



**Experiential Learning:
A Theoretical Critique
from Five Perspectives
Information Series No. 385**

by

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ERIC/ACVE would like to thank Tara J. Fenwick, Assistant Professor of Adult Education, University of Alberta, for her work in the preparation of this paper. Her research focuses on workplace learning and education, particularly examining production of knowledge and identities in particular cultural-political landscapes. She is the author of numerous articles and chapters on workplace learning, including a chapter on workplace development in the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Jossey-Bass 2000). She edited *Work and Leisure* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson 1996), and is the author, with Jim Parsons, of *The Art of Evaluation: A Handbook for Educators and Trainers* (Thompson Educational Publishers 2000), and with Leona English and Jim Parsons, *Spirituality in Adult Education* (Krieger Publishing Company).

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What does it mean to learn from experience? And, what, if any, is an appropriate role for educators in this process?

As lifelong learning, workplace learning, informal learning, self-directed learning, and other forms of experiential learning become increasingly prominent in adult education theory and practice, important questions have been raised about how to understand adults' experience, and how to conceptualize the relationships between adults' learning and their own perceptions of their experiences. For educators, these debates provide useful insights for curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, these debates encourage educators to critically question their very purpose, the ethics of their presumption to insert themselves into adults' experience, and the interests served by their approach to "using" experience for learning.

The dominant approach to understanding experiential learning in adult education has revolved around cognitive reflection upon concrete experience, an orientation commonly known as *constructivism*. Educators have developed a variety of ways to enhance this process: by facilitating adults' critical reflection on experience, by instigating holistic "experiences" in instructional settings, by coaching and mentoring adults to enhance their learning in the midst of experience, and by assessing adults' experience. Critiques of these educational practices have attacked educators' movement toward "managing" adults' experience. Criticism has also been leveled at the focus on mental processing, the unproblematic view of identifiable "concrete" experience, the assumption that individuals engage in and reflect upon their experiences as unitary independent selves, and the assumption that individuals are split from their contexts. From a perspective of examining power relations, critique has also explored the ways experience is or is not valued for producing certain desirable knowledge and the sorts of identities that are shaped or excluded when educators "help" people learn from their experiences.

Four alternate orientations on experiential learning have emerged in theories of learning, cognition, and pedagogy in the recent years. These perspectives are useful for educators in shedding light on complex dimensions of the learning-in-experience question. They also help educators with different responses to the question about the most appropriate role for educators in working with adults' experience.

- *Psychoanalytic perspectives* illuminate desires and resistance emanating from unconscious dimensions of experiential learning.
- *Situative perspectives* emphasize the connection between individuals and their communities of practice in a collective explanation of experiential learning.
- *Critical cultural perspectives* focus on how power and inequity structure experience and promote social transformation through experiential learning.
- *Enactivist perspectives* uphold an ecological systems understanding of experiential learning co-emerging in systems of human action, organizations, cultures, and nature.

These orientations each have their own blind spots and have been debated at length.¹ These debates focus on the way knowledge and human experience are understood, the way the person doing the experiencing is represented, the definitions of learning and the conceptualizations of desirable learning outcomes, the role of power and language in learning through experience, and of course, the role of an educator, if any. The five orientations cannot be synthesized, but they do offer insights for one another. Dialogue between and within them is the most valuable legacy for the educator, who ultimately must read across these perspectives and find a path for philosophy and practice that has the greatest integrity, defensibility, and efficacy for his or her own particular context.

Information on the issues of experiential learning may be found in the ERIC database using the following descriptors—*Adult Education, Adult Educators, Autobiographies, *Constructivism (Learning), *Educational Environment, Educational Philosophy, *Experiential Learning, *Power Structure, *Psychiatry—and the identifiers *Complexity Theory, *Critical Pedagogy, Reflective Thinking, and *Situated Cognition. Asterisks indicate descriptors that are particularly relevant.

¹ I wish to express deep appreciation to the four scholars who reviewed an earlier draft of this monograph. Their often detailed engagement in these debates and their critical questions have enriched this document and opened new paths for my own thinking.