Constructivism

The focus of the first chapter is on the background and dimensions of experiential learning, both as a philosophy and as a practice in adult education. Chapter 2 focuses on the dominant understanding of experiential learning in adult education, called in this monograph a *reflection* orientation, or "constructivism." The corresponding educational approach is a humanistic, learner-centered practice that assists adult learners in reflecting on their experience in order to construct new knowledge.

This chapter presents the fundamental bases of this constructivist conception of experiential learning and various prominent models that have influenced its practice in past decades. Four roles for educators are discussed, with various practical suggestions for activities and approaches generated by these roles. This information is presented for readers' cautious use, remembering the challenges to ideas for practice mentioned in the first chapter.

Chapter 2 ends with a discussion of critiques that challenge the constructivist orientation to experiential learning in adult education. Of particular concern here is the potential for reductionism and overdetermination of complex human experience when translated into "objects" of knowledge. Even more serious, the potential for the educator to colonize and regulate private human experience is great.

Learning through Reflection on Experience: The Theory

The most prevalent understanding of experiential learning is based on reflection. This casts the individual as a central actor in a drama of personal meaning making. The learner supposedly reflects on lived experience, then interprets and generalizes this experience to form mental structures. These structures are knowledge, stored in memory as concepts that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations. Theoretical models in this perspective explain ways people attend to and perceive experience, interpret and categorize it as concepts, then continue adapting or transforming their conceptual structures. Individuals are understood to construct their own knowledge, through interaction with their environments. This school of thought is commonly known as "constructivism." Critics of this perspective and alternative explanations of experiential learning take exception to the way the "individual" is considered fundamentally separate from his or her environment and relations with others. They argue that reflective processes cannot be separated from some sort of event called "experience."

Constructivism has a long and distinguished history, although many different perspectives coexist within it[1] (Piaget 1966; Von Glaserfeld 1984; Vygotsky 1978; Wells 1995), portraying learners as independent constructors of their own knowledge, with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions. However, all views share one

[1]Phillips (1995) identifies six distinct views of constructivism varying according to the emphasis accorded either to individual psychology or public disciplines in constructing knowledge, the extent to which knowledge is viewed as made rather than discovered, and the emphasis put on the individual knower as active agent rather than spectator in the construction of knowledge.

central premise: a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world.

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1966), after observing children learn through play, described this construction process as oscillating between *assimilation* and *accommodation*. He suggested that learning happens when individuals interact with objects in their environment (which can be material things, names for things, concepts, relationships, etc.) to "build" and refine constructs of knowledge in their heads. Individuals sometimes assimilate new objects of knowledge by incorporating them into their personal internal network of knowledge constructs. Other times individuals accommodate, by altering these constructs when confronting new experiences that may contradict their past knowledge. The important issue is that each individual is active in the learning process, not passively absorbing whatever happens, and each person may construct very different understandings after interacting with the same objects in the same environment. This notion challenged ideas of knowledge as a body of information created by scientists and experts, existing outside of individuals, and "learning" as a process of ingesting these others' knowledge.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of individuals' interactions with their sociocultural environment in this process of constructing knowledge. He developed a theory of what he called the "zone of proximal development," a time-bounded site of community activity surrounding a person that can limit or enhance cognitive development. The person learns by engaging fully in this zone, particularly through dialogue. Vygotsky's ideas have been influential in subsequent situative theories of learning, described in chapter 3. However, Vygotsky, like other constructivists, believed that the outcome and objective of learning was the development of individual consciousness, experiencing self-mastery, through a process of reflection (what Vygotsky called "inner speech") as well as interaction with people and objects in the external world.

David Kolb: A Constructivist Model of Experiential Learning

In the literature of adult learning this constructivist view is embedded in the writings of David Boud and associates (Boud and Miller 1996; Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1996), David Kolb (1984), Dorothy MacKeracher (1996), Jack Mezirow (1990), Donald Schön (1983), Jack Mezirow (1991, 1994), and many others. David Kolb (1984) developed a theory that attempted to clarify exactly how different people learn by integrating their concrete emotional experiences with reflection. For him, reflection is all about cognitive processes of conceptual analysis and eventual understanding. Kolb believed that experiential learning is a tension- and conflict-filled process that occurs in a cycle. New knowledge and skills are achieved through confrontation among concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and subsequent active experimentation.

First, the learner lives through some kind of *concrete experience*. This could be a simulated experience developed especially for a learning situation, such as a case study or role play, or an exercise involving the learner in actually experimenting with the skills to be learned. Or this could be a real life or workplace experience that the learner has encoun-

tered. Second, the learner takes some time for *reflective observation*. The learner asks of the experience: What did I observe? What was I aware of? What does this experience mean to me? How might this experience have been different?

Third, the learner uses insights gained through the reflective observation to create an *abstract conceptualization*. This is where the learner asks: What principle seems to be operating here? What general 'rule-of-thumb' have I learned here? What new understanding does this experience reveal about myself, or people, or how things work in particular situations? Finally, the learner applies the new learning through *active experimentation*. The learner asks, What will I do next time? How will I adopt this principle for other contexts? The new "principle" is tested out in similar situations, then in different situations, and the learner continues to revise and reshape the learning based on what happens through experimenting with it. The learner may not actually test out the new skill, but may simply think through its application.

Kolb and other theorists maintain that, although all adults are exposed to a multitude of life experiences, not everyone learns from these experiences. Experience alone does not teach. Learning happens only when there is reflective thought and internal processing of that experience by the learner, in a way that actively makes sense of the experience, links the experience to previous learning, and transforms the learner's previous understandings in some way.

David Boud: Considering Context in Experiential Learning

Boud and Walker (1991) introduced a model of experiential learning similar to Kolb's, with two main enrichments: they acknowledged that specific contexts shape an individual's experience in different ways, and they were interested in how differences among individuals—particularly their past histories, learning strategies, and emotion—influence the sort of learning developed through reflection on experience. For Boud and Walker, the extent of our learning corresponds to the way we *prepare* for an experience; the *noticing and intervening* of our participation in the actual experience; and the processes we use to recall and *reevaluate* an experience, attend to feelings the experience provoked, and reevaluate the experience. In preparation we examine the opportunities of the milieu and form particular intentions. We also bring certain skills and strategies of observation and meaning making as well as personal histories of past experience.

During a particular experience we each notice and intervene with different elements of the milieu depending on our individual predispositions. We balance our observations with awareness of our own reactions; we choose ways to participate in the activity, name the learning process, respond to different events, and deal with the unexpected—all by reflecting in action. Afterwards we recall and reevaluate our experiences through four processes. *Association* is relating new information to familiar concepts. *Integration* is seeking connection between the new and the old. *Appropriation* is personalizing the new knowledge to make it our own, and *validation* is determining the authenticity of our new ideas and the feelings of the experience. Notice that this model dwells especially on feelings, claiming that "negative" feelings, if not attended to, can block potential learning

in the experience. Boud and his associates also show the importance of the preparation or readiness the learner brings to the experience and the significance of the particular context in which the learner is acting.

Donald Schön: Reflection-in-Action

Schön, whose books include ***The Reflective Practitioner*** (1983) and ***Educating the Reflective Practitioner*** (1987), has been a significant promoter of constructivism to understand workplace learning. Schön's view is that professionals live in a world of uncertainty, instability, complexity, and value conflict, where they often must deal with problems for which no existing rules or theories learned through formal training or past experience can apply. He was most interested in how reflection, and particularly critical reflection, plays out in the ongoing learning of professionals in their practice. He proposed that practitioners learn by noticing and framing problems of interest to them in particular ways, then inquiring and experimenting with solutions. When they experience surprise or discomfort in their everyday activity, this reflective process begins. Their knowledge is constructed through reflection during and after some experimental action on the ill-defined and messy problems of practice.

When these adults meet such unique problems or situations containing some element of surprise, they are prompted to *reflect-in-action* by improvising an on-the-spot experimentation, thinking up and testing out and refining and retesting various solutions for the problem. Schön says professionals also often *reflect-on-action* in some zone of time after a problem episode, when they examine what they did, how they did it, and what alternatives exist. Other theorists of learning have continued to refine Schön's ideas of reflective practice. We have seen how Boud and Walker emphasized readiness and attention to feelings in reflection. Watkins and Marsick (1992) formulated a theoretical framework of informal and incidental learning to show how people's experiential learning is not always conscious and may simply reproduce the (sometimes dysfunctional or erroneous) beliefs of their surrounding contexts. Watkins and Marsick stress the importance of Schön's notion of problem framing that tests the assumptions of our reflections. Garrick (1998) also reminds us that experience is constituted by the particular discourses comprising a situation: these shape the way we perceive "routine" and "nonroutine" problems, which we approach and reflect upon differently.

Critical reflection, says Schön, is more than simply reflecting-in or reflecting-on action. When people engage in critical reflection, they question the way they framed the problem in the first place. Even if no apparent problems exist, the practitioner questions situations, asking why things are they way they are, why events unfold in the way they do. This is critical reflection to problematize what otherwise are taken-for-granted situations. As well, people reflect critically when they problematize their own actions, asking: Why did I do what I did? What beliefs inform my practice, and how are these beliefs helping or hindering my work? Schön's work celebrated the experiential learning of practitioners in everyday action—what he called the "swampy lowlands" of actual practice—and attempted to challenge the "high road" of theoretical knowledge, technical rationality, over which universities hold authority.

Brookfield (1987, 1995) and Mezirow (1990, 1991, 1994) both have made considerable contributions to constructivist views of adult learning by theorizing how critical reflection interrupts and reconstructs human beliefs. Brookfield (1995) suggested that when we reflect on our experience with skeptical questioning and imaginative speculation, we can refine, deepen, or correct our knowledge constructions. He describes three stages in the process of reflecting critically: "(1) identifying the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions; (2) scrutinizing the accuracy and validity of these in terms of how they connect to, or are discrepant with, our experience of reality; and (3) reconstituting these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative" (p. 177).

Jack Mezirow: Reflection on Experience for Transformation

In 1978 Mezirow presented a theory of learning, explained exhaustively in his book ***Transformative Learning*** (1991), in which reflection on experience and particularly critical reflection are central. Transformative learning has become one of the most influential ideas in the field of adult learning and development to emerge in the past 20 years. Mezirow has continued to argue, throughout the exhaustive debates gathering around his theory,[2] that when individuals cognitively reflect on their own fundamental understandings (formed through their biographies of experience), they transform these basic knowledge structures or "meaning perspectives" to become more "inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience" (Mezirow 1991, p. 14). This process of perspective transformation is fundamentally based upon a "reflective assessment of premises … [and] of movement through cognitive structures by identifying and judging presuppositions …. Reflection is the apperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively" (pp. 5, 9).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is based on a trilevel concept of critical reflection on experience. Mezirow suggests that when an adult encounters a "disorienting dilemma," a problem for which there is no immediately apparent solution suggested by past experience and knowledge, reflection is often triggered. First, individuals often reflect on the *content* of the experience—what happened—which may or may not lead to learning. If individuals find and test a solution to the problem that produces undesirable outcomes, they often reflect upon the *process* they employed—how did it happen. Thus procedural learning results as learners analyze and learn from faulty choices. But when the reflection process probes the very *premises* (deep-seated beliefs and assumptions guiding action) upon which we have based our problem-solving processes, then critical reflection results. Others' views can act as mirrors for our own views, opening a dialectic, helping us "unfreeze" our "meaning perspectives" (Mezirow 1991) and assumptions. In this third level of reflection we confront and challenge the taken-for-granted norms—what's wrong with how I am seeing what happened and how it happened?—leading to a dramatic shift or *transformation* in the learner's way of viewing the world. Mezirow (1991) describes this process of transformative learning as the "bringing of one's assumptions, premises, criteria, and schemata into consciousness and vigorously critiquing them" (p. 29).

[2]For a clear and thorough explanation of both Mezirow's theory and his many critics, as well as empirical studies applying the theory of transformative learning to various contexts of adult experience, consult ***The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning*** by Taylor (1998).

Roles for Adult Educators Suggested by the Constructivist/Reflective Orientation: Facilitator, Instigator, Coach, and Assessor

In this constructivist view of experiential learning, in which individuals are presumed to interpret their worlds actively and create their own knowledge through different processes of reflection, adult educators have suggested various ways for themselves to assist and perhaps enhance learners' reflective processes. In this section, four main educative roles are discussed:

- **Facilitator**—adult educators encourage people to recall, value, talk about, and perhaps critically analyze their own past experience to construct knowledge from it.
- **Instigator**—educators create a happening during instruction designed to engage learners "experientially" and thus encourage construction of knowledge.
- **Coach**—an educator guides learners to reflect on choices in the "hot action" of experience, so they will analyze undesirable outcomes and make corrections.
- **Assessor**—educators represent, judge, and give credit to people's experiences in terms of the kind of knowledge they have constructed from these experiences.

Obviously these roles are not distinct and separate in practice, but are often blended.

A model created by Caffarella and Barnett (1994) suggests that, in any one of these roles, issues of program planning, philosophy, learning activity and assessment are entwined. Caffarella and Barnett created this model for educators working with experiential learning based on constructivism. It points to four basic elements deserving consideration by any educator or educational intervention, regardless of which of the four roles form the central orientation: understanding learner differences and needs, applying concepts of reflection on concrete experience, using experiential methods and techniques, and assessing learning in ways that honor experience.

Characteristics and Needs of Learners
attending to learners' prior knowledge and experience, their different processes, the contexts of their lives, and their affiliation (belonging) needs

Conceptual Foundations of Experiential Learning
constructivist understandings of learning, especially Kolb's theory of concrete experience with reflection on that experience and Schön's theory of reflective practice

Methods and Techniques for Engaging Learners in Experiential Learning Activities
designing in-class activities, designing field experiences, and creating situations where learners' past experiences are discussed and processed

Assessment Processes and Outcomes
such as portfolios and other self-assessment practices that honor individual experiences and personal knowledge constructed from them

Although these considerations should be integrated into any educator's intervention, the four roles described next each illustrate a different emphasis that educators appear to take when employing experiential learning. These four roles are presented as suggestions for educators incorporating experiential learning. They share a particular assumption with the Caffarella and Barnett model—that an educative event involves a classroom, an educator programming and evaluating people's progress, activities specifically focused on learning, and an assumption that people learn by reflecting on experience. It is important to note that this assumption is not shared by all writers advocating experiential learning. In chapter 3, suggestions for educators are rather different given very different premises about what comprises an educative event.

Adult Educator as Facilitator of Experiential Learning

When Knowles (1984) focused attention on the importance of adults' experience in their learning and the value of reflecting on that experience as a pedagogical process, adult educators began to view themselves as facilitators of learning. Their role was not so much to dispense information and concepts as to encourage people to reflect upon and analyze their experiences. Educational suggestions grounded in Knowles' concepts included directives such as the following:

- Learners' past experience should be honored and given voice;
- Learners' past experience should be shared and compared;
- Learners should be assisted in actively seeking links between specific past experience and their current situations;
- Learners' past experience should be analyzed and perhaps reconstructed; and
- Learners should be helped to form links between their past experience and their beliefs about themselves, how things work, what is important, and what things mean.

Experiential learning, as Boud and his associates pointed out, often involves strong emotions. Therefore, a key responsibility of the facilitator of such learning is creating an environment of trust, authenticity, integrity, and mutual respect—as well as patience with each other on the part of all participants, learners as well as facilitator. For many people, self-disclosure is uncomfortable and inappropriate in group settings. They would prefer solitude and self-dialogue to critical reflection in conversation. And as Boud also concluded, there may be periods in our lives when we are more predisposed to reflection on experiential learning. There may be a "readiness" factor at work, a reflective learning style, or a lifespan issue of particular crises or transitions that prompt our motivation to reflect critically on who we are and where we're going. Some theorists have questioned the assumption that every adult is capable of or even interested in critical reflection.

Brookfield (1995) reminds educators that they need to revisit and analyze their own "visceral" experiences before asking learners to do so. Similarly, Cranton (1996) suggests that above all educators should be "adult learners striving to update, develop, expand, and deepen their professional perspectives both on their subject areas and on their goals and roles" (p. 228). Thus in this role the educator intends to facilitate, as Taylor (1998) puts it, "a learning situation that is democratic, open, rational, has access to all available

information, and promotes critical reflection" (p. 49). However, balancing this role with the educator's own healthy and critical self-reflexiveness about one's intents and perspectives is crucial.

Adult Educator as Instigator of Experiential Learning

As discussed earlier, experiential learning can result from eliciting adults' past experience and encouraging focused reflection and analysis of it, from coaching someone to reflect during actual situated experience, or from creating an "experiential happening." Usually, the latter approach is related to formal education, an institutional classroom or training session in which an educator wishes to engage the learners physically and emotionally. Such created experiences are considered most effective when reflection for learning is carefully layered into the experience, usually through dialogue debriefing the experience.

Educators can introduce "experiential" learning into a formal learning situation in a variety of ways. Three are described here: (1) experiential classroom exercises; (2) adventure activities; and (3) problem-based or project-based learning.

Adult educators have experimented with a variety of creative ways to involve learners physically, emotionally, and relationally as well as cognitively in learning activities. Simulations are one example. (For example, give everyone in the group a particular role with its own agenda, history, and resources, then assign a task requiring each participant to interact with others to achieve his or her goal.) Instructional games and icebreakers are widely available, e.g., ***Games Trainers Play*** by Newstrom and Scannell (1980) or Renner's (1994) ***The Art of Teaching Adults***. Role play is often used to practice interpersonal skills, for example, having pairs act out situations to explore possible approaches to handling them or improvise a scenario to see what might happen if particular actions are taken. Popular theatre technique has been adapted in adult education as an instrument of personal empowerment and cultural intervention (Prentki and Selman 2000). Short physical team problem-solving activities have been borrowed from adventure education. The point of such "experiential" classroom exercises is to stimulate participants' creativity and holistic engagement by leading them to act in unfamiliar situations.

Adventure activities are becoming increasingly popular in workplace training, particularly leadership education and team development (Richards 1992). The facilitator designs a sequence of concrete problem-solving challenges, usually set outdoors, and groups of learners work together to solve them. These might be specific challenges of risk taking such as scaling a mountain or challenges of survival in the wilderness. According to Richards, proponents of adventure activities believe the challenge and unusual setting engage and motivate learners; supposedly increase risk taking, communication, productivity; and help increase insights into barriers to their team processes. However, purveyors of organizational training and development using adventure education report the difficulty of assessing in any reliable way the learning outcomes of such programs and their impact on individual and organizational effectiveness. Educators may be more concerned about the personal and political consequences of a collaborative "managed" adventure on workers and their organizational relationships in the return phase.

Problem-based learning (PBL) typically organizes curriculum around a series of cases, each presenting a dilemma of practice (Albanese and Mitchell 1993; Norman and Schmidt 1992; Walton and Matthews 1989). These cases are usually prepared in detail, researched and based on an actual situation. Learners read, "diagnose," and discuss the case, exploring strategies for analyzing the issues and taking action on the problems. Some, such as Fenwick and Parsons (1998), have criticized this approach for predetermining problems and removing them from the multiple pressures and political dynamics of actual situations—in other words, for defeating the point of learning amidst the unpredictable, multidimensional, and fluid nature of living professional practice. Project-based learning involves structuring a curriculum around projects that the learners formulate. Unlike PBL, learners choose and take responsibility for completing a concrete project that is "authentic" (similar to or driven by an actual work task requiring completion). In the process of working through the project, learners must solve a variety of practical and philosophical problems.

Adult Educator as Coach of Experiential Learning

Mentors and coaches usually work one on one with someone *in situ*, that is, within the actual context of a person's practice. For Daloz (1999), mentors play a significant role in an adult's development and transformation by providing support, structure, positive expectations, self-disclosure, challenging tasks and questions, advocacy, high standards, modeling, maps, language, and a mirror for an adult's growth.

In contrast, coaching is usually associated with specific skill learning. For example, professional practitioners such as teachers, doctors, nurses, accountants, and lawyers experience a period of internship as part of their training, when they are assigned to a particular organization to carry out regular duties with the assistance of a coach—an experienced practitioner familiar with the organizational context. Schön described the role of coach in detail in his influential book ***Educating the Reflective Practitioner*** (1987). The coach provides encouragement, asking Where does it go from here? The coach also draws attention to strategies the student already knows or can observe from fellow students and other available models. The coach often shares personal experiences and encourages other learners to do the same to show the universal commonality of problems they experienced and demonstrates alternative strategies to achieve the desired effects. Above all, coaches must help learners accept that learning takes time.

Adult Educator as Assessor of Experiential Learning

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), Assessment of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are processes being adopted by many postsecondary institutions and adult education programs through which learners seek academic course credit for their life experiences. As Harris (1999) explains, adults have often developed valuable knowledge and skills throughout their study, work, travel, volunteer, family, and leadership experiences in contexts and social practices that do not easily fit the disciplinary concepts valued in a formal education program. PLA tries to recognize this life experience so that learners can avoid repeating courses presenting knowledge

they have already gained and show they have met the requirements to enter courses at their own level of understanding and skill. Hull (1992) describes the variety of tools employed in PLA processes to help learners reflect on, articulate, and demonstrate their past learning. Examples include portfolios, skill development profiles, written analysis of life experience, and challenge tests to demonstrate sufficient prior knowledge to obtain credit for a course.

The institution then matches the learner's experiential learning as reflected in PLA to its own established academic standards, so that credit can be awarded by a credentialing body. Many learners need help completing a PLA process, and institutions often provide workshops to assist in the process. PLA provides a rare opportunity to explore life experiences and accomplishments in depth, and so can really build learner's confidence and pride. PLA also can be a helpful ongoing process of reflection and self-assessment for the learner. It focuses on competency and understandings rather than grades, and it is often billed as a useful career planner. It helps learners actually recognize what they know and can do.

The downside of PLA, as Michelson (1996) points out, is the difficulty of articulating experiential learning. Not all learners have the means to express or demonstrate their understandings, especially when PLA often depends on writing ability. In addition, institutions ask learners to organize their life experiences according to only those competencies and concepts that the institution has decided are valuable. This may narrow and exclude the rich experiences of many adult learners. As Harris (1999) notes, processes commonly used for Recognition of Prior Learning can be prescriptive and limiting. They can be easily dominated by the excessive power of institutions to determine where the knowledge boundaries are placed and how the learner's experience is to be "regulated" to fit particular hierarchical categories of experience that are deemed worthy of recognition. Harris also suggests that there are different, more inclusive ways to assess adults' prior learning. She suggests that knowledge boundaries be negotiated among learners, academics, and representatives of workplace or other contexts in which learners must function. These negotiations may encourage a permeability of boundaries and recognize contextualized, action-oriented knowledge produced in social practices, as well as knowledge that fits disciplinary categories.

In reality, these four educator roles in experiential learning—facilitator, instigator, coach, and assessor—often blur within the actual activities that unfold in a learning event and embrace the four basic instructional elements described by Caffarella and Barnett (1994). Overall, four themes are apparent throughout this discussion of the educator's role according to the constructivist orientation:

1. Engaging learners in concrete experience as a starting point for building new knowledge
2. Creating conditions for educative dialogue during and after the concrete experience
3. Encouraging learners' focused reflection at different levels
4. Providing support, as experiential learning can be confusing, emotionally challenging, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable for learners.

The following section presents theoretical challenges to the assumptions underpinning these forms of educational intervention.

"Using" Experience for Learning? Critiques of Experiential Learning in Adult Education

Critical challenges to experiential learning have employed a rich variety of arguments to question its educational conceptualization. These are presented here not to negate the previous sections of theory and suggestions for educators, but to encourage more thoughtfulness in their adoption. Some of the critiques open insights about the repressive potential of harnessing experiential learning for educative purposes. Some raise concerns about inserting an educator into adults' processes of learning from experience. Many ask difficult questions about the meaning and relationship of experience and reflection, wondering whether certain models of experiential learning are too simplistic. If engaged with an open mind, these critiques encourage us as educators to become more "integrative, permeable, discriminating, and inclusive" (Mezirow 1991, p. 225) about our understandings of experiential learning and our role in it.

In the following paragraphs, critiques of experiential learning are grouped into five areas:

1. Challenges to the primacy placed on "reflection" as a cognitive activity and the limitations of this focus
2. Challenges to the view of experience as something concrete to be reflected upon
3. Challenges to the lack of robust consideration of interplay between people and "context"
4. Challenges to the notion of "learner" as a unitary self who can reflect unproblematically
5. Challenges to educators' intervention as "managers" of others' experiential learning

Challenges to Understanding Reflection as a Cognitive Activity

Critics such as Britzman (1998a) and Sawada (1991) maintain that the focus of experiential learning theory on cognitive reflection is somewhat simplistic and reductionist. First, this focus justifies and emphasizes rational control and mastery, which feminist theorists of workplace learning have criticized as a eurocentric, masculinist view of knowledge creation (Hart 1992; Michelson 1996). Second, this reflective constructivist view does not provide any sophisticated understandings of the role of desire in experience and learning, despite its central tenet that a learner's intention guides the inquiry process. Desire is a foundational principle in human experience and knowledge, according to psychoanalytic theories of experience and learning. Third, the focus on rational concept-formation through cognitive reflection sidesteps what Britzman (1998a) calls the ambivalences and internal "vicissitudes" bubbling in the unconscious. According to Britzman, they direct our interpretations and therefore our meaning making of experience in unpredictable ways. (This view is more fully developed in chapter 3.)

Britzman also argues that the emphasis on conscious reflection ignores or makes invisible those psychic events that are not available to the conscious mind, including the desires and position of the reflecting "I" respective to the reflected-upon "me" being constructed as a container of knowledge. Meanwhile, constructivism does not attend to internal resistance in the learning process, the active "ignore-ances" that Ellsworth (1997) contends are as important in shaping our engagement in experience as attraction to particular objects of knowledge. The view that experience must be processed through reflection clings to binaries drawn between complex blends of doing/learning, implicit/explicit, active/passive, life experience/instructional experience, reflection/action (most notably in Kolb's depiction of perceiving and processing activities conceived as continua from concrete to abstract engagement).

Sawada (1991) argues that understanding reflection as "processing" reinforces a conduit understanding of learning, relying on an old input-output metaphor of learning in which the system becomes input to itself. Furthermore, constructivism falsely presumes a "cut" universe, in which subjects are divided from the environment and from their own experiences and reflection is posited as the great integrator, bridging separations that it creates, instead of reorienting us to the *whole*.

Challenges to the Representation of Context

A second area of challenge to reflective constructivism is its separation of the individual doing the learning and the individual's context. Context involves the social relations and political-cultural dimensions of the community in which the individual is caught up, the nature of the task, the web of joint actions in which the individual's choices and behaviors are enmeshed, the vocabulary and cultural beliefs through which the individual makes meaning of the whole situation, and the historical, temporal, and spatial location of the situation. Obviously, these dimensions are crucial to understand how learning unfolds in experience.

In Kolb's model of experiential learning, context is given little consideration. "Experience" and "reflection on experience" are portrayed as if this "learning" exists in what Jarvis (1987) called "splendid isolation." Jarvis suggests that context is constituted partly by the different ways a person interacts with it. He proposes an altered model of experiential learning portraying a person, shaped by a particular sociocultural milieu, moving into and out of various social situations. The person's response might be *reflective learning* (contemplation, problem solving, or active experimentation), or it might be *nonreflective learning* (absorbing information, unconsciously internalizing new understandings, or mechanically practicing new skills). A response might even be *nonlearning* (rejecting learning, too preoccupied to learn, or just interacting mechanically).

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has been criticized for proposing "a concept of rationality that is essentially ahistorical and decontextualized" (Clark and Wilson 1991, p. 90). Although his later revisions of his theory recognized learning as situated in a social context, Mezirow, according to Taylor (1998), failed to maintain the connection between the construction of knowledge and the context within which it is interpreted.

Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1996) presented context as a significant dimension of experience, with learners reflecting before, during, and after their immersion in events in this context. The context presents possibilities from which learners presumably select objects of knowing with which to interact. However, context here is portrayed problematically as a static space separate from the individual. The learner is still viewed as fundamentally autonomous from his or her surroundings. The learner moves through context, is "in" it and affected by it, but the learner's meanings still exist in the learner's head and move with the learner from one context to the next. Knowledge is taken to be a substance, a third thing created from the learner's interaction with other actors and objects and bounded in the learner's head. Social relations of power exercised through language or cultural practices are not theorized as part of knowledge construction.

This is a fundamental distinction between constructivism and other views of experiential learning outlined in chapter 3. Situative theorists,[3] for example, criticize the constructivist separation of person from context, as if "context" is a container in which the learner moves, rather than a web of activity, subjectivities, and language. When context is viewed as this web, elements of experience such as "learner," "event," "action," "object," and "setting" do not appear to be so distinct as the reflective view portrays them. Michelson (1996, 1999) suggests alternative understandings of experience that destablize unitary identity and social categories, recognize the interplay between body and world, and challenge binaries such as person/context and reflection/action in experiential learning.

Challenges to Understanding Experience as Concrete

Many have critiqued Kolb's assumption that experience is "concrete" and split from "reflection" as a sort of dichotomy. With the proliferation of postmodern understandings of the relationship between person, context/culture, and experience (e.g., see Usher, Bryant, and Johnson 1997), it has become commonplace to assume the discursive production and fluidity of experience. As Michelson (1999) has argued, experience exceeds rational attempts to bound, control, and rationalize it according to preexisting social categories and sanctioned uses. From a feminist perspective, Michelson (1996) observes that emphasis on (critical) reflection depersonalizes the learner as an autonomous, rational knowledge-making self, disembodied, rising above the dynamics and contingency of experience. The learning process of reflection presumes that knowledge is extracted and abstracted from experience by the processing mind. This ignores the possibility that all knowledge is constructed within power-laden social processes, that experience and knowledge are *mutually determined*, and that experience itself is knowledge driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings. Further, argues Michelson (1996), the reflective or constructivist view of development denigrates bodily and intuitive experience, advocating retreat into the loftier domains of rational thought from which "raw" experience can be disciplined and controlled. In her later work she draws attention to experience that is "outrageous and transgressive, experience not easily reduced to reason and coherence" (Michelson 1999, p. 145). She suggests that reflective theories of

[3]See for example the works of Greeno (1997), Gold and Watson (1999), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wilson and Myers (1999), which are discussed in further detail in chapter 3.

experiential learning dominating adult education have actually repressed possibilities of meaning, knowledge, and identity. Working from the ideas of Bakhtin (1981), she suggests that the notion of "carnival" might help open our theories of experiential learning. Carnival is "a site for transgressing repressive, overdetermined meanings and creating knowledge within a wider play of possibilities … where we can welcome the excess of experience and with it, the contingent quality of both meaning and identity" (pp. 145-146).

Her critique of educators is aligned with other feminist poststructuralists such as Orner (1992) and Tisdell (1998), who argue that the assumption of (distorted) "concrete experience" leads to a mistaken educational orientation of freeing people from their misconceptions, ideologies, false consciousness, and colonized lifeworlds. Instead, argues Michelson (1999), educators should be assisting learners in exploring the availability of meanings *within* our cultures and societies. We cannot deny people's historically embedded subjectivity or the boundaries of self. Instead, we should be committed to opening self "to the transgressive, oppositional Other within our own discourses and societies" (p. 146). These ideas are developed in chapter 3.

Challenges to Understanding a Learner as a Unitary Self

The constructivist view considers the individual a primary actor in the process of knowledge construction, and understanding as largely a conscious, rational process. Clark and Dirkx (2000) show that in this dominant humanist view, the learner is assumed to be a stable, unitary self that is regulated through its own intellectual activity. Access to experience through rational reflection is also assumed, as is the learner's capacity, motivation, and power to mobilize the reflective process. As discussed in more detail in chapter 3, this view of the learning self is challenged by psychoanalytic, situative, and enactivist perspectives. Suffice to state again here that poststructural, feminist, postmodern, and other views argue that self is multiple and shifts according to context. "Self," argue some poststructural writers in terms of discursive reality, is an illusory image.[4] In fact, we are "subjects" brought into presence through discourses. What we construe as our unitary (or authentic) self having "experience" are stories we tell in particular contexts for particular purposes, which can be reshaped by infinite configurations and voices. Others argue in terms of the fluidity and interdependence of material reality (us in our worlds): the boundaries between self and nonself are actually more permeable and the flow between them far more continuous than we might be prepared to accept.

[4]Usher, Bryant, and Johnson (1997) describe this as a postmodern, "decentered" view of the self: "Subjectivity without a centre or origin, caught in meanings, positioned in language and the narratives of culture. The self cannot know itself independently of the significations in which it is enmeshed. There is no self-present subjectivity, hence no transcendental meaning of the self. Meanings are always 'in play' and the self, caught up in this play, is an ever-changing self" (p. 103). Michel Foucault (1980) even suggests that our society has tried to invent the illusion of a self through technologies such as counseling, journal-writing, and autobiography. Orner (1992) explains that the switch from conceptions of "self" to "subjects" encourages us to "think of ourselves and our realities as constructions; the products of meaning-making activity which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. The term 'subject' calls into question the notion of a totally conscious self" (p. 79).

Michelson (1999) shows the evolution of this concept of a unitary self beginning in the Enlightenment view of an interiorized subjectivity, in which body became the ground for an individual autonomy (separate from Other) and inner experience became privatized. In this movement toward privileging self came freedom and agency, along with the internalization of social control. As Kolb (1984) maintained, the modern discovery of a private inner realm of experience granted to individuals their worth, dignity, and liberty to make choices. However, the management of inner experience became important to ensure discipline and regulation of these choices as a bourgeois society arose. Michelson goes on to show how mainstream theories of experiential learning that arose gradually became tied to social relations of capitalism. As discussed in the following section, this movement to "manage" experiential learning poses grave concern for adult educators.

Challenges to Educators' "Management" of Experiential Learning

Ironically, experiential learning's focus originated in political attempts to resist the authority and hegemony of academic and scientific knowledge and to honor people's own unique experience. Also, as Michelson and Kolb both point out, experiential learning was politically focused on celebrating through acknowledging the importance of inner experience, human dignity, and freedom to choose. However, several writers have challenged mainstream experiential learning as becoming focused on managing this domain.

From her own long experience working with APL (assessment of prior learning) programs in the United Kingdom, Fraser (1995) explains the unfolding history of this approach. The objective of programs such as Making Experience Count (MEC) was to legitimize prior learning within vocational and nonvocational certificating bodies toward awarding National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) and granting access to or standing in higher education. MEC also intended to facilitate understanding and thence ownership of the learning process, to enhance self-esteem and confidence in a process designed to be "andragogical" in the humanistic tradition of Malcolm Knowles. The original MEC walked a careful line between the demands for accredited outcomes to their courses—and perhaps a reductionist educational framework—and a philosophy of empowering students, upholding their own life experience, and making it count.

However, Fraser argues that, although originally designed to value diverse individual experience, formal and informal, APL has become restrictive about what counts as experience. Much of the potential for valuing individual experience and finding creative outlets for its expression is being eroded as market forces hold sway over issues of vocational and educational relevance. Fraser describes this as a disjuncture between public discourse and private experience, producing a fundamental paradox when the private journey of discovery and learning is brought under public scrutiny and adjudication. The underlying assumption is that a coherent unified self exists who is a narrator, who can recollect experience and turn it into learning. Experience is assumed to be coherent, consistent, and a site for rational intellectual excavation. The process compels adults to construct a self to fit the APL dimensions and celebrates individualistic achievement: adults are what they have done. This orientation does not address social inequities or the issue of different and often painful lessons learned from experiences related to our subjec-

tivity as members of different cultural, economic, gendered environments. The "disadvantaged," claims Fraser, often experience great barriers to opportunity and fulfillment; it is unfair to measure them by "what they have done" according to institutional categories of valued and recognizable knowledge. One important area of inequity relates to the gendered nature of standards for assessing adult experience. In one example she describes how, at the School for Independent Study in London, student autobiographies were adjudicated. Fewer than 60% of women's autobiographies "passed" compared to 80% of men's. Fraser claims this was because men's life patterns—as self-chosen events pursuing rational goals—were more aligned to institutional ideas. Women's life stories were parts of others' lives, with diffuse voices and shifting identities.

Experiential learning cannot be discussed apart from its political, social, and cultural contexts. Like Fraser, Michelson (1996) shows how the interests, authority, and understandings of knowledge pervading higher education institutions distort people's experience in the process of assessing it, dividing experience into visible/invisible categories, creating identities, and generally colonizing people's experience by squeezing them into preset categories. Michelson (1999) claims that "the management of experience has become a way of regulating how people define themselves and construct an identity" (p. 144).

Critical analysts of learning initiatives in workplace contexts have pointed out that, in an environment where "production is, above all, production for profit; that nature is dead, malleable matter entirely at our disposal" (Hart 1992, p. 26), workers' experiential learning is often viewed as "human capital" with great potential economic benefits for the organization. Usher and Solomon (1998) write:

> The educational discourse of experiential learning intersects happily with the managerial discourse of workplace reform … since both shape subjectivity in ways appropriate to the needs of the contemporary workplace. (p. 8)

This shaping of the continuous (experiential) learner is perhaps the most troubling of all criticisms of the discourse of experiential learning in adult education. In the reflective/constructivist orientation, subjectivities that are potentially multiple, shifting, transgressive, and spontaneous are recast as coherent, stable, rational, and self-regulating. Their experience is raw capital to be processed into knowledge. Tennant (1999) has shown how the educational issue of "transfer," when brought to learning in human experience, implies an excavation of fluid experience to capture knowledge, generalize it, and apply it in different contexts. In this process, living human experience becomes normalized, standardized, then commodified and sold in the labor exchange relations defining capitalism.

In this configuration of human experience, organizations' fight to remain competitive in a global market of overproduction, underemployment, and impossible pace of technological change (Garrick and Usher 1999) can be transformed into a learning problem that is devolved onto individuals. Their "responsibility" is continuous (experiential) learning, which educators and managers assess according to knowledge claims recognized in their

own particular sociocultural milieu. As Edwards (1998a) argues, reflection, though differentiated, becomes a basic pedagogic stance for all workers, because nonroutine tasks are part of everyone's everyday work activity, not just professionals:

> A more intense working environment may require the reflective practice of workers being able to respond "on their feet" … Here self-management within organization frameworks displaces the forms of autonomous activity which are often associated with professional work. In this sense, reflective practice may be well part of the "moral technology" and forms of governmentality through which work is intensified and regulated … Engaging in reflective practice, bringing together thought and action, reflecting whilst you are doing, are key conditions of flexibility …. The reflective practitioner signifies the worker in reflexive modernization par excellence. (p. 387)

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter reviews the explanatory concepts and applications to practice of one particular orientation to experiential learning that has sustained a prominent position in the field of adult education: the constructivist perspective, called reflection in this monograph. The discussion shows how this perspective essentially privileges individual human consciousness constructing knowledge by engaging in a cognitive process of reflection upon episodes of lived experience. Influential theorists within this general orientation each emphasize different elements of this process: Kolb, Boud, Schön, Mezirow, and Brookfield. Some, such as Vygotsky, lay foundations for more sociocultural and psychoanalytic perspectives. Implications for practice based on this reflective/constructivist orientation are presented in terms of four roles for educators: facilitator, instigator, coach, and assessor of people's experience. Finally, this discussion gives examples of critical challenges to certain models within this reflective orientation, particularly critiquing the focus on reflection as a mental activity; the separation of cognition and situated, embodied experience; the failure to acknowledge the discursive production of experience; the representation of learner as a unitary self; and the managing role educators sometimes enact.

In chapter 3, alternate perspectives of experiential learning that in part attempt to address these and other conceptual problems are presented.