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The evolution of experiential learning: Tracing lines of research in the JEE

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Abstract

This article introduces the virtual special issue of the JEE focused on the concept of experiential learning. It outlines the historical trajectory of the concept beginning with human relations training practices beginning in 1946, as it came to be understood as a naturally occurring psychological process and a grounding for pedagogical reforms. The eight articles included in the issue reflect the way JEE authors have contended with problems arising from the concept's departure from its origins in practice. We suggest that experiential learning's evolution into a general theory was accomplished by decoupling it from its roots in a particular social practice and ideology, and then focusing on the concept's technical problems. It is now important for researchers to revisit assumptions underpinning current theory and practice, situate research on experiential learning in wider practical and scholarly traditions, and develop new vocabularies concerning the relationship between experience and learning in educational programs.

The evolution of experiential learning theory: Tracing lines of research in the *JEE*

How best to understand learning is a matter of obvious concern for scholars and practitioners studying or advocating for any educational reform. This is especially true for researchers seeking to explain educational processes or outcomes with any kind of specificity. Experiential learning theory has historically underwritten claims about the value of experiential *education* (Roberts, 2011), and many discussions on the topic have accordingly been published in the *Journal of Experiential Education* (hereafter *JEE*). As the *JEE* approaches its 40th year, it is useful to take stock of how experiential learning has been conceived in its pages so future articles can be more effectively situated in relation to main lines of inquiry on the topic.

This editorial article frames the inaugural virtual special issue of the *JEE,* which contains eight articles published between 1978-2015 that illustrate how authors have understood, studied, and promoted experiential learning. The issue is intended as a genealogy, explaining how the concept of experiential learning was shaped by specific historical events while also developing its own internal contours and momentum. Our approach is similar to others who have argued that major constructs such as adolescence (Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005), motivation (Roth, 2011) and even developmental psychology (Koops & Kessel, 2015) cannot be understood apart from their idea-historical origins (see also Miettinen, 2000). As these authors have shown, such constructs were established by transforming particular events and ideas into psychological universals through historical omission and abstraction. This tendency not only contributes to errors in research, it risks obscuring the ideological dimensions of the original practices, which are often carried forward as unconscious biases. Our contention is that the concept of experiential learning underwent a similar transformation and may now operate in this way.

This essay – and the curated collection it prefaces – is organized in three main parts. The first situates the origins of experiential learning in human relations training beginning in the 1940s. The phrase itself began to circulate in the 1950s and proliferated in the 1960s and 70s as authors published schematic models based on their involvement in therapeutic and adult education practices increasing in scope and popularity. These models helped to transform experiential learning from a descriptive term pertaining to human relations trainings to a conceptual vocabulary invoked in different contexts to explain and justify pedagogic conduct.

The second section introduces the first five articles included in the virtual special issue. They reflect the rising positivistic stance throughout the 1970s that took the new models and their assumptions as a starting point for understanding and promoting experiential learning in the context of experiential *education*. Authors in this era accepted the etiology encoded in published models and, correspondingly, prescribed pedagogical techniques to affect the supposed mechanisms of experiential learning.

The final section introduces three articles reflecting contemporary divisions that exist in conceptions of experiential learning. Two main trajectories can be detected: one seeking to identify the mechanisms of experiential learning as a psychological phenomenon, and one arguing that historical and socially critical analysis is needed to understand instances when experiential learning is presumed to occur. We conclude by discussing how these two trajectories intersect with several unresolved problems that were embedded within experiential learning from the beginning, but have been glossed over by a break from historical foundations (cf. Weatherbee, 2012). We close by making some general statements regarding future scholarship.

Experiential Learning Originates as a Social Practice

It is necessary at the outset to clarify what we mean by experiential learning. We are referring to a particular phrase and conception that rose to prominence in the late 20th century and started to be used generically to refer to relations between *experience* and *learning* more broadly, and that helped to underwrite experiential education in the 1970s. The clearest expression of experiential learning as we discuss it is Kolb's (1984) widely influential model. Our intent is not to diminish other possible conceptions of the relation between experience and learning (see Fenwick, 2001) or other influences on experiential education as a professional field (see e.g., Smith & Knapp, 2010), but rather to clarify the origins and meaning of experiential learning *as such* and to encourage greater precision when using this particular phrase and the assumptions that often accompany it. To accomplish the kind of precision we are after, it is necessary in our view to detail specifics of the historical association between the concept of "experiential learning" and the cultural institutions and practices that gave rise to it.

Differentiating **experience** *and* **learning** *from "experiential learning"*

Modern interest in the relationship between experience and learning corresponds to the introduction of institutionalized education in the era of industrial democracy. John Dewey spent his career developing "experience" as a philosophical category capable of addressing historically new political, economic, and cultural problems, including educating children (Quay & Seaman, 2013; Seaman & Nelsen, 2011). Dewey and other early 20th century reformers were especially attuned to the negative effects of children's segregation from economically productive activity after the rise of mass schooling (Coleman, 1972; see Dewey, 1899; Dewey, 1915/1990; Kliebard, 1995; Rogoff, Morelli, & Chavajay, 2010). Dewey's career-long use of the term *experience* to

address issues in this context earned him a reputation as a proponent of experiential learning throughout the second half of the 20th century.

It is important to point out, however, that there is little evidence Dewey used the actual phrase "experiential learning." Recognition that the relationship between experience and learning was not always expressed in this phrase is aided by charting its use over time. Figure 1 shows sources retrieved by three major academic databases using the search term "experiential learning." Searches yielded only 62 sources published between 1900-1950, none of them authored by Dewey and many apparently with the phrase added later as a keyword. Ninety-eight sources were found between 1950-1969, with sources multiplying in subsequent decades. The scholarly record therefore does not support the view that experiential learning dates to Plato (e.g., Stonehouse, Allison, & Carr, 2011), or was a concept championed by Dewey, but rather only began circulating after developments in the 1960s.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

What happened during the 1960s and 1970s that launched experiential learning as a general concept? In what follows, we discuss the evolution of human relations training programs into "experiential learning groups," the representation of experiential learning as sequential models, and the use of its language and models in other reforms.

Human Relations Training, 1946-1955

The original training laboratory, 1946. Psychologist Kurt Lewin has been cited as an influence on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Smith & Leeming, 2010), however, the nature of his contribution is rarely specified. Nonetheless it is foundational to the concept's origins. While

at MIT in 1944, Lewin was approached by community leaders in Connecticut to help address interracial and religious conflicts (Marrow, 1967). A team led by Lewin worked with the Connecticut Interracial Commission and the American Jewish Congress to plan a two-week training for delegates from public and private sectors, with the goal of developing strategies for improving civic policy (Bradford, 1967). Lewin's team, particularly Kenneth Benne, Leland Bradford, and Ronald Lippitt, lent expertise to the design and also intended to study people's conduct during the training (see Lippitt, 1949). This represented an innovative new form of collaboration between researchers and practitioners, an approach Lewin called "action research" (Lewin, 1946).

The training, held in New Britain, Connecticut, in June 1946, used the workshop method, a novel training format employing different configurations of small groups. This design choice reflected a number of influences. First, industrial sociologists in the 1930s had established the "primary group" as a legitimate area for scientific research (Shils, 1951). Scholarship on primary groups concerned the ways people organized in workplaces, municipalities, and social networks to achieve solidarity and assert personal agency amidst larger institutional structures. This research spurred an interest in groups as both a practical and scholarly category.

Second, the Connecticut training reflected the concerns of its designers. Kenneth Benne, an educational philosopher and a colleague of Dewey's at Columbia, was interested in methods of teaching civic judgment (Cahill, 2011). Leland Bradford had been pioneering the use of discussion groups in adult literacy courses in the 1930s. While working in the Works Project Administration, Bradford learned of Lewin's work with Ronald Lippitt on autocratic and democratic leadership (see Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939) and sought out Lippitt for collaboration. Lippitt, a protégé of Lewin's and respected social psychologist himself, had been

using Viennese psychotherapist Victor Moreno's role-playing techniques in educational trainings (see Moreno, 1969). Bradford organized a lunch with Lippitt and Benne in 1945, during which the three discussed using small groups in adult education and training (Bradford, 1967, p. 134).

The 1946 training was the first systematic effort by Benne, Bradford, Lippitt, and Lewin to incorporate emerging techniques from adult education – namely small discussion groups and psychodramatic role-play – with scientific knowledge about social problems. They also employed rigorous empirical methods to study processes of interaction as people worked together on issues related to social conflict and local governance (see Lippitt, 1949 for a detailed account). Organizers called the event a *laboratory in human relations training*.

Three interrelated developments significant for experiential learning stemmed from the original Connecticut training. First, delegates discussed sociological theory and research while also analyzing their own interactional processes as they rehearsed strategies for solving specific social problems. Second, attendees were expected to contribute to the design of the overall training as a way to orient them to their new roles as "change agents" in their communities (Benne, Bradford, & Lippitt, 1964). The third development came serendipitously; a specific time was established for delegates to discuss each day's events. David Kolb, who based his experiential learning cycle on the workshop structure, describes how this transpired:

> The two-week training program began with an experimental emphasis encouraging group discussion and decision making in an atmosphere where staff and participants treated one another as peers. In addition, the research and training staff collected extensive observations and recordings of the groups' activities. When the participants went home at night, the research staff gathered together to report and analyze the data collected during the day. Most of the staff felt that trainees should not be involved in these analytical

sessions where their experiences and behavior were being discussed, for fear that the

discussions might be harmful to them. Lewin was receptive, however, when a small

group of participants asked to join in these discussions. (Kolb, 1984, p. 9)

The evening discussions became popular among delegates (Lippitt, 1949), and the occasion to

share observations about interpersonal conduct was adopted as a permanent feature of

subsequent training laboratories.

The emergence of T Groups. In 1947, the operation moved to Bethel, Maine and was

renamed the National Training Laboratory for Group Development (NTL – see Benne, et al.,

1953). Bethel was selected because, to Lewin's mind, trainings in the rural town symbolized

"'cultural islands' free from some of the usual situations in people's daily lives that pressure

against change" (Eddy & Lubin, 1971, p. 626). As the NTL experimented during 1947-1948 with

different group configurations, a major addition was the Basic Skills Training (BST) group. BST

sessions occupied a limited time period each day and incorporated skill based role-playing

followed by discussions of immediate behavioral data. BST groups refined elements of the initial

1946 training to more deliberately focus on participants' understanding of their own interactional

styles, the group's ability to create insights into peoples' personalities, and the likelihood of

change strategies being successfully implemented back at home given these factors. By design,

BST groups heavily emphasized "here-and-now" events, which, although successful at

generating enthusiasm, "led eventually to rejection of outside problems as less involving and

fascinating" (Benne, 1964, pp. 83-87).

BST groups, which became known simply as "T [Training] Groups," took on greater

significance from 1949-1955 as NTL staff "pruned" extraneous functions; namely, whatever

didn't happen here-and-now wasn't admissible as material for learning (Benne, 1964, p. 90).

This meant that circumstances external to the training were categorically excluded from the sessions, which also effectively silenced the staff members responsible for initiating theoretical discussions (Whyte, 1953). During this time the NTL itself also changed substantially:

> In 1949 a deliberate effort had been made to invite more clinically oriented staff members in order to work more on the issue of 'action research' and 'clinical' models of training. The [original] staff had represented principally the discipline of social psychology, with others from education and sociology. Seven of the ten new major staff members were from psychiatry and clinical psychology. These represented both Freudian and Rogerian outlooks. … Bradford, Benne, and Lippitt were all deposed in 1949 … The focus of trainer and member attention became the interpersonal events occurring between trainer and members or between members and, in varying degree, group events in the developing experiences of the T Group. The language of interpretation used in clarifying events became more psychoanalytic or Rogerian and less sociological and Lewinian. (Benne, 1964, pp. 91-92)

As the trainings took on a more therapeutic flavor, delegates' fascination with so-called "experiential analysis" (Benne, 1964, p. 90) in T Groups influenced other workshop sessions. For example, in the afternoons, organizers planned Action, or 'A Groups,' to discuss applications of insights gleaned from T Groups held in the mornings. However, Benne writes, "the problem in most A Groups was that they tended to become a second T Group. The involving focus on interpersonal dynamics tended to spill over into the afternoon groups" (p. 93). The focus in T Groups shifted to interpersonal skills and small group membership as topics in themselves, displacing the original purpose of using small groups to enhance delegates' personal skills in addressing social problems in their communities.

Humanistic Psychology and Experiential Learning

Training laboratories became increasingly swayed by humanistic psychology throughout the 1950s, particularly Rogerian group psychotherapy and Maslow's utopian framework of self-actualization (Grogan, 2013). T Groups also spread beyond the NTL. While Benne and others experimented with workshop designs in Maine between 1949-1955, faculty at UCLA's business school adapted the method to create sensitivity trainings (Wechsler, Tannenbaum, & Zenger, 1957), a version of workshop training concerned

> with the strengthening of the individual in his [sic] desires to experience people and
>
> events more fully, to know himself more intimately and accurately, to find a more
>
> significant meaning for his life, and to initiate or sustain a process of individual growth
>
> toward ever-increasing personal adequacy. (pp. 34-35)

Benne (1964) describes how this shift toward psychologized humanism affected the tenor of experiential analysis:

> … the person is seen primarily in existential terms. The 'real' person is a private
>
> individual stripped of his roles and statuses. … The proper focus of training attention …
>
> is upon life values internal to the person. These life values are revealed most
>
> authentically in the language of feelings and behavior as these are manifested in here-
>
> and-now 'gut level' encounters in the laboratory situation. (p. 117)

The spread of T Groups and sensitivity trainings in the 1950s helped facilitate the rise of self-awareness programs in the 1960s, providing the template for encounter groups, Gestalt sessions, marathon groups, and wilderness-based personal growth programs (Anderson, 2004; Gottschalk, Pattison, & Schafer, 1971; Katz & Kolb, 1968). What these training milieus shared was the use of emotionally intense, small group interactions in retreat-like settings as vehicles for

generating reactions that signified personal authenticity and relational closeness. These kinds of trainings, which started to be known generically as "experiential learning groups" (see Barrett-Leonard, 1974), also contained an ideological dimension: "The continuing quest, beyond the training to which the participant is invited," Benne writes, "is a personal program of 'long-range individual growth and development'" (1964, pp. 126-127). Thus, experiential learning referred to a training format that was ideologically linked to personal growth as a both a programmatic outcome and a moral orientation.

Experiential learning becomes an abstract concept and moves into the head. Free from its mooring in Lewin's civic reform and research agendas, experiential learning expanded in the 1960s and 70s as schematic models abstracted from T Groups were published in a burgeoning literature. The new models of experiential learning simultaneously explained psychological processes, prescribed a formula for practice, and expressed humanistic values (e.g., Boud, 1973; Kolb & Fry, 1976; Tuckman, 1965). The fit between these characteristics and the progressive ethos of the time made the vocabulary of "experiential learning" attractive to advocates of other educational reforms, most prominently project-based school curricula (e.g., Hamilton, 1980) and efforts to award college credit for adults' prior knowledge (e.g., Hurkamp, 1976). In addition, the appropriation of previous reformers, most prominently John Dewey, as "founders and 'supporters' of experiential learning" (Miettinen, 2000, p. 56), created an impression that the new ideas and practices were extensions of long and venerable philosophic traditions (e.g., Crosby, 1981; Houle, 1976).

The humanistic ideology embedded within the new models gave methodological primacy to the individual, which helped convert experiential learning from a practice to a theory by reifying it as a naturally occurring, psychological process. This not only provided fresh support

for other reforms founded on notions of "experience," it also transformed a "historically very specific and unilateral mode of experience – feedback session in T-group training – into a general model of learning" (Miettinen, 2000, p. 54). As a consequence, assumptions rooted in a particular training tradition became separated from their origins in practice to establish the generic definition of experiential learning as "an independent learner, cognitively reflecting on concrete experience to construct new understandings, perhaps with the assistance of an educator, toward some social goal of progress or improvement" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 7). The basic archetype for this definition is the T Group after 1955.

Experiential Learning: Models, Mechanisms, and Techniques

Once experiential learning was transformed into a theory of psychological processes, it could be applied in other contexts like progressive educational reforms and organizational behavior. This transformation contributed to experiential learning's expansion since it provided a single explanatory framework for social and psychological processes across a range of reforms along with a diagrammatic format that could be prescribed, modified, and subjected to outcomes measurement. However, the conflation of theory, practice, and ideology, and the corresponding projection of experiential learning to new and different contexts, refracted what were concrete events and made them appear as complex theoretical problems. These included dichotomizing process and content, minimizing the role of "outside" social factors in face-to-face interaction, bracketing reflection as a component of the learning process distinct from experience, and documenting how personal change persists after a training event (i.e., transfer). These problems became a focus of scholarship in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Experiential education and the *JEE*. Our discussion to this point allows us to introduce the first five articles in the virtual special issue. The first three articles, Greenberg's *The*

community as a learning resource (1978), Coleman's *Experiential learning and information assimilation: Toward an appropriate mix* (1979), and Shuttenberg and Poppenhagen's *Current research in experiential learning theory for adults* (1980) illustrate how members of the nascent experiential education community attempted to address the problems listed above: how and when to introduce theoretical knowledge to the learning process, how individual learning relates to cultural practices and social problems, how reflection should be structured, and how different progressive reforms can all be explained and justified by a uniform theory. To our point, what these articles most exemplify is how by the late 1970s experiential learning had become communicable as a set of presuppositions abstracted from their origins in T Groups, which also incorporate the humanistic faith in personal growth as central to both learning and social progress. We therefore argue that these early *JEE* articles are properly understood as extensions of the human relations training tradition, not solely as efforts to establish experiential education as a field *de novo.*

The next two articles reflect the technical approach authors took to dealing with problems created once experiential learning was elevated to the status of a general theory: Joplin's *On defining experiential education* (1981) proposes conditions necessary for learning to be considered *educational*, and Gass's *Programming the transfer of learning in adventure education* (1985) addresses the problem of transfer by prescribing specialized techniques designed to trigger cognitive responses as part of the experiential learning process. These approaches reflect a new phase in experiential learning's life course – now as a standalone theory inviting refinement and verification.

Making experiential learning *educational*. Equipped with this new theory of learning, proponents of experiential education needed to address three related problems: (1)

how interior processes are affected by outside conditions, (2) how this newly discovered

mode of learning could be made *educational* without specifying subject matter content, and

(3) how to influence the mechanisms of "experiential learning" to produce desired outcomes.

Joplin (1981) and Gass (1983) approached these problems differently. Joplin's effort

can be described as comprehensive. She first diagrams a five-stage model for educational

situations including focus, challenging action, feedback, support, and debriefing; steps

mirroring the T Group format. Learning is defined according to humanistic values which are

expressed in the nine characteristics that Joplin overlays onto her stage model. Experiential

education is: *student-based rather than teacher-based; personal, not impersonal; process

and product oriented; evaluated for internal and external reasons; aimed at holistic and

component understanding; organized around experience; perception-based rather than

theory-based;* and *individual-based rather than group-based* (pp. 19-20).

Joplin's presentation bears close resemblance to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle

(see also Williamson, 1979; Kolb & Fry, 1976) and typifies the mechanistic approach to

experiential education that achieved prominence during this period – experiential learning is a

stepwise process occurring in the here-and-now that produces cognitive changes in an individual

learner. Joplin's model is therefore significant not because of its originality, but because it

codifies the belief that instructional formulas based on experiential learning are coextensive with

naturally occurring psychological mechanisms, a relationship that justifies certain forms of

pedagogic conduct. Joplin's article also illustrates how core elements of the T Group format had

become available as conceptual categories one could elaborate independently of their historical

origins, a process of decontextualization that prompted new instructional techniques targeting

different phases in the so-called learning cycle.

Techniques to enhance learning *from* experience. Conceptualizing experiential

learning as a stepwise, psychological process encouraged a focus on cognition, which in turn

generated a need for empirically verifiable techniques aimed at shaping people's impressions of

their own experience. Moreover, the need to gain "acceptance by educational institutions"

(Joplin, 1981, p. 19) and ensure continued funding (Gass, 1985) required evidence that outcomes

could be reproduced in settings different from the cultural islands of experiential programs.

Notably, this was a problem indigenous to the way the concept evolved; whereas the original

NTL programs treated community applications as integral to the very purpose of the training,

experiential learning as a psychological process of self-improvement treated social context as

extraneous to here-and-now events occurring in the immediate group. In this view learning was a

private activity mediated through the behavioral data at hand. Thus educational legitimacy is

achievable chiefly by making stronger claims about individual learning processes themselves,

particularly as a function of facilitated reflection.

In response to this dilemma of how to reproduce outcomes in some undefined future

context, Gass (1985) developed a three-part model of transfer: specific, nonspecific, and

metaphoric (p. 19). Gass's prescriptions considerably refined the kinds of instructor support

intimated by more general models such as Joplin's (1981), and presaged growth over the

following decade in resources for eliciting desirable responses from participants in different

phases of the experiential learning cycle. Gass's initial guidelines for achieving transfer were

later elaborated when strategies such as framing and frontloading were developed to target more

specific outcomes (Gass, 1993; Gass & Priest, 1997). Additional resources came from other

areas of training, education, or therapy including psychodynamic theory (Stouffer, 1999),

corporate training (Priest, Gass, & Fitzpatrick, 1999), and narrative theory (Cassidy, 2001).

Additional texts in this genre included *Designing processing questions to meet specific objectives* (Knapp, 1984); *How to process experience* (Quinsland & Van Ginkel, 1988); *Essential skills for processing adventure experiences* (Brackenreg, Luckner, & Pinch, 1994).

Joplin's and Gass's efforts not only bore the ongoing imprint of humanistic values, they signalled the emergence of a new phase in experiential learning's life course: as a psychological phenomenon and a set of related methods needing technical refinement to be used in different settings. Our purpose here is not to outline particular strengths or limitations of Joplin's (1981) and Gass's (1985) models, but rather to situate them in the history of ideas in order to trace how experiential learning evolved from a specific training modality to a theory providing foundations for a broad educational paradigm along with research agendas designed to substantiate it.

Experiential Learning After the Historical Break

Early *JEE* articles helped transform experiential learning into a standalone theory by extrapolating from ideas circulating in the wake of the human potential movement, the name for the larger group of social reforms spawned by the early laboratory trainings (see Anderson, 2004; Grogan, 2013). Rarely, however, were these origins carefully delineated. In an analysis paralleling ours, Weatherbee (2012) argues that the field of management studies suffered the same historical break. "In the USA," Weatherbee explains, "the modernist philosophy of science as the way forward was such that much of the Philosophy and History and its methods were left out or supplanted" (p. 207). As a consequence, "theories used to frame or explain phenomena and their interrelations become prone to *presentism* and *universalism*" (p. 205, italics added) – or the view that phenomena described by a theory have always been present and apply everywhere without reference to any social, historical, and ideological context.

Experiential learning's origins in T Groups were never a direct scholarly focus since this kind of investigation was ostensibly unnecessary to understanding what came to be seen as a psychological process rather than a pedagogical stance emerging from particular cultural institutions and practices. This orientation is exemplified in Itin's (1999) influential description:

> Learning is best considered as the process of change that occurs for the individual. Learning is an individual experience. … Experiential learning is best considered in Chickering's (1976) or AEE's (1994) definitions as changes in the individual based on direct experience. Drawing on Stehno's (1986) work mentioned earlier, experiential learning involves 1) action, 2) reflection, 3) abstraction, and 4) application. So experiential learning is best considered as the change in an individual that results from reflection on a direct experience and results in new abstractions and applications. (pp. 91-92)

Characteristically, Itin represents elements of a historically specific tradition of practice as eternally and universally true – a function of naturally occurring psychological properties – and then uses this construal to explicate experiential *education.*

Current Trajectories

One of the main traditions of scholarship on experiential learning in the *JEE* is thus recognizable by its *presentism* and *universalism,* or the view that experiential learning is a timeless and ubiquitous psychological process. The chronological point of departure for this tradition originates after experiential learning was modelled schematically and used to underwrite early descriptions of experiential education in the mid 1970s. Like Gass (1985), scholars in this tradition tend to assume the etiology of experiential learning as expressed by Itin (1999) above, and seek to either (a) discover the psychometric properties of the process outlined

within extant models, or (b) amend the models themselves, often by introducing other concepts or enumerating new variables.

The sixth and seventh articles in the virtual special issue – Paisley, Furman, Sibthorp, and Gookin's (2008) *Student learning in outdoor education: A case study from the National Outdoor Leadership School* and Schenk and Cruikshank's (2015) *Evolving Kolb: Experiential education in the age of neuroscience* represent current iterations of this tradition. Paisley et al. report on a qualitative study that examined "both *what* students learn and *how* they learn it" (p. 202, italics in original). The authors list program elements matched with outcomes as described by students and curriculum designers. It can be understood as an effort to align mechanisms of experiential learning with its context by focusing on the immediate program environment. In contrast, Schenck and Cruikshank argue for neurobiology as a foundation for future claims about experiential learning. They challenge many elements of Kolb's framework, especially his attempts to append neurology onto the experiential learning cycle (see Kolb & Kolb, 2005), and propose a new biological basis for understanding phases in the experiential learning process. Where Paisley et al. focus on external learning mechanisms – course elements as perceived by students – Schenck and Cruickshank focus on internal mechanisms – neurobiological processes. Both represent a style of investigation that approaches learning as a series of elements that interact over the course of action-reflection cycles to produce specific outcomes.

Together, these two articles are notable for several reasons. First, they urge a departure from extant models published in the heyday of humanistic, workshop-style trainings. Second, they propose additional theories that might offer better explanations for learning in experiential programs. In this, they are actually consistent with recent efforts undertaken by Kolb himself (Kolb, 2014; Peterson, DeCato, & Kolb, 2015), although Kolb assesses his original model more

favorably. These articles signal a growing dissatisfaction with canonical experiential learning models due to a lack of explanatory power especially across educational settings and aims. They also represent interest in new methodologies that expand beyond existing themes.

On the one hand, these are important advances within a tradition of research that is *psychometric* in orientation. On the other hand, to some extent the articles cited above echo the theory they criticize by assuming commensurability between the pedagogic organization of action-reflection cycles and individual psychological processes; indeed how this relationship works is their research focus. As a consequence, characteristics of early human relations trainings are often tacitly maintained as theoretical presuppositions: a necessary emphasis on small group development, interpersonal communication, and leadership training; continuation of an ideology of self-improvement; and downplaying cultural transmission as an aspect of learning, instead favoring individual-level outcomes.

In fairness, to a large degree these assumptions are entailed with use of the term *experiential*; so long as the learning under study is "experiential," vestiges of T Groups and humanistic psychology might be unavoidable. Occasionally, however, authors have tried to sever this linkage. This defines the second major tradition of research on experiential learning, exemplified by the final article included in the virtual special issue: Martha Bell's *What constitutes experience? Rethinking theoretical assumptions* (1993). Bell was among the first to critically and systematically interrogate core presuppositions of experiential learning theory, particularly its implicit affiliation with humanistic psychology. Bell writes: "The theory organizes the learning process … around facilitated, abstract, conceptual, 'objective' reflection on that quite subjective, embodied experience. Experiential learning is group-based, a social experience, and yet our traditions call it 'personal growth' and 'character building,' individual

changes" (p. 19). Later in her article Bell expressly repudiates the humanistic faith in self-actualizing individuals, the homogenizing notion of "the group," and the innocence of reflection, all definitional aspects of canonical experiential learning models.

Bell attempts to historicize, rather than psychologize, experiential learning. Although she does not ground the concept in earlier T Group practices, and thus stops short of a full genealogy, she rightly recognizes it had been "accepted uncritically as 'natural,' rather than understood as the result of social forces: certain thinking, meeting certain interests, at a particular time in history, and in a specific context" (p. 20). Bell's article therefore exemplifies what we call the *socio-historical* tradition. Unlike the psychometric tradition, which views experiential learning as an objective process that, under ideal conditions, will operate dependably, generate predictable outcomes, and avail itself to measurement – the socio-historical tradition rejects the view that the theory innocently describes a naturally occurring phenomenon. Like Bell, scholars in this tradition have called for research revealing "the ways in which experience is theoretically constituted, and then dislodging it from the dominant definitions which organize it in practice" (Bell, p. 23). Bell's argument is that experiential learning theory produces the very phenomenon it seeks to explain, with effects that are not politically or socially benign (see also Fenwick, 2001; Michelson, 1996; Vernon, 2016).

The psychometric and socio-historical traditions, while fundamentally different in their approaches, share a concern with the psychological and social dimensions of learning in/from experience. They also show increasing dissatisfaction with the power of canonical experiential learning theory to explain relationships between experience, learning, context, and ensuing outcomes. The traditions deviate, however, in the extent to which they (a) accept the theory's basic homology between action-reflection cycles and human psychological processes, and (b)

endorse the humanistic aims of self-actualization and its associated social conditions and quasi-therapeutic formulas for pedagogic conduct. The psychometric tradition seeks to improve on existing conceptions by isolating new variables and enlisting other theories to aid in explaining the assumed phenomenon's core processes; the socio-historical tradition sees the theory of experiential learning, the phenomenon it describes, and the practices it entails as caught in a tautological relationship, which psychologism only intensifies. We see these currently as the two main traditions of scholarship on experiential learning in the *JEE,* within which future work will be situated.

Implications and suggestions for future research

The main point of this article has been to illuminate how experiential learning theory has evolved so as to inform ongoing research efforts along the main lines of existing inquiry, which have been ambiguously defined. To this end we have shown how experiential learning began in the 1940s with group training techniques designed as a means to develop methods of resolving interracial and religious conflicts. Beyond the particular civic strategies developed through this training, the techniques were recognized as advancing effective membership and leadership of small groups, which itself became a training focus in the early 1950s. For the next two decades humanistic psychology and psychotherapy exerted a major influence on the direction of small group trainings in adult education and spurred a variety of personal growth retreats that human potential advocates believed would lead to self-actualization and social change. "Experiential learning" became a watchword in this larger movement.

The concept took on an increasingly psychological outlook as proponents published schematic models and prescribed practices fashioned after T Groups. Elements of the models were abstracted as principles in a general theory, enabling experiential learning to expand

throughout the 1960s and 70s. Experiential learning was represented similarly across different reforms: as a series of steps in which the cognitive and emotional processes of individual persons are emphasized, facilitated by situational conditions resembling T Groups.

The historical origins we have outlined in this essay still play a subtle yet powerful role in *JEE* articles addressing issues of learning in the twenty-first century. We hope to have revealed some of the origins of the assumptions and value commitments inherent in existing perspectives, and now see at least two important directions for future scholarship: (1) using other theories to investigate learning processes when pedagogical activities are organized to resemble T Groups, and (2) returning to Lewin's initial concerns by differentiating between *experiential learning as a culturally and historically specific type of social practice* and *educational experiences as essential to learning in a modern democratic society*.

Studying learning categorized as "experiential." One of the challenges with the concept of experiential learning is that it simultaneously expresses an empirical phenomenon, a set of pedagogical strategies, and an ideology. Early authors celebrated this eclectic unity as one of the concept's signature strengths (see Kolb, 1984); in our view this condition now inhibits progress in knowledge and practice. The psychometric and socio-historical traditions converge on the idea that the study of learning ought to be separated from the rationales given for maintaining established practices, for example, insisting on structured reflection events because they are believed to constitute learning. Canonical models of experiential learning offer limited guidance on how this separation should be achieved, which is a role other research paradigms could productively play. In sum, future research should make the relationships between theory, practice, and ideology a central focus, not just for philosophical purposes, but also to achieve greater empirical precision (see Baldwin, Persing & Magnussen, 2004).

Learning versus education. Rather than attempting to advance experiential learning theory by continually elaborating on themes tied to a historically specific mode of training in adult education, we suggest positioning learning, as Dewey did, within education more broadly: "The currents of social life that run outside the school," Dewey wrote (1933), "condition the educational meaning of whatever the school does" (p. 103). In this vein, Biesta (2005) has argued that the preoccupation with *learning* is actually one such force, undermining education by treating it as a marketable commodity. "Teaching has, for example, become redefined as supporting or facilitating learning, just as education is now often described as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences" (p. 55). Experiential education is not immune from this critique, as Roberts (2011) has shown. He coined the term "neo-experientialism" to refer to individualistic conceptions of experiential learning that facilitate the application of market logic to education. Creating new justifications for experiential education will require arguing for, rather than assuming, the desirability of deeply entrenched humanistic assumptions, and possibly to devise alternative rationales rooted in other theoretical and philosophic traditions.

Future empirical research could also fruitfully link psychological processes with the socio-cultural aspects central to learning, a major theme in the broader learning sciences (see Sawyer, 2006). Pedagogically, revisiting commitments to formulaic action-reflection cycles frees both educators and learners from prescriptive scripts and can help to recognize the diversity inherent in learning environments and personal experiences. For instance, valuing experiences as embodied and situated in particular places (e.g., Mullins, 2014), rather than simply as fodder for abstract reflection aimed at self-understanding, may help to connect experiential education – as with the initial Lewinian trainings – with democratic rationales that more clearly link individual goals and social purposes. It is unclear to us whether "experiential learning" as a general

perspective can usefully contribute to this effort given its ongoing association with ideas from humanistic psychology which elsewhere have been abandoned. Indeed, the aim of self-improvement through experiential analysis came under heavy attack throughout the 1970s as critics pointed out the empirical and moral shortcomings of the human potential movement (see Anderson, 2004; Grogan, 2013; Schur, 1976). Just as any researchers studying learning should be mindful of the historical and cultural origins of the theories they use, future research on experiential learning should position itself within these preceding debates.

Conclusion

Experiential learning, as a 'named' phenomenon and concept, began in 1946 as a form of social practice influenced by Kurt Lewin's action research agenda applied to problems of intergroup conflict. It then transformed from a term referring to a quasi-therapeutic style of personal growth training based on T Groups, to a standalone theory referring to a particular relationship between cognitive and emotional processes, "action-reflection" cycles, and ideals of personal transformation. To borrow a metaphor from Roberts (2011), early *JEE* authors drew liberally from an already moving river with headwaters in New Britain, Connecticut in 1946, whose democratic and scientific currents were irrevocably altered when it encountered the contours of humanistic psychology in the early 1950s. The flow accelerated as the current merged with various quasi-therapeutic group practices popularized by retreat centers in the 1960s (Anderson, 2004). By the *JEE*'s founding in 1978, experiential learning had been transformed into a general concept referring to an internal process and set of practices whose elements could be imagined, refined, and examined independently of the original practices.

The merger between experiential learning and progressive educational reforms, along with its representation in schematic models, helped legitimize the concept and expand its reach.

Its conversion into a general theory of learning also tacitly sustained an ideology and related set of practices that had begun to fall into disfavor as the public lost interest in new-age retreats and as critics assailed the human potential movement for sponsoring a "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, 1979) among its largely white, middle-class adherents (Grogan, 2013). These arguments now reverberate in critiques of self-expressive pedagogies (Tobin, 1995) and discourses that treat learning as private property (Biesta, 2005). Since contemporary understandings of experiential learning have largely become divorced from their historical foundations in human relations practices, experiential educators have been able to sidestep many of these issues raised throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which are now resurfacing in current discussions about the shortcomings of experiential learning theory, its related prescriptions for practice, and its relevance to contemporary social and educational problems.

   Unresolved issues in research on experiential learning can be addressed by directly examining the concept's historical evolution, ontological assumptions, and ideological commitments, and by approaching experiencing and learning empirically from other vantage points. Our purpose in assembling the virtual special issue has been to restore links to the history of an idea that is central to scholarship and practice in the *JEE*, so as to promote conceptual clarity and give further warrant to scholars keen to introduce new theoretical perspectives to the study of experience and learning in diverse environments, and with respect to the multitude of aims that are necessary to education.

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