Experience and experiential learning in the modern context

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Abstract

Dewey’s approach on education includes the concept of experience, with its two major mechanisms: the continuity and the interaction. Enlargement (extending the experience limits) and emancipation (setting free the experience) have been also addressed. Kolb presents a personal model on experiential learning in 1984, starting from Piaget, Dewey and Lewin and introducing four elements in this complex and integrative model: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situations. Jarvis has considered there are a number of responses to the potential learning situation. He used Kolb’s model and he has developed a model according to which different routes are allowed: non-learning, non-reflective learning, and reflective learning. The above mentioned models are used not only in education institution, but also in counseling and psychotherapy (e.g., experiential psychotherapy).

Keywords: Dewey; Kolb; Jarvis; experience; experiential learning; psychotherapy

1. Introduction

In his theory on education John Dewey focused on experience – people learn better by experiencing themselves - and instrumentalism – ideas are understood to exist primarily as instruments to solve problems in the environment. He stressed the importance of education in institutions/schools not only to obtain a quantity of knowledge, but also to learn how to live and this is an important part of his “experiential education” (Fig. 1).

Dewey pointed also toward two major mechanisms within the human experience: enlargement of experience (extending the experience limits) and emancipation of experience (setting free the experience) (Dewey, 1938). His practical approach was associated with the curriculum-centered education rejection rather than student-centered education.

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Experiential learning involves a “direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it.” (Borzak, 1981). This category of learning is developed by an institution and could be used on training programs for different professions.

The second type of experiential learning is “education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life” (Houle 1980: 221). In this case learning is not developed in institutional environment and in a formal way but by people themselves who learn through reflecting upon daily experience (informal and usual way of learning).

One of the modern approaches on experiential learning is presented by Kolb, which discuss it focusing on the learning process for the individual. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) presents a holistic and integrative model of the learning process and also a multidimensional model of adult development, consistent with developmental psychological phases and psychotherapy direction.

The ELT model presents two dialectically related modes of collecting experience (Concrete Experience – CE - and Abstract Conceptualization – AC) and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience (Reflective Observation – RO - and Active Experimentation - AE). In a four-stage learning cycle, concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences (Kolb et al., 2000; see Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. The Experiential Learning Cycle and Basic Learning Styles (Kolb, 1984, apud Kolb et al., 2000)

2. ELT further development

Kolb introduce also the concept of “learning space” as a framework for understanding the interface between student learning styles and the institutional learning environment, starting from Kurt Lewin’s theory about life spaces. For Lewin the person and the environment are in an interdependent relation. Also Kolb’s approach is based on the situated learning theory: “situations in situated learning
theory such as life space and learning space are not necessarily physical places but constructs of the person’s experience in the social environment” (Kolb, 2005).

Another model of ELT suggests there are a number of responses to the potential learning situation. Jarvis applied Kolb’s model on different adult groups and asked them to explore it based on their own experience of learning. This way he has developed a model which suggested different routes: non-learning, non-reflective learning, and reflective learning (Jarvis, 1994, 1995).

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**Fig. 2.** Jarvis diagram on experiential learning (Jarvis, 1994)

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### 2.1. Meta-cognitive experiential learning

A major implication in all these theories reflexive learning is the “meta” function of the learning. The meta-cognitive aspects of the learning introduce the conscious experience in the learning process. William James, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Carl Rogers placed conscious intentional action based on subjective experience at the center of the learning process (Kolb, 2009).

Kolb developed a new model of meta-cognitive learning, starting from the work of W. James and Flavell, first analyzing the role of the consciousness in daily experience and implicitly in learning and the second proposing the concept of meta-cognition, developed further by Nelson by emphasizing on monitor and function control in the meta-cognition process (Kolb, 2009; Nelson, 1996) – Fig. 3.
3. Experiential learning in psychotherapy

Learning is a process developed not only in learning situations, but in the re-education situations too, such as psychotherapy. In this regard, psychotherapy consist in identifying the dysfunctional models within the client’s mind and changing these models into functional ones, meaning helping to re-educate the client or learning new and functional patterns. Experiential learning in psychotherapy uses actions instead of talking only in order to help the client to experience in secure environment different feelings, thoughts and behaviors. This way the psychotherapist can conceptualize the case and establish together with the client the distance between functional and dysfunctional.

Experiential learning in this case could involve desensitization, relaxation procedures; work with anxiety and depression etc. When the therapist and the patient process the experience through a specific discussion that may take place during or after the experiential activity, the patient receives specific feedback regarding specific actions or behaviors. At the same time, the patient has the opportunity to identify and evaluate the behaviors that he/she exhibited during experiential therapy, as well as the thoughts or prior experiences that may have prompted those behaviors. All these aspects are actually methods of learning new functional or efficient behaviors, way of thinking and expression of feelings. One of the major psychotherapists which used this direction was Carl Rogers, the founder of the client centered therapy in which the focus should be on client’s experiences.

4. Discussions

Experiential learning has many advantages comparing to traditional ways of learning, where the subject of learning is only a receptacle. Even the ELTs have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century and they have proved their efficacy, even Dewey, Piaget, Lewin and Kolb, Jarvis and Rogers contributed in a big way to a much better understanding of the learning we are still witnessing today non-experiential ways of learning. The modern education seems divided into two major opposite directions, but the emergence of increasingly more studies in the education
field which indicates the efficiency of the experiential education and learning, tip the balance towards the latter.

References