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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DEFINITION¹

by

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Experiential learning is a highly qualitative concept, and cannot be received as a rigidly defined theory of learning. Carl Rogers makes a step towards a conceptualization of experiential learning by trying to define its essence:

It has a quality of personal involvement — the whole-person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects being in the learning event.²

An important point in Rogers' statement, as underlined, is his use of the term "whole-person". Note that Rogers explains that the individual is involved in both feeling and cognitive aspects of the learning event. A third learning dimension of behavior can be added to the affective and cognitive dimensions.

Experiential Learning Dimensions

Experiential learning is conceptualized here as a methodology of education which has a learning impact on the whole person, including feeling (affect) and behavior, in addition to cognitive stimulation. The bulk of whole person/experiential learning approaches can be found in the applied behavioral science literature. The conceptualization of experiential learning developed in this paper differs slightly from the common usage of the term "experiential" which is found in most of the literature of laboratory training.

The laboratory training conceptualization of experiential learning equates the term "experiential" with the term "affective", and consequently hinders useful definition of the affective element of educational processes. In order to develop a conceptualization of experiential learning that is useful experimentally, experiential learning practitioners need effective delineation and definition of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of learning as separate components.

Experiential learning is "whole-person" learning. That is, it functions integratively, combining the affective and behavioral domains with the cognitive domain always found in educational processes. With this conceptualization of the dimensions of experiential learning, it is

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² Carl Rogers, Freedom to Learn, (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1969), p. 5

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now possible to turn to an examination of the learning person's involvement and the concept of intensity in experiential learning.

Intensity and Involvement in Experiential Learning

A full understanding of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of experiential learning requires an examination of these learning domains as they function individually, and in interactive combinations. If experiential learning practitioners are to maximize whole-person learning outcomes, they must understand the tools, or combination of tools, available as specific approaches. From a whole-person perspective, it makes more sense to view the cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements as occurring simultaneously rather than sequentially.

The learning individual, conscious, and therefore perceiving his environment, has at least some level of involvement on all three of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Thus, when terms such as "affective learning" or "skill learning" are used, they refer more to a technique or approach than to the "pure" psychological state of the learning individual.

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual classification scheme which presents the experiential learning dimensions of cognition, affect, and behavior in combination and as independent learning dimensions. The first three categories present the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions as if they existed independently. As already discussed, conscious learning realistically involves all of these dimensions, at least to some extent. This fact is illustrated by the accented line around the box indicating the all inclusive combinatorial category. Note that the cognitive term dominates the six categories. This reflects the prime importance of cognition in any educational process leading to intellectual insight.

Just as experiential learning varies by dimension, it can also vary in intensity. Since experiential learning has already been conceptualized as a whole-person process, it follows that the intensity (and strength) of experiential learning is a function of the inclusion of the learning modes of the experientially involved individual. Therefore, the highest intensity learning experience is one in which the learning individual functions at a high level of arousal and activity on all dimensions - cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Conversely, lower intensity experiential learning can be conceptualized as those learning situations in which the whole learning person is not involved, or is involved at an insufficient level of arousal.

These low Intensity learning situations can be contrasted to higher intensity learning situations. Literature has already been cited expounding the benefits of combining the cognitive and affective dimensions. Likewise, high intensity learning experiences can exist combining the cognitive and behavioral dimensions in situations involving skill practice or "learning by doing". Illustrative examples here are driver training classes for traffic safety and accident avoidance or stimulation machines for pilot training.

Figure 1 suggests that the "highest" type of high intensity experiential learning occurs when all three learning dimensions are operating

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simultaneously, and at a high level of arousal. The dashed X's in Figure 1 illustrate that if these learning dimensions are not operating at a high level of activity, the learning experience can very well be low intensity. Examples of high intensity learning situations involving high levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioral activity can be found in "learning to soldier" under battle conditions or learning to play football in actual game situations. Examples of low intensity learning in these same situations might be found in mock battle drills or football scrimmages.

FIGURE 1
A CONCEPTUAL CLASSIFICATION SCHEME
ILLUSTRATING COMBINATIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

	Cognitive	Affective	Behavioral	Cognitive/ Affective	Cognitive/ Behavioral	Cognitive/ Affective Behavioral
High Intensity Experiential Learning	NULL	NULL	NULL	X X	X X	X X X
Low Intensity Experiential Learning	X	X (?)	X (?)	X X	X X	X X X

DIMENSIONS AND THE CONCEPT OF INTENSITY IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Figure 2 illustrates a concept of a continuum of whole-person involvement. This continuum, at its extreme points, does not exist in a real sense. Zero involvement, or complete detachment, could really only exist if the learning (really non-learning) individual was in an unconscious state. Likewise, it is hard to realistically imagine a learning individual so totally involved that he would be completely unaffected by distracting elements within himself or his learning environment. Within these extreme points, however, it is possible to conceptualize varying degrees of whole-person learning involvement. Towards the left of the continuum, learning activities tend to operate at a low level or on a one-dimensional basis. This type of activity, as already described, consists of lower intensity experiential learning. In these conditions, learning (if it occurs) tends to be relatively passive.

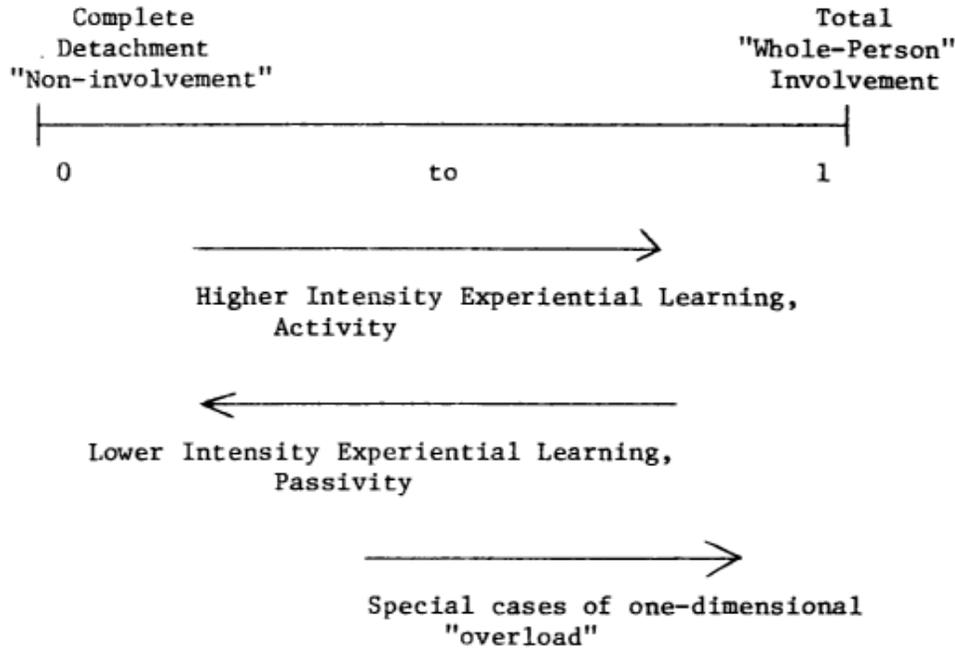
On the other hand, the right of the continuum represents higher intensity experiential learning. In these conditions, the learning individual is actively involved in the learning process. The learning dimension of cognition, affect, and behavior are combinatorial, co-existent, and perhaps even synergistically interactive.

The whole-person involvement continuum in Figure 2 is really a horizontal illustration of the accented box on the far right of Figure 1.

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but the involvement continuum can also be used to illustrate special cases of one-dimensional "overload." There are situations in which individuals report high levels of involvement, without necessarily functioning on all three dimensions of experiential learning. An example might be found in a condition of fear "overload." Likewise, moments of extreme intellectual insight can be reported as situations of high learner involvement, in a one-dimensional sense. However, on a continuum of whole-person involvement, these situations are the exceptional cases. In addition, such situations are extremely difficult to replicate or produce consistently in most educational environments. The intent of experiential learning techniques is to produce higher intensity learning situations for active learning participants.

FIGURE2
A CONTINUUM OF WHOLE-PERSON INVOLVEMENT



Experiential Learning: A Definition

In a very real sense, all conscious learning is experiential, for all learning processes involve, at least to some extent, the three dimensions of cognition, affect, and behavior. Experiential learning approaches essentially attempt to combine the processes of learning with the content of learning. To the extent that any educational process is participative, it accomplishes this outcome. However, the designers and users of experiential learning methodologies attempt more conscious use and deliberate adoption of the learning dynamics inherent in the process dimension. This focus on process is an attempt to achieve learning and insight from the "how" as well as the "what" of the instruction or training.

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Without any experience (sensation and perception), there is no learning contact with the environment. Any level of environmental contact involves the reception and processing of information (cognitive), emotional reaction (affective), and a degree of awareness or action/ reaction (behavioral). Astute design and selection of experiential learning methodologies is thus a question of how to efficaciously use these learning dimensions.

Defined most simply, experiential learning is "learning by doing". The following definition, more specific, attempts to describe experiential learning as an ongoing process.

Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant(s) cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement.

This positive definition ties together the previously introduced concepts, and introduces the prescriptive role of the learning individual one of autonomy and self-direction. In many usages, the term experiential learning is often associated with the better utilization of the full human potential to learn.

As an educational approach, experiential learning may be viewed as follows:

Experiential learning may be viewed as a methodology of education whereby structure and individual or group experiences are contrived to develop learning and perceptual capacities, to develop and reinforce cognitions, to impact on emotions and attitudes, and, importantly, to function in developing capacities to behave consistently with the insights of these processes and experiences.

Management educators have focused primarily on the cognitive aspects of learning and have tended to use traditional methodologies grounded in the lecture format. This paper suggests such an approach can produce a one-dimensional lower intensity learning experience. Management educators should now begin to focus upon whole-person learning processes, so as to equip our organizational product, students, in all of their intellectual, emotional, and behavioral capacities, to function in the complex business world of the future.