves some or all of these stages:

1. **LOSS** - the person is said to feel a sense of loss, both in terms of the particular person but also in terms of their own security and self;

2. **SEARCHING** - the person engages in an active searching - for the dead person, for the meaning of death, for the security which they feel that they have lost, for a new pattern to life which respects the previous role of the now dead person but which operates without them;

3. **RE-FINDING** - after a period of searching, the person is said to re-find themselves in a way, but this proves to be a temporary position - a substitute for awareness and burial (see below). The person may move between searching and re-finding with some regularity, depending upon both their own experience of coping with loss and upon the nature of their relationship with the lost person;

4. **RE-LOSS** - the assumed finding is lost by the person - they realise that the security they thought they had found was transient, that they had not managed to "cope" with their loss and that they need to continue searching;

5. **AWARENESS** - after a period of grief-work (in which the work of grieving rather than the fact of grief is the most important feature), the person gains an awareness of their own position and disposition after the loss and uses this awareness to better understand what they need to do to cope and what they need to do in order to re-build their life;

6. **BURIAL** - the person finally puts to rest both their grief for the lost person and their non-coping self and regards themself as having gone through the grief-work process and come out sane at the other end of it.

I was writing about this model - derived mainly from the work of John Bowlby (see Murgatroyd and Woolfe, 1982) - at the very time when the death that affected me occurred.

My reactions to the death did not follow this model at all, and that in itself was important to me intellectually. But more importantly, there was a realisation that several steps in this model (which I have simplified here for the sake of space and convenience) were missing. To be fair, the death that affected me was anticipated -the person died of a cancer of the lower bowel and liver. But the death involved three stages which were not featured in the model. These are:

1. **GUILTY RELIEF** - a whole range of issues and problems are resolved by the death of an elderly and ill person and this is a source of relief, but it is coupled with guilt - feeling relieved did not seem like an appropriate emotion at the time;

2. **RECOGNITION** - the death of one person reminds you of the death that is inevitable for all of us. It reminded me of the possibility of my father dying sooner or later and of the difficulties I might experience if Lynne (my partner) died. In a sense, ths recognition carries with it a great many implications about all sorts of things - the meanings we attach to certain things (ie. work), the time we spend with family and friends, the lengths we go to help others sometimes at the expense of ourselves . . . all of these thoughts crowd in to remind us of our frailty;

3. **FAILURE** - no matter what is said, there is a sense in which those who are left behind often feel as if they have failed the lost person in some way. It is as if some action taken sooner might have lead to a different outcome - not true, but thought and felt.

While these can be accommodated within the model outlined earlier such an accommodation would not be appropriate. For these were three distinct stages for me.

Of these stages, that of recognition was the most experiential piece of learning for me. It involved me as a person - I reacted emotionally, physically and intellectually to it and my behaviour towards certain other people has changed as a result. The death served to remind me of some essential messages I had thought of before but had never integrated. It was a form of cathartic event which worked at a variety of levels. What is more, it is an experience which enabled me to consider both past and future in terms of a current state of being. In essence, this recognition

stage (lasting about 3-4 days) met the four conditions for experiential learning outlined above.

I have described this at some length since it both documents an experience of experiential learning whilst at the same time showing the relationship between such an experience and the ideas which inform the thinking in this collection of pieces about the nature of experiential learning.

Some Issues About Experiential Learning

Much of the available literature which describes experiential learning is concerned with therapeutic experience and forms of catharsis. This gives rise to the question - is experiential learning simply a description of the processes which lead up to and follow from cathartic experiences? The answer is NO. I am confident for three reasons. First, many creative workers - in drama, art, literature, humour, education - frequently engage in experiential learning. Many settings give rise to experiences which could be regarded as experiential learning, but not all necessarily involve catharsis.

Second, some of the outcomes of experiential learning involve lasting self-change. Not all personally significant learning need involve catharsis. For example, my own realisation that a colleague I had thought of for six years as a helpless and awkward person was in fact helpful and supportive lead to significant changes in my behaviour and to learning at a variety of levels which I did not experience as cathartic, but which certainly counted as experiential learning. Finally, whilst catharsis is by definition an experiential learning event, a large number of persons experience catharsis only rarely in their lives and yet engage in a deal of experiential learning.

A more significant issue is can experiential learning be actively promoted? The answer here is clearly YES. Perhaps the most successful methods of doing this are those documented by John Heron in his descriptions of intervention analysis (Heron, 1975). In particular, my own experience suggests that the following specific methods are useful in promoting experiential learning either in groups, between two individuals or for an individual:

1. **LITERAL DESCRIPTION** - evocation of the current situation and process in terms of the present tense so that the situation is examined as if being currently experienced or a current situation is examines literally;

2. **REPETITION** - to repeat words, phrases, ideas over and over again with slightly different emphasis each time so as to ensure that the full personal meaning of the ideas and thoughts is appreciated;

3. **ASSOCIATION** - working back through experiences which feel similar to the current experience and seeking to locate both similarities and differences between past and current experience - this is generally a powerful way of using a current experience for transition learning;

4. **ACTING INTO** - the person acts into the thoughts, feelings and behaviours which seem appropriate to current experience and in some ways uses paradox to develop the experience for themselves;

5. **SELF-ROLE PLAY** - the person plays out (either openly or entirely within their own heads) the various parts which they feel to be within them during a particular experience - those with TA knowledge often find using standard TA scripts or games helpful for this activity;

6. **CONTRADICTION** - the person seeks to find ways of contradicting and confronting their own experiences by playing "devil's advocate" to themselves (openly or within their own head) and by finding ways of experimenting with alternative and radically different thoughts, feelings and behaviours where appropriate;

7. **PHANTASY** - whilst in a situation, the dynamics of that situation can be changed by the skilful use of phantasy, with the person exploring the realms of possibilities (real or imagined) inherent in that situation;

8. **SHIFTING THE BALANCE OF ATTENTION** - the person changes the nature of their experience by shifting the balance of attention from one person to another in the group of which they are a part, or from their external and internal condition, or the content of the experience and the processes which facilitate that content.

In siting these eight co-counselling techniques as being particularly useful in the promotion of experiential learning the intention is not to suggest that these are the only appropriate techniques for the promotion of experiential learning. There are many ways

of doing this, and this list here is notably devoid of methods (massage, meditation, relaxation, active physical work). The point is that these techniques are readily available to many - teachers, counsellors, individuals - and lie at the core of experiential learning methods.

A final issue is: is the content of learning restricted when experiential learning is the mode of learning being used by the person? Some suggest that it is possible to learn anything (ie. languages, statistics, geography, physics) through experiential means. Others suggest that such a learning process is restricted to personally significant learning about "self". This seems to me to be an issue without resolution. There are so few attempts to learn subjects rather than to understand self that are documented in the experiential learning literature that speculation is the only way in which this issue can currently be addressed. So let's speculate! Most of the significant developments in any learning occur against a background of worry-work - learning how to speak French or calculate a regression coefficient or being able to use Ohm's law followed on from a period of struggling to speak French, to calculate regression coefficients or use Ohm's law. The moments at which personal achievement occurs in any field of learning is a truly experiential moment and can be used to acively understand both the nature of the learning now completed and the processes which lead to that learning. Thus, learning about a subject cannot be divorced from learning something about self. In this way all forms of learning carry the potential for being experientially processed. Yet much learning (especially in relation to the examples given here) is not experiential because: (a) no real attention is given to the processes of learning by the learner; (b) rarely do learners attend to the meaning of learning over and above the content of that learning - they do not relate current success and failure as processes to previous success and failure; (c) what is being learned is given more importance than how something is being learned; and finally (d) most learning in which people actively and consciously engage is "brain-work" rather than learning involving the whole person.

There are many more issues of this kind that are of interest and concern to those who engage in or seek to understand experiential learning. These issues are of interest to me.

Conclusion

This introductory paper has outlined the nature of experiential learning and raised some basic issues about its nature and utility. The papers which follow elaborate upon some of these issues and explore the personal meaning of particular learning experiences.

References

Heron, John (1975): Six Category Intervention Analysis. Guildford, Surrey: Human Potential Research Project (mimeo)

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H.L. Gray

THE PAIN OF LEARNING

Little children seem to enjoy learning though they often experience frustration at their lack of success. Adults tend to be more cautious and selective about what they learn and to avoid that which they find too difficult. The consequences of learning are pleasurable, for the most part, but the process of learning involves effort and effort is frequently accompanied by some form of pain or discomfort which seems not to get less with age for many people.

In normal usage, the word "learning" refers to a cerebral or intellectual process of remembering and recalling. We tend to associate learning with school and certain specified subject areas. We may recall that there was also physical learning in games and sport but most of us will forget that the most important learning had little to do with the classroom or sports field; the more important and all embracing learning was the process of "growing up", an essentially emotional process in which physical and intellectual development were parts.

It is strange that the word 'learning' has become almost com-
-pletely dissociated from the experience of its complex reality