

# The Oppression of Experience

## A Book Review of *Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education*

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I LEARNED TO TEACH THROUGH EXPERIENCE. I BECAME AN educator to share the benefits of experiential learning. Experience has always been a place of growth and transformation for me, a way of bringing empowerment, self-agency, and democratic ideals into the classroom. Jay W. Roberts, in *Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education* (Routledge, 2012), echoes my passion for experience—and offers a troubling critique of the ways that experience can oppress and limit the intellectual, democratic, and spiritual growth of learners.

Roberts frames his discussion around the metaphor of a river, with each tradition of experiential education (romantic, pragmatist, and critical) representing unique currents. After defining the river, he shifts to a critique of the most common form of experience in schools today, neo-experiential education, where experience becomes a commodity traded around the educational marketplace. He concludes with a call to embrace a new current, critical pragmatism, which “. . . renews a sense of democratic experiential education as a means of both resisting the negative aspects of modernism and capitalism as well as creating an ethical platform for the advancement of positive freedom through education” (Roberts, 2012, p. 10).

The first chapter is an analysis of Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato and their contributions to experience-based learning, particularly the contrast between rationalism and empiricism as forms of knowledge. In a break from the traditional history of experiential education, Roberts highlights the philosophical contributions of women, Eastern philosophical traditions, and indigenous cultures to our understandings of experience in education. A critical question framing the chapter is, who owns the knowledge gained from an experience: self, mind, society, or the community of animate and inanimate objects?

With the intellectual banks of the river established, Roberts defines and analyzes the romantic, the pragmatic, and the critical currents, experiential education’s traditional pathways. Roberts summarizes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and the role of nature in the learning process to explain the romantic current. To its advocates, Roberts raises the question of transferability. If the transformative and transcendent experience occurs in nature, out there somewhere beyond the road’s end, how can educators help students bring



learning home, where “out there” no longer exists, with fidelity?

While the romantic current situates learning in the individual, for pragmatists, knowledge is a product of context and social interaction; truth is communal. John Dewey as the classic pragmatist views democracy as social relationships and a commitment to mutual interdependence worked out in day-to-day interactions. The

challenge, according to Roberts, for pragmatists is answering the critique of Nel Noddings and Maxine Greene (p. 63), who argue that social experience in school (from service-learning to ropes courses) can be implicated in issues of unequal power and identity de-formation. As Roberts writes: “We discovered that shot through this notion of ‘democratic schooling’ are some very sticky questions about power, equality, and justice that remain unresolved in many respects” (Roberts, 2012, p. 67).

The pragmatist’s dilemma, according to Roberts, is the core of the critical current in experiential education, particularly the work of Paolo Freire and his critique of the “banking theory” (p.77) of education. According to the critical current, a planned and organized social experience, if not critiqued, can unduly change the consciousness of students by devaluing their everyday lived experiences and replacing self-agency with predetermined, market-driven forms of knowledge. But experience in schools can also liberate and resist the undemocratic oppressive impulses in education. In support of this claim, Roberts points to bell hooks and her advocacy of storytelling, the “passion of experience” (p. 81) as a process of student self-empowerment and social critique.

In chapter six, the most provocative chapter in *Beyond Learning by Doing*, Roberts argues against the market forces of modernity that have normalized experience in schools into a

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commodity to be freely traded. For Roberts, neo-experientialism should be resisted because it “increasingly seems to be colonizing the other currents we have discussed by normalizing a particular construction of experience . . . Experience itself becomes a consumable product, varying little from any other product in the educational marketplace” (p. 95). Educational experiences like ropes courses, internships, and service-learning become one-off activities devoid of real reflection, personal change, or increased civic engagement. Freedom, choice, and autonomy are part of the school curriculum, but only as individual-consumer purchases, not as collective goals and essential to a fully functioning democracy. As a challenge to educators, Roberts asks: “What would it look like to run not a *simulation* but an *actualization*?” (p. 100).

Roberts’s analysis of neo-experientialism is a clarion call for renewing the greater purpose of experiential education in schools, particularly democratic participation and personal transformation. As an experiential educator, I was a bit shocked to realize how much the purpose of experience in education has drifted from its original intentions. I remember, as a young educator, designing and implementing educational experiences that were unique and particular to each learning situation. But on campuses today, much of what passes as experiential education fulfills Dewey’s caution against the reduction of experience just for experience’s sake. Now that I see, thanks to Roberts, the extent of the drift away from original goals, I will more vigorously challenge the purpose and learning outcomes of service-learning and internships on my campus.

The final chapter ponders the question of where experience-based educators should turn for guidance when confronted with the increasingly oppressive, commodity-driven, un-democratic versions of experience in schools today. Drawing from the deepest

and clearest currents in experiential education, Roberts avoids a technical answer and instead encourages educators to resist complacency, imagine an alternative paradigm, and live into a new future that is more democratic and transformative. Faced with the “McDonaldization” (p. 92) of our beloved experiential education, with it becoming a force for stunting student empowerment, Roberts turns to a more hopeful possibility:

*Freedom is enacted when confronting obstacles. Our river of experience is only alive in its conflicts, its tensions, its multiplicity. The impeded stream simply reminds us that there is much yet to do, more to fight for. Democracy (like freedom) is not, in the end, a birthright, something to grasp and own. It is, as Dewey reminds us, a way of life. It is something to enact day to day in our relations with others. (p. 109)*

Roberts encourages educators to resist the impulse of neo-experientialism. He invites a deliberative strategy consistent with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s “living the questions” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 34) instead of a search for answers in fixed truths, even if those truths arise from direct, immediate experience. Roberts encourages experiential educators to revive democracy in schools by living the experience and avoiding quick technical solutions to educational dilemmas.

## References

- Mitchell, S. (1984). Rainer Maria Rilke Letters To a Young Poet. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. New York: Random House.
- Roberts, J.W. (2012). Beyond learning by doing: Theoretical currents in experiential education. New York: Routledge.