

*The substance beneath the labels of experiential learning: The importance of John Dewey for outdoor educators.*

# The Substance Beneath the Labels of Experiential Learning: The Importance of John Dewey for Outdoor Educators

*Jon Ord and Mark Leather*

*University College Plymouth St Mark & St John*

## **Abstract**

This paper recommends a reconceptualisation of “experience learning”. It is premised on a belief that the simplistic learning cycle is problematic and moreover is an oversimplified interpretation of Kolb’s original model of experiential learning. We argue that to understand experiential learning fully a return to the original theoretical conceptualisation by John Dewey is necessary. Importantly Dewey conceives of an experience, and therefore the learning that results from it, as a transaction between the individual and their environment and is therefore a consequence of their ‘trying’ and ‘undergoing’ within that experience. Dewey also emphasises the importance of ‘meaning’ within experiential learning, something not fully accounted for within the simplified model. We argue that with an appreciation of Dewey the full potential of learning by, and through, the experience of outdoor education can be maximised and the full meaning of that experience explored.

Keywords: experiential learning, outdoor education, John Dewey, David Kolb, learning cycle

In this paper we argue that in order to fully comprehend an outdoor education experience, it must be understood as a form of *lived experience*. A premise of this paper is that the conceptualisation of experience and experiential learning is dominated in the academic texts by the cyclical model associated with Kolb (1984) (Brown 2004, Seaman 2008), but we suggest that this model is presented as a reification and simplification of David Kolb’s model of experiential learning. As previously argued by Greenaway (2008) models can be useful because they simplify and reduce complex and variable processes into a regular and standard pattern. However, he cautions that “Models simplify reality. Practitioners simplify a model further if they work only with the model’s labels and have little understanding of *the substance beneath the labels*” (p.363, emphasis added). On this basis we consider the importance of John Dewey’s theory of experiential education (1916/2007, 1938/1997) and argue that in order to fully understand the outdoor education experience as a lived experience it is essential to return to Dewey’s original ideas, as Dewey more fully addresses how participants make meaning out of their experience. Again, as Greenaway (2008) similarly argued:

Dewey provides a broader vision of “educative experience” than many of his followers do. Dewey’s interest was in the kinds of experiences that arouse, that are intense, that strengthen, that stimulate, and that live on in future experiences that have similar properties. (p.365)

The purpose of this paper is to explore in detail the substance beneath the simplified experiential learning cycle. We argue for the importance of Dewey,

as did Wojcikiewicz and Mural (2010) in relation to sail training and instruction. However our aim is to give the reader a fuller and more detailed understanding of the Deweyan foundations of experiential learning and explore the implications for outdoor education as a whole.

## **Experiential Learning Theory (?)**

It is evident that experiential learning is at the heart of outdoor education and this concept has become embedded within the literature over the last four decades. Examples range from Harold Drasdo’s original essay in 1972 *Education and the Mountain Centres* (see Drasdo, 1972/1998) which discussed the outdoor education experience as a life enhancing experience, through Colin Mortlock (1984) who considers adventurous experiences in the *Adventure Alternative* to Berry and Hodgson’s (2011) *Adventure Education: an introduction*.

However, theory is not necessarily embraced within outdoor education. For example McWilliam (2004) argues that for some practitioners in the outdoors theories appear irrelevant or as barriers to learning, particularly so for those who see all learning grounded uniquely within an individual’s experience. This is perhaps in the minority, and a wide variety of authors have developed philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of outdoor education which help explain, support and inform the work undertaken by practitioners in the field. Chronologically, although not exhaustively, this includes; Parker and Meldrum (1973), Hunt (1989), Miles and Priest (1990), Hopkins and Putnam (1993), Barnes, (1997), Higgins, Loynes and Crowther (1997), Exeter (2001), Barnes and Sharp (2004), Prouty, Panicucci and Collinson (2007),

Becker and Schirp (2008), Knight (2009) and Berry and Hodgson (2011). Importantly, all these authors have explored the notion of learning through direct experience as an essential element. However, describing and explaining this idea appears varied in breadth and depth throughout the literature. This may at times reflect the intended audience, as well as the changing educational culture, and differing conceptions of the role the outdoors has for educative purposes over the years. Clearly whilst there are many similarities, there are also marked differences. For example *Education and the Mountain Centres* from 1972 (Drasdo, 1972/1998) has a different context to *Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years* (Knight, 2009). There are also differences in these texts between the target age groups, the activities and locations considered, as well as the dominant pedagogy implicit within the text. For example, Knight (2009) suggests that outdoor learning in a Forest School happens over time, in six week blocks a half day at a time and that the learning is play-based, child-initiated and child-led. By contrast, Drasdo (1972/1998) discusses education in “wild country” for the purposes of field studies, namely geographical or biological studies, and “Outdoor Pursuits... such as hill walking, rock climbing, mountain camping... and even canoeing...” (p. 16), that have greater need for structure, physical and intellectual maturity and duration of the experience. None the less, despite these differences it is clear that direct experience is a fundamental part of the outdoor educative process.

Since the 1970’s, in part as a result of the work of Drasdo (1972/1998) and, Parker and Meldrum (1973), experiential learning has been formalised into the experiential learning cycle, and has become increasingly embedded within the vocabulary and pedagogy of outdoor education. However, for some this appears not to be theoretically grounded. For example, Taylor (2006) acknowledges the ‘plan – do – review’ cycle without reference to experiential learning or the work of Kolb (1984) or Dewey (1938/1997). Perhaps for a canoe coaching handbook this may be appropriate, however we argue that a deeper understanding of experiential learning would benefit all outdoor educators however specialised. Similarly, Ogilvie (2005), in his text on Leadership, describes the “commonly used shorthand device to aid the memorisation of this [reflective] process: - What? - So What? - Now What?”(p. 261), again without reference. Barton (2007) is equally scant with his exploration of learning from the outdoor experience, but does at least name Kolb when he states “the learning cycle described by Kolb and others” (p. 8), before drawing a ‘plan-do-review’ cycle. Neill (2004) similarly recommends and adopts the ‘plan do review cycle’ (see figure 1), despite an appreciation for a variety of more complex models. Neill suggests

that this model equates to “going forth and having an experience” (Do), “reviewing what happened and what can be learnt” (Review) and “plan a way to tackle the next round of experience” (Plan). Indeed McWilliam (2004,) suggests that many adopt this “single theoretical model and apply it with uncritical evangelical zeal” (p.129).



Figure 1: Do-Review-Plan: A 3-stage experiential learning cycle (Neill, 2004).

We would echo a number of recent critiques of this simplistic cycle, (Beard and Wilson, 2006; Brown 2004, 2009, 2010; Fenwick, 2000; Seaman 2008,) and agree that conceiving experiential learning in the form of a cycle is not only problematic but provides an impoverished theoretical conceptualisation of outdoor education experiences. It is not necessary for the purpose of this paper to revisit comprehensive critiques of Kolb’s model; we refer readers to the above citations, although perhaps Smith (2001) captures the tenor of many of these critiques when he suggests, the idea of stages, or steps, does not sit well with the reality of thinking. We argue that a sufficiently robust theoretical framework for experiential learning must be utilised to take account of the depth and breadth of experiences, not least because an implication of conceiving of the outdoor education experience in simplistic terms is likely to reduce the potential for understanding the meaning of that experience. For example a canoe trip or a mountainous trek is much more than just, travelling from point A to point B. What each participant brings to the journey in terms of previous experience must be accounted for. The journey could be the greatest challenge of their lives, or alternatively it could be so familiar as to be mundane. The degree of challenge encompassed on any given journey is something specific to the individual and dependent in part on their previous experience. Importantly this previous experience, namely what we bring to the present experience but is the culmination of past experiences, is unique to the individual and will have a direct bearing on the quality of the present experience (Dewey, 1916/2007, 1938/1997).

Of course it is fallacious to argue that simplistic models cause simplistic practice. Practitioners are not necessarily bound by the simplicity of the model. They could be creative in their use of the model and even move beyond it. Indeed as Hovelynck (2001) found, some practitioners develop 'practice theories' once in the field to more accurately reflect the work they are doing. But this is not an argument against producing better, more meaningful or useful theories. Not only is there little within the simplistic models or theories to encourage 'going beyond', the model is equally, if not more, likely to constrain practitioner's understanding of experiential learning, and certainly existing simplistic theory does little to enable a depth of understanding of experiential learning.

The simplistic cycle does not encourage a depth of exploration, or the development of the meaning of outdoor education experiences. It can construe these outdoor experiences not in an holistic way (Seaman 2008), contextualising it in the life of the participant, but it can compartmentalize the experience (Brown 2004, 2009). This can then reduce the learning from the experience to identifying practical ways in which the undertaking of similar experiences might be made better in the future. For example if a kayaker capsized a number of times on the descent of a river it would be realistic to reflect on the need to improve that particular skill and therefore more efficiently undertake future river trips. It is not as easy to incorporate the wider implications of learning within such a simplistic model. For example how does the participant feel as a result of the proficient rescues undertaken and the care and support of the companions? Or despite the apparent inefficient descent perhaps the participant was overwhelmingly satisfied with the meeting of the challenges on the journey. Such knowledge is not "decontextualised" (Seaman 2008, p 15) but is "situated" in the lives of the participants (Brown, 2009).

Not all the literature is devoid of theoretical underpinnings of the experiential learning cycle. Kraft (1990) writes a brief overview on experiential learning and includes a section on Dewey and the progressive education movement, and states that "had space permitted, we would have gone into the work of learning style theorists such as Kolb..." (p. 182). The evidence suggests that whilst many authors acknowledge the influence and importance of the work of Kolb and Dewey, few however explore these ideas in any great breadth or depth. In *The Complete Practical Theory of Outdoor Education and Personal Development*, Barnes (1997) acknowledges that John Dewey is the "father" (p. 15) of experiential education and the true originator of the experiential learning cycle, but focuses almost exclusively on the popular Kolb cycle, as do both Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, and Breunig (2006), and Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin and Ewert (2006).

Priest and Gass (2005) provide a fuller consideration of both Dewey and Kolb and they detail Priest's experiential learning and judgement paradigm which is an evolved version of Kolb's model providing a fifth stage of judgement. They developed this model acknowledging that for Dewey "judgement plays the pivotal role in the experiential learning process" (p.155). They suggest that judgement is refined over time and learning takes place through repeated reflections upon experience. However this is a small concession to Dewey's theory of experiential learning and it does not take full account of the depth of his analysis. Panicucci (2007) argues that the field of adventure education "is enhanced with a solid understanding of Dewey's ideals and philosophies... [and that] the experiential learning cycle... is an excellent tool to ensure that the actual experience that Dewey describes is educative" (p. 35).<sup>1</sup> A more thorough consideration is found in Hopkins and Putnam (1993), including the basic model of experiential learning articulated by Kurt Lewin. They suggest that Kolb's book is "highly recommended" (p. 79). In particular, they highlight a number of Kolb's propositions that they suggest characterise experiential learning. For example "learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes... learning is a continuous process grounded in experience" (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993, p.79). However, the "Lewinian Model" is problematic for Hopkins and Putnam since "it is static and circular and confines movement and growth to a particular situation..." (p. 79). They prefer a spiral notion of a learning cycle or progression, similar to Bruner's (1966) spiral curriculum, where the learning from a specific situation can be applied to other areas of an individual's experience. We concur with Hopkins and Putnam and suggest it is perhaps useful to think of experiential learning three dimensionally, as a continuing spiral of action and reflection, where the activities are specifically designed to build upon each other and so extend an individual's range of experience and cognition over time. As Dewey (1916/2007, 1938/1997) underlines, experiential learning operates within a continuum, of living from the past, through the present, and into the future.

More recently Roberts (2008) located Dewey as one of three essential strands of experiential education referring to Dewey's theory as "experience as interaction" which he claims should stand alongside equally important aspects of "embodied experience" and "experience as praxis" (p. 19). Whilst making a significant contribution to the centrality of Dewey's theory to the understanding of experiential learning, he falls short of embracing the full depth of Dewey's ideas. In addition he wrongly claims Dewey gave up on his original notion of experience in favour of the term culture, a claim countered by the fact that Dewey's later work, which attempted to concisely summarise his theory, was entitled *Experience and Education*. This

was published towards the end of his working life in 1938, and it gave experience central importance. Also Roberts thesis is further off the mark in his claim there is “no evidence in Dewey of an awareness of marginalised groups in the democratic process” (p. 23), using this criticism to generate a contrasting strand of experiential “education as praxis”, which places power more centrally. However, as discussed later, Dewey’s concept of interaction is “situated” and at least implicitly acknowledges power relations. It should be noted that Dewey was a founder member of what is still the largest and most influential pressure group for lobbying on issues of race and anti-racism in the US, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, 2011). Dewey was certainly not unaware of issues of race, if perhaps it could be argued they ought to have been writ a little larger in his work.

## Developing the Theory of Experiential Learning:

### Kolb

Despite these references to both Kolb and Dewey in the outdoor education literature, there is a breadth and depth to both theorists which is rarely acknowledged. Firstly it is of the utmost importance that there is a marked difference between the models of experiential learning almost universally referred to as: “Kolb’s experiential learning cycle” and the actual cycle of experiential learning in Kolb (1984), (figure 2), and as such the popularised Kolb cycle is a misrepresentation and an oversimplification.

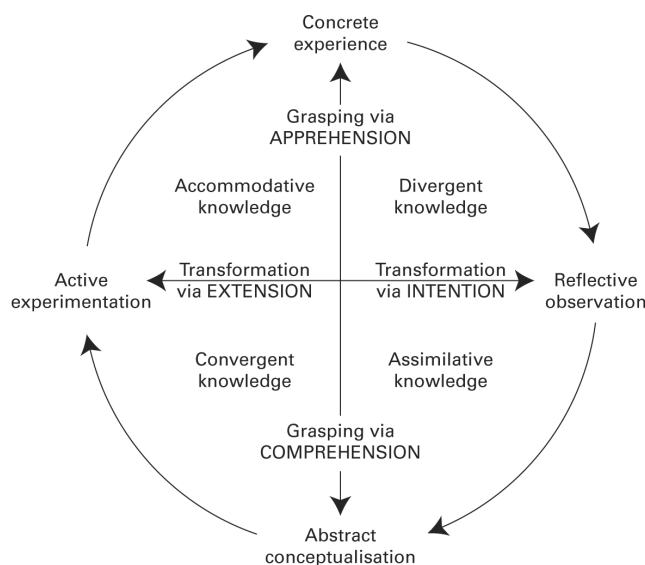


Figure 2: Structural dimensions underlying the process of experiential learning and the resulting basic knowledge forms (Kolb, 1984, p.42).

This is significant for, as a result of this misrepresentation of Kolb, a whole important aspect of his theoretical model is omitted. As one can see from figure 2 there is an outer circle (akin to the popularised learning cycle) which involves a move from concrete experience, via reflection, to further conceptualisation and onto more experimentation. Kolb (1984) acknowledges explicitly this outer circle as Lewin’s experiential learning model, which he characterises in figure 3. Importantly in his book *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Kolb sets out with the intention of developing this previous model, not merely replicating it; not least because Lewin (1951) was concerned with learning within organisations and not experiential learning per se.

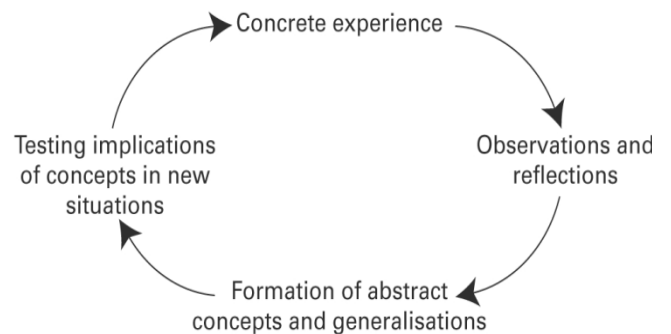


Figure 3: Kolb’s depiction of Lewin’s experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984, p.21).

The outer circle, which has become synonymous with Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, can at the very least only tell part of the story of experiential learning. How much of the story it is intended to tell is however difficult to assess. For it is not clear from reading Kolb (1984) how much emphasis he puts on this outer circle. At times he appears to conceptualise learning in such a separate and therefore sequential manner as the following suggests:

New knowledge, skills or attitudes are achieved through confrontation among four modes of experiential learning. Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities- concrete experience abilities (CE), reflective observation abilities (RO), abstract conceptualisations abilities (AC) and active experimentation (AE) abilities... Yet this ideal is difficult to achieve. How can one act and reflect at the same time? How can one be concrete and immediate and still be theoretical. Learning requires abilities that are polar opposites, and the learner, as a result must continually choose which set of learning abilities he or she will bring to bear in any specific learning situation (p.30).

Thus he appears to see these aspects of the cycle as separate, difficult to integrate and one must presumably pass from one to another distinctly and sequentially. However importantly at other times Kolb (1984) on the contrary, suggests that learning is not a sequential process of passing through separate phases or functions but a holistic process. This process is what he refers to as a dialectic integration of opposing functions. It is this dialectic aspect of learning by experience that the inner circle of Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning refers to. He suggests therefore that: "...all the models above [figures 2 & 3] suggest the idea that learning is by its very nature a conflict filled process" (p. 30). And "... experiential learning is also concerned with how these functions are integrated by the person into a holistic adaptive posture toward the world" (p.32). Citing Bruner (1966), Kolb (1984) claims that at the heart of the creative process of learning is the dialectic tension between "abstract detachment" and "concrete involvement".

Kolb's theory at the very least must be seen as more than its simplistic popularisation as a sequential learning cycle. Indeed in all probability Seaman (2008) is right in his conclusion that "existing cyclic models might be better valued for their historical contribution, rather than as active theories of learning in experiential education" (p. 3). To understand experiential learning more fully we must look to its architect John Dewey (1900/1956, 1916/2007, 1938/1997), not least because it is upon Dewey that much of Kolb's theory originates<sup>3</sup>. We would concur with Greenaway's (2008), assertion that "Dewey provides a broader vision of 'educative experience' than many of his followers do" (p. 365).

## Dewey

At the heart of the differences between, on the one hand, Dewey's theory of experiential learning (as well as a more accurate depiction of Kolb) and on the other the popularised simplistic learning cycle is the conceptualisation of experience itself. Experience is conceived of, in the simplistic cycle, almost exclusively as "doing". In a sense Kolb promotes this with his apparent emphasis on concrete experience, and this is perhaps one of the flaws in his model. However Dewey would, no doubt, be critical of such an impoverished conception of experience. As Garforth (1966) suggests, Dewey means something quite specific by experience and Garforth offers a number of contrasts before describing what Dewey himself means by it:

He [Dewey] does not mean by this [experience] the stored up product of the past; nor does he mean simply the immediacy of the experienced present; nor the mere acceptance of environmental impact by a passive recipient; nor does

he contrast experience with thought or reason. Experience is continuous from past through present to future; it is not static but dynamic, moving, in process. It is not unilateral but, as Dewey would say, 'transactional' for the experient is modified by his environment and the environment by the experient in a constant reciprocal relationship (p.13).

It is the transaction which is of fundamental importance for Dewey: "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p.43). Underlying this notion of a transaction, as Garforth alluded to, is what Dewey (1916/2007, 1938/1997) refers to as "trying" and "undergoing". Trying refers to the outward expression of the individual, the attempts by them to manifest themselves upon the environment. Undergoing refers to the manner in which the environment manifests itself upon the individual. For Dewey (1916/2007, 1938/1997), this process is dynamic and two way; the interaction involves an impact on the environment by the individual as well as in turn, an impact on the individual by the environment. "Trying" refers to the outward expression of intention or action. It is the purposeful engagement of the individual with the environment or in Dewey's words "doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like" (Dewey 1916/2007, p.104). In action an attempt is made to have an impact on the world. "Undergoing", the other aspect of the transaction in experience, refers to the consequences of experience on the individual. In turn, in attempting to have an impact, the experience also impacts on us. Undergoing refers to the consequences of the experience for us.

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness of experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience (Dewey, 1916/2007, p.104).

For example: we may choose to clear litter from our regular lunch stop along a favourite river trip, and in so doing the area is visibly improved (a consequence of trying) and at the same time we feel good about the deed that has been carried out (a consequence of undergoing). For Dewey experience necessarily contains these two distinct aspects.

Importantly Kolb develops and expands this dual notion of transaction and links this to Piaget's (1951, 1971) notion of "assimilation" and "accommodation". Importantly it is this that begins to characterise the

inner section of his model of experiential learning (figure 2), and which have largely been ignored within the literature. Kolb (1984) suggests,

In Piaget's terms, the key to learning lies in the mutual interaction of the process of *accommodation* of concepts or schemas to experience in the world and the process of *assimilation* of events or experiences from the world into existing concepts or schemas (p.23).

This for Kolb represents the dialectic tension at the heart of experiential learning: the tension between accommodation and assimilation; the degree to which the *individual is changed* by the environment and the extent to which the *environment is changed* by the individual. Importantly the notion of a change to the environment can and often is a reconceptualisation or change in how we see the environment or the 'world' as much as an actual physical change in it. Thus as a result of an outdoor education experience we are changed but so is the world, or at the very least and perhaps more importantly, how we both perceive and conceive of it as changed.

To illustrate let us consider a hypothetical example involving the different dynamics of women's outdoor experiences (Boniface, 2006; Humberstone, 2000). Imagine an all female backpacking journey, which for the women was the first time they have had to rely on both themselves and on other women to undertake tasks normally performed by the men in their lives. As a result of the challenges undertaken and the relative ease by which they could undertake such tasks as pitching tents and carrying rucksacks, they begin to see both themselves and the world differently. Their understanding of themselves and of gender stereotypes changes. They begin to question assumptions about their own perceived lack of abilities and a new realization begins to take shape of the world as an 'oppressive environment' where gender prescribes their identities, abilities and opportunities, and they begin to question the status quo. Thus for the women as a result of this process, they have been changed, as has the world around them. Alternatively, as Ord (2007) suggests, the behaviour of young people on an outdoor education residential experience may undergo similar transformations:

The dialectical tension in peer groups could be characterised by the extent to which young people adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of the group, or free themselves through a process of assimilation of information about the experience of peer groups and peers group pressure... discovering that they actually have a choice to conform or not (p 71).

Pring (2007) suggests that Dewey argued in *Experience and Education* that this process equates to a reconceptualisation of experience and that for Dewey there is an "organic connection between education and experience" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p.25). This reconceptualisation is at the heart of educative experience as Dewey notes, "the concept of education is a constant reorganising or reconstructing of experience" (Dewey, 1916/2007, p.59). Education is therefore part of a search for meaning, trying to make sense of the world and our place within it. Hence, Dewey's educative "inquiry is that attempt to 'make sense' but to do so in the light of what other people have concluded in similar circumstances" (Pring 2007, p.65). Or as Dewey (1900/1956) puts it, "his [sic] activity shall have meaning to himself" (p.23). As has been argued elsewhere, *educative experience* is therefore as much about how we understand the world, as it is with acting in it. It is as much about meaning making as it is with a concern with the solutions to practical problems (Ord, 2009).

Contemporarily in the literature *making sense* of experiences is perhaps most evident with young people who engage in extended overseas expeditions, (see for example Allison, 2000, 2002). For them, the importance of 'sense making' of experiences appears to be essential. The concept of experience acting as the teacher, and the gaining of more experience as desirable, then allows for learning to occur, as Allison and Wurdinger (2005) state by "making sense of them [experiences], it is possible to grow and develop"(p.397). So for example when someone experiences trekking in Nepal they will almost inevitably be transformed and their view of the world irrevocably altered; whether that be by the majesty of the mountains, the humility and grace with which porters struggle with their loads, or by the joy in the faces of children who greet them in each of the villages they pass through. In many often incalculable ways the experience means something deeply significant and the 'sense made out of it' means the 'world has changed' for the participant.

### **The Implications for Outdoor Education Practice.**

One of the initial and most striking implications for the conceptualisation of an outdoor education experience, given the above critique of the dominant discourse of experiential learning, is that we must move away from a situation where the activity itself is conceived of as "concrete experience" (Kolb, 1984). That is, as an immersion in 'activity', or 'doing'. Storry (2003), for example, appears to place an over emphasis on the importance of "doing" which we suggest masks the subtler aspects of the underlying experience. "Like the perception of colour in a rainbow, the reasons for outdoor adventure merge into an holistic experience of doing" (Storry, 2003, p.136). Whilst

Storry acknowledges that there are a variety of different reasons for having an outdoor experience, he implies that these distinctions are subsumed under the auspices of “doing”.

On the contrary no doubt, Dewey would argue that the reasons for having an outdoor educational experience are at least as many as there are experiences to have, as there are people to have them, and therefore there are infinite interpretations of the outdoor education experience itself. As we saw for Dewey (1916/2007, 1938/1997) the activity itself or ‘doing’ is regarded as insufficient for an experience. Furthermore, that the collapsing or merging of the distinctions between some of these differences prevents us from fully understanding the experiences that these outdoor activities are enabling. Outdoor education experiences might involve ‘doing’ something but they involve much more besides. Understanding an experience in the outdoors is best done by appreciating the subtle and often significant differences in why they are undertaken, and what they mean to those undertaking them.

Implicit in this formulation of experience as ‘concrete’ or as ‘doing’ is a separation of thought and action (thinking and doing). The extent to which Kolb is guilty of this is debatable. However, it is evident that the simplistic models of experiential learning attributed to Kolb<sup>4</sup>, evidenced earlier, are guilty of this separation. Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism, (1900/1956, 1916/2007, 1938/1997) would categorically object to such dualism. This dualism was opposed by Dewey, as “a bipolar, dualistic view of reality that divided it into ideational, or conceptual, and material dimensions” according to Gutek (1997, p.84). Dewey (1916/2007) regarded “any such split as radically false” (p.122). For Dewey thought and action are not separate entities but are unified in experience. Human beings are immersed in the world and the thoughts about it are not separate and removed but products of it. The experience of the outdoors cannot be removed from the thoughts, ideas and ultimately the ‘meanings’ we make of it.

Given Dewey’s rejection of the separation of thought and action, one is immediately struck with the inadequacies of simplistic learning cycle models. One is engaged at all times in the experience, not with a suspension of thought and analysis, but with a potential at least for a heightening of it. Yes one may be at times, ‘in the moment’ but it is not without a lack of awareness of the significance of it. The experience can and often is characterised by both an immersion in the ‘hands on’ nature of the experience as well as, rather than a suspension of, thinking about what the experience means.

Allied to this critique is the role and place of reflection in experiential learning. Within the simplistic models, and to some extent for Kolb himself (1984)<sup>5</sup>, reflection is explicitly framed as a separate mode or phase to concrete experience. Dewey (1900/1956, 1916/2007) does emphasise reflection and its importance in experiential learning. At times reflection is subsequent to a particular experience, possibly following a pause, but this should not necessarily preclude all other alternatives for reflection. The idea that reflection and experience are separated is anathema for Dewey: <sup>6</sup> “No experience having a meaning is possible without having some element of thought” (Dewey, 1916/2007, p.107). That one could reflect upon or think about one’s experience whilst immersed in that experience is not only possible but often desirable; the realisations about one’s abilities and sense of achievement is perhaps most lucid at some point during the outdoor activity as much as it is at the activity’s end. As Schon (1987) has pointed out not only is “reflection in-action” possible but it is also often more desirable and effective, than “reflection on action”.

A further implication of Dewey’s theory of experience for the conceptualisation of outdoor education experiences is the importance of “meaning”. As we saw above, experience is not synonymous with activity or “doing”, it is much more than this. It is also integrally linked to meaning as Dewey (1916/2007) makes clear

It is not experience when a child sticks his finger into the flame; it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he [sic] undergoes in consequence. Henceforth, the sticking of the finger into the flames *means* [emphasis added] a burn (p.104).

Experience is therefore integrally linked to meaning, and the meaning of the experience is for Dewey a consequence of ‘trying’ and ‘undergoing’. As a result, for Dewey learning cannot be conceptualised as exclusively occurring via a review or reflection in isolation from the experience. We are changed within the experience, and by the experience, not simply as a result of reflection upon it at a later date. As Holman et al (cited in Brown 2009) recently claimed “there may be no reason other than symbolically to differentiate between the reflection and the process of experiencing. Both can be considered as part of the same augmentative process which constructs meaning” (p. 7).

To illustrate this point consider three different but essentially similar long distance walks. One person visiting the region for the first time marvels in the vistas and is in awe of the surroundings, soaking it up. The same walk undertaken by someone who is

revisiting childhood places and has not returned to for many years has an experience filled with nostalgia of previous experiences. They are also engaged with the environment, but it is a different environment, one that is filled with memories of past events, people and previous experiences. Alternatively, if the walk were undertaken by someone to raise money for a cancer charity, in the memory of a friend who has recently died, the experience would again be significantly different. One that is perhaps filled with sadness but also hope that some good will come of it, and the walker may be barely aware of their footsteps, never mind the distant views. Such are the uniquely different and multifaceted aspects of outdoor education experiences that one needs to appreciate their complexity to fully appreciate and facilitate learning from them.

Finally for Dewey (1916/2007, 1938/1997), the meaning of our present experience is necessarily in the light of past experiences, and with regards to future experiences. This is integral to Dewey's notion of transaction. For Dewey all learning by experience is within the context of the continual adaptation of the individual to, and within, their environment. Thus the quality of educative experience is judged in part by how well it facilitates future experiences. "Every experience is a moving force; its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moves towards and into" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p.38). Dewey refers to this as his continuity principle.

When considering the meaning of outdoor education experiences, as 'transactional experience', account must be taken of the significance of that outdoor education experience in the life course of the individual, in particular its links to future experiences. This is what Pring (2007) describes as Dewey's 'ends in view'. To understand the significance of an experience to the individual, much of the understanding must be elicited prior to the activity and explored during it, as much as on subsequent completion. For example, when dealing with an outdoor experience involving exposure to heights, such as a hill walk involving precipitous drops, it would be imperative to understand the significance of this experience prior to it. Perhaps previous experience of heights has left a deep fear of such situations and the participant would balk at the idea. Perhaps they are equally scared but wish, with guidance and support, to face the challenge. Alternatively perhaps this walk has been undertaken many times by the individual and they would much rather go elsewhere. Or indeed, perhaps the familiarity is just what the participant would like, so they could relax and use the opportunity to discuss what is really on their mind, which being out in the outdoors enables them to do. Understanding what an outdoor experience means to the individuals concerned is imperative. Furthermore it is unique to the individual and too often the facilitators of outdoor experiences presuppose or impose their own preconceptions of

those experiences on the individuals, thinking they know what is in their best interests (Brown, 2004; Boniface, 2006).

We should no doubt heed Brown's (2004) advice and move away from an exclusive focus upon what he refers to as going "round the circle" – the post activity review, led by the facilitator which attempts to draw out and acknowledge the learning from the activity. As he suggests, if "adventure educators wish to provide opportunities for students to express and articulate learning that reflects that experience, they may wish to explore other ways to facilitate this learning" (p. 170). These other ways should, we argue, involve engaging in conversation with participants before and during the experience to attempt to genuinely understand what it means to them. Such an approach would utilise informal educational processes (Jeffs and Smith 1990, 2005) which emphasize the importance of building trusting relationships between the educators and those being educated, enabling a depth of understanding to emerge. Informal educators emphasise the importance of conversation as the primary vehicle by which we develop an understanding of the experiences of those we wish to educate. These ongoing conversations may well be a better way to elicit an appreciation of both how the individual now sees themselves, others and the world around them.

In this paper we have argued for a consideration of and return to the philosophical underpinning of experiential learning provided by John Dewey, particularly in the light of the dominance of the simplistic interpretation of the experiential learning cycle. We have detailed how outdoor education experiences contain thinking, action and learning, in a complex and inter-related weave of the experience, uniquely situated in the "transactional" experience of each individual. As such, for Dewey experiential learning is a consequence of both 'trying' and 'undergoing' (as it is for Kolb, with an appreciation of the complexity of his theory, in terms of accommodation and assimilation). Therefore the meaning of an experience cannot be accounted for sufficiently with a simplistic emphasis upon reflection after the experience. When we are involved with the outdoor education experiences of others, as educationalists, facilitators or even with friends, it is imperative we take into consideration the complexities and uniqueness of these experiences. As Greenaway (2008) succinctly states "experiences do not come in regular and standard packages and we learn and grow [through experience] in many different ways" (p. 363). Dewey's theory begins to take account of these complexities, and with an appreciation of it we can ultimately enhance all our outdoor educational experiences. Dewey's theory implores us to engage with the whole experience and engage with the participants fully and meaningfully throughout.



## Notes

1. Panicucci (2007) appears to overly simplify the use of learning styles when she states, "it is safe to say that each of these learning styles is represented by at least one person in that group. When a learning experience follows the experiential learning cycle, everyone's learning style is supported" (p. 38). This seems to suggest that each person has only one learning style. The work of Honey and Mumford (1992) is useful as it emphasised that individuals do not have just one distinct learning style rather that people have preferences and are a blend of all four stages of the experiential cycle. Honey and Mumford also recognised that people's preferences (of learning style) can change with age, job, and context and as such they are not a fixed trait.

2. Lewin (1951) did not depict the learning in this form; this cycle was drawn by Kolb to attempt to illustrate what he thought Lewin was trying to communicate (Kolb 1984, p.21).

3. For a more detailed critique of Kolb's theories see Beard and Wilson, (2006), Brown (2004, 2009, 2010), Fenwick, (2000), Ord (2007; 2009), and Seaman (2008).

4. The extent to which Kolb separates thinking and doing (thought and action) is debatable as, on the one hand he situates concrete experience opposite abstract conceptualisation (in the outer ring of his model) and one does not get to that mode until one has moved into and through the reflective phase. However at other times, as we have seen, he does talk about the tension between these two opposing modes and in their 'dialectic tension' both can be active at the same time.

5. Again the same problem arises with the contradictory stance Kolb (1984) takes by proposing a model that is portrayed as both sequential and dialectical.

6. Kolb does attribute a sequential learning cycle to Dewey (Kolb, 1984, p.23) however it should be noted that this is not a model that Dewey formulated and whilst he talks of such notions as impulse, observation and judgement, and purpose (the various phases of the model characterised by Kolb and attributed to Dewey) they are not formulated into a sequential model in any of Dewey's works.

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## About the authors

*Dr Jon Ord is a reader in Youth and Community Work at University College Plymouth St Mark & St John. He is the author of a number of papers on youth work as well as the book: Youth Work Process Product and Practice: Creating an authentic curriculum in work with young people. His research interests relate to the theoretical basis of informal and social education. The origins of this paper lie in a sea kayaking journey the authors shared on the Devon coastline.*  
*jord@ucpmarjon.ac.uk*

*Dr Mark Leather is a senior lecturer in Outdoor Adventure Education at University College Plymouth St Mark & St John. He teaches on a range of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes that contain adventure education and outdoor learning. His doctoral thesis explored the use of outdoor learning with disaffected pupils as an integral part of the curriculum within a pupil referral unit. Mark is interested in many aspects of personal and social education, and the unique contribution that outdoor education can make. Given the chance you will find him connecting with nature sailing or kayaking along the Devon coast.*  
*mleather@ucpmarjon.ac.uk*

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