BURTON, MARIN E., Ph.D. Experiential Education and Social Justice: Philosophical and Methodological Considerations for Integrating Experiential Learning in Educational Leadership. (2010)
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Experiential education has been practiced in the United States for the last forty years. During that time, the philosophy and practice has taken a variety of shapes and has evolved in purpose and methodology. Experiential education can be used as a meaningful approach to education often yielding transformational results. This inquiry explores the belief that one aim of education should be to prepare students to become responsible and active citizens within the democratic society they will eventually help to shape. This means offering opportunities for students to engage in meaningful experiences that allow them to grapple with the complexities of social constructs in addition to other intended curricular outcomes. Experiential education is one form of education that can engage students in an active way so they can practice the democratic skills they will use while outside the educational environment.

Using philosophical memoir, I describe the lived experience of experiential education. I explore the aims and promises of experiential education and explore how experiential education is well positioned to be a vehicle for transformational change and how it can be used to address aims of social justice. Experiential education is connected to principles of social justice when it challenges authority hierarchies, when choices are offered during educational experiences and when educators work to create agency within their students, by increasing cultural awareness of self and others through shared experiences of diverse learners. Further, educators would be well served to intentionally

utilize experiential methods in order to create truly democratic educational environments that critically examine various issues of equity and justice. Educators and students alike are socially constructed beings that co-create knowledge within experiential classrooms.

Rooted in pragmatic philosophy, I analyze narratives of experience illustrating how knowledge is constructed and how this educational approach can be used for democratic aims. This epistemology set the stage for philosophical themes discussed throughout the inquiry, such as understanding knowledge construction in a way that is useful for the lived experience and utilizing democracy as a way of life. These pragmatist ideas influence and compliment experiential practice encouraging students to examine cultural contexts and practice skills needed within society as they experience and then intentionally reflect on those experiences. This work helps educators to seek to fulfill pragmatist's promises of democracy.

Intentionally focusing on social justice as an educational endeavor asks educators to recognize the cultural constructs of all players within the educational scene. These constructs influence self-concept which in turn, influences how we engage with one another in our educational endeavors. Negotiating principles of social justice means examining institutions for power, privilege and hidden curriculum that may be oppressive or sending messages to students about their worth. It also means nurturing the voices of all learners encouraging them to become agents of change within their personal and social worlds in order to work toward more equitable and just social environments.

The idea is not that experiential education should be used at all times or that it offers a panacea for educational woes. It would be counterproductive and the antithesis of

what this inquiry is suggesting to dogmatically prescribe a particular practice. However, just as pragmatists hope for the promise of the democratic experiment, there is hope for experiential praxis to make transformational change toward a more socially just world.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTEGRATING

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

IN EDUCATIONAL

LEADERSHIP

by

Marin E. Burton

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Approved by

Dr. Glenn Hudak_____
Committee Chair

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Rebecca L. Carver

who lived in the true spirit of experiential education

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of

The Graduate School of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
                        Glenn Hudak

Committee Members _____
                        Leila Villaverde

                    _____
                        Svi Shapiro

                    _____
                        Julie Carlson

_____
Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____
Date of Final Oral Examination

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INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Inquiry

A Need for Change

Our national culture is ripe for change. In a time when the first African American

is president, despite the critics there is an overwhelming feeling that people can bring

about change within the world. Indeed, the echoes remain that *Yes We Can*! And yet, the

nation must ask, what will we decide to change? What impact are we hoping this change

will bring about? The desire for change in the United States' educational system resides

within the current educational structure that values standardization in order to produce

measurable results. The United States seems to have an insatiable need for standards that

can be quantitatively tested and demonstrated. Supporters of this desire for testing claim

that they are in search of accountability measurements that keep our educational leaders

on track. (White House Website, retrieved from

http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html#2). However,

tracking accountability has investors from outside the system creating the rules and

consequences according to the standards they have developed.

Slattery (2006) describes our modern educational environment as a "nightmare"

stating that "characteristics of this nightmare include the lack of public and democratic

conversation about education, education's standardization across the United States, and

the deprofessionalization of teachers…" (p. 21). The standardization of education is a particularly interesting trend. Clearly standards are not inherently negative, destructive or "nightmarish." Standards can serve as guides or signposts on the curricular trail intended for increased accountability and improved performance. However, the result of national standardization may be an epidemic of mediocrity (Laurie Frank, personal communication, October 19, 2007). It may be true that educators need standards that create a certain level of performance. However, synonyms for the word *standard* create a less than optimal focus for transformational educators. Standards are normal, typical, average, ordinary, customary, traditional, or everyday. These words hardly describe educators we strive to become or educational environments we strive to create. Educators who consistently perform at a level that is above standard are constrained to focus on things such as national standardized tests, which drastically limit their capabilities and possibilities for educational praxis. Standards give educators an understanding of expectations and goals to meet. However, standardization may limit expectations and goals creating mediocre performance.

How do you create standards that also allow room for professional latitude and a meaningful curriculum? According to Slattery (2006) "curriculum development in the postmodern era begins with the deconstruction of master narratives that impose knowledge through unequal power relations where students must be subordinate to teachers; it then moves to the emancipation of both teachers and students who have been disempowered by this structure" (p. 27). Instead of being accomplices in an institutional structure in which some have lost faith, what if we were accomplices and collaborators in

new models of curriculum? Slattery (2006) reminds us that "our accountability must be to human persons and not tests and measures" (p. 56). Ghandi is quoted within graduation speeches and bumper stickers alike, declaring that *we must be the change we seek*. But what change do we seek? In what ways can we collaborate to create new curricular practices?

The institutions of education must ask what impact they desire and what skills, knowledge, and understandings students should be equipped with when leaving its doors. At a recent installation of the new Chancellor for The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the chancellor was asked to uphold certain values and vow to work toward particular desired aims. One promise was to demonstrate that efforts were made that would lead to engaged citizens in a democratic society. If this is an intentional purpose of educational institutions, what are the activities and methods used on a day-to-day basis within the classrooms that work to produce these outcomes? Are today's students even ready to discuss the impact and implications of having the first American President of a race other than white? Today's students must have the opportunity to examine issues of power and equity during their educational careers. They should grapple with inequalities they encounter and should seek an understanding of how differences both enhance and challenge society. They must understand themselves and others as socially constructed beings that impact one another. Currently, there is not *always* a means for students to move beyond the facts in the test-taking culture to engage in rich and meaningful experiences that inform who they will become as citizens of the society they will eventually work to change and will help to create.

The Importance of Experience

During their academic and personal lives, students may engage in a wide variety of experiences with diverse people and cultures, but there are limitations that prevent them to have meaningful educational experiences that intentionally focus on issues of societal relevance. Students must have opportunities to engage within experiences that aim to explore social justice as an educational outcome. If educators truly want engaged citizens, this engagement must begin within the educational process. While one educational approach could not adequately or fully cover the complete scope of this issue, the practice of experiential education offers a promising and potentially transformational way to address issues of justice and equity within society.

Experiential education supports the belief that people learn from experiences when they are relevant and meaningful and when they are tied to reflection and application for future learning. In fact, the neurological field of research is discovering that experiential practices support brain development tied to learning. Zull (2004) discusses the "realization that learning produces physical change in the brain. This concept represents a new way to look at both learning and neuroscience" (p. 68). Zull continues to describe the change processes of the brain through practice and emotions that contribute to learning. He goes further and aligns the four major regions of the brain with a constantly referenced experiential model – David Kolb's Experiential Education Cycle. Kolb (1984) developed this cyclical model offering signposts for the process of learning. He argues that students must have an experience, reflect on that experience, make broader generalizations from their reflections and observations and then find ways

to apply the new meaning to other aspects of the student's world. The relevance for this cycle is enriched from neurological studies as Zull (2004) describes the different functions of the brain, "*sensory cortex* (getting information); *integrative cortex near the sensory cortex* (making meaning of information); *integrative cortex in the front* (creating new ideas from these meanings); and *motor cortex* (acting on these ideas)" (p. 71). Zull continues, "If teachers provide experiences and assignments that engage all four areas of the cortex, they can expect a deeper learning than if they engage fewer regions" (pp. 71-72). Experiential education can work to engage all four of these areas of the brain. Warren, Mitten, and Loeffler, (2008) distinguish between experiential education and learning:

> Experiential education has been defined as both a philosophy and methodology while experiential learning may be thought of as the process. In experiential education, a teacher or leader intentionally uses experiential learning (the process of the student encountering direct experience) to move toward a specific learning outcome. (p. xii)

Educators should honor the process of learning through experiential methods in order to develop rich connections with their intended outcomes.

Social Justice as an Educational Endeavor

If learning outcomes that foster engaged citizens are what is desired, educational opportunities must be created that encourage the brain's development more fully with these outcomes in mind. The Association for Experiential Education (2010), a leading membership organization within the field, declares that their vision is to "contribute to making a more just and compassionate world by transforming education"

(http://www.aee.org/about/visionMissionEnds). If a more just and compassionate world is ever going to be created, citizens must be nurtured to be socially responsible. As educators, we cannot be satisfied with only having specific days that honor important figures within the Civil Rights Movement, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. We cannot confine our efforts to showing videos of cultural traditions or displaying principles of people like Gandhi on the walls of our learning institutions. We must engage our students with experiences that will prepare them for the society they will inherit and then influence.

What does it mean to create a more just world? Defining a term like *social justice* can be a daunting task. Clearly, how one conceptualizes social justice depends on the context – political, social, educational, or a combination - the definition depends on one's realm of interest. While tracing the evolution of the concept of social justice is beyond the realm of this inquiry project, it is important to narrow the scope of social justice that will be discussed here. David Miller (1999) states that when we speak of social justice:

> Very crudely, I think, we are discussing how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society. When more concretely, we attack some policy or some state of affairs as socially unjust, we are claiming that a person, or more usually a category of persons, enjoys fewer advantages than that person or group of person ought to enjoy (or bears more of the burdens than they ought to bear), given how other members of the society in question are faring. (p. 1)

This inquiry examines social justice within education. Drawing from David Miller's basic concept of how one might think about social justice, this examination is concerned with distribution of advantages within education and, as a result, how educational experiences

influence individual experiences within society. Some educational institutions have a direct focus on social justice curriculum, such as the Global Village School, a private Kindergarten through twelve homeschooling program based in southern California, which claims:

> In our view social justice curriculum concerns itself with peace, compassion, justice, sustainability, community, integrity, diversity, creativity, and responsibility. We offer a social justice education that encourages the development of thoughtful human beings, and when we explore religion we do it in a non-dogmatic way. We encourage critical thinking and an appreciation of open, pluralistic societies through study and service learning opportunities. (Global Village School, 2009)

Creating institutions that focus on and specifically address social justice concerns as a central aspect of the curriculum is one approach. However, other educational environments can maintain an emphasis on social justice without developing a new institution with that focus. It is plausible that no matter what the curriculum, themes of social justice are present. The Global Village School operates under the premise that "Core subjects such as English, History, Math, and Science often contain peace, diversity, social justice and environmental themes" (Global Village School, 2009). The question becomes what principles of social justice might be present within the educational scene no matter what curriculum is studied?

A Call for Experiential Education with a Social Justice Emphasis

From my experiences within the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, several principles of educational social justice have emerged through my coursework. First,

educational social justice involves a belief that our identities consist of a myriad of cultural constructs that influence one's self-concept. An aspect of education concerned with social justice involves increasing one's awareness of these cultural constructs of self and others and how we impact one another from a societal perspective. Second, educational institutions interested in creating socially just environments examine systems of authority, power, and privilege and adopt a belief that all players within an educational system have worth and value to knowledge production. Third, increased awareness of self identity, the identity of others, and educational experiences that reinforce one's worth, develops the individual's belief that they can be agents within the world outside of the educational realm. An outcome of an emphasis on educational social justice is one's belief in their own agency. Finally, this agency can develop into a practice of being engaged citizens within society modeling the intellectual curiosity and continual learning experienced within the educational scene. Educators who strive to nurture learners' voices and develop students who are empowered agents within their worlds to work toward equitable and just social environments are involved in pedagogical social justice. Pedagogical social justice seeks educational aims that I believe yield the promises of democratic societies.

In order to focus on social justice aims within our educational environments, we must examine our practice. In particular, we must remember that, "We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us" (Marcel Proust, as cited in Luckner and Nadler, 1992, p. 10). As an experiential educator, for over thirteen years I have been attempting to *not* spare people from

discovering wisdom. It can be tempting to think of our role as educators as a process of *giving* information to our students or inspiring new knowledge based on our actions and behaviors within our various "classrooms." The educational moment is traditionally thought of as the time when a teacher prepares a particular curriculum and then covers that curriculum by *teaching* their students the material. However, experiential educators think about the educational moment differently. Experiential education privileges the learning process in addition to learning outcomes. While there may be a curriculum or intended outcomes, the task of the experiential educator is not about covering a certain amount of material in a particular amount of time; it is the educational journey to get there that is important.

Experiential educators know they cannot simply give their students wisdom. They know they cannot sit down and transfer knowledge from one person to another. Rather, they view their roles as guides or facilitators of the educational process who create opportunities for learning with conditions best suited for students to discover their own wisdom through the process of their learning journey. Experiential educators cannot travel the journey for their students; they must take the trip together.

Imagine an educator who is leading diversity training for incoming teachers who will be serving in institutions that have been identified as lower income, Title One schools. The goals of her training are to teach skills, competencies, and values for honoring culturally diverse students so the teachers are prepared for their new teaching environments. The educator figures she is well positioned to lead the training because she has had ample experience with diverse cultures. She has studied abroad multiple times,

has served in the Peace Corps and grew up in a racially and socio-economically diverse community. She has experienced a multitude of remarkable lessons and wants to share this new knowledge with her students. Fueled by her own experience and passion for this topic, the educator leads the training by telling her own stories about what she has encountered in various cultures. She describes to the students that she has been transformed by what she has learned throughout her myriad of experiences. She aligns these stories with a Power Point lecture outlining the core principles of culturally competent teachers. She administers a test on the diversity principles the students read about in an article and from the lectures within class. She continues to report to the students about the people she met, powerful conversations she had while she was in various cultures. She tells her students how she learned about the things that are important in her life by spending time with people who live a different lifestyle. After her tremendously rich description, lectures, tests, and personal stories, she turns to her students and says, *Okay, because I have shared this information with you in such great detail and with all my teaching passion, you are sufficiently trained and ready to serve in your new schools. You are empowered to successfully navigate the cultural scene in your new environment in all of its complexity*.

Now this seems like a somewhat absurd scenario, but this is often the educational exchange that occurs within many traditional classrooms. With best intentions, educators *give* their students knowledge they have already acquired and then expect their students to be ready for the journey ahead feeling confident that they have prepared them for the trip. How can we expect students to acquire skills and competencies from written or

verbal explanations? How can we demand that students gain new knowledge only from other people's experiences? Why do we expect students to understand the nuances of cultures and human interactions that impact our human values without experiencing these real moments themselves in order to examine and refine their own values? Educators often experience their own educational journey while unintentionally sparing their students from the learning process. Students need the opportunity to *experience* their learning. They need to examine their own culture and how they have been influenced by their cultural contexts. They need to feel the discomfort of navigating within cultural norms that are different from their own. They need practice having conversations with and living among people who are different from themselves in order to clarify values that are important to them in their lives. Even with our best intentions, we can continually spare our students from the opportunity to learn.

Please understand that I do not assume that experiential education is the cure for all educational woes. Educational philosophy and practice has assumed many forms and has evolved in countless ways over time in response to the context and needs of particular societies over time. While I believe that experiential education is a promising approach to education of this time, it is not *always* appropriate *all* of the time. Experiential education will not be the preferred methodology if one is looking to convey large quantities of specific information or if one is asking students to learn specific facts and figures or arrive at specific conclusions. However, this dissertation focuses on how experiential education may be appropriate and is well positioned for fostering socially responsible and empowered citizens. This is specifically relevant during a time when educational

opportunities for critical thinking seem to be trumped by teaching to the test behaviors.

Experiential education offers a breath of engagement that might otherwise be lacking.

The hope for experiential education may be that experience and purposeful reflection to

connect learning becomes so ingrained within mainstream education that we might no

longer need to distinguish experiential education from what we mean when we discuss

education in general. Educational theory and practice will evolve and we will continue to

respond.

Nevertheless, I have been a champion of experiential education for a number of

years because I have discovered that experiential education creates a different educational

environment where powerful results can occur that are beyond originally intended

curriculum results. I am constantly cognizant of the question: what are the aims of

education? Influenced greatly by various experiential educators (Breunig, 2005, 2008a,

2008b; Itin, 1999; Garvey, Mitten, Pace, & Roberts, 2008; Dewey, 1938) and critical

pedagogues, (hooks, 1994; Greene, 1988; Giroux, 2005; Shapiro, 2006) I believe that one

aim of education is to create socially conscious and engaged citizens within society. I am

specifically interested in this inquiry, because it has implications in a wide variety of

environments for how we educate. Through my experience in my doctoral course of

study, I have developed a deeper passion for the connection between educational

methodologies and social justice. Even though this doctoral program does not have a

specific emphasis in experiential education, my horizons about educational theory and

practice has been broadened while I continue my passion for experiential education.

During my experiences as an experiential educator while teaching classes and offering

experiential programs, I have seen glimpses of social justice outcomes. I have seen power and authority examined and questioned. I have seen individuals who were previously disempowered become agents within their learning experiences. If one believes that a desired result of education is to create actively engaged citizens within society, then the need for cultivating socially just educational environments becomes critical.

This dissertation explores the following questions: Why is experiential education an effective tool for serving the aims of social justice? In what ways do experiential philosophy, principles, and practices enable an educator to foster the development of socially responsible and empowered citizens? What are the organic connections between experiential education and social justice work? Are they inextricably intertwined or are they connected only with intentionally created educational circumstances? If aims of social justice should be worked on within experiential educational environments, how can its methodology be articulated and practiced in a way that is consistent with the core principles and spirit of experiential education? And finally, what is the lived experience of exploring issues of social justice through experiential education and how does that inform experiential educational practice?

A Way of Knowing: A Pragmatic Approach

In the next section, I will discuss philosophic memoir as the methodology used within this inquiry. Before diving into the specifics of this approach it seems prudent to trace the philosophical epistemology that has guided my inquiry into why experiential education is an effective tool for serving the needs of social justice. A significant contributor for the development of the philosophy and practice of experiential education

is John Dewey. Incidentally, he was also an advocate of pragmatism. I find that the two philosophies compliment each other and have served to strengthen my understanding of how educational practice can serve social justice aims.

Pragmatist philosophy challenges more traditional notions of philosophy developed by those who came before them. While more ancient philosophical writings, such as Plato's Republic (as cited in Grube, 1992) may have espoused that absolute truth with a capital "T" exists and the philosophers job is to discover it, pragmatists are more interested in philosophy that is useful for the lived experience within society. As an experiential educator, understanding pragmatist philosophic epistemology helps to shape the aims and practice of education. In particular, I have been influenced by pragmatist ideals of democracy as a way of life, the significance of the role of the lived experience, and the development of social intelligence. These ideals compliment experiential education practice that is concerned with fostering empowered students and socially responsible citizens.

Brief Pragmatist Overview of Truth and Knowledge

Advocated by John Dewey and then later reintroduced and defended by Richard Rorty, pragmatist philosophy offers a different view of the scope and purpose of philosophy. Pragmatists differ from metaphysicians (such as within the traditions of Plato and Kant) in that they are not in search of universal truths that apply to all people at all times and all societal contexts. Conversely, pragmatists understand the world as being in flux and being contingent; philosophy should be something that is useful for helping people navigate this contingent reality. This view of philosophical truth is in stark

contrast to more Platonic notions of knowledge where "their accounts are for the sake of knowing what always is, not what comes into being and passes away" (Plato, as cited in Grube, 1992, p. 199). Because we evolve and change as a society, pragmatists suggest that our truths shift in response to our societal developments. Allison Kadlec, (2007) a useful contemporary interpreter of Dewey, describes him as someone concerned with "philosophy as a problem-centered enterprise, the importance of change rather than permanence, the emphasis on consequences rather than absolute Truths, and the celebration of process rather than the search for the final ends" (p. 44). Similar to experiential practice, pragmatist philosophy offers a dynamic and engaged approach to the philosophical realm. Rorty (1989) offers Hegel's definition of philosophy as "holding your time in thought" (p. 55). This definition builds on the idea that philosophy does not create static truths that are unwavering over the span of human existence. Rorty states, "I construe this to mean 'finding a description of all the things characteristic of your time of which you most approve, with which you unflinchingly identify, a description which will serve as a description of the end toward which the historical developments which led up to your time were means" (p. 55). The point here for Rorty is that the world is constantly changing and becoming based on the experiences of a particular society. Rorty suggests that we build descriptions of the world based on past experiences and knowledge while looking forward to future hopes for our evolving reality. Rorty describes pragmatic philosophy as "a willingness to refer to all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for" (p. 27). Pragmatists search for how we can progress and grow in order to increase our democratic potential. Pragmatists *hope* for something

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more, something better for society; our collective experiences create the knowledge to move society forward.

Pragmatist Philosophy as a Democratic Endeavor – A Way of Life

The philosophical task for pragmatists involves engaging in dialogue and free discussion. Rorty (1989) states, "I have defined 'dialectic' as the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another, rather than merely to infer propositions from one another" (p. 78). Rorty describes the use of vocabularies as the way we communicate and describe the realities of our times. People use language to describe their truths and this language becomes our collective vocabularies. At times, we need to redescribe our world when contemporary vocabularies fail to serve our democratic needs. Kadlec (2007) states, "For Dewey, reconstruction is the name given to the work we do when we apply creative intelligence to rethinking and readjusting our principles and practices" (p. 38). People in society examine the vocabulary currently in use to see how it stands with their contextualized experience and then critique or reconstruct reality when it is seen that something else would be more useful. We can also think about redescription as "redefining the world in a plausible way that excites the imagination in a way that asks people to think differently" (personal communication through class lecture, Glenn Hudak, May 21, 2009). We must engage in the process of redescription when our current vocabularies do not serve our democratic ideals.

One aspect of pragmatist philosophy that resonates with the spirit of this inquiry is that it encourages democracy as a way of life. Pragmatists are rooted in the search for living up to the promises and the ideals of democracy. However, pragmatists define

democracy in a particular way. Kadlec (2007) states that Dewey felt strongly about examining how well society is measuring up to intended ideals according to democratic principles. This concept can be understood by "Dewey's unwavering faith that democracy should not be judged according to its institutions but rather by reference to the intersubjectively constituted habits of inquiry and communication skills it encourages in its citizens" (p. 119). Dewey prioritizes creating a democracy that is a way of life; therefore, the institutions should, in its habits, reflect and continuously work toward democratic principles in action. My inquiry into educational environments working toward social justice aims is deeply intertwined with Dewey's notion of democracy as a way of life.

Therefore, one must ask what pragmatists mean when they describe democratic truth. Rorty (1999) considers Dewey's notion of truth: "He [Dewey] taught us to call 'true' whatever belief results from a free and open encounter of opinions, without asking whether this result agrees with something beyond that encounter" (p. 119). Determining truths depends on what people come together and decide given their particular historical context and situational reality. Discovering truths occurs within social interaction from a pragmatist's point of view. Democracy enters this equation because the way we come to these truths, must result from people who are "full participating members of a free community of inquiry" (p. 119). This pragmatic idea of democracy is described as a "promising experiment" (p. 119). Pragmatists see democratic communities as vital for growth. What pragmatists offer as an inheritance to future generations is a belief and confidence in humanity to discover truths that democratic societies live by at a particular

time. They do not need to look outside themselves; they possess the intellectual tools they need.

This is an important inheritance for developing future democratic communities because it impacts how groups of individuals will conceptualize the world in the future. Rorty (1999) argues against divinizing any one argument or way of thinking about the world. He poignantly explains that once you call something truth with a capital T, it limits dialogue and impedes progression. This is the antithesis of the values of democracy which claim that we construct truths of the society based on what is most useful within the context of the time. Rorty (1999) states, "the notion of 'inalienable human rights' is no better and no worse a slogan than that of 'obedience to the will of God.' Either slogan, when invoked as an unmoved mover, is simply a way of saying that our spade is turned – that we have exhausted argumentative resources" (p. 83). Calling something divine places it in an untouchable category and inhibits society's ability to redefine things that might have once been an accepted truth but is no longer useful. Given new circumstances and contingencies, a democratic society may decide these things need to be redescribed. The idea that democracies must continue to develop as they continually experience the world also must be considered while designing educational experiences.

Rorty (1989) offers a summary of the concept of de-divinizing by suggesting that "we get to a point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance" (p. 22). To "de-divinize the world" could be an incredibly scary prospect to contemporary society. The institution and language of

religion is extremely powerful and serves as the basis for which many move through life and describe their truth. However, Rorty explains his concept of the contingency of language through this quote because it demonstrates that society's concepts about everything in the world – yes, even religion - is a construct created by humans. How we talk about what we hold sacred is the language we have created. Calling something "divine" is the equivalent to calling it "Truth" and this is in direct antithesis to what Rorty claims is important for us to do as humans: to be literary critics, to check our languages and consider other options that might serve us in more useful ways. While individuals may maintain a certain core of beliefs that help them navigate the world around them, they must also gain awareness that it is the language they currently employ. And given another set of "time and chance" circumstances, they might be better served using a different vocabulary. Language is a tool that allows us to describe the world as we experience it. From this perspective, calling anything "divine" or "truth," limits our abilities to develop new languages and engage within the changing world around us. We must account for the uncertainty that exists within the world.

Pragmatist Influence on the Aims of Education

This understanding of democracy as a way of life has implications for the development of the aims and practices of education. One must ask how well the various institutions of education are measuring up to these democratic ideals and if we are moving in a direction to increase democratic principles. A key to developing democracy as a way of life is that students must be allowed and encouraged to practice these democratic ideals within educational settings. Dewey sees "education as the locus for

growth" and "growth takes place or is crippled, depending on which educational practices are adopted" (Kadlec, 2007, pp. 56-57). Kadlec helps to show Dewey's continuous dedication to a democratic approach because there is room for society to decide which practices to adopt in order to enhance the growth capability of society. Fishman and McCarthy (2007) concur with this understanding of Dewey as they state, "Dewey's ultimate hope is for a society that enables its citizens to grow. It enables them to develop flexible habits and lead creative lives as they work cooperatively with others to be more intelligently wholehearted about their beliefs, tastes, and choice of ideals" (p. 21). To obtain these types of educational outcomes, students must be given opportunities to grow and develop flexible habits through collective experiences working with others. Their school experience should reflect democracy as a way of life.

To reemphasize, Dewey sees the aim of education as growth. Rorty (1999) explains Dewey's views "that 'growth itself is the moral end' and that to 'protect, sustain and direct growth is the chief *ideal* of education'" (p. 120). In the Deweyan sense, growth is concerned with adapting, adjusting and learning from the new challenges the world introduces into our lives in order to move toward a better future. Therefore, students must engage in inquiry, not in an attempt to reach set conclusions or absolute Truth, but to interact with existing reality in order to grow. Education should excite the imagination for continuous inquiry projects throughout a lifetime. Rorty (1999) explains that Dewey believes that we should "give up the idea that knowledge is an attempt to *represent* reality. Rather, we should view inquiry as a way of *using* reality. So the relation between truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational" (p. 33).

Students must practice the skill of developing understandings of causal relationships and must discover a passion for questioning through the process of inquiry. Steve Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (2007) echo this suggestion: "a problem solving approach with our students, a chance to dialogue and name the world in common inquiry, can make both our students and ourselves more critical and humane" (p. 74). In this way, students can become versed in holding beliefs that are useful, and "continue to hold beliefs which prove to be reliable guides" (Rorty, 1999, p. 33) instead of holding steadfast to static truths which may be antiquated.

Dewey and Rorty are concerned with the process of socialization within Kindergarten through twelfth grade education. Rorty (1999) describes education as addressing "two entirely distinct, and equally necessary, processes – socialization and individuation" (p. 117). Socialization helps students to understand the choices society has made in the past, including common practices and vocabularies they chose. But this process of socialization must not be given to students at the end of their development, but rather should be thought of as a springboard for their future progress and the foundation of their prospective contributions. Rorty (1999) says "there is only the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process" (p. 118). Most importantly, Rorty reminds us that the socialization process that occurs must be rooted in democratic ideals: "Dewey wanted the inculcation of this narrative of freedom and hope to be the core of the socialization process" (p. 122). From a pragmatic perspective, students must be socialized in a way

that respects the aims of democracy so that they can become individuals that seek self as well as societal improvement.

It is within higher education that Rorty (1999) hopes individuation occurs. Once students have been through a certain socialization process, they may begin to "make themselves into people who can stand up to their own pasts…" as the students begin "noticing everything that is paltry and mean and unfree in their surroundings. With luck, the best of them will succeed in altering the conventional wisdom, so that the next generation is socialized in a somewhat different way" (p. 124). In this way, students in a democratic educational system translate to citizens within a democratic society who are continually looking for new growth. "To hope that it will nevertheless be perceptibly different is to remind oneself that growth is indeed the only end that democratic higher education can serve and also to remind oneself that the direction of growth is unpredictable" (p. 125). Educational processes that allow students to develop individually will encourage growth that is rooted in hope while managing the unpredictable nature of the world. Students must have the opportunity to examine these contingencies within education so that they may become decision-makers within the changing society they will help shape and hopefully improve.

Creating educational processes that honor democratic ideals can instill hope in future generations. Rorty (1999) describes hope as "the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past" (p. 120). As students develop confidence in themselves to use the language they have inherited and to dream of new possibilities and new languages that are more useful, they can maintain

hope for an improved future. They will have confidence to handle the contingencies and uncertainties of the world and will rely on a faith in the democratic community in which they will become participating members. They can operate as full citizens ready to engage in the free and open discussions of their times. But they must develop these practices through experiences within their educational settings.

As a component of democracy as a way of life, pragmatists like John Dewey were concerned with the lived experience and how it informs a continuation toward democratic ideals. Kadlec (2007) describes this value: "pragmatism is a natural ally to those who believe that ordinary citizens can do more to actively and intelligently participate in determining the conditions under which we live and directing the course of events" (p. 3). Citizens, through their lived experience can influence the outcomes of their lives. Further, Kadlec describes critical pragmatism as a means "to improve our individual and shared capacity to tap into the critical potential of lived experience in a world that is unalterably characterized by flux and change" (p. 12). Pragmatists desire a democratic society that critically engages the world around them in order to imagine new ways of being when democratic ideals are not lived. But pragmatists remind us that our work is never completed. "Our contingent conditions require that this crafting never be considered finished once and for all, but instead be viewed as an ongoing process" (p. 12). Democracy within the lived experience will change as new experiences create new contingencies for society to work through.

If pragmatists value lived experience as a means for recreating society within democratic ideals, then education must also follow suit in honoring the lived experience

within its educational design. Education must provide opportunities for students to have democratic experiences as well as chances to reflect on the lived experiences they have had outside of the educational institution. Kadlec (2007) states, "Dewey argues that all knowledge is the product of a dynamic interaction between the knower and the known that belies any notion of a private interior realm apart from the world it inhabits" (p. 17). Dewey's notion of philosophy demonstrates that developing knowledge is a matter of being engaged in the world. Therefore, educational pursuits must give students the opportunity to be involved in this type of dynamic interaction.

Further, Kadlec (2007) describes Dewey's ideas that "all knowledge is active, and that experimental and communicative inquiry is the mode through which we come to order our experiences in ways that allow us to apprehend the consequences of propositions in action" (p. 19). Education must engage students in active experiments and inquiry processes. Further, "Dewey's experimentalism is intrinsically social and communicative…and it is through the development of more richly ordered experiences that we learn to more intelligently navigate our course both as communicatively constituted individuals and as a pluralistic society" (pp. 19-20). Educational endeavors must create experiences that are social and meaningful for "there is no realm that can be reasonably or profoundly understood as *outside of or prior to* experience because it is only *through, in and by* the active medium of experience that humans come to develop the capacity for critical reflection and intelligent action" (p. 20). However, Dewey is careful to note that "the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (p. 22). Kadlec

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continues: "The educative quality of an experience depends on the extent to which it enhances our capacity to further perceive the consequences of our choices, actions in the pursuit of fuller and richer experiences moving forward" (p. 22). The concept that we are inextricably linked and that growth is a social process is emphasized here: "Children learn the meaningful connections between their individual experiences and the larger social context in which they grow by doing things in cooperative settings, rather than by passively receiving information" (Kadlec, 2007, p. 59). This also reveals Dewey's emphasis that education should give children an opportunity to practice democratic ideals through a social growth process.

Finally, the importance of enacting the lived experience within education is emphasized by Kadlec (2007) who states, "in Dewey's view, education does not prepare us for anything, it is rather the process by which we develop our capacities as self-directed human beings capable of creative collaboration in a changing world" (p. 56). As educators, we could be less concerned with *preparing* students for the world; rather, we should be helping them to make meaningful connections between their lived experience and the curriculum they are studying. Education should help individuals within society grow and cope with and manage the contingencies of the world. Through understanding our lived experience and the consequences of our actions we can work to improve the world toward positive change.

Democracy that Encourages Social Intelligence

Pragmatists also claim that the lived experience of a democratic society works to create the social intelligence of that society as an ongoing evolutionary process. By way of offering a definition, Kadlec (2007) states:

> Social intelligence is not a possession, it is a de-centered and educative process of ordering our experiences through manifold communication. The guiding principles of social intelligence then are 1) the protection and expansion of our capacity for free and communicative inquiry and 2) the protection and expansion of our capacity to perceive the shared consequences of our habits and policies. (p. 129)

Through these practices we work to develop social intelligence. To continue the discussion, Kadlec (2007) states, "the critical salience of pragmatism is grounded in key insight that the greatest obstacles to meaningful democracy are not fixed institutional or economic arrangements; rather, they are the fluid and discursively constructed forces that isolate us and preclude the generation of social intelligence" (p. 6). Again, Dewey believes that we are inextricably linked to one another and that our democratic commitments can only be realized through the work of the social - "the name Dewey gives to the world produced in and by communication and conjoint activity" (p. 74). It is through dealing with the complexities of social realities that people come to understand how to treat each other. Kadlec (2007) argues that it is through deliberative democracy where "deliberation is vital for democracy not because it helps us create fixed and final principles about the best way to order society or because it pretends to make possible the reconciliation of all interests in the generation of 'rational consensus'; but rather because it helps us tap into the critical potential of lived experience in a world defined by flux and

contingency" (p. 118). This relates to social intelligence because once we recognize that the world is in flux, we can realize that "we are less in need of fixed principles than we are in need of flexible habits of inquiry and a taste for imaginative approaches to social intelligence" (p. 118). Through our struggle with the world in flux, we continue to develop social intelligence. Through our interactions within the social world, we have an opportunity to see the consequences of our actions and to grow collectively. This is entangled with viewing growth (and education, for that matter) as part of the process of living.

This concept of social intelligence has significance for educational practices. Kadlec (2007) states, "education for Dewey, is fundamentally intertwined with the critical political implications of social life" (p. 59). There is a purpose for growth and for education – so that we can better understand and then create the democracy we would like to live in; this occurs through the continued development of social intelligence. Educational environments must work to develop social consciousness within students. Educators must ask how their efforts can work to foster its development. Kadlec (2007) argues that "for Dewey, 'the process and the goal of education are the same.' Therefore, the goal of education must be to treat the subjects of study…as expressions of social life through which children develop by having their own experiences transformed in the ongoing growth of their social consciousness" (p. 59). Education must reflect the lived experience. What children experience in school should mirror processes of society outside of the more managed school life so they can develop democratic habits. Kadlec (2007) continues, "Subjects of study have meaning only if they are connected to social

life and, consequently, the moral duty of education is to activate children rather than demand passivity" (p. 59). This ideal also echoes Dewey's concept of the continuum of experience where individuals must connect past experiences with present as well as future experience in order to make learning relevant and create significance for the future social intelligence of communities.

These ideas are echoed in Fishman and McCarthy's (2007) account of how Dewey and Freire's philosophy can inform educational practice. They state, "Both Dewey and Freire argue that what we do in the classroom is political…as teachers, we are either supporting the status quo or challenging it…we have opportunities to work for reform, social reconstruction, and more hopeful living" (p. 72). Fishman and McCarthy remind us that the educational environment reflects the lived experience in the outside world, and if we have hope of improving our social intelligence in the direction of more democratic outcomes, educators must work toward these ideals in the classroom.

Ultimately, pragmatists encourage us to engage in the sort of philosophy that is active and alive within our lived experience. Rorty (1999) asks us to consider that "we should view inquiry as a way of using reality…Pragmatists realize that this way of thinking about knowledge and truth makes certainty unlikely. But they think that the quest for certainty – even as a long-term goal – is an attempt to escape from the world" (p. 33). In our quest to understand our lives, we must engage within the world, not remove ourselves from it in search of a truth that exists in an isolated vacuum. For a pragmatist, the key is that the educational environment must prepare students for actively engaging in society. By creating opportunities for students to engage in meaningful

experiences that are connected to the lived experience, by creating circumstances for social interaction and learning, and by offering genuine inquiry projects that do not have final answers but that lead to future questions, we are attempting to increase the potential of living up to the ideals of democracy. The rub is there are no guarantees how society will decide to use our tools and habits that intend to bring about democratic outcomes. Will we create equitable power structures, or will we oppress? The responsibility is ours. Democracies allow us to choose.

Methodology

As a dedicated experiential educator, I wanted to create an experiential dissertation. Falling short of figuring out a way to bring my intended participants on an actual expedition of learning, I am choosing to write in the format of a philosophic memoir. Rooted in pragmatist philosophy which asks us to use language to define our realities, describing experiences through the use of stories allows for analysis, making meaning and generalizing conclusions. The point is that one does not know things in abstraction; rather, one develops knowledge within the context of our lived experiences. I viewed my job as creating a plausible argument through the use of story and narrative held up to theory and philosophy about why experiential education can be used to work on aims of social justice and to demonstrate how that methodology can be articulated and practiced.

In addition, the philosophy of experiential education suggests that learners honor a process of learning in addition to educational outcomes. Therefore, the process of writing this dissertation provided yet another learning experience that has influenced the

way I view and then interact with the world around me. In order to maintain consistency with experiential practice, I used this inquiry project as a way to continue the experiential learning cycle. The act of writing this dissertation holds true with experiential theory that asks learners to examine experience in a meaningful way. I have taken a hard look at the experiences I have had over thirteen years of studying and practicing experiential education. From this broad perspective, this inquiry process has allowed me to reflect on these experiences, make meaning or generalizations about the significance of these experiences and then draw conclusions about how these generalizations can be applied in future practice. Simply put, the act of writing this dissertation allows me to complete my own experiential learning cycle.

Specifically, philosophic memoir aligns with the experiential and pragmatist philosophy as it offers the opportunity for reflection and articulation of the lived experience and its impact on our way of life. In particular, memoir, as a philosophical tool, stands in stark contrast to traditional philosophical ways of knowing. Vivian Gornick (2001) defines a memoir as "a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom" (p. 91). The notion of *Truth* is challenged through memoir as personal stories and histories provide the basis for knowing. A philosophical memoir is an essay that is based in personal account and which investigates the nature of reality and how to deal with particular experiences or situations. Dewey (as cited in McDermott, 1981) stresses the importance of the lived experience for developing philosophy and ways of knowing the world: "The traits possessed by the subject-matters

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of experience are as genuine as the characteristics of sun and electron. They are found, experienced, and not shoved out of being by some trick of logic. Then found, their ideal qualities are as relevant to the philosophic theory of nature as are the traits found by physical inquiry" (p. 253).

One example of the use of memoir as a philosophical method can be found in Susan Brison's (2002) book, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Brison, a philosophy professor, was brutally attacked, sexually assaulted, and left to die. Her role as a professional philosopher framed her personal process of survival, recovery, and healing and consequent explanation of memoir as a method for examining identity through a philosophical lens. Brison found that the use of memoir not only influenced how she dealt with experiencing trauma and the subsequent daunting process of living through and attempting to make sense of this experience, but it also impacted her understanding of philosophical methodology.

Initially, Brison (2002) situates herself in traditional philosophical training. She describes that as philosophers, "we are trained to write in an abstract, universal voice and to shun first-person narratives as biased and inappropriate for academic discourse" (p. 6). Brison was trained to be an objective observer who constructed knowledge that could be used in universal applications. This traditional line of philosophical thinking can be traced from Plato's views about seeking wisdom and truth with a capital *T*: "philosophic natures always love the sort of learning that makes clear to them some feature of the being that always is and does not wander around between coming to be and decaying" (as cited in Grube, 1992, p. 158). A fundamental Platonic belief is that there is absolute truth

that already exists and the task of the philosopher is to discover this truth. Rorty (1999) describes an individual who believes in a Platonic absolute truth as a metaphysician (p. 102). Rorty claims that a metaphysician "says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances" (p. 102). Brison (2002) explores metaphysics and the study of self with a philosophical lens; however, through memoir, she uses a different method to arrive at philosophical conclusions. While not all memoirs are philosophical, in that they do not explore logic, metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics, Brison offers an example of how memoir allows philosophers a different perspective or alternate understanding of reality. Brison argues that by changing one's method (using personal narratives rather than detached objective observations) one can develop new ways of knowing.

Philosophical memoirs share some methodological similarities with Carolyn Ellis' (2004) description of autoethnography. Ellis describes autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to cultural, social, and political" (p. xix). Ellis's account of autoethnography considers one's narratives and stories as valid evidence for understanding the world. Ellis recognizes that it is not simple to generalize all personal stories to larger social considerations. She states, "I would argue that a story's generalizability is always being tested – not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (pp. 194-195). Ellis concedes that one must continually work to question and complicate

the generalizability of one's story to larger notions of societal truths. Ellis proposes that people push beyond more traditional ideas about how one uses theory:

> What makes principles of universality, general terms and principles, and representation necessarily the source of our moral vocabulary? There's nothing God-given about these notions. They were ideas, as Rorty says, agreed to by like-minded people who had the authority to effect practices. If we think of theory as social…then the concerns become less those of representation and more of those of communication. (p. 195)

Ellis argues for the inclusion of narratives as ways to theorize about the world. She asks readers to consider questions, such as, "do our stories evoke readers' responses, do they open up the possibility of dialogue, collaboration, and relationship?...Do they help us change institutions? Promote social justice and equity? Lead us to think through consequences, values, and moral dilemmas?" (p. 195). Memoirs and narratives are powerful when they have an application to a greater purpose.

Another example of effective use of memoir for academic or philosophical purposes is Timothy Tyson's (2004) *Blood Done Sign My Name* where he expertly tells the story of being a white child growing up in the south and the impact on cultural development. Through understanding his story, readers can share a lens into a part of society's cultural experience that might not otherwise have been considered. Narratives bring readers into theory in new ways. The stories are valuable if they resonate for readers and if they help people to make sense of the world around them. That is not to say anything goes. A plausible argument must be made that the memoir can be used for greater theoretic purposes that lead to greater understanding. The use of memoir and narrative is used a wide variety of literature. For instance, within business literature,

Patrick Lencioni in various books, such as *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (2002) and *Silos, Politics and Turf Wars* (2006) use story telling to bring the reader into the world of management and team struggles. Within leadership literature including, Joseph Jaworski's (1996) *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, and Parker Palmers' (2000) *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, personal narratives and memoirs are used to develop the challenges leaders face in order to lead from an authentic core. Joan Didion (2005) uses memoir as her approach to her account of the impact of her husband's sudden death on her life in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. These examples from various fields reveal that personal experience, narratives, and memoirs are relevant for knowledge production, understanding the world around us, and making meaning of the human experience. This dissertation uses memoir to offer a different perspective or alternate understanding of the world of experiential practice through philosophical examination of memoirs.

My interest for using philosophical memoir is to explore the phenomenon of experiential education and to gain an in-depth understanding of experiential philosophy as it merges with practice. I believe that experiential education offers a different sort of education that is potentially powerful and transformative for both educators and students. This dissertation will explore and attempt to describe these impactful moments. However, just as philosophers of experiential education argue that experience is not enough; we must also understand the theoretical connections or reasons experiential learning functions as it does.

Methods

In order to examine experiential education and how its practice can work towards aims of social justice, I drew from my own experience using memoirs and narratives as evidence from moments that occurred during courses I taught or programs I facilitated. Because the evidence is told as recalled from memory some latitude has undoubtedly been taken in the retelling process. I consulted my facilitation and teaching agendas and notes as well as class assignments that were a regular part of the program or classroom procedures. Any time I used a student's direct written word, instead of my perceptions of a particular experience, I obtained permission from the particular student to use their words. I have changed or eliminated identifying information and have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of individuals who may have been part of the experiences I recount.

These descriptive stories examine the experience or phenomenon and explore the connection between experiential education and social justice. The memoir evidence is complimented by a philosophical discussion that demonstrates the merging of theory and practice. I drew from any source that helped to address this inquiry exploring a variety of philosophical traditions within education, including but not limited to critical pedagogy and feminist theory as a means of strengthening theoretical connections for experiential practice. I am using personal memoir from actual experiences I have had as an educator because I am also attempting to discover the voice of the experiential educator. Finding voice is a value of experiential education, and this dissertation is a practice of this value.

Subjectivity

Given the fact that these are stories from my memories of these experiences, they are undoubtedly my perspective. They have been influenced by my values, my interests, and my biases about what occurred during the educational experience. However, I believe they will illustrate the educational moment and serve as my attempt to take you with me to the experiential environment. For me, experiential education is not just something I study for a job or for my academic career; rather it is a part of my belief system about what is necessary for meaningful education. These experiences have influenced and shaped the person I am today. Experiential education has become an inherent aspect of my educational epistemology. My personal views of experiential education are guided by years of being a practitioner of experiential education as well as an avid student of philosophies and methodologies of education. I have certainly let experience become my curriculum as I learn and grow from each new educational situation and constantly search for new ways to meaningfully engage in education, both as an educator and a student. My hope is that I will continue to refine my personal educational philosophy based on future educational experiences.

As an experiential educator, I am energized by rich, experiential learning opportunities that provide examination of the cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual, social, and cultural aspects of our world. As a researcher of educational environments, I celebrate educators who believe their role as a learner is just as important as their role as an instructor or facilitator of learning processes. I value teachable moments where educators and learners engage in authentic experiences and have opportunities to make

conscious choices about their participation in their learning processes. As an educator, I bring my passion to the educational environment and hope to inspire a passion for learning within my students. As an experiential educator and learner, I am constantly gaining new knowledge from diverse experiences. As I teach, my students invite me to consider new ways to approach old knowledge.

Therefore, my passion is a part of my subjectivity and I bring this passion to my research. As a result, I must be mindful of how my passion and belief system colors and shades the lens from which I view inquiry projects. In order to consider other perspectives that may also influence me in important ways, I must continually question my assumptions and challenge my beliefs. Without this critical examination, I am vulnerable to gaps in my reasoning as well as blind spots that may contain important pieces to the next stage of my epistemological development.

It is also important to understand the bias I bring to this inquiry project and how I think about and define various concepts. I am the director of a university experiential education program that uses the outdoor environment and challenge courses to help groups with their development. I am also a university instructor teaching both undergraduate as well as graduate students about the theory, philosophy and practice of experiential education. Because I work with various students, community members, corporate executives, and other learners, I think it is important to define what I mean by the terms: student, educator, and educational environment. I have a broad definition of these terms. In my view, *students* are individuals who are interested in learning while developing/cultivating knowledge, acquiring new skills, or clarifying values (Association

for Experiential Education, 2000). These students may find themselves in a wide variety of *educational environments* such as university classrooms, training centers, or outdoor settings where there is a purposeful, educational, or curricular intent. *Educators* may be classroom teachers, group facilitators, tenure-track professors, trainers or organizational specialists. No matter how the educator identifies her/himself, the experiential educator believes that they are simultaneously a student or learner within the process.

Audience

My intention is to offer reflections of an experiential educator as a way to describe this promising philosophy and methodology for education, and how experiential methods can work toward aims of socially engaged participants – students and educators alike. As an educator, I see the connections between experiential education and social justice. I know there are other experiential educators who are also passionate about this connection. However, I am wondering why this connection is not as pronounced for all experiential educators. My primary audience for this dissertation is the community of experiential educators who are interested in meaningful educational experiences and are unsatisfied by the current status quo accepted in our current institution of education. I am hoping to expand our understanding of experiential learning and to explore how it can be used to expand social justice within a variety of educational settings, traditional and nontraditional. My hope is that this is useful for other experiential educators who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of philosophy and theory that underlies our practice.

In addition to experiential educators, this inquiry may also be useful for other educators within higher education in particular. Educators who teach within a wide variety of higher education environments may find experiential methodologies helpful. In particular, instructors who engage in cultural foundations may find ways this inquiry can complement or add to their current educational praxis. While this may also be useful for educators within the public school system who serve kindergarten through twelve grades, given the realities of policy demands, it may be more plausible within the higher education environment. Finally, this dissertation represents a personal journey to find my own voice as an experiential educator.

Study Summary

By critically examining past experience through memoir and aligning these experiences with theory, I attempt to answer many questions about the connections between experiential education and social justice. Ultimately, I hope to arrive at a greater understanding of how experiential educators can provide meaningful educational opportunities that result in socially responsible and engaged citizens. This study should help other educators seriously consider and then intentionally create educational environments that realize social justice goals in education.

In the next chapter, I explore the background, definition, aims and nature of experiential education in order to examine its usefulness for working on aims of social justice. In Chapter III, I offer a more thorough investigation of the connection between experiential education and democratic social justice. This chapter includes memoirs and discussions of practices and experiences that bring these connections to light. Chapter IV

investigates the constraints of experiential education as well as the concepts that compel educators to nurture a social justice minded educational environment. It also offers some suggestions for future research and practices as well as calls on experiential educators to consider principles of social justice within their practice.

CHAPTER II

THE SPIRIT AND VALUES OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION:

SOCIAL JUSTICE EMPHASIS?

What Education Based on Experience Means

There are few topics that can unite most people in a common understanding. While we may spend a great deal of time engaging in conversation about complex topics and concepts, from politics to religious values and beliefs, we see these topics from very diverse viewpoints depending on our culture, gender, socio-economic status and other personal experiences. Given the amount of resources, conversation, debate and political energy given to education within this country, the need for education is something this society values. Passionate debates arise around this topic as individuals sort through what should be the goal of American education. Are we educating to simply teach survival skills or to prepare individuals to secure promising employment? Or are we also educating our society for democratic citizenship and human development?

Many in society attempt to propose the *best* means of structuring systems of education. People spend significant time, energy, and resources investing in school systems and educational processes and procedures. We debate the desired outcomes and the appropriate roles of students and educators alike. In this chapter, I examine experiential education as a philosophy and methodology of education. While I do not propose that experiential education is the only, or even the best answer for education, it is

a promising philosophy that can yield powerful and meaningful results for learning. This section focuses on defining the aim of experiential education. It also describes the epistemological assumptions that underlie the philosophy and methods, as well as beliefs about the desired role of the educator as related to and in conjunction with the experiential learner. It describes my personal philosophy of experiential education as informed by my experience as well as the wisdom of other educators seeking meaningful educational aims, outcomes, and processes. Throughout this chapter, memoir and narrative is woven into the theoretical discussion in order to illustrate the theory in practice.

If we consult educational journals, philosophy books, or even listen in at school board meetings, we can see that educators have been calling for methodological change for years. The progressive education movement was a response to positivistic notions of producing knowledge and a movement toward more democratic and engaged educational environments. While not the only approach, experiential education is one philosophical and methodological approach for creating a change in the educational environment and providing a more engaged education. Championed by John Dewey with its philosophical roots developing during the progressive education movement, experiential education has taken many forms over the years. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some of the philosophical roots are derived from pragmatism. As Breunig (2008a) states, "He [Charles Sanders Pierce] and fellow pragmatic William James concluded that humans generate belief through their 'habits of action,' or that ideas and truths are developed through experience" (p. 80). Pragmatists held firm to the belief that theory is developed

through human interaction with the world. Breunig (2008a) goes on to say that "The theories, he [James] felt, are 'instruments' that humans use to solve problems and should be judged in terms of their practical consequences for human conduct" (p. 80). These ideas are seen today in the principles of experiential education that require curricular content to be relevant and meaningful within the lives of students.

These ideas about curriculum were promoted by John Dewey as well who employed experiential methodology in his Chicago laboratory schools in the early 1900's. As Breunig (2008a) contends, "Dewey believed that the child's experience must form the basis of the school curriculum. He believed that subject matter should not be learned in isolation…" Studied further, it is also seen that "Dewey believed the main aim of education was the preparation of individuals to participate in social change" (p. 81). Dewey (1938) also introduced a cyclical learning method called the pattern of inquiry. The learning process starts with identifying a problem, and then moves to brainstorming possible solutions to the problem, testing the solutions, and finally reflecting on the results. The reflections may then stimulate new questions or problems and the cycle starts again (Dewey, as cited in McDermott, 1981, pp. 227-239). The philosophy of experiential education began to take firm root in progressive and pragmatic circles.

As time went on, experiential education took various forms. Kurt Hahn (as cited in Cousins, 2000) initiated expeditionary learning within the United States with the inception of Outward Bound in the 1970's. In these environments, experiential education takes place during the course of outdoor and adventure expeditions. Over time, there has been a flux of programs throughout the country where challenge courses within school,

university, or camp settings have used experiential education as a tool for personal and

group development. Challenge courses, or ropes courses, tend to serve as co-curricular

tools that invite individuals and groups to learn and grow from physical, mental, and

emotional challenges based in problem-solving initiatives evoking the spirit and practice

of experiential education. Experiential education has expanded in scope and practice but

has roots planted within early forms of thinking about education.

> Support for experiential education can be found in the earliest form of learning
> from the earliest time of humans. From learning being passed through storytelling
> and oral tradition to Plato's interest in soul, dialogue, and continuing education,
> experiential education has prevailed as a prominent mode of learning in Western
> culture. (Breunig, 2008b, p. 470)

While not the focus of this section, there are many writings to consult that address the

history and development of experiential education. (For a more complete picture of the

philosophical and historical development of experiential education, consult Breunig,

2005; Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman, 2008; Cousins, 2000; Frank, 2004; Itin, 1999;

Joplin, 1981; as well as Warren, Mitten and Loeffler, 2008).

Experiential education is often viewed in very limited terms by people who are

not familiar with the scope of the field. If people have heard of experiential education at

all, images of rock climbing and hiking trips may come to mind. Memories from a

summer camp or high school church or choir trip may spring to the mind's surface while

trying to choke down the urge to sing "Kumbaya." However, experiential education is a

philosophy of learning that can be engaged in many environments, including the outdoors

and within the four walls of a classroom. As Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) describe:

> Experiential education cannot be understood simply as a particular set of activities. Yes, outdoor adventures, new games, and ropes courses all are linked to 'experiential education' in the minds of many people. Yet as valuable as backpacking, rock climbing, canoe trips, and ropes courses are, they comprise only a small part of the potential arena. Cross-cultural homestays, community service projects, urban adventure programs, work-study programs, internships, cooperative education approaches in the classroom – all these (along with much more) provide great opportunities for students to become directly and enthusiastically engaged in real learning. (p. 4)

A wide variety of approaches can constitute the curricular opportunities for experiential education; therefore, one must explore the possibilities of experiential education in order to develop a full understanding of the educational approach. In the next section, I introduce a personal memoir that demonstrates one way experiential education can come alive for a student.

My first real romanticism with experiential education took hold when I was twenty year old sophomore during a staff training experience for a university experiential education program. I was a facilitator for the program that provided team building workshops for other student organizations on campus. As a part of the staff training, we were invited to take part in a caving trip. I had never been caving before, and this was of the real spelunking variety. There were no giant caverns with artificial lights or guided microphone tours. There was mud, bats up close, headlamps, and the experience of true black darkness. I was twenty, wide-eyed, active on campus, on academic scholarship, and the anticipation of this caving expedition shook my otherwise fairly stable confidence to

the core. I did not know what to expect and I wasn't sure I wanted to find out. I was extremely uncomfortable with the prospect of squeezing through tunnels and cave openings with my body that seemed too big for tight spaces. I respected the leader of this trip, but I was secretly very skeptical and wishing she had chosen a different activity to bring our staff members together. But not going wasn't an option for me. I had to be a team player; after all, that is what we teach.

I first became an experiential educator my freshman year. I had my first encounter with experiential education and started facilitating team programs using experiential methods the year before the prospect of caving entered the scene. Knowing what it meant to be an actual experiential educator probably occurred a little later. I loved this job of providing active, engaged learning experiences for groups. I was already hooked on the feeling I had when I watched a group learn about themselves and strive to improve how they worked together. When I went through my first training the year before, I knew I had accidentally stumbled upon something that resonated somewhere in the depths of my being. But I didn't understand why and I certainly didn't understand what caving had to do with it and why it needed to be a part of our training weekend. How was this going to make me a better facilitator and staff member?

During the first part of the training, we went through various team development initiatives. These experiences helped us to get to know each other as an evolving staff and gave us exposure to other ways to facilitate new activities to add to our repertoire. I was feeling more comfortable with my peers and learning a lot about my job, but all the while there was an internal fear lingering inside the pit of my stomach. I was worried I didn't

bring the right clothes. I was worried I would get stuck or do something embarrassing. I was worried I would chicken out. I was worried I would fail.

The day turned to evening and before I knew it, we were getting into our caving gear and preparing to drive to the site. I sat next to a friend on the way there and he was not stressed about this trip at all. In fact, he had been to this cave before and was one of those rock star guys you encounter in college who has already had all kinds of adventure experiences. I sat in awe by his steady calmness as he belted out songs from a mixed CD he had made. I ended up sharing some of my concerns when I was at a breaking point of anxiety. Luckily he assured me that we would be in this together and he would help me out if I needed it. But I still needed to know a little more about what to expect.

We parked on a somewhat deserted dirt road and walked through farmland to get to the cave entrance which was a "hole" in the side of a hill. We set up a rope to stabilize ourselves as we lowered into the opening. When my feet made it to solid ground, I thought w*ell, this isn't that bad*. Then I realized we hadn't actually entered the cave yet. The entrance of the cave was ahead. To get to it we had to walk into a cavern on rocks and boulders that were in fact the ceiling that had fallen several times over the years. Soon we were walking on a much flatter surface. We needed to start kneeling because the floor and the ceiling were gradually coming together to meet in a place I couldn't see but was apparently the true entrance to the cave. My kneeling turned into crawling and I soon found myself lying down on my back with my feet pointed at the place where I was told I would find the entrance of the cave. I was using my hands on the ceiling right above my face to scoot the rest of my body toward this opening to the cave.

The first "squeeze" was called the birth canal which seemed extremely appropriate for the experience I was undergoing. I was directed to keep scooting forward until my legs found the opening. I finally came to a place where the floor opened to a small hole and my legs lowered to a ledge with the help of my friend who had gone before me. I kept pushing myself forward in a backbend-type position (thankful for days spent in gymnastics) until my legs lowered to the ground and I squeezed the rest of me through the undersized opening. When I brought my head through and opened my eyes, I was greeted by headlamps and the smiling faces of my friends who were waiting to see my response. I smiled. Big. I started to feel a glimpse of my fear turning to excitement and anticipation for what would be next. I had been born into the world of caving. I took in my surroundings and was struck by the somewhat chilly but comfortable temperature of the underground world. I could hear dripping from somewhere and was amazed by the formations made by the earth's response to its surroundings.

We moved through the different "rooms" of the cave encountering other squeezes or obstacles to maneuver. Occasionally there were choices about how to proceed into the next place of the cave. I soon found that if given an easier or more difficult path, I would choose the path that would challenge me more. And I loved it. I looked for it. I couldn't wait for the next opportunity to challenge myself and see what would happen. As a group we all gathered in a larger room of the cave and sat around various levels of this "bowl" of rock that made up the room. We agreed to turn off all of our headlamps so we could experience true darkness. Once the last lamp was extinguished, I was overwhelmed with the first experience of what true darkness looks like. I waved my hand in front of my face

and couldn't see anything. I looked around for any sign of the physical world and found nothing. It hit me that we were truly underground; there was no light in the vicinity except for what we brought in with us and it was a deep, never ending dark. We sat in silence for awhile so we could take in the moment individually. Our leader then indicated that it was time to do a little experiment. Previously, we had been given Wintergreen Lifesavers to hold onto. In the midst of the pure dark, we put our breath mints in our mouths and simultaneously crunched with our mouths open. It worked! They really do make a spark in the dark. Out of the pure dark came sparks of green that seemed like camera flashes going off all around us. I was relieved to have a bit of light and to know that during the very alone time of total dark and complete silence, my peers were right next to me the whole time.

It was time to head back through the cave and find our way out. I found myself joyful and laughing with my friends and loving the absence of the fear that had previously dominated my thoughts. Right before we were leaving the cave, our leader offered one more challenge. It was called the mud room. In order to get to it you had to squeeze through a tunnel that was even smaller than the birth canal, but inside there was a room full of the best mud. Oh yeah, I was in! I squeezed through this hole I didn't think I would fit through and could not believe I was doing this. Once I got in the mud room I was joining my friends in mud fights and making mud sculptures (some more appropriate than others) and having a great time. Inhibitions were out the door and life was good. We left the mud room, still amazed at being able to squeeze through the tiny opening. We

worked our way back out of the birth canal – this time an entrance back into the world outside above ground.

The birth canal ended up serving as a rebirth for me. Just like the cave that was shaped and changed by the circumstances and environment, I was changed and impacted by this experience. Upon reflection, I realized that my anxiety about the caving experience was attributed to the fact that I had no prior experience that I could relate to the challenge in front of me. I had no point of reference that gave me ideas about what to expect, and more importantly, how I would perform in the midst of the challenge. In the weeks that followed I found myself writing poetry about the experience. I realized that I challenged myself in a way I didn't know I could and I came out on the other side just fine. In fact, I came out of the experience as a changed and better person as a result of working through the challenge. I realized that I had said "no" to things in my life if I didn't already know I could accomplish it. I was a high achiever-type. I didn't like to *fail* and so I limited what I did in life to things I thought I could succeed, even thrive.

After the caving experience, I became somewhat addicted to the feeling of challenging myself to see what I was made of. I loved the idea of the unknown and looked for the next opportunity that would replicate the feeling I had in the cave. During the remainder of my college years, I got into rock climbing, and went on adventure spring break trips where I climbed, kayaked, hiked peaks, and pushed myself further than I thought I could. I learned about preparing for experiences so that I would not focus on the fear of the unknown, but rather to fully immerse myself in the experience. On one of my spring break trips we encountered some petroglyphs, or rock carvings on the side of a

stone wall. One symbol that repeated throughout the images was a spiral. Our leaders on the excursion told us that the Anazazi culture of the Southwest often used the spiral to symbolize a journey. I took hold of that idea and soon identified myself with the spiral. The importance of the journey has become a life mantra for me. It is not about where you begin or where you end up, but the journey along the way that is important. I learned about the importance of being present during all of life's offerings so that I do not miss out on an experience or a lesson that might be gained. Even in difficult times, I find myself sitting with the experience so I don't miss out on the important lessons of that part of the journey. My house is decorated in spirals – over my mantel in my living room, on dishware, and within jewelry I often wear. They all serve as reminders for me to engage in life and to seek challenge so as to not limit my potential. I have a necklace decorated with a spiral and sunrays emerging from the outer layer. I wear it during staff trainings where I am now the facilitator asking others to challenge themselves in new ways. I wear it during important days in my life where I might need a little more courage or strength. The lesson to challenge myself in order to continually learn from my experiences stays with me. And it all started in a cave.

This story illustrates how *experience* can serve as an educational and even transformational tool within the learning and human growth process. John Dewey stresses the importance of the lived experience as a vehicle for educational outcomes. McDermott (1981) suggests:

> *Experience and Nature,* repeats in a detailed and passionate manner one of
> Dewey's lifelong concerns, the irreducible importance of everyday experience for
> philosophical method. Proceeding from his assertion of the continuity between

experience and nature, Dewey affirms the relevance of the commonplace to the most profound philosophical speculation; indeed, as cut off from the use of experiences undergone, speculation becomes first incestuous and then trite. (p. 249)

Dewey's philosophical underpinnings root the activities within life as essential for developing truths or theories about the world. The idea is that theory is not developed in isolation from what we encounter as human beings; rather, what we encounter in life constitutes the material for the development of philosophical approaches. If we attempt to develop theory apart from experience, we engage in what McDermott sees as "trite" and "speculation" (p. 249). For me, the caving experience was one that eventually influenced not only my beliefs about how I wanted to interact within the world, but also my understanding of the world around me. Upon reflection, the experience in the cave allowed me to be open to developing a personal philosophy about life values. It was through experience that philosophy was created and understood. McDermott continues, "Dewey writes again and again of the reach of experience, its depth and its inferential power…In Dewey's version, philosophy has the task of creating and promoting a respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities" (p. 249). Dewey's ideas about the power of experience for developing and understanding philosophy also serve as evidence for the importance of using memoir within this dissertation. Experiences inform our philosophy about the world. "Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference" (Dewey, as cited in McDermott, 1981, p. 252). Our experiences told through our stories are crucial to our theoretical development and our understanding of the world.

On Defining Experiential Education

While the caving experience represents a moment that incited my passion for experiential education, how I define the term has developed over time. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has contributed to shaping my understanding and offers the following: "Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education, 2009). Closely examining the combination of words in this definition helps to clarify its meaning even further. AEE chooses to refer to experiential education as *both* a philosophy and a methodology revealing the strong connection between the merging of theory and practice. It is both; not mutually exclusive but rather working in concert to create this educational approach. The words "purposefully engage" signify the intentional nature of the educator's work as creating intentional learning processes as well as their active role within the educational environment. The use of the word *with* may seem like a small choice; however, it reveals a powerful idea concerning the interaction between educator and learner. The educator must engage *with* the learner as a co-creator within the learning process. The facilitator of the caving excursion led a group reflection session that intentionally drew out connections between what the staff members experienced in the cave and how it related to us personally as well as our everyday work life. She was with us in the cave experiencing things right along with the group, and therefore, was able to focus our reflection accordingly. She demonstrated important actions of an educator as described by Chapman, McPhee and Proudman

(2008): "The teacher's role is to define the boundaries to ensure a safe learning environment (physically, emotionally, intellectually) within which a student can become totally immersed" (p. 9). Because the facilitator created conditions for total immersion in the experience, the participants were enabled to focus on learning from the excursion.

AEE's definition reveals that both "direct experience" and "focused reflection" are necessary to the process of learning. Experience provides a portion of the curriculum, but meaningful reflection aids in turning a solitary experience into experiential learning. For example, my adventure in the cave was just a singular experience until the group's and my personal reflection about the meaning of the experience allowed me to engage in a learning process. The facilitator of the caving experience enacted the experiential educator's role to "provide opportunities for students to make sense of their experiences and to fit them into their ever-changing views of self and the world" (Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 2008, p. 9-10). Both the experience and the reflection that connects activity to the context of the world around the students allows for learning to occur.

AEE also offers outcomes for this form of education: "to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values." The goals and subsequent outcomes will differ based on the experience and reflection process.

To expand the definition, Carver (1996) contributes: "Education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that consciously integrates student experience into the curriculum. Experience involves any combination of: senses, emotion, physical condition, and cognition" (p. 9). From the previous example, it is clear that my encounter in the cave included a sensory experience that engaged my emotions as I persisted

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through a physical challenge. The ensuing reflection engaged the cognitive aspect of the experience. Carver's definition also reveals an emphasis on the process of learning and signifies that experience is a main ingredient of the curriculum. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) emphasize, "Whatever is being studied, the point is to place students into a different, more direct relationship with the material. Students are actively engaged – exploring things for themselves – rather than being told answers to questions" (p. 4). I was given the opportunity to determine the significance of the caving experience for myself; others who were in the cave that evening left with different learning outcomes. The educator provided the opportunity for learning, but the individual learners discovered their own outcomes. Experiential educators use experience to purposefully engage learners.

The Aims of Experiential Education

In philosophical dialectics, Aristotle focused on questions of *telos*. Concerning philosophical positions, he asked to what end or purpose do we hold the beliefs or values that we deem important? While detailing a philosophy of education, it is important to define the *telos,* or the aim of the educational philosophy. The aim of experiential education is to promote learning and positive growth in individuals and to provide meaningful learning experiences that are relevant and applicable to the lived experience. Experiential education privileges the process of learning as well as the educational outcomes, and continually seeks ways to apply this knowledge within the context of the world in which we live. Experiential education values theory in so far as it speaks to, and informs, life outside the educational realm. In fact, the lived experience constitutes the

educational curriculum as it aids in informing current and future educative experiences.

But what constitutes experiential education? What is the difference between all

experiences that facilitate learning and an educational approach to learning that values

and is rooted in experience?

Influenced by Dewey, Rorty, Freire, hooks, and many others, I propose that

experiential education's aim is to develop engaged, critical thinking individuals within

society. I align with other experiential educators, like Breunig (2008a) who believes that

"experiential education is rooted in the educational ideal of social change" (p. 78).

Experiential education has the potential to create connected citizens within their worlds

who understand their relationships with others and the impact they have on the world

around them. One graduate student involved in a course I taught on experiential

education and social justice summarized this connection in a reflection paper:

> Another lesson for me was how much theory, philosophy and research was
> included in this course that helped us think critically, reflect often and most
> importantly take action. The classroom climate and culture was safe, caring and
> conducive for learning. It promoted communication, teamwork, cooperation,
> trust, decision-making, and problem-solving in an atmosphere of fun and
> challenge.

Theory was interwoven for this student within the experiential environment to encourage

critical thinking about the curriculum and how they can "take action" outside of the

learning experience. This student also discussed the importance of connecting with others

during their learning experience and the values they would like to carry into their

community. The learning that occurs within the experiential education environment does

not exist within a vacuum, but rather is relevant when it can inform other aspects of life:

past, present and future. John Dewey (1938) states, "The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 27-28). It is not enough to learn particular skills or to simply gain knowledge based on a particular subject matter. The skills and knowledge acquired in the educational scene must have application beyond a singular educative moment. Moreover, the Association for Experiential Education's definition suggests the merging of theory and practice as experiential education is both educational theory and engaged practice. This definition speaks further to the idea that experiential education pushes beyond educational moments and searches for application in the contextual world of the learners and educators.

The aim of experiential education also values the individual learner by honoring an individual's learning style preferences and responding to diverse learning goals. The aim is to find relevant application for each unique learner who is encouraged to take away multiple and complex outcomes from any learning opportunity. Experiential education encourages increased skills and competencies through active experimentation, trial and error, and direct experiences creating opportunities to demonstrate learning. Furthermore, experiential education aims to benefit from unexpected teachable moments that occur organically from the process of learning in addition to any intended learning outcome or desired results. Finally, experiential education is fluid, responsive, and dynamic according to the needs of the specific educational situation and learners.

Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemology of experiential education proposes that knowledge is constructed through experience, reflection and meaning-making based on experience. Experiential education encourages the learner to discover knowledge based on their experiences and direct reflection as opposed to relying on something like lecture or on the experiences of others. Knowledge is developed through the *process* of the learning and is constructed cognitively (gaining new knowledge and awareness), emotionally (creating, responding to, and understanding feelings and instincts), physically (from trial and error or actual embodied experiences), spiritually (awareness and growth that influences a central core of beliefs or sacred aspect of the being – this may be defined differently by each individual depending on their religious and spiritual belief system.) In order to further understand the epistemology of experiential education, we must critically examine its definition further. Itin (1999) offers this definition for experiential education:

> 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 held 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. (p. 93)

Knowledge construction is not limited solely to cognitive understanding but rather values epistemology that honors multiple approaches to learning and complex ways of knowing.

An example of developing multiple ways of knowing (i.e., cognately, emotionally, physically, and spiritually) through problem-solving and pushing beyond originally intended learning outcomes occurred during a program working with graduate level business students. I was informed well in advance of the program that there would be two women in wheelchairs who had severe physical limitation. They had electric wheelchairs that were able to navigate our outdoor environment, but the women had concerns about their abilities to fully participate in the program. I met them at the property where we conduct our programs and we discussed a variety of options about how they could fully participate. Some of the options we created were based on their group's ability to help out when needed; for instance, some of the trails we were going through would require some spotting and assistance from the group to make it safe. The women were up for the challenge and seemed thankful that we would find ways to accommodate their needs. I was hoping for an accommodating group.

When the day of the program arrived, I was a little nervous about how it would all work out, but my fears quickly subsided during the first initiative. The group was charged with the challenge to balance all twelve members on platforms without anything touching the ground. Without much hesitation, the group actually came up with a plan to use the women in the wheelchairs as their foundation of support. They asked them if they could lift their chairs onto the platforms. Originally, the women did not think the group would be able to lift them, but the group members reassured them and I watched as these women put their trust in the group as they were placed with ease to the platforms. The plan they came up with allowed for a fairly quick solution to the problem at hand and the

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celebration that ensued after their success was loud and genuine. Now the intention of the program was to examine how group skills are required for success in business, but that group gained a lot more from their experience. Their learning was expanded to include physical, emotional as well as cognitive ways of knowing.

They learned that we can often view disabilities as limiting our capabilities. However, that group learned a lesson Kurt Hahn was teaching many years ago when he said, "Your disability is your opportunity" (as cited in Cousins, 2000, p. 18). The group consistently surprised themselves throughout the day by how they rose to the various challenges in front of them and how they discovered new ways of doing things as a result of having to think more creatively in order to involve everyone in their group. We often view our capabilities in drastically limited terms. I see it all the time during challenge course programs. This group learned in a holistic way by "actively posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, constructing meaning, and integrating previously held knowledge" (Itin, 1999, p. 93). They intellectually learned lessons through the program; the originally intended curriculum pieces were not removed from the agenda. However, they also learned new things about physical capabilities and they became emotionally connected to one another as they sorted through various social challenges "in an uncertain environment" (Itin, 1999, p. 93). Participants shared that this experience allowed them to develop as a group and I witnessed that these more complex ways of knowing enriched their learning outcomes as compared to other smaller groups that did not benefit from this same shared experience.

In addition, experiential education epistemology merges theory and practice through reflection about experience and how the meaning that is derived applies to real world scenarios relevant to the learner. Dirkx and Lavin (1991) claim:

> Experience-based learning is a concept and a phenomenon which represents the core of the research-to-practice issue. As a phenomenon, the term refers to the fact that learning takes place within the crucible of our life experiences and cannot be separated from them. As a concept, experienced-based learning provides a means of developing a theoretical understanding of how lived experiences influence what is learned and vice-versa. (p. 6)

Individuals construct knowledge through personal experiences that connect with past experiences or previous knowledge. A graduate student in a class I taught demonstrated how even simple exercises can connect profoundly with other lived experiences. The class was designed to explore experiential education theory and practice. On this particular day, we were examining how trust can be understood and developed within a classroom community. We had been covering this concept throughout the semester as we intentionally worked to develop a learning community; however, this day we were using activities that allowed the students to provide physical trust for one another in order to actively demonstrate the trust they could give and receive from one another. I led the class through a fairly basic trust sequence where the class members were asked to clasp hands and lean back on one another. The exercises progressed from there, and with each addition of trust requirements I noticed this one student, "Sarah," struggling to complete the tasks at hand with her classmates. Sarah had been an extremely active participant in all prior experiences and so her classmates seemed to be surprised at her lack of willingness to engage in these tasks.

Eventually, we worked through some of her fears and she finally let go and trusted her classmates. I did not anticipate the impact this moment had on her until I read her reflection about the class experience:

> I know that every fiber of my being has grown. I have challenged my self in areas of participation that I really did not think I would be successful at. As most students do, no matter what age, I wanted to please my facilitator because of the respect that I held for her. Then as the class continued I wanted to be successful for me. I wanted to grow. I wanted to be able to connect with my environment. I connected with Hahn instantly because he was about enriching the self so one could be a whole person. I know I have grown intellectually, physically, spiritually and most importantly I learned to trust my peers because they motivated me into positive action. This course was what I needed to step out of the box literally and confront my own fears, short comings and anxieties… Each exercise became easier to participate in because of the positive energy that the facilitator brought to the table. ***NO PRESSURE***, just assurance that we could all do it together. I never had that experience before and it meant the world to me.

The reflection that occurred after the learning experience illustrates how experiential education helps students connect theory to practice. It also reveals a deep connection with a student's prior life experience. She brought her previous experiences to class that day and needed to challenge the fears she lived with during the experience. The impact was an authentic reflection about how this theme of trust has played out in her life. She went on in her reflection:

> In my opinion these educational exercises did more than just reflect how teachers can hinder or aid students in the classroom. It made me discover something about myself and that is - - I have trust issues with people outside of my immediate nucleus. I know that I am a person who can be counted on. I know that I am a good supporter a strong backbone if you will. I, however, have never had that type of support from anyone outside of my family. It is hard for me to believe that I can really trust or count on anyone other than myself or my family. This course forced me to deal with what I have known all along, but refused to deal with… I am the one who gives out the nourishment, but never nourished.

The previous lived experience impacted this woman's engagement with the current

educational exercise. Prior to the exercises, she refused to address her lack of trust in

others. After the exercise, she had a greater awareness and understanding of herself and

her relationships with others. The exercise that was lived in the educational environment

had implications for her life outside of the class. This demonstrates what Dewey (as cited

in McDermott, 1981, p. 508) refers to as the continuity of experience:

> The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaption of material to
> needs and capabilities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-
> educative…The principle of continuity in its educational application means,
> nevertheless, that the future has to be taken into account at every stage of the
> educational process. (p. 521)

Experiential education asks individuals to learn from experiences and curriculum that

connect with and are significant for other aspects of their lives. These experiences must

have relevance to future learning experience that allow for continued growth. Theory and

practice are developed and understood together; both contribute epistemologically.

In addition, learning occurs through relationships. Groups or communities

construct group knowledge through mutually shared experiences that may include, but

are not limited to, time together, rituals, traditions, structured experiences, and learning

through interpersonal interactions. Itin (1999) states, "The hallmark of the philosophy of

experiential education is that the teacher and student(s) create the educational process

through their transaction and interaction. Furthermore, this dynamic exchange becomes a

critical part of the process" (p. 94). The dynamics of the relationships within the learning

environment influence the educational outcomes. One student in a graduate class summarized the impact of learning within a community:

> As far as the learning community is concerned, I was excited to be a member of a class where learning is respected and valued as an ongoing process; where the spirit of generosity and sharing are valued and encouraged; and where the contributions of each of the parts helped to shape and reshape the whole.

This student expresses how the openness and sharing developed within the relationships during the learning community impacted what was learned. She continued:

> I felt privileged to work with a group of people who are motivated by the possibility of creating a more just and equitable world—no matter how ambitious that may sound. The opportunities to work together with a diverse community have provided me with some of my richest learning experiences to date and have introduced me to uncharted territory.

This student explored how diverse relationships deepened her learning experience. These relationships that occurred within the learning community motivated this student. She further explains, "I deeply appreciate and feel honored to be a part of this experiential education process—working together, collectively, collaboratively, and learning from one another." These statements seem to represent a student who felt a part of a significant community. It is through this interaction between the students and educators that knowledge is produced. Experiential epistemology recognizes that knowledge is constructed within, and as a result of, *the relationships* that occur within the learning process.

If knowledge is constructed as a result of the relationships within the learning community and this learning is based on the experience that occurs, the exact same

experience cannot be replicated in exactly the same way with the same participants.

Therefore, learning will be unique and distinct based on the educational participants and a

variety of other factors that contribute to the learning process (environment, attitudes, and

personalities). Dirkx and Lavin (1991) develop these ideas further and discuss two

orientations for how learning occurs. One orientation "tends to focus on the individual

learner, the subjective meaning of his or her experiences, and how this meaning is

derived through the learning process" (p. 3). This perspective "emphasizes the process of

deriving meaning from experience as a reasoning skill problem" where "the process of

reflection occupies a crucial role in the process of learning from experience" (p. 3). From

this orientation, a cyclical process of learning is suggested including a reflection process

that is crucial for individual learning. A second orientation emphasizes "the learner's

socio-political context" and is "grounded in a more sociological view of the learning

process" (p. 3). Pushing beyond just the individual's learning, this perspective

emphasizes that "learning from experience is a way to learn about one's self and the

relationship of the self to the broader society of which it is a part" (p. 4). The complex

sociopolitical backgrounds of the diverse learners within each educational experience will

impact the learning process.

Proponents of this perspective:

stress more the role of context in the process of learning from experience and the need to view multiple constructions of realities before knowledge can be brought to bear on a specific problem. For educators in this orientation, experience and learning are not regarded as neutral and what is learned cannot be considered outside of the social relationships in which experiences occur. (Dirkx & Lavin, 1991, p. 4)

The experiential educator must be attuned to the context that influences the learning experience. Itin (1999) reinforces this view of experiential learning: "Education cannot be neutral; by not paying attention to the political aspects of education, it by default supports the dominant paradigm which is currently informing the socio-political-economic aspects of the educational system" (p. 94). Learning occurs within a specific socio-political scene that influences the results of that learning as it relates to the relevant context of that particular community of learners.

I have taught the same graduate level course for three consecutive years and each class has been dramatically different from the others. The last two years in particular demonstrate the need for very different approaches to the educational environment based on the specific community of learners. While this may be true for more traditional learning environments as well, because experiential education relies on the experiences of the community of learners, understanding the larger world context as well as the previous experiences of the learning community holds particular importance. One year, I had a class where the majority of the students had full-time jobs and were in the midst of completing their Ph.D. This class was ready to engage with the material we were studying at a level that was consistent with doctoral seminars. They showed deep investment in the material, and they provided the class with rich examples of how the curriculum was alive within their professional and personal lives. The following year, I had a smaller class where the majority of the students were master's students, many of whom went directly from their undergraduate education straight through to their master's degree programs. I had to conduct this class very differently. Many of these students did

not have the life or professional experience to connect with the material the same way the previous class could engage. I had to provide more examples to help students relate to the material rather than depend on the examples contributed from the class. A great struggle occurred when I asked some of the students to engage in more critical thinking within their writing to enrich their understanding of the material. I had to be more of a coach about writing processes and how to synthesize material in new ways as these students were figuring out basics of how to think differently in graduate courses. My role needed to change in order to meet the students where they were in each setting. Every class is different. The individual's prior experiences and contextual understandings influence what is ultimately learned. Therefore, educators must be adept at adapting their role and approach in order to create relevancy for their learners.

Dirkx and Lavin (1991) expand the discussion of the role of the educator or "the aim of facilitators working from this perspective is the transformation of meaning perspectives and/or the development of critical consciousness among their learners" (p. 4). They claim that this orientation privileges "transformations or development of consciousness" (p. 3). Experiential epistemology pushes beyond one's understanding, to how knowledge, once constructed, is engaged within real-world contexts and, hence, will encourage the production of further knowledge.

Essential Elements of Experiential Education that Distinguish it as Unique

Experiential education emphasizes the process of learning in addition to the outcomes of educational efforts. It also maintains a unique and dynamic role of the educator in relationship to learners. Additionally, experiential education focuses on

experience as the main curricular component for learning. Experiential education places emphasis on the learning process and organic learning experiences, and not solely on predetermined learning outcomes. As such, it capitalizes on teachable moments or unexpected learning outcomes and treats them as valuable as any planned curricular intent. The process is privileged with the idea that if we can inspire students who love to learn, their education continues regardless of a formalized or institutional environment. By inviting learners to view life experience as their curriculum, experiential students are hopefully empowered to continue a life-long process of learning along their journey.

The following story offers an example of how the process of learning is as important as the outcomes that occur. I was working with a school staff at our experiential campus. They came to the program in order to build a sense of community among the teachers at their school. Their desired outcomes included enhancing trust among team members, gaining an understanding of the strengths and roles of everyone on the team across teacher and administrative lines, and building a stronger community. Throughout the program with this team, I believe we helped this staff accomplish these goals. Their discussions woven throughout the activities were fruitful and the evaluations that were completed at the end of the program were glowing. However, something else emerged as we worked with this group. As facilitators of experiential education programs, we asked the participants to put on their educator hats in order to observe the process that was occurring behind the scenes. We added questions to their debriefs like: *What choices did I make as a facilitator and what was the impact on your learning as a result? How did learning occur through this experience?* As educators who may or may

not have considered experiential learning as an approach to education, they were

connecting with the process of learning as much as the learning outcomes themselves. On

their program evaluations, in addition to seeing comments about how their team came

together throughout the program, they also made comments about what they learned

about the power of using experience as a means for achieving educational ends. The

process of learning was as important as what was learned.

Experiential education embraces the relationship between educator and student

and recognizes both as co-constructors of knowledge through their mutual experience. As

Dewey (1938) states:

> The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction
> means that education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the
> degree in which individuals form a community group. It is absurd to exclude the
> teacher from membership in the group…when education is based upon experience
> and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes
> radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on
> that of leader of group activities. (p. 58-59)

Notions of hierarchical authority are complicated within the experiential education

environment. While authority exists and boundaries are important and should be

negotiated between educator and student, the relationship is experienced differently than

in traditional educational settings. Epistemologically, learning is constructed, not given to

the learners. This epistemological assumption reinforces the belief that while their roles

may be different during the process, all individuals are both teachers and learners within

the experiential environment.

This concept of challenging the authority on knowledge can be difficult for many students who are bought into more traditional approaches to education. Especially in my undergraduate classes, I am often challenged to provide *the right answer* to questions we might be struggling with as a class. I am often presented with questions such as: "Can't you just tell us the answer?" and "What will you want to see on the midterm?" These students are not often satisfied with my responses that are something like, "Well, we have to discover the answers that make sense to this particular question. What do you think?" and "What I want to see on the midterm is your well thought out ideas about this concept." These are not popular teacher responses for students who have been raised in an environment that emphasizes testing. It can be a scary prospect for both teacher and student alike to change the rules of the educational game. As an experiential educator I have to recognize that choices I make that may be counter-normative may create resistance from my students.

In addition, educators must take an active and intentional role in sorting out the authority that exists with students in the classroom. Through the influence of feminist pedagogues, I have to recognize that I cannot get around the power I hold as an educator who ultimately has to turn in grades. Authority exists. In particular, Villaverde (2008) expands on this idea by stating, "The existence of power is not the issue (we understand it is everywhere and operating in multiple directions); rather, how power is exercised and experienced is central to feminist pedagogy and discourse" (p. 123). The same is true within experiential education. There is much to be negotiated within the educational environment that honors a mutual relationship within knowledge production. As an

educator, I certainly bring my knowledge, experience, and educational background to the table and the hope is that my students benefit from my facilitation and educational preparation. However, the knowledge that is produced and the process of learning that is experienced are dependent upon our ability to engage with the curriculum together. This relationship must be negotiated together.

It is important to note here, that creating an experiential environment that honors co-constructed knowledge production is a complicated prospect that can also lead to uncertainty about roles, questioning of authority, and doubt concerning the educator's competence. Experiential pedagogy shares this challenge with feminist pedagogy. Villaverde (2008) recognizes:

> The attempts at creating a democratic educational experience often can backfire, and educators are left open to ideological and pragmatic critique. Non- feminist classrooms are in this sense protected by the absence of student participation, interrogation, or investment. Traditional educational conventions insist that power resides with the educator…Education is neither neutral nor objective, and a feminist pedagogy catapults such critique to the forefront of the learning experience. (p. 124)

Similar to feminist pedagogues, experiential educators should be prepared to undergo critique and should invite the opportunity to discuss how knowledge is produced within their classrooms. Villaverde (2008) continues to describe the challenges with this approach to educational practice:

> Negotiating authority is equally tricky as educators try to balance sharing knowledge with student knowledge production…Negotiating the give and take of authority and establishing mutual respect, while pushing students to question existing knowledge and assumptions, is an ongoing, trying process. (p. 124)

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Examining authority and nurturing a co-constructed learning environment provides

constant opportunity for examining the process of learning in addition to any outcomes

that result from this process.

Finally, more than other educational approaches, learning experiences are meant

to connect to realities beyond any single educational moment. Emphasis is placed on

transferring learning experiences to future experiences. Itin (1999) declares, "If we want

to develop critically thinking, self-motivated, problem-solving individuals who

participate actively in their communities, we must have an educational system and

educational approaches that model and support this" (p. 94). Experiential education seeks

to create relevant, meaningful experiences as the main, curricular ingredient. These

experiences encourage learners to transfer their constructed knowledge to future learning

endeavors. In this way, theory unites with practice and experiential education seeks to

practice what it proposes to teach.

The Nature of the Educative Experience

A powerful educative experience is one that engenders growth that leads to future

and continued learning. Dewey (1938) distinguishes between educative and mis-

educative experiences:

> The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not
> mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and
> education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-
> educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or
> distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to
> engender callousness… (p. 25)

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Educational experiences, as opposed to mis-educative experiences, foster a desire for learning and continued growth. Dewey (1938) questions educational structures: "How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?" (p. 26-27). The key here is that learning must be meaningful and relevant to the learner in a way that inspires the learner to continue to engage in a learning process and to seek out other learning opportunities.

A couple of years ago, I was covering the concept of mis-educative experiences in a graduate class. One student asked if I could give them an example of a mis-educative experience as they were struggling to clearly grasp the concept. Another student raised her hand immediately and blurted out that she could provide an example. She went on to describe her experience as the only black teenager in an all-white religious school setting. She shared her experience of being told to sit at the back of the room and find something to do quietly because she would not be able to understand what they were studying. She tearfully told the class that the majority of her educational upbringing had been a mis-educative experience as she was taught she was not capable of learning. I told this brave student that I could not think of a better example of a student "being rendered callous to ideas" or how a student could lose "the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them" (Dewey, 1938, p. 26-27). The amazing thing about this student's story is that she did not buy into the message she was told. She eventually

used those mis-educative experiences as a catalyst for her educational drive. This woman told her story of mis-education to our class as she was in the midst of earning her Ph.D. While her initial educational experience may have demonstrated mis-education, she was not to be deterred from finding her own path to her educational journey. This student's story also exemplifies one way to view Dewey's educational aims of growth. As Breunig (2008a) states, "According to Dewey, the aim of progressive education is 'to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation' " (p. 81). Through this one student's example of taking a mis-educative experience and turning it around to growth opportunity within her life demonstrates Dewey's ideals of rectifying unjust advantages within society.

In addition to creating appropriate educational experiences, experiential education recognizes that learning does not occur within a vacuum; ideally, it would have immediate application. Laura Joplin (1981) claims, "Experiential education is based on the assumption that all knowing must begin with the individual's relationship to the topic. The involved paradigm explains that everything is connected to everything else. Therefore, to learn, we must investigate those relations" (p. 20). In order to avoid mis-educative or non-educative experiences, educational experiences must be relevant to the learner. This signifies that it is not enough to just provide an experience or an activity during an educational moment in order to call it experiential education. This experience must be intentionally selected as appropriate for the content being covered. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) state that in order for an experience to be appropriate, "students must perceive it to be relevant, and the activity must provide a worthy vehicle

for approaching the issue" (p. 5). Experiential educators seek to find or reveal connections between the learner and the curricular material.

Educational experiences aim to empower students during their learning process. This is directly tied to the ways students are offered true choices within the learning setting. While offering a structured and intentional learning environment, educators must encourage students to examine the choices they make and the impact of those choices for their personal development as well as the impact on others and the world around them. A graduate student in one of my previous classes discussed his experience with being asked to make choices. He stated, "The instructor left a lasting impression with me on the *power* that we have to choose; choose how to see the world, what to embrace and what to reject, whether to support or resist this or that directive. As we choose appropriately, change happens." Choice must be honored, focused on, and taught. Ideally, learners and educators alike are aware that they have choices, examine the consequences of these choices, and attempt to become purposeful in their decision making.

As a beginning facilitator of experiential education programs, I did not have a developed understanding of students' processes of learning. I distinctly remember working with a group of seventh graders. I had worked really hard to establish credibility with this group as middle-school age students can tend to require. I felt great about how the group was progressing over the course of this two-day program. We seemed to have gained mutual trust, and students were thriving in their learning experience. On the last day, the group had an opportunity to experience the high challenge course. While there are usually some individuals within any group that have some fears about climbing and

facing a fear of heights, there was one girl in particular who determinedly expressed a great fear about the challenge that lay ahead. Feeling very confident in my facilitation abilities, I asked her questions like, "is there any part of you that wants to try to climb? Would you be willing to put on a harness and attempt it and then choose from there?" I shared with her observations I had made over the last couple of days. I told her how I watched her come out of her shell with her peers and show leadership in ways that I thought surprised her and the group. I asked her to keep an open mind about the process and see if she could surprise herself here on the challenge course as well.

We got the group harnessed and quickly various seventh graders were sailing through the high course challenges. It was finally time for this scared soul to make her entrance into the course. I watched as she fought every step of her ascent. I felt nerves creep into my own throat and experienced a desperate desire for her to succeed. She made it to the platform where I was stationed and immediately burst into tears. She articulated feelings of joy and relief as she made it into the course while simultaneously expressing feelings of utter fear about how to move through the course and eventually get down. I told her how powerful she was and I coached her through the whole process of moving through the remaining challenge course elements. It took a long time, but she made it through to the end including the zip line finish.

Once I came down from the platform from where I coached her through her journey, she came bounding up to me, threw her arms around me and said words that haunt me still, "Marin, I did it! Thank you so much! I couldn't have done this without you!" What had I done? Even with my best intentions of building self-confidence and

efficacy, had I really just taught this child that she could not have completed this challenge without me? Originally watching her complete the challenge course, I felt extreme pride and accomplishment. Listening to her describe her experience later, I heard her tell her peers that she was "so thankful that Marin was there to help her because she never would've done it without her." I cringed with the realization that I pushed her to achieve what *I* thought she needed in order to feel accomplished. I did not offer her true choices. It became my accomplishment more than hers. What if the lesson she needed to learn in that moment was about listening to her gut and deciding what was best for her? Who said completing the challenge course was the way to develop self-confidence? I did; and she listened to me. I was the person in authority and I decided what she should learn.

When choice is offered as a true aspect of the educational environment trust is established within the educator-student relationship. Because the student is invited to make choices according to what is most appropriate for their education while advocating for their own needs, they become active and responsible for their learning process. I did not offer this seventh grade girl the true option to be responsible for her self and for her learning. When done well, these experiences, facilitated by the educator, create educative experiences (versus mis-educative experiences) because the students own their experience and are empowered within their process of learning. I was the one who was the student that day on the challenge course. I needed to learn about the selfless act of truly encouraging others to advocate for their own needs so that their learning is authentically their own. This experience involved struggle for me as an educator, but was an experiential lesson that stayed with me more than ten years later.

Educational experiences which honor the choices of both the educator and the learner instill accountability. In the social environment which demands educational accountability, experiential educators ask us to examine what we value in the process of holding educators and students accountable. As educators, "our accountability must be to human persons and not to test and measures" (Spring, 2005, p. 56). It is the human relationships that must be nurtured within the educational environment, not measurements or tests. Educators are responsible to learners for offering meaningful experiences that ask them to explore choices and experience accountability.

Theory and practice are intertwined for Dewey (1938) through experience. In order to break down dichotomous thinking about theory and practice, Dewey distinguished between primary and secondary experience. Primary experience is the direct engagement of a combination of senses. It is where the student is actually involved in a concrete experience that engages their being. For example, I climbed Long's Peak, a 14,000 foot peak in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. This was a direct experience that included the physical challenge of attempting to keep up with the six-foot-two inched men I chose to experience this journey with. It involved a 2:00 a.m. start time in order to avoid being above tree line when the afternoon storms came into the area. It introduced the experience of altitude sickness at thirteen thousand feet, as well as the awe and wonder of the size and scope of mountains I had never seen before. It also incorporated the feeling of accomplishment after making it back down to the campsite after a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenge.

Secondary experience is the reflection, study, or meaning-making component of experience. Secondary experience also includes theory building or research or consulting other sources for previous knowledge. For us as mountain climbers this included gathering needed information about the mountain, what the experience might be like, and how we needed to prepare. We talked to others we knew who had experienced the peak and retrieved trail maps and writings of others' experience with Long's Peak. After the climb, our secondary experience included reflection about the significance of the climb and the impact it had on us. We each reflected by the campfire about our own experiences. Some of us were coming to grips with getting older and others were celebrating the accomplishment of pushing our bodies and minds to their extent in order to accomplish a goal. We learned about the ways in which we can limit ourselves as well as what we can discover when we push ourselves to do more than we originally thought possible. As a result of any experience, the conclusions or wisdom gained through the secondary experience, in conjunction with the primary experience itself, should yield transferable knowledge that can be applied to future purposes. Dewey (1938) states,

> An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as a theory. (p. 499)

Dewey argues that both primary and secondary experiences are vital to educational processes. Typically around the third or fourth class session, at least one of my undergraduate students will challenge me with some statement such as *why do we have to*

read so much and write papers? Isn't this an experiential education class? Shouldn't we be engaging in experiences? It is usually about this time that these students get a lesson in Dewey's distinction between primary and secondary experiences. I describe the importance of learning theory from those who have gone before us so that we can apply that knowledge to the lesson at hand. I discuss the way their reflection papers help them to complete the experiential learning cycle so that their process of learning will be enriched and more developed. While this is not always popular, they seem to grasp the idea that experiential learning environments incorporate both primary and secondary experiences that yield meaningful and transferable learning results.

The Image of the Learner

While experiential education espouses that both educators and students learn, co-construct knowledge, and experience within the learning environment, there are differences in the roles they play. The next two sections sort through the roles or images of the learner and educator within the experiential environment.

Experiential education reveals an involved participant in the learning process. Experiential learners construct knowledge from problem-solving opportunities, questioning previously held beliefs about the self through novel experiences and through critical examination about how those experiences influence their lives. The Association for Experiential Education describes: "Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning" (The Association for Experiential Education, 2008). Itin (1999) adds, "In the

philosophy of experiential education, the learner actively engages in co-creating with the teacher the educational process" (p. 94). Ideally, experiential learners become empowered as they develop their voices and become agents of change within their personal lives as well as within society. In describing the impact of how experiences within the classroom can connect with the society we live in, another graduate student wrote:

> Experiential education cultivates and embraces pedagogical practices. It allows for the student to draw on their experience and turn that experience into a creative reflection. I believe without implementing the practices of experiential education we will continue to create students who are educationally banked, void of creativity which, in my opinion, is an educational injustice. I have seen the positive side of experiential education. I have witnessed and experienced how experiential education and social justice work hand in hand during this semester and because I have witnessed and reflected upon it in a positive light, I can see when it is not prevalent in the environment. I look for social justice at work, in corporate decisions, and in government. I recognize the hegemonic fluidity of it within the educational system. In the educational arena, social justice is not a prevailing force. Experiential education nurtures engaged citizens seeking a democratic and equitable society.

This student demonstrates what Itin (1999) considers to be important outcomes of experiential learning: "experiential education is a purposeful process aimed at increasing the capacity of the student to understand, utilize, and affect his or her experience in the world and ultimately this is for participation in a democratic process" (p. 94).

While learners clarify values, develop competencies, and increase their knowledge (The Association for Experiential Education, 2008) they are asked to make sense of and engage in the complex world around them. Carver (1996) specifically describes experiential education as creating Agency, Belonging, and Competence (the

ABC's of Experiential Education) within learners (p. 10). Carver argues that experiential

learning environments invite students to believe they can make a difference in their lives

by becoming active agents who make conscious choices. She refers to developing a

student's personal *agency* as:

> 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 this lives within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity. (p. 10)

Carver also suggests that experiential education invites educators and learners to engage

in community where they establish a sense of *belonging* or a connection through

relationships with one another. This community is one where students and educators "see

themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability" (p. 10).

This image of an educational community further develops the idea that experiential

education strives for democratic learning environments. Finally, *competence* is nurtured

as knowledge is increased and skills are developed that contribute to each learner's

educational growth. "Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge

and attaining the ability to apply what is learned" (p. 10).

To illustrate Carver's ABC's I will trace a story about an undergraduate student

named "Tracy." This student was a bit socially awkward and had trouble connecting with

her peers who were also a number of years younger than she was. Over the course of the

semester, she shared with me some of her challenging life experiences with her family

and about her learning disabilities which may have contributed to not being readily

accepted within the social scene in classes. She was painfully quiet in class and would

rarely offer her input during class discussions. Because the course was on the theory and practice of experiential education, I used experiential initiatives throughout our sessions in order to illustrate the concepts we were studying. The early initiatives included getting-to-know-you activities, problem-solving challenges, and communication exercises. This student would consistently opt out of various challenges or would find other side-line ways of going through the process. She avoided being too exposed or vulnerable by not participating to the full extent. I could tell she needed to make those choices and I made sure she knew she could find tremendous learning through the perspective of observing and participating when comfortable. She seemed relieved.

Eventually, we progressed to the class that covered how to build trust within groups you facilitate. Of course we had been building trust throughout the semester through our shared experiences as well as opportunities to open up and share about ourselves. However, this class session focused on low challenge course initiatives that work to foster trust and support within groups through more physical challenges. I was expecting to have to make accommodations for Tracy's participation and came prepared with ways she could contribute without actually engaging in the activities in direct, physical ways. I led the students through a typical trust sequence where they start out holding hands and leaning back on each other. I watched Tracy carefully choose her partner. I was relieved to see this classmate take great care with helping Tracy work through the challenge. Tracy did not quite get to a place of fully putting her trust in her partner but at least she tried. I introduced the next level of challenge and Tracy decided it was too much and decided to stand next to me for the remainder of the sequence. I was

worried about what was in store for her experience as I knew some of the other challenges would require even more faith in her classmates. I was hoping she would choose to engage at some point, but was worried when these somewhat simple challenges stopped her.

Toward the end of the class session, I introduced the group to the Spider Web challenge where group members find themselves on one side of a web of ropes secured between two poles. The challenge is to move the group through the various holes within the web without touching any of the rope material in order to get to the other side. I watched as the group began solving the challenge. We had a discussion about allowing individuals to choose the level of challenge (the hole they would prefer to go through within the web) in order to honor each person's comfort level. I observed Tracy staying toward the back of the group silently watching the problem solving taking place. I also saw group members looking back at her wondering if she would participate and trying to account for her potential preferences. As the group moved through the exercise, I kept expecting Tracy to ask me if she could take a pass to the other side of the web. One of the classmates turned to Tracy and asked her which hole she felt most comfortable with. To all of our surprise, Tracy chose a hole that was high in the air which would require her to be lifted by her classmates. I fought to keep my mouth from dropping to the floor as I watched Tracy go through the trust commands she would not participate in previously and saw Tracy's classmates lift her in the air. I was so proud of this group of students who showed such care as they moved Tracy through the tight squeeze. They made reassuring comments and moved slowly. When Tracy made it down to the ground on the

other side of the web, the whole class cheered and I watched as a shy grin arose to Tracy's face.

After the rest of the class made it through the web, they circled up to engage in a debrief of the activity. On the ground, I spread out cards that had various words of group characteristics and feelings. I asked the group to choose one or two cards that represented how they felt during the experience. As we went around the group, several people chose cards that related to being proud that Tracy trusted them enough to be lifted through the web. When it came time for Tracy to reveal her cards, she simply showed two words: accomplished and happy. She couldn't talk about the experience; she let the cards speak for themselves. But we all had huge smiles on our faces as we witnessed Tracy's amazing accomplishment. The students were required to write a reflection paper after that class session and a consistent theme in many of their papers was their amazement about how we were able to create an environment where Tracy finally felt comfortable fully participating in the class experience. Her success was their achievement as well.

An even more amazing event occurred toward the end of the semester when we were going through the class sessions where the students learned the technical skills required to safely facilitate a high challenge course program. One of the skills they learned was a rescue from about 35 feet in the air. We practiced on the ground and Tracy asked if it would be okay if she just demonstrated the skill on the ground course. Absolutely, I assured her. She demonstrated her rescue at about 3 feet off the ground, and I thought that was the end of it. As the course was drawing to an end and I was working with the remaining students through their rescues at height, Tracy asked if she could still

perform the skill. The students I was standing with on the course, looked at each other in amazement and then yelled down, "Get up here!" We all supported Tracy as she went through all the steps she learned and she carefully lowered one of her colleagues to the ground. She needed a couple of reminders along the way, but she completed the rescue. We couldn't believe it. She finally felt like she could not only trust her classmates with her safety, but she was ready to demonstrate that she was trustworthy as well.

Throughout the semester Tracy provided the class with the lessons about Carver's ABC's of experiential education. We watched as Tracy slowly developed "Agency." She made choices throughout the entire semester about how she would participate during every class. Her choices were honored, not only by me, but the rest of her classmates as well. We experienced an authentic sense of "Belonging" as a community as Tracy worked her way to a point where she could trust the class and offer her contribution as well. The class showed incredible respect for her involvement and articulated how proud they were of her accomplishments. This student who previously shied away from her peers in other settings was being accepted and commended for a job well done. And finally, because the environment encouraged her to move at her own pace, she developed "Competence" in skills she did not think she would be able to complete.

In her final reflection, Tracy commented that some of the most significant learning that occurred for her involved her ability to make choices during the course. She expressed feelings of being empowered to engage in an activity based on her comfort level and was more willing to participate when she could freely choose it. She described her personal growth over the semester by setting goals to achieve each week concerning

her participation. She also complimented her classmates for how they encouraged her, let her go at her own pace, and supported her decisions. She discussed the ways in which she grew by developing trust in other people, overcoming her fears, increasing her self-confidence, and encouraging her ability to try new things and challenge herself in other life events. Tracy demonstrates the image of the ideal experiential learner. She defines how she increased her Agency, Belonging and Competence through the experiences within the class.

The Image of the Educator

Experiential educators are empowering, not empowered. Defining experiential learning through practice reveals that the role of the educator within the learning process is to create an environment through intentional facilitation that is conducive for others to learn their own lessons from their experiences. These educators are guides and facilitators and seek learning opportunities along with their students. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) describe the role of the educator as "providing minimum necessary structure. In other words, the teacher's role is to give just enough assistance for students to be successful, but no more. If the teacher carries out the role properly, students will accomplish more than they ever could on their own" (p. 5). Educators honor where each student is by encouraging learning from individuals according to their unique talents, interests, and learning styles. Experiential educators believe all learners are valuable and have something to offer to the educational setting and others within it. The educator takes great care in intentionally designing the learning experiences and opportunities and then practices intentional flexibility during the actual learning experience in order to respond

to what takes place. "The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning" (The Association for Experiential Education, 2008). Once within the learning experience, experiential educators display an authentic interest in the students and their learning process. They are right along side them in the experience and therefore, they model continual learning.

While in other more traditional educational settings, the role of the educator may be viewed as disseminating or imparting information to the learner, the experiential educator's role is to create experiences and opportunities that are conducive to educational (versus mis-educative or non-educative) experiences. The experiential educator's focus is to guide students through the learning process. For instance, an educator attempting to teach a problem-solving process could just give the student an answer that would help to solve the problem. However, that educator then robs the student of his or her learning process and the steps it takes to get there. Not only will the student not acquire the necessary steps of problem solving through this experience to be equipped for future problem solving opportunities, but the educator also removed the chance that the student could have come up with a different solution that even the educator had not considered before. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) reiterate, "if the approach is truly student-centered, they may not be aware the teacher had a role at all" (p. 5). The educational experience is about the students, not about the educator.

Experiential educators believe their students are co-conspirators in the learning and knowledge building process. Dewey (1938) states:

> The very nature of the work done is a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility…the educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (p. 56)

During this process of learning struggle sometimes occurs. As students attempt to acquire new skills or knowledge, it is not always easy. As educators we can discourage our students from learning through experience by trying to rescue them. This is not to say that students should endure painful learning experiences that do not lead to further growth; however, some meaningful learning processes that are occasionally difficult, teach us some of the most important lessons. As educators we must be willing and able to assess those learning moments that can encourage new learning. Educators must help students move through all educational moments as they arise. Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (2008) describe, "Another critical role for the teacher is to help students make connections. I think most of us would agree that students must eventually understand the point of an experience for it to be educative, and that point seldom emerges fully developed on its own" (p. 5). Instead of taking away a struggle or challenge, we must identify connections that exist within an experience and reframe positive challenges that lead to student growth.

One aspect of an experiential educator's role that can help students make connections is debriefing or processing. After an experience, the educator must provide opportunities for reflection and analysis of the experience and what applications can be drawn for future learning. Joplin (1981) indicates that during debriefing, "the learning is

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recognized, articulated, and evaluated. The teacher is responsible for seeing that the actions previously taken do not drift along unquestioned, unrealized, unintegrated, or unorganized" (p. 20). The ideal result of debriefing experiences is expressed in one graduate student's reflection paper when he states:

> Debriefing and guided reflections are also skills that impacted me. The debriefings were purposeful and focused on the transfer of learning to real-world situations. The open ended questions during the reflection helped us infer our own lessons from personal experiences rather than being dictated to us by the instructor.

Experiential educators must provide reflection opportunities that encourage learners to make their own conclusions about their learning and how that learning can be applied beyond the educational environment.

The experiential educator also develops a strong theoretical and philosophical core that guides his/her practice. This includes developing a strong personal awareness and a spiritual core in order to present an authentic educational persona. The Association for Experiential Education reminds us that "educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and preconceptions, and how these influence the learner" (The Association for Experiential Education, 2008). Experiential educators recognize that they affect the learning environment by their social constructs. Instead of shying away from these social factors that are inherent within human beings involved in a process of learning, these factors are recognized as a component of the complex contextual learning scene. Furthermore, "the educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety,

and facilitating the learning process" (The Association for Experiential Education, 2008).

Itin (1999) adds, "A central premise of the philosophy is that the teacher is responsible

for presenting opportunities for experiences, helping students utilize these experiences,

establishing the learning environment, placing boundaries on the learning objectives,

sharing necessary information and facilitating learning" (p. 93). Experiential educators

are intentional about their role within the educational environment and continually work

to improve upon the relationships they establish with their students as well as focus on

creating and nurturing positive learning environments that are conducive to

transformative learning.

In an attempt to answer the question, *what is experiential education*? Chapman,

McPhee, and Proudman (2008) claim:

> It is an approach that has students actively engaged in exploring questions they
> find relevant and meaningful, and has them trusting that feeling, as well as
> thinking, can lead to knowledge. Teachers are cast as coaches and are largely
> removed from their roles as interpreters of reality, purveyors of truth, mediators
> between students and the world. They are asked to believe that students can draw
> valid and meaningful conclusions from their own experiences. Learning in this
> way ultimately proves more meaningful than just relying on other people's
> conclusions about others' lives. (p. 7)

Experiential educators work to provide authentic learning experiences for students who

actively engage in their process of learning.

Connection between Experiential Education and Social Justice?

This chapter has examined the definition, aims, epistemology, and unique

characteristics of the theory and practice of experiential education. From the examples

provided, one may determine that experiential education is a method for teaching social

justice because it flattens hierarchies, allows for choice which creates agency within

learners, increases awareness of others through an emphasis on relationships within the

learning process, and honors collaboration of diverse learners in order to produce these

results beyond the educational scene. Furthermore, I share values about aims of

experiential education with Breunig (2008b).

> For me, the purpose of schools is to develop peoples' critical thinking skills as a means to develop a more socially just world…schools can do both – they can prepare people for future work in the world 'that is,' while still offering them a vision of what 'could be.' For me, that vision of what 'could be' is the development of a more socially just world" (p. 474).

The next chapter will explicitly explore the connection between experiential education

and the ways it can affect outcomes of social justice.

CHAPTER III

EXPERIENTIAL JOURNEY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

In Chapter II, I wove important concepts of experiential education into stories of my lived experience. This chapter offers various memoirs coupled with theoretical and philosophical discussion of what significance the stories reveal. The memoirs situate the reader within the experiential education environment and explore how this educational approach can be used as a methodology within social justice contexts. The chapter attempts to answer the question: what is the lived experience of exploring issues of social justice through experiential education? In this chapter I also delve into more detail and to problematize experiential education. The journey has not always been easy, the road hasn't always been straight and there has been struggle, doubt, and fear along with joy and success. This is the continued story of an experiential educator on a journey in search for justice-filled democratic education.

The End is the Beginning

I cried for the first time during the introduction of the 2009 Institute on Experiential Education. It snuck up on me and yet there I was, introducing the day with a quivering voice. I talk in front of people for a living, so it threw me when I felt tears creep up in my throat and start to flow. The full title for the institute is the Rebecca L. Carver Institute on Experiential Education. You see, it was the name in the title that brought the emotion. This was the fourth year I put on a day-long workshop in Rebecca's

honor. It was the fifth annual institute because we organized the first one together. I was

taking a few moments during my introduction to situate this year's participants in the

spirit of how the institute came into being. Many of the people in the room did not know

Rebecca and I needed to share the story about why we were gathered together on this

rainy day in October.

I explained to the gathering that Dr. Rebecca Carver was a professor in the

Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations (ELC) Department at the University of

North Carolina at Greensboro. When Rebecca and I met we immediately bonded over our

mutual passion for experiential education and developed a friendship. I helped her with

EE1 (experiential education one) – the graduate course she taught that first year we met.

She called the course EE1 from the beginning in order to signify that there would indeed

be other courses to follow. During that first year we co-sponsored the 1st Institute for

Experiential Education because Rebecca came up with the idea that we needed a

community of people who were interested in experiential education so that we could

support each other in our efforts. She believed so passionately in the promises of

experiential education that she felt she couldn't just limit its influence to those who take

her classes, but that she needed to invite the community in as well.

The following semester, Rebecca was diagnosed with breast cancer. After a very

hard fought battle, she lost her fight in May of 2006. This is where the tears that had been

lying in wait at the back of my throat made their appearance for all to see. My internal

dialogue was telling me this was ridiculous. I had told this story countless times,

including during the three previous institute introductions, and I had never cried. This

time I felt differently. I had to fight a little harder in a somewhat political battle to get the funding for the institute this year. I was filled with fear that it might be the last one. I finally shared with the participants that I just kept thinking about one of the last conversations with Rebecca while she was in the hospital. She could barely get the words out because she was so sick, but she was asking me to continue this work. Organizing the institute was a small way I could keep her memory and our work alive.

I owe a lot to Rebecca. It is because of our friendship that I pursued my Ph.D. One day after we had lunch together, she asked if I knew about the department in which she taught. Being new to the university I did not. She went on to speak very passionately about this tremendous department. She convinced me that I needed to take a class and see what I thought. I was hooked immediately during my first class on education, leadership, and culture, and we got excited in that first year about future research and practice possibilities. Ironically, as detailed below, it was her death that brought me the greatest opportunity of all – one that shaped my developing passion of connecting experiential education with aims of social justice.

During her brief time at UNCG, Rebecca had started a community of people who were interested in Experiential Education, and the ELC Department wanted to let her work live on. After she passed, I was asked if I was willing to teach her experiential education course and to offer the institute in her honor. I was overwhelmed with the prospect. However, I did understand the passion both Rebecca and I brought to experiential education. I decided to do the best I could to do my work and teach the class

as well as offer the institute, this time without Rebecca by my side, but fueled by her spirit.

I co-taught the first class after Rebecca's passing with two of her previous students from EE1. When Rebecca thought she would be healthy and on the road to recovery after chemotherapy, we had started to plan the second institute. She mentioned that she thought it should have a social justice theme because of cultural values of the ELC department. Her students and I decided to follow through with that theme for the institute as well as center the entire course curriculum on this connection. It is with this decision that pieces began to fall into place for me about where my true passion lies. In my brave moments I have ideals about transforming education. After studying themes of social justice throughout my doctoral coursework, I began to understand how my passion for experiential education could work more meaningfully on the inequities I witnessed in the world. But this would not be an easy prospect. After Rebecca's death, I was charged to explore what it means to be an experiential educator who is concerned about social justice.

This is Not Traditional

"Experiential education is not rigorous." "It does not give students an opportunity to engage at an academic level that is appropriate for graduate students." "Experiential education may be interesting, but a class in this subject cannot count for your Ph.D. coursework." These are certainly not my beliefs, but these are a sampling of comments individuals from other departments on campus received when asking if they could add the experiential education course to their doctoral plan of study. Experiential education

fights for credibility in the larger academia schema. How could a bunch of people having experiences together (that they may even enjoy – heaven forbid) learn anything that can compare to the scholarly rigor of more traditional classes? This question hovers around the heart of philosophical epistemology about how we construct knowledge. In order to believe in experiential education as a meaningful, valid, and yes, even rigorous educational pedagogy, you must believe that experience can and does shape our world and helps us to construct knowledge. The philosophical debate over the mind/body connection will certainly not be solved within the confines of this writing. However, it is essential to recognize that experiential educators, even the very passionate ones, will undoubtedly face much criticism and even laughter when describing how their practice contributes within academia at large.

Those same passionate experiential educators may have to develop a thick skin as they fight for their place in the educational scene. I was recently talking with a young professional interested in establishing a career in experiential education and he asked what else he should know before he continues on the next steps after his degree. I told him to be prepared for nonbelievers. Work on exploring other forms of education and understand how and why experiential education works for you. Then develop a very tough skin and be prepared for the nonbelievers and *the looks*. I can think of numerous conversations with professors and practitioners who have asked what it is that I do. As I explain that I am an experiential educator, I watch their eyes shift to the ground or away from mine, and sometimes a sly grin spreads across their face as they say, *Oh, so you do that ropes course stuff. Yeah, I'm sure that's fun.* At this point in the conversation, I

usually smile as I resist the urge to reach over and strangle the other person in an effort to be heard, and choose one of several responses: a) *yes, I am pretty lucky to be afforded the opportunity to enjoy what I do. And you know, you might be surprised about what occurs during that ropes course stuff.* This is the response I give when I decide to accept the person's previously conceived notions about experiential education, but to also place a probe out there to see if there is room for future discussion. b) *Well, we do have access to low and high challenge courses, but we only use them as an educational tool if it is appropriate for the curriculum outcomes we are striving for.* This is the response I give if I think there is an opening for a discussion about the fact that some experiential education does in fact, strive for curricular outcomes like other forms of more traditional education. The best case of this scenario is that we engage in a discussion about how experiential education searches for meaningful and sometimes even transformational educational opportunities for students through different practices or methodological approaches. This can result in a meaty discussion about educational praxis. Sometimes. c) *Yes. My parents were pretty surprised to learn that I could turn my childhood tree climbing hobby into an actual job with a salary and benefits. How crazy is that, huh?* This response is the one I give if I assess that this person has already written me and all of experiential education off and the conversation is over.

Expanding the Lens of Academic Validity: An Act of Justice?

During the last thirteen years, I have been trying to understand why experiential education is not considered rigorous or as valuable as other methodological approaches to education. Why is it so hard to gain credibility? One could ask why credibility is

important in the first place. I believe it is important because hegemonic forces influence

what is practiced. If a particular philosophy or methodology is viewed as acceptable for

education, it may be easier to navigate inevitable politics within the process. During my

coursework, I continually encountered other educators writing about this same tension to

be heard and treated as valid. In my feminist theory classes, I found kindred spirits, such

as Patricia Hill Collins, (1993) Gloria Anzaldua, (2002) and bell hooks (1994) that honor

personal voice and experience as valid ways of knowing. Within critical pedagogy I

encountered individuals, including Paulo Freire, (1970) Maxine Greene, (1988) and

Henry Giroux, (2005) who believe in a fight for the unrepresented and a quest for change

in an educational system that was not designed for equal access for all. In some ways, the

fight for experiential education as a valid form of education is a social justice aim.

Experiential education asks us to open our minds to other ways of knowing and learning.

It complicates the educational scene that believes you can stick to previously determined

lesson plans that are constructed before ever meeting the specific students within the

class. It challenges a tradition of lecture and auditory learning and asks for space for

different learning styles. It asks us to invite emotion and spirit into the educational

environment. It asks educators to let go of total control. It asks teachers and learners to

become vulnerable and bring themselves into their learning process. Chapman, McPhee

and Proudman, (2008) address these themes:

> Any experiential learning model that does not recognize the importance of
> emotional investment diminishes its potential effectiveness for the learner in the
> long run. The process needs to engage the learner to a point where what is being
> learned and experienced strikes a critical, central chord within the learner…The
> teacher's challenge is to create a physically and emotionally safe environment (in

the eyes of the students) so as to encourage emotional investment…It means creating an environment where people are fully valued and appreciated. (p. 13)

Immersing oneself into an emotionally engaged learning environment is a vulnerable prospect, but one that has potential to yield meaningful results. Experiential education also asks us to deal with uncertainty – the uncertainty of educational outcomes, the uncertainty of knowledge itself and the uncertainty of the contextual world around us. It pushes us outside our boxes because as you live and experience the world, you realize those boxes are constructed and can just as easily be deconstructed.

The act of writing this dissertation in a nontraditional format is in itself a challenge to think through how we make meaning of education and what we view as valid. My favorite question when I encounter someone in higher education who discovers that I am working on my dissertation is *oh, have you collected your data yet?* Again, usually there are a variety of responses to choose from, but the fact that this question is almost always asked confirms the static nature in which we view knowledge production. Sometimes I respond that I have been collecting data for the last 13 years and then smile and walk away. Other times, I explain that I am writing about the connection between experiential education and social justice, and I am using a non-traditional format for my dissertation in order to attempt to get at the heart of educational experience. Sometimes, I can see resentment in people's faces when I tell them I am writing a philosophical memoir as they perhaps remember the rigid structure of their dissertation process. I have to laugh when I get statements from people of *wow, it must be nice to just be able to tell stories for your dissertation. I wish my dissertation was that easy*. If only they could be

here with me in this coffee shop as I agonize over how to appropriately capture the phenomenon of experiential education while weaving philosophical and theoretical backing for how these experiences lead to education. I have spent much time throughout my career doubting if I can make it as an experiential educator simply because I can feel and see how many people do not get it or value it. During this writing process I have battled with myself over and over again as I use "I" language and personal experience and fight the urge to water it down and to intellectualize it in a solely philosophical discussion. I too have been trained in a traditional educational environment and that training holds fast.

However, there are other traditions which stand firm on the validity of more non-traditional forms of research and epistemological approaches. For instance, feminist critical theory focuses on relationships of power while examining, pushing, and deconstructing traditional dogmatic, hierarchical power structures and institutions. To this point, Villaverde (2008) describes educational pedagogies as immersed in, subject to, and responsive to politics:

> This is where feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and 'good' teaching leak into one another. I suggest these are not separate types of pedagogies; theoretically they work from similar premises that pedagogy is an emancipatory process; it is about identity formation and the development of critical consciousness and political awareness. Central expectations are the development of critique and social change through an analysis of power and language. (p. 120)

These critical theorists work at "overturning oppression and achieving social justice through empowerment of the marginalized, the poor, the nameless, the voiceless" (Lincoln and Denzin, as cited in Gannon & Davies, 2006, p. 76). Feminist critical

theorists are concerned with issues of equality within power structures and social justice agendas by engaging in critical analysis of institutions, systems, and hegemonic structures and finding ways to incorporate critical thinking into their educational practice. bell hooks (1994) voices her concern: "It is evident that one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references" (p. 64). This type of theory-making perpetuates a certain elitist thinking that maintains a hierarchical access to theory and accepted knowledge. These critical theorists are interested in empowerment and freedom from oppressive power structures.

Certainly, feminist theorists would argue that there should be a certain rigor applied to the way we articulate theory; however, they argue that one must theorize in a way that is liberating versus limiting. Villaverde (2008) identifies themes within feminist pedagogy such as "the need for student voice, community, collaboration, democracy, empowerment, action, struggle, consciousness raising, and critique" (p. 121). These themes, when practiced in educational environments expose the power structures within institutions so that women and others who have experienced oppression may find their voice and seek empowerment. This pedagogy values a process of knowledge production that allows for freedom of choice and agency. Utilizing philosophical memoir as a dissertation approach is one way to empower the voice of experience. Experience then becomes an important way to empower the voice of social justice.

My hope is that I am not misunderstood. I am not suggesting an either/or option for looking at education or research. John Dewey discouraged setting ideas against each other in dichotomous relationships, whether it concerns approaches to educational practice or how to best study a particular research question. As Jasper Hunt (2008) explains, "Dewey's main concern was that these dualisms resulted in ontological fragmentation, that is, a fragmentation of being, with negative results in practical affairs" (p. 204). Setting things apart from one another in a dualistic fashion, limits our evaluation about what is possible within practice. I am simply joining the cadre of voices that asks for multiple ways of knowing. I understand and appreciate many forms of research and honor more traditional approaches to dissertation writing and education.

Experiential methodologies and nontraditional research methods can also be valid. It is rigorous to examine experience with all of its variables and complexities. There will be bias, but this bias will exist regardless of the research method because the world is messy. Just because we attempt to control variables in order to examine correlations does not eliminate the world of contextual truths. The difference between traditional and pragmatic perspectives is that the former believes truth exists and a philosopher's job is to discover it, whereas the latter believes individuals construct truths according to the language they use, or how we justify the world at a particular time. Pragmatists believe that seeking knowledge is not about "an attempt to *represent* reality. Rather, we should view inquiry as a way of using reality" (p. 33). Seeking an ultimate truth is not possible or desirable for pragmatists. Rorty (1999) points out that pragmatists "think the quest for certainty – even as a long term goal – is an attempt to escape from the world" (p. 33).

Pragmatists believe the search for truths will never cease as humanity will continue to evolve, grow, and redefine their lives. Rather, pragmatists consider Dewey's notion of truth: "He [Dewey] taught us to call 'true' whatever belief results from a free and open encounter of opinions, without asking whether this result agrees with something beyond that encounter" (p. 119). From a pragmatist's point of view, discovering truths occurs within social interaction which is why learning through experience and within relationships is valid pragmatically speaking.

Human behavior is complex and unpredictable. We evolve in our understanding as we continue to experience the world. Experience guides our research in all forms – it guides what we choose to research in the first place and how we interpret our findings and therefore, how we construct knowledge. Experiential educator, Martha Bell (2008) argues that "experience 'exists' through interpretation. It is produced through the meanings given it. Experiences are contingent, interpretations can change" (p. 171). If we follow this line of thinking, it is through research and education that we interpret our experiences. These interpretations of experience influence how we learn. Bell (2008) continues:

> There is no generic clone for 'the experience' that applies to everyone. This could only happen if experience was an absolute principle, or if people were clones of each other, without personal situations, social contexts, or historical places in time. In reality people have very different experiences. (p. 172)

Understanding experience and how it helps us to construct knowledge and understand our interaction with the world is essential for understanding educational practice. This

dissertation continues to capture contextual and social experiences that influence learning and how learning can encourage socially responsible and engaged citizens.

Experiential Education for Democracy and Social Justice

As this story moves toward viewing experiential education through a social justice lens, I would like to clarify some terms. I join the voices of experiential educators who view social justice as interwoven into history, aims, and practice of the field. In their article, *A History of the Association for Experiential Education 1990-2008*, experiential educators Garvey, Mitten, Pace, and Roberts (2008) state:

> Social justice…must be seen as braided into the very fabric of AEE. While diversity can be defined as recognizing, appreciating, valuing, and utilizing the unique talents and contributions of all individuals, in it broadest context social justice is about the power attached to all of this. More narrowly defined and organizationally focused, social justice is the action behind knowing how to embrace and engage this rich mixture of individual differences and similarities so that it can be applied in pursuit of organizational objectives. (p. 97)

These authors have interpreted experience with an understanding of social justice as a pervasive theme. In line with this thinking as an experiential educator who is concerned about social justice aims, I approach this goal in two ways: by creating an *environment* that is conducive for democratic and socially just relationships and educational experiences and by creating educational *outcomes* that are focused on increasing awareness and behavioral change for issues of social equity, access, and justice. If we believe that social justice issues are pervasive within educational environments, then educators can work to put democratic processes in place that encourage a community of learners that honors the mutually defined values of the group and savors the belief that all

voices are valued and encouraged. In this type of environment, it would be expected that

individuals critically examine and challenge notions of power, privilege and authority in

order to reduce oppressive hegemonic tendencies. Facilitators of this educational setting

should critically examine hidden curriculums that may inhibit students' access to or

success within the environment. These educators encourage learners to actively engage in

their learning process in order to become agents of change within the society they will

help to shape.

There may also be educational curriculum that is geared toward outcomes of

social justice. These outcomes may include expanding our definitions of diversity and

difference beyond more typical distinctions of race, class, and gender. Social justice aims

may also attempt to increase awareness about issues of age, ability, body size, sexual

orientation, educational level, or marriage status. In short, expanding our concept of

diversity includes all cultural constructions that impact one's interaction with society.

There needs to be recognition that our cultural constructs perpetually influence who we

are in the world, and subsequently how we learn and grow. For instance, while discussing

the impact of gender, Bell (2008) states:

> Becoming gendered occurs in not only the unconscious with its drives and
> instincts, but also the socially constructed body with which one enacts one's
> feeling and fears. The link for experiential educators is that embodiment is the
> direct experience of one's own 'lived' body within different cultural
> meanings…Participants cannot experience learning experientially without
> actually embodying their own coming to consciousness. (p. 437)

Our social and cultural beings are ever-present within the learning process. Seeking

socially just outcomes involves honoring the wide variety of embodied learners present

within the educational scene and encourages a greater cultural understanding and competence rooted in a belief and commitment to our interconnectedness. The following stories explore themes and ways in which experiential education can serve democratic and social justice outcomes.

Relationship Interdependency

A democratic and experiential environment is subject to relationship interdependency; meaning, relationships between all stake-holders: learner to educator, learner to self, and learner to other learners, are all significant to what and how something is learned. To illustrate, I would like to revisit the story I told earlier about the young girl who I pushed to go through the challenge course to achieve the goals I thought she needed to achieve. I bring our attention back to this story because of what it says about the student-educator relationship. During the recent Institute on Experiential Education, the presenter reminded us that relationships come first before learning. We might also flip this statement and claim that we learn *within* relationship. We learn through experience within relationship to self, relationship to others, and relationship to the world. Emphasizing relationships within the learning process is an important aspect of experiential methodology, but it also signals the need for educators to examine these relationships in order to create socially conscious and democratic learning environments.

The seventh grader I worked with who diligently followed my coaching and pushing through the challenge course may have found a sense of accomplishment after completing something she did not think was previously possible. However, the learning did not need to be filled with such struggle. As the educator I needed to be more mindful

of the power I held for influence within our relationship. Breunig, (2008b) emphasizes power within teaching:

> Teaching is, thus, a theoretical, intellectual, and political practice within the critical classroom…The teacher as an agent of social change attempts to build coherence and consistency as a classroom virtue, while recognizing that s/he is operating as an agent to either perpetuate the institutional structures and those people who hold power within that structure, or to be critical of the institution and those who hold power as a means to lessen oppression. (pp. 477-478)

Teachers decide what they model and what they reinforce within power structures. Educators who are interested in being mindful of social justice aims examine the educational scene for troublesome power dynamics and search for opportunities for students to gain personal agency. Experiential educators like me who want to keep ideals of social justice in their practice, share a passion for democratic education. My desire to teach in ways that create spaces for social justice stems from my strong passion for educational experiences that empower the learner to become agents in their learning experiences and their world. I have had conversations with many educators who might say the same thing. Experiential social justice pedagogues are interested in how we can work toward truly democratic and equitable learning environments where processes of learning are critically examined for structures of power, authority and privilege in order to cultivate meaningful and transformative learning. Even though asking/forcing someone to complete a challenge course when they do not want to may not seem extremely oppressive, it is not freely allowing the student to examine the opportunities and to gain power by making their own choices.

It is here that John Dewey echoes in my head and I am reminded that an educator's job is not to create mis-educative experiences, or experiences that restrain a learner's growth potential. Many educators would agree that they are not trying to create mis-educative experiences; after all, what educator would strive to create callousness within their students? Certainly, that is not the intention. But what do we do as educators that could create callousness or a lack of desire to learn? Dewey (1938) questions, "How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?" (p. 26-27). How do we dis-empower students unknowingly or otherwise? I got lucky that day on the course with my infamous seventh grader. She could have come down from the course with fire-filled eyes and hateful words for making her do something she originally said she didn't want to do. She could have become callous to learning through a mis-educational experience that I unknowingly facilitated.

For me, the ability to empower students is directly tied to the ways we work on creating agency within our students by offering them true choices and opportunities to examine consequences. Bell (2008) discusses the term empowerment:

> In psychological terms, empowerment is a process of facilitating the development of individuals into whole, moral persons, finding greater purpose to their lives and activities by making choices that allow them to reach their personal potential as capable, knowing, and integrated human beings. (p. 432)

As educators, if we are looking for this type of empowerment, we must be mindful that too often we give students a menu of choices that we have pre-selected. This is what I provided the seventh grade student. I pre-selected her experience for her. While still offering a structured and intentional learning environment, we need to encourage students to examine the choices they make and the impact of those choices for their personal development as well as the impact on others and the world around them. Our job as educators is to remind students to become advocates of their own needs and to own their educational experiences.

This all sounds very idyllic, and in some ways, it is. However, I have evidence that it works. Through these stories, there should be indications of how experiential education can lead to change, growth, and learning for students. However, this growth is ultimately dependent upon the relationships created within the learning environment. The difficult thing for experiential educators is that no one can be apathetic in the learning process in order for growth to happen. I am smiling as I write this, because even someone as passionate about learning as I am can have apathetic moments. We certainly cannot expect that all educators and all students will be actively and excitingly engaged at all times during the educational experience. It simply will not happen. But I do believe we can create conditions where educators and students can be engaged in more authentic learning more of the time.

Generally, I am a very positive and optimistic person. I have been accused of and criticized for being too idyllic, too hopeful, or too positive when I account for the world around me. I accept that criticism to be mostly true. Upon college graduation I was asked

to deliver a sermon at my childhood church. I was asked to examine lessons learned during the college experience and how these lessons interacted with my faith. After the service, one of my favorite older, curmudgeon parishioners who would give me the most real, in your face feedback after solos or speeches, came up to me afterwards and said, "Yeah, Marin, you did a good job today and it is all well and good, but it is far too cheerful. You are not grounded in reality. It isn't all that good out there all of the time." He was right. He was certainly speaking from far greater experience within his world that included war, loss of sons, being a homicide detective, and many more challenges that my optimistic spirit may not have offered solace. I struggle, I doubt, and I fear that I am an imposter. The voice of doom, as my counselor calls it, lives alive and well in my head just as I am sure it does in other people's minds. However, I also live true to experiential theory that states that our mistakes, our challenges, and our missteps are all material for learning and growth.

With that said, there are many times when my optimism is trumped by more bleak circumstances and no matter how I try to nurture the relationship, there are the students I just cannot reach. Sometimes, I cannot find the right combination of motivation, connection and approaches and some students slip through the educational cracks. Experiential educators, and I might argue, all educators, are dependent on the students' willingness to actively participate in the learning process. I had a student who was dealing with some difficult issues at home including a very sick child. I struggled all semester with this student who had difficulty showing up for class, turned in papers that included plagiarized work, and contributed little in class when there. It seems to me that

when some basic needs of security and emotional stability are not present, it is pretty

challenging to engage in a meaningful process of learning that leads to long-term growth.

Fair enough. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is alive and well.

Relationship to the Contextual Scene

This example further demonstrates the importance of the relationship between the

educator and the learner. Experiential education aligns with critical pedagogy as they

both honor individuals' experiences as well as critically examine the relationship between

teacher and student. Itin (1999) connects experiential education to critical pedagogical

practice by stating:

> Another philosophical voice that lays the historical tradition for the philosophy of
> experiential education is Paulo Freire…for Freire, the educator engages in a
> collaborative dialogue about concrete situations with the student…For Freire,
> education is about the content to be taught, and the resulting consequences for the
> person within their social context. (p. 93)

The example above also reveals that a learner's social context can also influence their

ability to engage in the learning experience in the first place. The lesson might have been

for me in that struggled relationship. I had to consciously examine the power I held as an

instructor of a course. I could have responded to his contextual struggles in a wide range

of ways and this was a critically important time of practicing what I preach. In addition,

Itin (1999) recognizes both Freire and Dewey for valuing direct experience that also

includes reflection about the relevance that experience has within the student's contextual

reality. The student's real learning might have been through our discussions and email

exchanges about plagiarism and taking on more than you can in a time of life crisis. This

may have been what was relevant to this student even though it was not a learning

outcome listed on the syllabus. Itin (1999) demonstrates this connection between

experiential educators Kurt Hahn and John Dewey, and critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire:

> All three are concerned with increasing the capabilities (self-efficacy) of individuals to participate in the democratic process (political awareness and action). Each of the voices cited expressed a concern for understanding the subject matter within experience (experiential learning), which can really be seen as developing a critical understanding. Each is also concerned with a purposeful process that involves the teacher actively engaging the student in experience. Lastly, each has some concern for reducing the power relationship between students and the teacher. (p. 93)

The experience of the student is what I chose to focus on in how I handled the semester

long struggle. Certainly he had to complete the required work of the course and his grade

reflected the way he lived up to, or fell short of honoring his end of the classroom

contract. The subject matter for this student was just a bit different because his

experiences outside of class dramatically influenced his interaction with the class. Part of

being a socially conscious experiential educator involves meeting students within their

contextual reality.

Critical Experiential Education: Connecting Learning through Experience to the Socially Constructed Environment

Critical and experiential educators attempt to empower their students to actively

engage within society as a result of learning. Itin (1999) discusses:

> Hahn took many of his ideas from Plato in terms of the development of the citizen and particularly the citizen's ability to serve the community…Like Dewey, Hahn was concerned with the democratic process and the place of education in this process. Both were reflecting the ideals and ideology of the progressive education

movement…Hahn clearly approached education as a transactive process between educator and student that used experience within a larger socio-political process. (p. 92)

For these experiential educators, learning was never to be stagnant. Rather, past experiences are brought into the classroom and experiences that occur within the educational environment capitalize on those past experiences. In turn, the learning from the educational experiences informs future experience as learning is applied within society. Dewey (1938) called this the continuity of experience.

Critical and experiential pedagogy must examine their curriculum in order to engage their students in experiences that are relevant and meaningful to their outside worlds. The experiential education curriculum purposefully searches for ways to connect with a student's past experiences, while simultaneously offering new experiences to expand learning. One of the principles of experiential education is that "experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis" (Association for Experiential Education, 2008). Carver (1996) shares this value as she calls for authenticity as a primary principle in experiential education where "activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives" (p. 10). Educators in the postmodern era must become comfortable with lifelong learning that leads to educational growth and flexibility in order to engage students in meaningful processes of learning. "The notion of prior experience as a legitimate source of knowledge construction in schools and classrooms allows us to think about education as a life process rather than a static set of information or procedures" (Slattery, 2006, p. 81). Critical educators must engage in that process in order to avoid

complacency. Experiential educators must be acutely aware of their impact. A critical and experiential curriculum actively engages the educator as well as the students in meaningful processes of learning.

I was once working with a group comprised of individuals from various organizations and companies within a community. A portion of their goals included developing a community of leaders who could make positive change within the community they lived. The group utilized our experiential programming in order to help achieve these goals. One initiative we led brought ideas of social justice and inequity into high focus.

The parameters of this particular activity divides the large group into four smaller groups who begin the activity by being positioned at four corners of a large rope square placed on the ground. Placed throughout the square, there are various rubber spots about a square foot apiece. The objective given to the group is that they must get their team to the other side. Their only starting point is the spot directly in front of them at their corner. Their only exit is the spot directly across from them on the opposite corner of the square. They are able to use the rest of the spots to get to the other side, but they may not touch the ground within the squared roped boundary. In addition, once a spot is put in play, some form of human contact must be maintained with the spot. If contact is broken, the team loses the use of that spot.

Interesting things occur while groups experience this activity. The first question that usually comes up for groups is whether they are competing with the other smaller groups to get to their other side first, or if they are going to work together as one team.

Groups usually realize during the first few minutes of play that if they compete for resources and lose spots for other groups, they will not be successful at achieving their ultimate objective of getting their team to the other side. In particular, if one group rushes through the middle of the square and leaves their starting spot, they have eliminated the exit for the smaller group directly across the square. The same can happen for any of the smaller groups, so, the team must decide how they are going to play the game.

I framed this activity as a metaphor for completing community projects. This group would be receiving assignments for projects within their community that they would be completing within the next few months and this activity was a great way to set the stage for that process. I asked the group to brainstorm various resources they would need to complete their projects. The idea I had in mind when I selected this activity for the group is that they would have a discussion about the resources within their society and the ways in which they must coordinate or even share resources. Also, I was hoping the group would engage in a dialogue about what sort of community they would like to be – one that operates as separate groups of people, or one community with common goals who are inextricably tied to one another. I got a whole lot more than I anticipated.

This particular group began by plotting their smaller group courses through the square. After losing many resources and the exits for each other, they quickly realized they needed to reset the activity and come together to form a strategy that would enable their whole team to achieve their common objective. There was quite a bit of yelling at each other and the problem solving process was pretty painful to watch. But, it was how they were approaching the problem so we let it go. Learning occurs for groups *after* they

engage in the experience – we needed to see how it would unfold. Once they organized

themselves in a way that allowed all smaller groups to navigate through the field in order

to achieve the larger team's success, the real action took place. Someone stepped off a

couple of resources on their journey around the square. As soon as they stepped off the

spot, one of my diligent facilitators went up and removed the spot according to the rules

that were delivered at the beginning of the activity. This person became furious and

yelled (I mean *yelled*) at the facilitator asking, "Why are you taking those away from

me?" To which the facilitator checked her emotions and replied, "It's OK, you have

plenty of other resources, I am taking these because you lost contact with them." The

participant responded, "What?!? Those weren't the rules! I didn't hear that." The

facilitator continued to try and explain that these rules were stated at the beginning of the

exercise, to which the individual yelled an expletive that is inappropriate for this writing,

but which sounded something like "why don't you just ____ off."

I had a couple of staff members run up to me during the midst of the chaos with

incredibly worried looks on their faces reporting what was taking place on the other side

of the square. I assured them I was watching and also noticed that the group was

continuing to move through the experience at the time, and I would deal with it during

the debrief of the exercise. I saw the looks on the other facilitators' faces. They seemed to

be thinking, *Glad I am not leading this debrief* and *I wonder what Marin is going to do*

now. Meanwhile, emotions were stirring right in the pit of my belly. I wanted to yell at

this participant for what I witnessed as a completely inappropriate behavior with one of

my staff members. I wanted to shake this person for what I perceived to be a complete

lack of awareness of how their actions influence others around them. But I recognized learning could occur here and I did not want to miss it.

The group maneuvered everyone to the other side and was technically successful. There were some celebrations and I began the debrief by allowing them to report on the things that enabled their success during the activity. Then I went for it. I said something to the effect of, I agree that all of these behaviors contributed to your success, and I also want to name a few things I witnessed during your execution of the activity. Some of you experienced some strong emotions during this activity. For some it even resulted in some pretty forceful expletives. This statement evoked what seemed to be uncomfortable chuckles from the group. I went on to say that moments where we experience strong emotions are important because they indicate something is going on for us. I reminded the group that this is an activity that has no real significance for the group in and of itself. They do not need to figure out how to perfect this task. However, it is important to examine what was occurring for the group and in particular how this activity brought about such strong emotions.

Thankfully, the participant who displayed the strongest emotions spoke up. (I got lucky!) He said, "You know when that stupid spot was taken away from me, I was so angry because I thought the rule wasn't stated at the beginning and I felt I had been wronged in some way. I am realizing that because of the position I am in professionally, I usually understand the rules we operate under and to be honest, in most cases, I am typically creating them." The insides of my stomach were doing flips of joy because he was actually willing to be vulnerable and admit where his emotion was coming from. I

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commended him on his honesty and then led the group in a discussion about how this activity plays out within their community. The group engaged in a discussion that included themes about how rules are created in the first place, who has the power in creating these rules or laws, and how we perpetuate some inequities as a result. We charged through a tough conversation about power and privilege. Who knew an activity with rubber spots and an old climbing rope could yield such results? Critical experiential educators do.

Creating a Mindful Social Justice Educational Environment

Not all educators would agree with my emphasis on the connection between experiential education and social justice. Some could argue that education is about teaching skills, competencies, and knowledge, and it is not about social justice concerns. However, if someone witnesses a situation like the one described above, I do not think you can or should shy away from these lessons that can increase social consciousness and critical thinking about justice. Learners of all kinds need opportunities to practice being the kind of citizen we hope to have in a truly democratic society where power and privilege is critically examined. Educational experiences should seek to prepare learners for that role. Dewey (as cited in Fishman & McCarthy, 2007) defines democracy as "faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and actions if proper conditions [freedom of communication, inquiry, and consultation] are furnished" (p. 54). Other pragmatists like Rorty (1999), aim for an ideal democracy that recognizes truths result from human beings who are "full participating members of a free community of inquiry" (p. 119). This pragmatic idea of democracy is described as a "promising experiment

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engaged in by a particular herd of particular species of animal – our species and our herd"

(p. 119). This group engaged in a process of learning that allowed them to examine their

tendencies as a community. They engaged in a process of inquiry about how those

tendencies influence their community as well as their ability to be leaders seeking change

within the community.

Pragmatists see this promising experiment as one that people must continually

work to achieve. A one-day experience certainly is not enough for behavioral change on a

broad scale, but hopefully the window into a more just community was cracked open a

bit. Educational experiences that expose societal privilege structures can lead to more

insights, skills, competencies, and behavioral changes that are more socially just.

Pragmatists recognize the search for democracy as an experiment because the outcomes

are not certain. American society has not lived up to all it has promised or hoped to be.

The veil is lifted when individuals see the lack of equality, the ways people are

discriminated against, and how society still causes suffering and humiliation. This

experience offered one way to lift the veil of inequity. Rorty (1999) contends, "What

matters for pragmatists is devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing

human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal

chance of happiness" (p. xxix). Pragmatists view democratic communities as vital for

living up to the promises it set out to achieve. Education must serve as a preparatory

process for achieving this promise of democracy. Educational experiences, like the one

illustrated above, ask leaders to critically examine the various perspectives and power

and privilege they experience and perpetuate within their community. The ideal is that this examination plants seeds for promising democratic outcomes.

Another example of education experiences in search for the promise of democracy occurred in one of the semesters of the experiential education course I inherited from Rebecca Carver. We engaged in an activity that is somewhat similar to the spot cross activity described previously. This was a smaller group of about sixteen individuals and the boundary rope was set up in a large triangle with three smaller groups positioned at each corner. The main objective remained the same: to get the team to an opposite corner. However, in this case individuals had the resources they could use to travel through the center at the starting point (versus already laid out in front of them in the playing field.) In addition, there was a central block that all team members had to travel through before successfully exiting the activity. Similar themes experienced in the earlier example played out, such as the group making choices about whether they would work together as one large team, share or compete for resources, etc. However, since this course was an experiential class examining themes of social justice, I intentionally set up the activity differently. For instance, some groups had more resources to begin with that they could use to complete the initiative. Also, the center block was positioned closer to the group with the most resources. In addition, I framed the activity as a metaphor for completing community projects like the ones they were engaging in as a part of their course assignments. I intentionally set up the initiative in this manner in order to bring issues of power, privilege and injustice to life.

The results were fascinating. During the debrief of the initiative, after discussing

many themes that played out within the experience, I asked, "What choices did I make when I set up this initiative and how did those choices impact the nature of the activity?" The discussion that ensued involved their struggle with either feeling guilty for having so many resources when others had little, celebration for having so many resources, or frustration for feeling the "game" was rigged. Depending on the learners' position within the activity, they had different experiences. I then asked how do we "play this game" in society? How does this initiative mirror the world around them? It was this question that illuminated the connections with social justice. Some students mentioned the inequities we face within society where many people are positioned better than others. Some people benefit from opportunities they have as a result of the family resources or because of the cultural make-up that gives them additional privileges. They mentioned how the "game" doesn't always provide equal access for success, that some members in society struggle more or have to work harder to achieve the same results.

This discussion led us back to a conversation during the earlier part of class, where we examined their reading assignment of Dewey's (1938) *Experience and Education*. The book came to life as the students experienced what Dewey discussed about social control. He described how children play games, and "the games involve rules, and these rules order their conduct…no rules, then no game; different rules, then a different game" (p. 52). The activity served as a metaphor to how society constructs rules to the social game we live every day and that sometimes the rules we create do not lead to equitable outcomes for all players in the game. Dewey recognized that these childhood games are typically competitive in nature and encouraged us to look at "instances of co-

operative activities in which all members of a group take part" (p. 55). Here Dewey points out that "in such cases it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are parts of a community, not outside of it" (p. 55). These students saw Dewey's concepts come to life through this activity that exposed our societal practices and how they impact our community.

An unintended, but powerful outcome came from this experience because we had a student who was experiencing significant pain that limited her range of participation in class. She processed the experience in this way:

> The last exercise of creating a community through a specific shared task was also fascinating. It replicated what we so often see in society in many ways. Probably the most notable way is how people who are differently abled are largely ignored if they can't participate in the same way as the majority of population. Due to my limited range of mobility and the pain in my neck and shoulder I was unable to contribute to the experience in the same fashion as the other members. In the rush to complete the task it became easier to move ahead rather than to think about creating real community. Much of this, I believe is derived from our cultural Western values that drive us forward toward a goal with little regard for the process or the people involved. These values are not about creating community but about achieving.

This is an example of a student engaging in critical thinking about democracy as it came alive within this educational experience. Our goal as educators is stated by Fishman (2007) who points out that both John Dewey and Paulo Freire "put their theories into action in the field of education" (p. 55). Our educational practices must be informed by the ideals and theories we hope are lived out within the educational arena. He goes on to say that "both view being active in the world as people's primary need. As a result, they

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share the belief that social action – intelligently wholehearted, critical action – is essential to living in hope. And the direction of this social action is, for both, perpetual democratic reform" (p. 55). Students must develop the competencies for critical engagement within society during their educational experiences. This student made connections between her educational experience and the society around her. Fishman (2007) recognizes that "both Dewey and Freire rest much of their hope for a more just future on reforms in education" and on "their confidence that educators can promote a more democratic future" (p. 55). It is education that will enable society to achieve the democratic promise as students process and reflect on their experience and then hopefully act on these potentially powerful lessons. The question is, has her educational practice changed as a result of this experience?

This attention to one aspect of cultural identity – ability, demonstrates how experiential education is positioned for working on aims of social justice since it centers experience as a main component of its curriculum and honors the holistic development of its learners. Aspects of the learner's identity cannot be denied. Students are complex, socially constructed individuals, and we cannot separate the components of individuals' identities in order to get down to the business of educating. The social construction of our learners is an important aspect of education and must not be overlooked. In addition, since experiential education relies on previous experiences to inform present experiences and future applications (Dewey's continuity of experience,) then all aspects of our learners' identities and social experiences are relevant for the educational scene. On this point, Itin (1999) claims that "a definition of experiential education must consider the

larger system level issues of education such as socio-political-economic elements in the learning environment" (p. 92). The contextual environment must be factored into the educational equation in order to understand the learning that occurs.

Other students were also deeply affected by this experience and reflected on how this theme of ability plays out within their contextual environments. Of course, their learning was different because of their perspective in the activity, but that is largely the point. This experience provided a very powerful learning opportunity for many of the participants. Many included the group's behaviors in regard to this student's situation in their reflections. The experience had an impact. One student reflected on how ashamed she was because she did not work to find an alternative way to include her colleague in the initiative. She stated that she normally takes pride in paying attention to different abilities and this opportunity passed her by completely. It was easier to just let the student observe rather than work a bit harder to adapt the activity for total community participation.

A different student also reflected on the process of experiential learning itself in addition to the lessons learned through her experience. She wrote:

> I tried to fully engage in the activities of the afternoon, while simultaneously attempting to study the techniques you used to model experiential education facilitation. I was able to see what happened so clearly after your de-brief of the blocks activity, that I thought I'd take a closer look at that activity and the de-brief. I could see the way you framed the activity by giving directions and parameters. I observed that you did not interfere until we needed to reset. But the event that had the biggest impact on me was the process of discussion after the event. We had a hard time getting started. You offered a number of prompts, but discussion was still slow. *You allowed that uncomfortable silence* to give us time to process what happened. That's not an easy thing to do! Even I was tempted to stand up and fill in the gap! The old model of teaching allows the teacher, even

requires the teacher, to fill in those gaps with information that the student does not have. Once we started talking, though, it was amazing. I got so much more out of the activity through our discussion than I would have just participating, or having you tell us about it. So, I was floored by the power of the de-brief.

My big question, though, is what lessons you had planned for us to learn? Did you have a list of goals you were hoping for us to discover? Or did you just allow the learning to emerge? Did we "get" all that you were hoping we'd "get" out of the activity? What would you have done if we "missed the boat" (your goals) but found our own (unplanned by you)?

This student was critically engaging in how the process of learning occurred as a result of experiential education. She had recently attempted to utilize some experiential methodologies in her classroom and wanted to further explore how this approach works in practice. Through my comments within her reflection paper, I engaged her in the discussion is this way:

It may be better to have a conversation but I will attempt to answer some of your thought provoking questions. I have quite a bit floating around in my head each day as I approach the classroom. This experiential education stuff is not easy – but may very well be worth the effort! OK. You asked "what lessons you had planned for us to learn? Did you have a list of goals you were hoping for us to discover? Or did you just allow the learning to emerge?" I certainly had a list of questions based on what topics and content areas I knew would probably come up or surface during the initiative. I had a list of debriefing questions prepared ahead of time based on those things. I had my own personal thoughts about those questions that I was prepared to consider in order to ask new questions if needed. I also set up the experience in a particular way and "framed" the experience in order to highlight certain themes (like resources and how they are handled within a community.) Here is where it gets tricky. The learning is NOT about me and my agenda. Of course, we are engaged in a particular class with a particular subject matter and I am guiding the experiences we have together as a class. But how you engage with those experiences and the specific learning outcomes that result is what is important and what I privilege. So, the list of questions I create before the class is what I deviate from or work with as I observe the outcome of the experience. I respond as a facilitator to what happens in the group. For example, I could not predict before class that one student was going to be dealing with a different level of ability than she normally has. The experience was affected by this and as a facilitator I had a responsibility to allow for reflection and learning

based on these factors within our community. It happened to create great food for our discussion on social justice. Ignoring that moment and sticking to any "desired" or pre-planned outcomes I may have had before class does not serve the learning community.

Next, you asked "Did we "get" all that you were hoping we'd "get" out of the activity? What would you have done if we "missed the boat" (your goals) but found our own (unplanned by you)?" I celebrate!! Students come up with amazing outcomes that I could never plan for or at least fully anticipate. Experiential Education is about how learners make sense of experiences and relate those experiences to other relevant areas of their lives. If I determine all of the outcomes, I take away your experience. Let's talk more about this! Thanks for the opportunity to reflect!

This exchange with this student brings to light what we hope will happen in the experiential environment. My favorite comment from this student is what she added at the end: "PS - My students in the class I referred to above keep asking me when we are going to do another 'experiential education' class!" Now, she will continue to have an opportunity to reflect and then practice the theories through more experience.

OK, So How Do You Do It?

The complex nature of educational environments must be considered in order to move toward social justice aims. It is precisely because there is the potential for experiential environments to focus attention on the complexities of our socio-political environments that experiential education offers more possibilities for social justice than its counterparts in traditional education.

I recently had an opportunity to design and then facilitate a full day's program for a group of community leaders on understanding the various perspectives that exist within the community they live in. This day was designed to help leaders expand their definition of diversity as well as find ways to work through difference in order to do the work that is

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needed within their community. What an opportunity! To me, this was a chance to put

my passion for social justice and democracy into action and of course I used experiential

methodology to achieve my aims. Fueled by the spirit of critical pedagogy, I thought this

was a perfect opportunity for these members of society to become active participants who

critically examine power structures through an educational process. One could claim that

critical pedagogy is a form of experiential education; though there are unique nuances

and characteristics of the educational philosophies, the aim of their practice is similar. A

close investigation of the two educational approaches reveals provocative connections

between the pedagogies. Both critical pedagogy and experiential education seek equitable

and democratic educational processes that honor the experiences and the authority of

learners. The aim of these pedagogies is not only to empower individuals but to transform

and create just societies.

> Henry Giroux (2005) articulates this need when he writes:

> Fundamental to a pedagogy of critical literacy would be the opportunity for
> students to interrogate how knowledge is constituted as both a historical and
> social construction. In addition, students can be given the opportunity to address
> the question of how knowledge and power come together in often contradictory
> ways to sustain and legitimate particular discourses that define a notion of public
> good. (p. 33)

The participants of this program would have an opportunity to examine the ways in

which power and privilege play out within real world scenarios and how these concepts

impact their abilities to be meaningful leaders and do *good* within their community.

Similar concepts are explored within experiential education theory as Rebecca Carver

(1996) describes that "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" (p. 8). The hope of experiential and critical pedagogy is that students will emerge from educational experiences not as producers of current hegemonic tendencies, but as citizens who engage in their public lives in democratic ways by serving as agents of change for those power structures that oppress, silence, and disenfranchise. This program would allow these students, or participants, to examine the community in which they live for these hegemonic forces that may, or may not be impeding their abilities to be leaders within their communities. I will admit I was a bit trepid as I approached the day. Sure, I had taught this topic before within graduate classes, but I typically had a whole semester to build relationships and gain credibility with my students. Here, I worked with a group of strangers who would make quick judgments about my abilities to facilitate the day.

As an educator, an essential aspect of creating a learning environment is creating safer spaces. I used to champion creating safe spaces, but I have certainly reconsidered the possibility of truly *safe* spaces. When we are passionate or experience strong emotions concerning a particular educational topic (like discussing topics of power, privilege, and social justice) we may say things that challenge others in negative ways. We cannot know, as community members or as educators, how we might impact those around us. Learning communities are dynamic spaces that cannot be sheltered from misunderstanding, strong opinion, or past difficult experiences. As a result, I like the saying *safer* spaces which I define as a space where people can come as they are to discover, assert, and empower their voices. Safer spaces emanate respect and an

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assumption of positive intent. People within safer spaces are working toward developing

trust over time and are seeking to understand first. In the educational setting, the

opportunity for safer spaces can be intentionally nurtured by the educators but only work

when students and educators work together to maintain them. Safer spaces require

continual work and mindfulness as a seemingly safe space can turn unsafe for

people within moments. How people handle those moments is what really determines the

safety of the space. Spaces are safer when members in the community take responsibility

for the things I mentioned above.

      In order to attempt to create a safer space for this group of leaders, I did several

things. First I chose a typical way to introduce myself and gave my educational

background and my experience teaching and facilitating on this topic. I also gave the

participants an indication of what the day was going to be and what it is not. For instance,

I stated that I am strength-based facilitator. I explained that the day was not about blame

or feeling bad about the perspective each person brings to the table. Rather, the day was

about increasing awareness and understanding about self, others, and our community as it

relates to concepts of diversity and social justice. Ideally, we were looking to discover

actions we can take as leaders in order to improve our community regarding issues of

diversity.

      I also told the group upfront that in order for us to meet our goals, it would require

vulnerability, or their willingness to engage in meaningful and real dialogue about

potentially difficult topics. I explained that the session's success was dependent on what

this group decides, as well as what I offer as the facilitator. I told the group that we would

be asking ourselves these questions: How do we have honest, open, meaningful discussion together? What ground rules are needed? What are you willing to commit to for this session?

I also felt like I needed to acknowledge a few things about my culture such as I am white and young and a woman and I come from a particular background. I explained that we all have a cultural make-up and that we all contribute diversity to this group because of the varied cultural backgrounds we offer to the group. This was the first change to start expanding our view of diversity beyond typical issues of gender and race. I explained that the issue is not my diversity or your culture; it is about how to facilitate conversations and activities that increase our understanding of how we work together through understanding difference.

I designed the day in three parts: understanding and increasing awareness about self, understanding and increasing awareness about others, and then applying that awareness to the community. I facilitated experiential activities that first got the participants to open up about themselves and their past experiences. Then I gave them a chance to root themselves in the understanding of where they have come from – their family background, their childhood experiences, and their cultural make-ups all the while working to expose a broad view of the ways in which we are all diverse culturally and to expand our view of perspective. We engaged in experiences that helped us to understand each others' perspectives and their cultural backgrounds as well as the values that are core to the individuals in the room. We explored themes of difference, privilege, power,

oppression, discrimination, strength from diverse perspectives and the power of challenging assumptions. It was a full day.

One of the participants who is an African American male, approached me after the day was over. He wanted to process a couple of the themes that came up for him during the day. He told me his mind was blown during the day due to the impact of an activity I led called the privilege walk. In this activity, the group lines up behind a long rope in the middle of the room and clasp hands. Individuals are then asked to take steps forward or backward based on statements I read as the facilitator. The steps forward are for statements that typically signify privileges within society For example, if you had more than fifty books in your house growing up, please take a step forward, or if you are able to show affection for your loved one in public without the fear of ridicule or violence, please take a step forward. The steps back represent experiences that may have served to oppress or give someone a lack of access or opportunity. For example, if your ancestors were brought to this country by force, please take a step back. Or, if you have ever been a victim of violence or discrimination because of your gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc. please take a step back. The participants were instructed to hold hands as long as they could until their steps forward or backward forced them to lose connection.

The gentlemen who came up to me at the end of the day talked about this experience. He stated that when I introduced the exercise, as an African American, he assumed he would end up at the back of the room with the rest of the minorities in the group. He explained that his race had always meant a lack of privilege for him. He said

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his mind was blown as he found himself taking steps forward for other privileges he experienced throughout his life that he hadn't necessarily considered as things that contributed to his being a privileged person. He told me that he realized that privilege extends far beyond race. The thing that struck me the most was his willingness to share this insight with the group, which he did during the large group debrief; but it was also that he was still processing this fact at the end of the day and needed to discuss it further. This was one of those *ah ha* moments I could not have predicted as a facilitator before the program, but it was one of the more powerful insights of the day. Expanding our understanding of difference beyond more typical categories of privilege helps us to understand difference on a larger scale and hopefully work towards greater understanding about how our difference can unite us in the commonality that we all share difference at some level.

Educational experiences such as these work to encourage learning that focuses on critically examining cultural structures in addition to exposing imbalanced power structures and oppressive hegemonic tendencies. Critical educators expose hegemonic structures that may impede our ability to be equitable, democratic, and focused on outcomes of justice. Maxine Greene (1988) defines hegemony as a "means directed by moral and intellectual persuasion, not by physical coercion. That is what makes it a matter of such concern for those interested in education for freedom. The persuasion is often so quiet, so seductive, so disguised that it renders young people acquiescent to power without their realizing it" (p. 133). In addition, Patrick Slattery (2006) offers this definition: "[hegemony] is an image in which the values and beliefs of the dominant class

appear so correct that to reject them would be unnatural, a violation of common sense"

(p. 38). This participant expressed how hegemony had influenced him. He bought into the

message that he was not privileged because of his race. Slattery goes on to say the

"hegemony in this sense is indoctrination and manipulation, and it can affect classrooms

when a teacher does not encourage or allow students to question prevailing values,

attitudes, historical interpretations, and social practices in a sustained and critical

manner" (p. 38). Instead, critical educators encourage a counter-hegemonic educational

process that nurtures critical thinking, even in cases (or perhaps especially in cases) that

require the instructors to challenge their own previously held beliefs. Activities such as

the privilege walk seek to encourage critical thinking about our hegemonic structures.

Critical epistemology declares that part of the aim of education is to educate for

liberation from oppressive educational and societal practices. The debriefing questions I

asked the group to consider after the privilege walk included: What did you observe

during this activity? What personal feelings did you experience? What went through your

mind as you were moving through the exercise? What was the impact of the physical

connection and/or loss of connection during the exercise? Did you notice a difference in

the size of your steps? Were there times when you felt the urge to take smaller or bigger

steps? Did you notice that happening in the rest of the group? Why? How did you feel

when you looked around at where other people were positioned? How did you feel about

your position in relation to others? What does this activity say about societal messages

about your worth or the worth of people within various "privilege" levels? How has

privilege affected you, your family and your community, in terms of opportunity and

access? What can be learned from this activity that can be used to help us do good work in our community? Through answering these questions, individuals within the program could draw their own conclusions and dissect their own story of cultural impacts in their lives. These debriefing questions are a direct attempt to process an educational experience in order to encourage critical thinking in a way that exposes hegemonic forces within our society and community.

During a large group debrief, a participant mentioned the impact of actively participating in activities that revealed a broad definition of diversity and then the facilitated discussions that led to an increase in understanding. I asked the group if they understood why I was facilitating activities to move through our agenda. After all, many people are comfortable with Power Point presentations, and I could have offered dynamic slides that revealed all the different forms of difference and subsequent privileges and then offered suggestions for how to improve our society. Some of the participants chuckled because it was so clear how much this would have been boring as well as less effective. Participants shared comments such as: the privilege we experience becomes clear when you have to take a step forward and feel the tension of disconnecting with your neighbor who didn't share the same advantage. Or, we needed an opportunity to engage in genuine conversation with each other in order to gain comfort with having real conversations about this very difficult topic. These comments describe actively engaged participants and represent the antithesis of what Paulo Freire (1970) called banking models of education where students are repositories into which knowledge is dumped. The power point version of this program would be the equivalent of a banking model of

education. I would be claiming I have the authority as the presenter on this topic. The participants' job is to take in the information I feed them. Experiential and critical pedagogy react against this type of education that does not recognize the need for students to construct knowledge through educational experiences.

To this point, Giroux raises concerns revealing that we are in an educational crisis where developing critical thinking skills, valuing the learning process, and creating a democratic environment are at stake. Giroux (2005) appears to merge critical and experiential theory as he makes the argument for "a critical theory of citizenship education" where "central to a politics and pedagogy of critical citizenship is the need to reconstruct a visionary language and public philosophy that put equality, liberty, and human life at the center of the notions of democracy and citizenship" (p. 28). Students and teachers within critical pedagogy and experiential education must be empowered through meaningful educational processes to critically engage with their learning experiences in order to develop life-long learning capacities that enable them to question, challenge, develop, and celebrate the society they co-create. The outcomes such as the realization that diversity and privilege extends far beyond race is not something I could have told the participants and had the same result. The experience taught them lessons that will hopefully be applied back to the society they live within.

Now let us look at the other side of the coin, because I can guarantee that not all participants left this program with a similar impactful conclusion. Sometimes even with best intentions, we miss the mark even within the same program of powerful learning. I actually worked with this group of leaders for two days and the second day took place at

the experiential campus of the program I direct where the group engaged in a continued

community building program ending with a high challenge course opportunity. We made

it to lunch and then it started to pour down rain. I led the group in a decision making

process to decide as a community if we were going to continue on with plan A and go

outside even in the rain, or implement the rain plan and do indoor activities. This process

took about fifteen minutes tops, which is impressive for a group of about 45 people, and

to my surprise, we actually reached a full group consensus that everyone wanted to go

outside and give the high challenge course a shot. This blew me away. I have been a part

of much longer decision-making processes with this many people and we never reached

consensus, let alone in 15 minutes. Feeling very pleased with the decision of the group, I

was happily walking my smaller group to our first high challenge element when I was

tapped on the shoulder. This gentleman who had been with me for over a day and a half

at this point stated something to the effect of, "I'm going to give you some feedback. If

that were me back there, I would have just said, look, it's raining. We're going outside.

Suck it up." I have to admit that my response was not an example of one of my finest

facilitator moments. I met him with the same energy and I believe I responded with

something like, "Well, yes, you could use a dictator style of leadership if you want, but I

don't think you would get the results I was searching for back there." I then proceeded to

do something like lecture him on the lessons we had just been working through over the

past day and a half about making sure all voices are heard, gaining buy-in from your

community as a leader on tasks, and doing the tough work of building a community

vision. He missed it. Completely.

My passionate response was redirected by other members of the group who chimed in and shared how amazed they were by the decision-making process and how shocking it was that we actually reached a full group consensus and how far they had come as a group. Their words comforted me, but I continue to think about the gentleman who just did not seem to value the same thing. Accepting different values and beliefs is a part of the democratic process as well as meaningful education through experience. Greene (1988) states that progressive educators "believed they could devise a mode of social inquiry inextricably linked to their commitment to democratic norms and values. Indeed, they could not conceive of democratic freedom apart from critical thinking, hypothetical inquiry, the open exchange of ideas" (p. 43). In order for experiential education that is concerned with social justice to work, we must allow room for all voices in that open exchange of ideas. If experiential educators truly believe in moving beyond positivistic ideals of defining reality, and believe in democratic educational processes that value experience as important for constructing knowledge, they must invite and accept all voices and feedback, even when they do not agree.

Hopefully, during our work as educators, we hit the target more often and with more students. During the later part of the first day, I engaged the group in an activity that helps to broaden our perspectives beyond our local community or even this country's society, and expands our thinking to the world at large. Once people started to understand how many people do not have things like basic sanitation, a bank account, or a roof over their head, they started to understand how privilege and oppression truly is a matter of perspective. During the debrief of this exercise, people were humbled by how good we

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have it in this country. Even some of our poorest community members have it "better" than many others in the world. In some ways we are all privileged. This is an incredibly powerful insight for a group of people who were sorting through the degrees of privilege in the room and the ways in which we are different. This type of insight brought the group together when they realized the ways in which they were blessed and fortunate.

This experience has reminded me about feminist pedagogy that critically examines power and authority structures. Oppressive patriarchal educational environments were the impetus for seeking balance in power relationships. Feminist educators question how authority is established and suggest that dogmatic ways of knowing suppresses diverse voices. Feminists understand that we are affected by and can affect our contexts. Most importantly, we must craft empowering educational opportunities. bell hooks (1994) describes liberating, feminist environments:

> Those classrooms were the one space where pedagogical practices were interrogated, where it was assumed that the knowledge offered students would empower them to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond academe. The feminist classroom was the one space where students could raise critical questions about pedagogical process. (p. 6)

Not only must educators assess their own influence within the classroom, but they must encourage students to engage in rigorous examination as well. This program was made up of very competent people who were all leaders in some capacity in their everyday worlds. I attempted to give them opportunities to examine the space in which we were learning. From there, I offered chances for reflecting on ways in which their learning could be applied within the society at large. A feminist classroom is one where students develop

multiple ways of making meaning as well as interacting if the current mode of operation is experienced as oppressive. bell hooks continues to say that "…many students still seek to enter feminist classrooms because they continue to believe that there, more than any other place in the academy, they will have an opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom" (p. 15). Feminist classrooms encourage flexible thinking and allow space for liberation from oppressive power structures. This group had an opportunity to engage in the practice of freedom when they created the community agreements they needed from one another at the beginning of the program. After setting the stage for the day and engaging in an initial dialogue-focused activity, they determined what was needed for meaningful conversation and participation. It is hoped that the conditions for agency and voice were created through this construction of the learning environment.

Experiential pedagogy can create conditions that are conducive for aims of social justice. This potentially transformative education involves educators who strive to nurture learners' voices and develop students who are empowered agents within their worlds to work toward equitable and just social environments. Experiential social justice pedagogues are interested in how they can work toward truly democratic and equitable learning environments where processes of learning are critically examined for structures of power, authority and privilege in order to cultivate meaningful and transformative learning. Breunig (2008b) summarizes some of these notions by stating, "I believe the advantages to engaging in a more purposeful classroom praxis that acts on the theoretical underpinnings of experiential education and critical pedagogy can be one means to working toward a vision of a more socially just world" (p. 481). Pedagogies that work

toward aims of social justice practice education for liberation and democracy.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLORING FURTHER QUESTIONS AND WHAT IS NEXT

Rorty (1999) reminds us that "we should view inquiry as a way of using reality" (p. 33). In this final chapter, I explore the usefulness of experiential education as an educational practice for serving aims of social justice. The purpose of this inquiry is not about demanding the implementation of experiential education or to force an emphasis on social justice aims. Such a demand would be an attempt to search for a particular certainty within our educational environments. Rather, we must remember Rorty's (1999) warning that "the quest for certainty – even as a long-term goal – is an attempt to escape from the world…Dewey urges that the quest for certainty be replaced with the demand for imagination" (pp. 33-34). As educators, we must ask how this inquiry can be useful for addressing the needs of our current reality?

This chapter offers a brief summary of the main points contained within the previous chapters and addresses many questions that still linger as a result of this study. It explores the following questions: What constraints hinder the practice of experiential education? Can educators who are comfortable with the status quo also become comfortable with this educational approach? Can educators let go of some of the control within their classrooms in the way experiential education asks? What role does fear and vulnerability play within this educational scene, for both educators and students? How do you intentionally design this environment? Where does this approach and educational

environment fall short of reaching its intended aims? How do educators move beyond the perceived and real constraints? This chapter also offers some suggestions for future research and practice.

Themes and Connections between Experiential Education and Social Justice

The previous chapters worked to make a case for experiential education as a meaningful methodology for addressing aims of social justice. If we believe that aims of education also include preparing students to be participating and engaged contributors to a democratic society, then educational environments must respond appropriately. In addition to content, educators must also work to cultivate an atmosphere that includes the following characteristics:

- Encourages a community where all voices are valued and encouraged

- Critically examines the learning community to honor the values of the group

- Examines and challenges notions of power, privilege and authority and knowledge is viewed as being co-constructed within relationship through experience

- Critically examines hidden curriculum that exists within the educational environment

- Encourages an examination and implementation of choice and the subsequent consequences of those choices and actions for the community

- Honors a variety of perspectives and encourages an increased cultural competence rooted in a belief and commitment to our interconnectedness

As educational leaders, our charge is to embrace our role as facilitators of students' learning processes. Educational leadership involves empowering others to take ownership of their learning experience and development. This leadership is about inviting voices and perspectives that are not readily our own and learning from differences as well as finding commonalities that center people as a community of learners. Leadership is also a transformative process where individuals take new insight and understanding to help reshape educational leadership practice in the future. Transformational leadership within education is a continual process of inquiry.

Constraints of Experiential Education

While introducing and teaching experiential education theory and practice to other educators, I typically encounter energized reactions to this methodology that seems so promising for educational practice. Upon experiencing the methodology, common responses are: *Why are educational systems resistant to experiential education? It makes sense that we learn by actively engaging in the process of learning; why has this not caught on? Wait, John Dewey has been writing about this for over a century; why are we unwilling to incorporate experiential education into our educational systems?* However, this enthusiasm is typically short-lived before I also receive a laundry list of reasons why using experiential theory in practice is not feasible given a particular educator's set of challenges. A powerful constraint often cited by many students are the federal mandates and policies that ask teachers to focus more on testing than teaching experientially. A student from one of my graduate courses who serves within the K through twelve public educational system, eloquently describes this pressure:

Since the NCEOG [North Carolina End of Grade] standards-based assessments begin in the formative elementary years, children are characteristically categorized as above, at, or below-grade level. Subsequently, adults and these children begin to form unconscious assumptions, beliefs, and thoughts about their intelligence. Continuing, if a student is considerably below-grade level, teachers are generally taught to ignore him/her and to focus on children who may reach grade-level status. Similarly, noneducative experiences are supported when instructors believe that a learner will attain an at grade level score, which often times can be earned by correctly answering only 40% of associated questions. In other words, what incentive is there to scrutinize instructional pedagogies, incorporate Gardner's multiple intelligences, or implement Covey's whole-person paradigm when tests scores are considered good? As I pose this question, I echo the sentiments of several educational leaders who fervently argue that good is the opposite of great.

This student describes the specific pressures teachers face on daily basis to influence teaching strategies or priorities based on mandates handed down from policy makers. These are real concerns that educators must contend with. Other constraints of implementing experiential methodologies include: the perception that this form of education takes more time or too much time to be practical; stronghold of notions of appropriate authority or an unwillingness to let go of some control within the classroom; apprehension of outside perceptions, or the concern that others will not understand that this education or methodology should be valued; assessment or the difficulty measuring the results of this type of learning and teaching; the drive of a capitalist culture where schools are often driven by market-place values, language, and constraints and therefore practices that are geared toward economic gain; students' resistance to a different way of learning or the challenge of shifting the minds of students to value this process of education; fear and vulnerability for challenging the status quo. I would like to examine a few of these constraints in more detail below.

Time

   I have often heard the perception that creating an experiential environment

requires much more time than more traditional approaches to education, like the time it

takes to prepare lectures. I wholeheartedly agree that an experiential educator's time is

spent in a different way. Experiential educators' time is spent considering and developing

appropriate experiences that will meet their curricular aims while engaging their students

in their own learning process. It takes time to consider how students can engage with

curricular concepts through the use of activities, initiatives, experiments, dialogues, or

projects. It requires time and thought to intentionally set up and continually construct the

learning community the experiential educator desires. Because this is viewed as a central

component to the experiential learning process, an educator may even have to take time

during a class session to focus on the dynamics of the community that may be hindering

learning. Experiential educators put energy into the design of the experience and then

observe and guide students through the process. This is a different way to spend time

when compared to lecturing and answering students' questions. Experiential educators

may spend their time serving as guides through the learning experience and process. In

addition, experiential educators may choose depth over breadth in covering a particular

curriculum topic to ensure the entire experiential learning cycle runs its course and that

ample reflection and time to develop meaning is available for students to learn from their

experiences. It is true that meaningful reflection takes time. I would argue that educators

are probably spending time on these topics regardless of the methodology they are using.

However, a paradigm shift may need to occur in order for educators to shift how they

spend their time and on which aspects of their educational practice. Educators serving in the K through twelve environments may not have the luxury of choosing depth over breadth when they are given certain learning outcomes they must address for testing. There may need to be a full culture shift for what is valued within the educational system in order for experiential education to take any hold within public school systems.

Student Resistance

Students are used to playing the educational game a certain way with rules that have allowed them to be successful. Experiential education requires a different sort of responsibility for students and there can be resistance or frustration when they are asked to play the game differently. As Joplin (1981) indicates, even over twenty years ago when the test taking culture was not in full swing, "Using a student-responsibility schema requires great faith in the learner. Students often express great anger and resentment when first introduced into a responsibility-oriented experiential situation" (p. 19). Students might challenge educators that they are not doing their job because their tasks look very different from what they are used to experiencing. Students might accuse educators of not knowing the "answers" to a particular problem or not being an expert. They might be faced with quotes like, *You are the educator; teach us!* This may be a fair resistance from students as they may have been taught that people within authority positions have answers. It is a different thing to suggest that knowledge should be co-constructed through learning experiences. Experiential educators must be mindful about how they change the rules being careful to change slowly when warranted and needed.

Shifting to an experiential methodology requires students to shift their thinking about the role they play within their educational process.

Faith in the Status Quo

Extremely talented educators have been teaching for years with successful methods. These teachers may have received rewards for their work and have been recognized by administrators, teachers, and students alike. In many ways, educators are offering powerful learning opportunities for students within the current system. It may be an overwhelming undertaking to change an educational strategy; especially if you believe what you are currently doing works. For educators who are not interested in experiential education and they are achieving tremendous results within their classroom, there is not a need for an experiential make-over. However, for others who may see this methodology as useful for connecting educational curriculum with their students, experiential education may offer a great option.

Experiential education requires that educators think differently about their role within the educational scene. To move from educator to facilitator can seem overwhelming. Teachers who are used to their role as giving students the *answers* or being the expert on a particular topic may resist a methodology that asks them to create democratic conditions that flips the educational equation from giving answers to asking students to develop conclusions. There must be a willingness to be open to various outcomes of that process. Joplin (1981) states, "Increasing student responsibility does not mean leaving a student to struggle with a problem that is beyond his capacity or background preparation. The problem must be appropriate to the learner, and it is the

teacher's responsibility to design it accordingly" (p. 19). It requires a major paradigm shift to operate within experiential methodology, and considering such an alteration in practice may not be a reasonable request for many educators. One might ask, how can experiential methodologies complement what is currently working for the educational growth of students?

Fear of Rocking the Boat

We are in powerful educational waters with certain tides and currents. Experiential education has not traditionally attempted to stay within the flow of more traditional approaches to education. It has served as a sort of undercurrent throughout the years. Many educators express a fear of retribution as we live in a time when continued employment and salary is based on test scores. It appears as though one of the major obstacles to engaging in an experiential approach to curriculum development is overcoming this fear. Slattery (2006) explains, "This postmodern shift involves rethinking some sacred beliefs and structures that have been firmly set in human consciousness for at least the past five hundred years" (p. 19). Slattery's use of the word "sacred" reveals a potential societal mindset that is entrenched and static, not to be disturbed. The natural tendency is often to fear the unknown. Dramatic shifts in thinking about approaches to curriculum should not be approached with a light heart. However, if current curricular models are not producing meaningful educational environments and opportunities, the heart should move us to overcome that fear of the unknown while accepting the challenge of engaging in educational reform required today. Our fear of change and the unknown must not inhibit our quest for meaningful education. Slattery

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(2006) announces this imperative by stating, "I deeply fear the loss of creativity, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, environmental connections, autobiographical sensibilities, spiritual awareness, emotional maturity, heightened consciousness, and educational passion in our teachers, students, and citizens. I truly believe that the health and safety of the planet and its citizens are at stake" (p. 69). While Slattery's words may ring out as a fearful cry, we might center our inquiry in the ideal of pragmatist hope and ask ourselves, what do we hope for within educational reform?

A student in a graduate course on experiential education came up to me after class one day. His eyes were wide and he spoke with great excitement as he told me he has finally found a theoretical basis to back up what he has been practicing within his classrooms. This educator taught within a college environment and had been using experiential methods, he just did not know the tradition behind his teaching praxis. His fear of rocking the boat lived within him as he had students out of their chairs engaging in various educational experiences. He worried when the students became excited that his classroom was too loud and he nervously watched the door for administrator's eyes to appear in the window. He explained to me that he did not let his fear change his practice. He discovered that experiential curriculum offered opportunities for growth in creativity, spiritual engagement, critical thinking and inspiring passion; he found a theoretical home to ground his practice. Experiential curriculum attempts to counter the hegemonic structure that yields disconnected learning while offering relevant educational experiences. For this educator, fear of disapproving administrator eyes at the classroom

door, eventually turned to teaching awards providing him with additional courage for "rocking the boat."

<div align="center">**When Experiential Education Does Not Work**</div>

Ego-Driven Educators/Facilitators

I have been a part of experiential education programs, classrooms or workshops that did not encourage meaningful, powerful or transformational learning. Just like any educational practice, there are things that can counteract the effectiveness of this promising approach. I was once a participant in an experiential program when at its completion I looked around thinking, *Well, that was a great facilitator performance. When does the learning occur?* Facilitators' egos can get in the way of their success as educators. If the educational process feels like it is about the facilitator of the learning process, the focus is in the wrong place. Rather than focusing on the ego, the focus should be on relationships and the interconnectedness that leads to co-constructed knowledge. Experiential educators must lead from an authentic place that supports the learners in their educational process.

The Belief That This is Easy

In my director's role at the university, I get many calls from people asking for experiential activities to utilize with groups. I facilitated a staff development program for a group and during the following week, I received a call from one of the participants. The individual explained they loved one of the initiatives we facilitated with their group and then asked if I could give them the activity so they could use it with another group. I engaged this individual in a fairly lengthy conversation explaining that it is not the

activity that promotes the meaningful learning process. I described the planning process

we engage in while preparing to facilitate a group that includes selecting activities only if

they are appropriate for the goals of the group or the educational outcomes we are trying

to achieve. I then went on to discuss how essential the reflection process is for facilitating

a learning process rather than just engaging a group in an activity. I ended up giving the

directions for the initiative to this former participant as well as several other links to

resources on facilitation and experiential education. I received a phone call a month or

two later from the same person. She described what happened when she tried to *use* the

activity with her group. She shared that it lacked something and that it was not as

powerful as when our team facilitated the same activity for their group. The good news is

that this person developed a deeper respect of the role of the facilitator educator. The

powerful reminder is that you cannot simply insert an activity into an educational process

and expect it to achieve the learning outcomes you desire. Experiential education requires

dedication to training and experience just like any other profession.

When Individuality is Not Honored

I had a recent conversation with someone who discovered what I did for a living

and said, "Yeah, I'm not really into all of that team stuff." I smiled and asked her why

she thought that was true. She relayed to me that she prefers to do things on her own and

she struggles when she is forced to work in teams. She gave other reasons about her need

for control and her need to lead if she is going to be within a group. The bottom line is

that many people do not love working in teams and perform better when they are allowed

to work on solo projects. Many people do not necessarily want their learning to happen

within community in the way experiential education requests of them. While I would still argue that we are inextricably tied and have to work together on many things in life for survival, or for love and joy, or for companionship, there is also a tremendous need for individuals to be alone. Much is gained from quiet times we spend in reflection or during solitude experiences. Experiential educators must find ways to honor individuals for their preferred ways of learning and working. They must find balance in their educational activities and reflection strategies and should respect someone's needs when they desire a more solo way of engaging in the midst of a learning community.

Inadequate or Poor Reflection

In order for deep learning to occur from experience, there must be time and energy committed to a valuable reflection process. Often when first training new experiential educators on processing or reflection techniques, I will get sample practice questions such as, "Was your communication effective during this initiative?" New facilitators often struggle to move beyond yes or no questions about a topic they believe is important for the group to discuss. Closed-ended questions offer no place for a learner to examine their own thoughts and discover their own conclusions about what was effective about a group's communication. During practice debriefing sessions I have also heard facilitators in training spoon-feeding a group's answers as they say things like, "I really felt like you worked well together as a team. You each played a role within the group, you demonstrated trust in each other's ideas, and you were really focused on achieving the task. Are you a better team now that you have gone through this experience?" Green facilitators must work hard to shift their mental model of learning

from lecturing and telling learners what to learn, to finding ways to ask powerful questions that allow students to offer their own observations and articulate their own learning outcomes based on their experience.

It is also difficult to be patient and give adequate time for learners to reflect. I often find experiential educators rushing through a reflection session because silence can feel uncomfortable. If silence occurs after asking a debriefing question, educators may need to give people ample time to formulate their reflections. Or, if responses do not come, educators may need to reformulate questions that motivate learning in a different way. Additionally, experiential educators must be creative and find many approaches for reflection in order to serve a variety of learning styles. For instance, discussion-based reflection is great for verbal processers and auditory learners, but other students will need written reflection options. Other students may need to express themselves in other ways including art-based reflections. Educator skills and time for quality reflection is critical for meaningful experiential education.

Experiential Education: Less than Optimistic

My critics come to haunt me in my dreams from time to time. During the process of writing Chapter III, I dreamt that I was sharing a timeline of pivotal moments in my personal and professional career with a group of women. I got to the point in the story where I was excitedly talking about a program I had led on experiential education and social justice and I was explaining to the group the outcomes from this workshop that I believed were really powerful. A woman in the group raised her hand and said, *I was at that program, and I thought you missed the mark*. I was derailed in my dream, and I woke

up sweating with my heart pounding in my chest. It was though my dream was smacking me in the face with the doubts others will have about my experiences and contributions. The humbling part of this dream is that this woman, or others like her, exists. I will miss the mark with many people I work with. I will not meet people where they are, and they will not have the meaningful, transformational moments I had hoped for. I have in the past and there will be times when I will fail again at meeting my desired goals as an educator. The hope is that this happens far less often than the meaningful moments, but perhaps I will never know.

As I move forward with my work, I continue to battle the doubts that I will ever really make a difference. I believe we all face the reality that the world will always go on with or without our contribution. And yet, we search for meaning in our lives. Our contribution may not result in earth-shattering changes as one might have hoped, but we may make a difference in the lives of those we encounter. Enough people making a difference in similar ways could make a shift in the collective consciousness. Rorty (1989) states that the particular vocabularies a society uses enables a common understanding that will provide some form of solidarity. He states, "What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes" (p. 86). When individuals within society unite through common hope they can create a shift; but as educators, we may be far removed from the influence we had within the lives of those people who create change. It is for this reason that we must find meaning in the moments when we struggle and the times when we succeed. It is not where we end up, but rather, it is the journey along the way that is important.

Concepts that Compel Experiential Educators to Move Beyond These Constraints

Educators as Facilitators of Learning

If experiential educators value and privilege a process of learning, they must not rob their students of that process. Educators often want to bail students out when they are struggling with a concept or a problem. It may be a natural tendency to want to *help* a student move beyond struggle; however, it the process of struggle that yields the experience of education. "Teachers must become facilitators of learning, and they must expect students to go beyond the surface knowledge frequently achieved through rote memorization and unconnected content" (Donna Jean Carter, as cited in Slattery, 2006, p. 53). The role of the educator is to select the appropriate primary experiences as well as to effectively align these active engagements with appropriate secondary experiences and connections. The Association for Experiential Education (2008) discusses another principle of experiential education: "The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process." This role of the experiential educator is distinguished from a lecturer or instructor who gives answers to students. The process of learning is valued. Again, Marcel Proust states, "We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us" (as cited in Luckner and Nadler, 1992, p. 10). We must not be educators that attempt to spare our students from the learning process; we must let them walk their journey as we facilitate the educational experience on the way.

Emphasis on a Community of Learners

Experiential curriculum emphasizes a group or community experience as well as individualistic learning. Frank (2004) describes this emphasis of the various experiential programs:

> Their common themes involve community, integrated/thematic instruction, reflection, authentic learning, and empowerment. They are based on the foundation that people are whole beings connected to a larger environment and to each other. The benevolent dictator approach to teaching is giving way to participatory democracy. A sense of community is replacing isolationism. (p. 2)

The community approach challenges traditional notions of power, privilege and the pervasive culture of competition. In its place, there is collaborative learning, mutual respect and understanding, and reminders of our connectivity. Slattery (2006) declares, "one of the central premises of postmodern thinking: the importance of cooperative and collaborative models to replace rampant, destructive competitiveness" (p. 61).

Even more, the experiential environment is concerned with creating a particular culture. As Joseph (2000) explains, "Culture essentially means sense-making. It becomes the system in which people organize their perceptions of their environment and their lives…the existence of a culture suggests that there are shared systems of meanings as revealed in ideas and public expression" (p. 16). The experiential classroom (broadly defined) creates a culture that values knowledge as it is constructed through a relationship within the community members. AEE (2008) espouses the principle of experiential education that "relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large." This educational environment espouses the belief that

we are all teachers and we are all students. When we are in relationship with one another we inform one another; we teach one another; we learn from one another and understand our collective relationship to the world.

Experiential Environment That Serves to Meet Aims of Social Justice

As educators we must keep a watchful eye on hegemonic structures that may impede our ability to be equitable, democratic, and focused on outcomes of justice. Slattery (2006) clarifies the definition of hegemony through McLaren: "It [hegemony] is an image in which the values and beliefs of the dominant class appear so correct that to reject them would be unnatural, a violation of common sense" (p. 38). Slattery goes on to say the "hegemony in this sense is indoctrination and manipulation, and it can affect classrooms when a teacher does not encourage or allow students to question prevailing values, attitudes, historical interpretations, and social practices in a sustained and critical manner" (p. 38). Instead, educators must become comfortable with an educational process that encourages and nurtures critical thinking, even in cases (or perhaps especially in cases) that require the instructors to challenge their own previously held beliefs. What if a postmodern hegemony supported critical thinking and constant analysis of our learning environments rooted in contextual understandings? What if it became normal and expected to critically examine our process of learning and to develop continual mindfulness of our own blind spots? In describing the "reconceptualization in curriculum theory," Slattery (2006) states that "schools are viewed as dynamic communities committed to critical thinking, discovery learning, theological inquiry, autobiographical analysis, ecological sustainability, aesthetic wide-awakeness, social

justice, compassion, and ecumenism" (p. 109). Experiential curriculum actively explores the educational environment and intentionally designs learning opportunities for participatory democracy and equitable engagement.

Recommendations for Future Research and Actions

Experiential educators within the field have often recognized that great facilitators and practitioners do not always make wonderful researchers and publishers. Nevertheless, there is a cadre that stands across the lines of developing theory and serving the field with meaningful practice. I had an opportunity to hold a volunteer leadership position with the Association for Experiential Education and am aware of the many initiatives they are advancing in order to improve the research and documentation in experiential education. Experiential educators must continue to conduct inquiries that can document the results that occur within practice. The book *Theory and Practice of Experiential Education* (Warren, Mitten, & Loeffler, 2008) is a wonderful addition to the field that serves as a model for engaging inquiry about the definitions, historical, philosophical, psychological and educational foundations of the field. This book also contains sections on ethics and spirituality, social justice, and theory into practice and should inspire other practicing experiential educators to capture their work in written documents. Critical reflection and inquiry is not only in line with experiential methodology and beliefs about how we learn, it should also help to validate the field.

One exciting topic that requires more research attention is the connection between experiential methodologies and brain research. Zull's (2004) article, *The Art of the Changing Brain,* is one example that demonstrates that the brain learns through practice

and emotion (p. 69). Zull maps the parts of the brain in conjunction with the experiential learning cycle to show the patterns of learning that occur in the brain, which has great implications for the field of experiential education. In addition, Roberts (2008) details information about the brain that has inferences for experiential educators. He states, "The brain changes physiologically as a result of experiences, and these changes happen much quicker than originally thought. The environment in which the brain operates determines to a large degree the functioning ability of the brain" (p. 216). This research can provide foundations for justifying experiential practice that focuses on experiences that are meaningfully facilitated in effective learning environments.

Additional research can help to address valid critiques of Quay (2008) and Seaman (2008) that ask experiential educators to critically evaluate the experiential learning cycles that have provided the foundation for practice. Seaman (2008) states, "the idea that experiential is by definition a cycle made up of orderly, sequential steps is neither eternal nor universally shared" (p. 223). In addition, Quay (2008) also criticizes the use of the experiential learning cycle as a hard stage model where each step is done in isolation. He offers this evaluation:

> In many of these models (e.g., Kolb, 1984) learning has been equated with a stepwise process in which an internalized reflection follows concrete experience resulting in an adaptation revealed in further experience. We step out of experience to reflect and process, then we step back in. (p. 185)

Quay speaks well to say that learning is not something that can be broken down into isolated steps. Rather, it is a more disorganized process that is always occurring. When I teach the experiential learning cycle in courses, I suggest that the model be thought of as

a continually moving three dimensional spiral. Students can engage in any aspect of the model at any time, experiencing, reflecting, and applying, sometimes simultaneously. Both these authors ask experiential educators to continually scrutinize the foundations of the field and for practice to be driven by critically examined theory. (For a more developed critique of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, refer to http://reviewing.co.uk/research/experiential.learning.htm).

If experiential education was to take a more firm position within mainstream education, educators would need training and development in order to combat many of the perceived and real constraints listed above. Breunig (2008a) also recognizes that experiential education has not been integrated into more conventional educational institutions and requests:

> As future trends are considered within the field of experiential education, educators need to consider how to better mainstream experience-based programs into more traditional schools and environments. It is time for experiential educators to "come inside" and enter the public school system as a means to engage in a more meaningful and integrated experiential education practice. (p. 89)

Experiential methodologies should be taught more within educator preparation courses and should be practiced during internships and practicum experiences. However, even if educators embrace experiential practice, the reality is that in order to shift the paradigm of educational practice, there would need to be large scale, national policy change. This is a tall order that will take much time and energy if it occurs at all. However, educators in many environments may still work toward experiential praxis that is rooted in a democratic environment while searching for aims of social justice.

Critical Experiential Education Focused on Social Justice Principles

Schubert (1997) describes the Critical Sciences Paradigm and explains that "critical praxis combines inquiry and action in an attempt to realize and expose that which is oppressive and dominating" (p. 182). The experiential community must examine the structure of the educational environment in an effort to create equitable and democratic values and practices. "Critical praxis combines sensitivity to false consciousness with conscious attempts to perceive and expose unjust values" (p. 182). The experiential classroom must work for a just environment while holding community members accountable when classroom behaviors or dialogues reflect unjust values. Joseph (2000) describes the "Deliberating Democracy" culture of curriculum where students "learn and actually experience the deliberate skills, knowledge, beliefs, and values necessary for participating in and sustaining a democratic society" (p. 13). Educators must critically examine their educational environments so that they encourage democratic engagement. Furthermore, Greene (1981) declares, "the teacher must have more trust in those who are present as learners than teachers normally have. He or she must, as Freire has said, become a partner with the students in a shared effort to unveil their lived worlds" (p. 394). Focusing on fostering a community where trust is foundational creates an atmosphere where social justice principles can emerge through a common commitment for mutual understanding. Eisner (2002) further suggests,

> The school and the classroom should reflect democratic principles. What this meant in practice was that schools and classrooms should offer children appropriate opportunities to formulate their own rules for social living, that internal and personal needs should be fostered so that children learned how to use

collective intelligence to cope with problems in which their peers had an equal interest. (p. 70)

Not only is trust important between the educator and students, but students should be able to engage in a discussion about their values and commitments to one another in which they hold each other accountable for a democratic environment that honors their collective input.

Conclusion

Critical experiential education pushes beyond the status quo of societal structures to seek a more just and equitable society. Itin (1999) reminds us that from the beginning, contributors to experiential education philosophy, "Dewey, Hahn, and Freire were all concerned with the preparation of individuals to participate in a democratic society. As such they were concerned with developing the capacity of individuals to take action and recognizing that education is a political process. The choice of what is taught and not taught must be understood in a political context" (p. 94). Again, as educators purposefully engage with students in the learning environment, the choices they make about curriculum and the experiences that are utilized for educational purposes are related to relevant happenings within society. Breunig (2005) explores the roots of experiential education and concludes that "experiential education is rooted in the educational ideal of social change" (p. 1). I assert that experiential education can be a tool to connect learners with aims of social justice when it produces learners who are cognizant of power and privilege that exists within social contexts and who are concerned with establishing equitable societal structures. Experiential education nurtures lifelong learners by

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demonstrating and honoring the value of the learning process. This learning process is then utilized in future endeavors allowing for learning through struggle, critical thinking, and experience. Experiential education increases personal, group, team, and societal awareness about structures, institutions, and processes within society and seeks to encourage individuals to become actively engaged within these societal forces. The social justice-minded experiential education environment is not focused on one aspect of culture or identity; rather it is working to develop the whole individual and to nurture learners' ability to engage within contextual society to become change agents when they experience or see injustice.

Experiential education creates embodied experiences that can be transferred to the society in which students and educators live. Relevant and meaningful educational experiences must include reflection and then engagement of the curriculum within the world. Experiential education that is focused on social justice aims will treat learners as whole beings allowing cultural constructs to play a role and to be honored within the learning environment. Students can become agents of change and active members of democratic communities as a result of transformative education. However, there are consequences to this empowered educational praxis. Educators that value teaching for democratic, liberating and freedom-filled outcomes might consider the question: *Do we fear freedom?* When we engage in liberating practices within education, and when we truly examine our societal practices with a critical eye, we end up seeing things we do not necessarily want to see and hearing things we may not want to hear. Our eyes and ears become aware of oppression, power, and privilege which may be painful. It is often

easier to engage in what Freire (1970) calls, banking models of education, wishing there were just facts to memorize and regurgitate. Being fully alive within education means acknowledging and coming to terms with the painful realities of ourselves, education, and societal practices. The alternative, however, is a form of educational death, where we only partially engage in the world around us while closing our eyes to the complex realities that can be unpleasant. It is only through overcoming fear and becoming vulnerable to a multitude of experiences that we can become agents of change. It is through this vulnerability that we can experience the strength of true educational freedom.

As a master's student in educational leadership and experiential education, I wrestled with a tough lesson. We were studying the work of John Dewey, and student after student made comments in class that if we just keep making small changes in our practice, we will make larger changes down the road. I felt frustration rise within me and in a passionate display I exclaimed, "These ideas have been around for over one hundred years. We do not need small steps. We need a revolution!" I received a great response from my colleagues as we discussed visions of slogans, battle cries, and revolutionary flags. However, while my passionate cry for revolution was heart-felt, it was not necessarily useful. There are incredibly difficult choices we make as educators on a day to day basis. As we continue to adjust to the needs and demands of our times, policy makers struggle to do what they believe is best. So, it is educational reform, not necessarily a revolution that I am after. My hope is that we continue to ask the difficult questions that impact our educational practice. Rorty (1999) states, "The vista, not the

endpoint, matters" (p. 28). I wear the necklace symbolizing a journey around my neck

because I recognize the importance of the vista. As we wrestle with the social justice

concerns of our day, we should be mindful that outcomes of social justice cannot be

forced. Educators can work to create equitable and democratic learning environments, but

it would undermine the spirit of experiential education to become dogmatic and demand

particular social justice aims regardless of the learning contexts or goals. Experiential

education is positioned well to address issues of social justice. It can be a powerful,

transformational educational aim. The outcomes in education will depend on the vista

educators seek.

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