Conceptualising learning from experience: Developing a model for facilitation

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Abstract

The key feature of adult learning is the the experience which learners bring with them. Whatever else they may be, adult educators are essentially workers with the experience of others. This paper describes a model designed to aid thinking about learning from experience and how it can be facilitated.

How little we know about learning from experience

Increasingly we are confronted with situations in which adult educators are working with many different learners and attempting to help them learn from their experience. This may be in the context of the recognition of prior learning and returning to study, adult basic education, vocational training and workplace learning or community intervention. What does adult learning theory tell us about how we can operate effectively in such situations? What research is there that can inform the decisions we make on a day-to-basis when we make an educational intervention in the classroom, workplace or the community? There is a lot of research and writing, of course, about teaching in which the teacher is the authority and the learner acquires knowledge from this source, but literature offers relatively little assistance when learners' experience is the central resource for learning.

What does the literature offer?

While much has been written about the importance of learning from experience, the present literature falls short in providing frameworks that aid the facilitation of such learning. There is also a lack of attention in adult learning literature to the work that has been done, predominantly with adults, in the field of experience-based learning. Schön (1983, 1987) has drawn attention to the place of reflective practice, particularly reflection-in-action in learning in the professions, but his metaphorical modes of description mean that application to practice must necessarily be indirect. Kolb (1984) has produced a useful pragmatic device in his version of the Lewinian experiential learning cycle, but it is insufficiently wide ranging to sustain the weight of situations to which it has been applied. Jarvis (1987) has stressed the importance of the social context of learning from experience and developed a model, but this is complicated and limited by the particular empirical data set he used. Although Heron (1989, 1993) has provided the most sophisticated and theoretically rich accounts of the facilitation of adult learning so far; his models place much more emphasis on the role of the facilitator than on the features and dynamics of experience-based learning. None of these authors have sufficiently addressed the needs of those confronted with the typically context-specific and personally-embedded learning which characterises the tasks which adults face.

Development of a model

The paper explores the use of a model of learning from experience to aid learners, and those who assist them, to examine and remind them of their own facilitative practices. Such a model will succeed only if the elements represented are both central to an appreciation of learning from experience and if they are formulated in a way which 'makes sense' and are useable by practitioners. The key elements of such a model are presented in the paper and interrelated in a form designed to guide the design andprocessing of learning from experience in any setting. The proposed model represents a critical reflective approach which is context conscious.

The model has been developed from the experiences of members of the Australian Consortium on Experiential Education (ACEE), an extended group of researchers and practitioners mostly based in Sydney, Australia who have been concerned with finding ways of conceptualising their own practice as learners and facilitators of learning. It originated in two parts. The first stage of development, which focused on reflection on experience, emerged following consideration of a

series of workshops conducted by the ACEE on the facilitation of learning from experience (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985). The second stage is more recent and, starting from a focus on the role of reflection in learning, considered the interaction of learners with learning activities and explored the role of preparation for experience and reflection in the midst of action (Boud & Walker 1990). The model presented here has been used in a variety of experience-based workshop and field-placement settings, and modified in the light of feedback from those who have used it.

The model is an indicative rather than a normative one, aimed at prompting learners and facilitators to address processes of learning as well as the ostensible content of learning activities. It provides a source of suggestions for how learning *might* be prompted, not a prescription for desired process. It draws from various theories and concepts in education and the social sciences—probably more than the authors are consciously aware—and organises them around the notion of a learning event in which learning from experience is the raison d'etre.

Assumptions

The basic assumption of the model is that learning is always rooted in prior experience and that any attempt to promote new learning must in some way take account of that experience. All learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding and links must be made between what is new and what already exists if learners are to make sense of what is happening to them. Conventional teaching does this to a very limited extent when teachers make what they regard as plausible assumptions about what learners already know and sometimes check this out through questioning and testing students. However, this is an insufficient basis for forms of learning which significantly involve affective and conative as well as cognitive learning.

Learners bring with them to any event their *personal foundation of experience*. This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. We all bring our embodied life history with us on every occasion and this will profoundly affect our perceptions of what does and does not count as important, it acts to sensitise us to some features of our world and blind us to others and it shapes the *intent* we have which guides our priorities. Normally our personal foundation of experience is not readily accessible to us and can only be inferred with difficulty from our actions and our intent.

The second assumption behind the model is that the process of learning from experience is necessarily an active one which involves learners in engaging with and intervening in the events of which they are part. This engagement and intervention is with what is termed the *learning milieu*—ie. the social, psychological and material environment in which the learner is situated. There is room for vicarious learning in which the learner appears to learn from the experience of others or appears to be passive, but even in these cases there has to be an active engagement of the mind of learners with the experience of others so that the learners might identify with and make the experience of others part of themselves. There is no clear demarcation between vicarious and experiential learning: one merges imperceptibly into the other. Our personal foundation of experience and intent influences predisposes us towards active engagement in any given situation and it may be necessary for teachers and facilitators to provide compelling reasons, particularly to learners encultured into the relatively passive norms of conventional teaching or in social roles in which they are oppressed by others, why they may gain more from an active and participatory stance than an accepting one, if indeed this is the case.

The model

While the prime focus of the model is on learning which is planned and organised by learners or others on their behalf, the elements of it can just as well be applied in situations in which learning is not the initial impetus for engaging in a particular event. For example, informal learning in the workplace or community. It is convenient to discuss the model in terms of the three stages of engagement in a learning event: activities and experiences prior to the event, during the event, and those which occur subsequently. See Figure 1. Other models, for example, those of Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983) place prime emphasis one of these only.
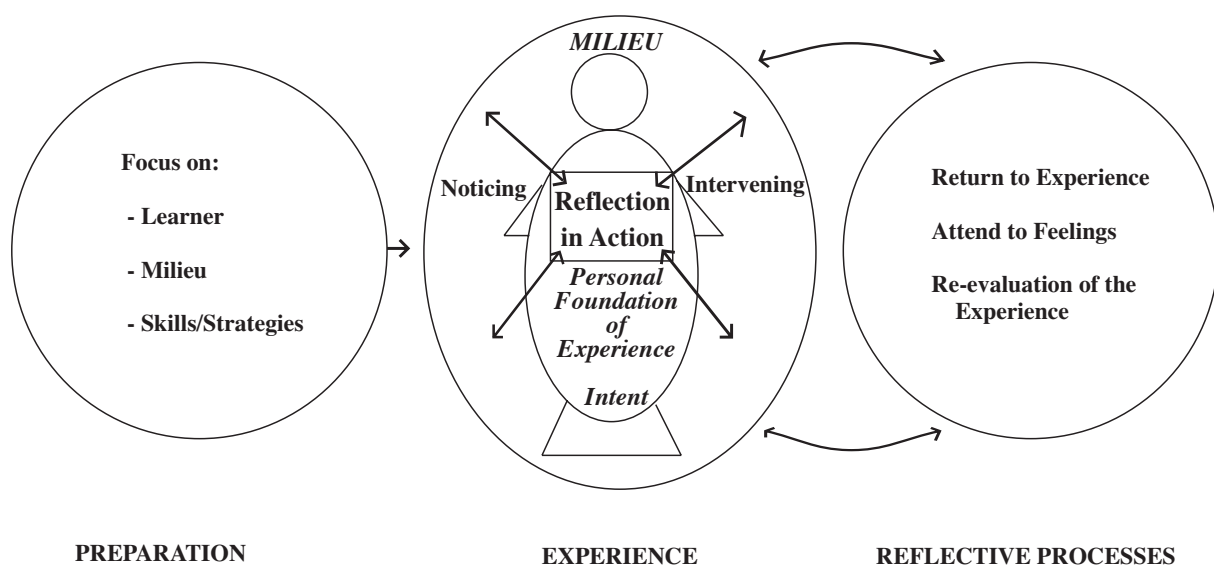
Figure 1. Model for promoting learning from experience

Prior to the event

The emphasis here is on what preparation may be required to enhance the possibility of the event being one from which a given learner can learn fruitfully? The model suggests that there are three main considerations which should be taken into account. Firstly, a focus on the learner. What intent and specific goals does the learner bring to the event? What part of their personal foundation of experience of which they are aware may be engaged or provoked? What are his or her expectations of the event, the outcomes? Secondly, a focus on the milieu. Usually, much of the learning milieu in any event is given and cannot be altered. What is fixed and what can be changed? What does the learner need to know about the rules? What possibilities for interactions with people and materials are there available? Thirdly, a focus on learning skills and strategies. It is not sufficient for there to be a focus on the learner and on the milieu as the learner is often not equipped to make use of the opportunities which exist. What preparation or rehearsal may be needed to maximise and create opportunities for learning? What guides, heuristic devices or learning-to-learn strategies might be usefully learned and deployed?

During the event

It is the learner's engagement with the milieu which constitutes the particular learning experience. Learners create a learning milieu through their presence and interaction with it. Through *noticing*, *intervening* and *reflection-in-action* they steer themselves through the milieu in accordance with their intents and what is available for them to use in this process.

Noticing is an act of becoming aware of what is happening in and around oneself. It is directed towards both the interior and exterior worlds and involves attending to thoughts and feelings. Noticing affects the extent to which the learner is involved in the process whether or not the learner might appear 'active' to others.

Intervening refers to any action taken by the learner within the learning situation affecting the learning milieu or the learner. Again, intervening may not be overt and noticeable to others, but is an act which brings about some change. The conscious decisions not to speak or to focus ones attention on interior rather than exterior dialogue can be forms of intervention just as much as a provocative question or a physical act.

Reflection-in-action describes the process of working with noticing and intervening to interpret events and the effects of ones interventions. For much of the time these factors are invisible and unconscious and, as Schön eloquently points out, they are part of the artistry of effective practice. However, in developing expertise of any kind it can often be helpful to become more deliberate and conscious of the process and be aware of the decisions which are being made bu oneself and others. It is through exposing these decisions to scrutiny that the assumptions behind them can be identified and a conscious decision taken to act from a new perspective.

While these factors are obviously applicable to forms of experience-based learning such as gaming and simulation, role-play, practical work and adventure training, the model can be applied to any context which involves meaningful learning.

Following the event

Much important learning can occur following an event as the distractions of the milieu and the lack of opportunity to stand aside from the dynamics of the action limit what it is possible to do at the time. Some aspects inevitably take time and the ability to view particular events in a wider context. Reflection after the event has been discussed over many years, but the formulation of it in the model emphasises that it is not simply a process of thinking, as Dewey has appeared to suggest, but one which essentially involves feelings and emotions. It has three elements: *return to experience*, *attending to feelings* and *re-evaluation of experience*.

• Return to experience

The base of all learning is the lived experience of the learner and to return to this and recapture it in context in its full impact allows for further reflection. Often too little emphasis is placed on what happened and how it was experienced at the time. Judgements about this are made prematurely and possibilities for further learning can be shut out for ever. Mentally revisiting and vividly portraying the focus experience can be an important first step.

• Attending to feelings

As part of returning to the experience, learners focus on the feelings and emotions which were (and are) present. These feelings can inhibit or enhance the possibilities for further reflection and learning. Feelings which are experienced as negative may need to be discharged or sublimated otherwise they may continually colour all other perceptions and block understanding; those experienced as positive can be celebrated as it is these which will enhance motivation and desire to pursue learning further.

• Re-evaluation of experience

Re-acquaintance with the event and attending to the thoughts and feelings associated with it, prepares the ground for freer evaluation of their experience. There are four aspects of the process of re-evaluation which may need to be considered by the learner. They are: *association*—relating new information to that which is already known; *integration*—seeking relationships between new and old information; *validation*—determining the authenticity for the learner of the ideas and feelings which have resulted; and *appropriation*—making knowledge one's own, a part of one's normal ways of operating. These aspects should not be thought of as stages through which learners should pass, but parts of a whole.

These reflective processes can be undertaken in isolation from others, but this may often lead to a reinforcement of existing views and perceptions. Working one-to-one or with a group for which learning is the raison d'etre can begin to transform perspectives and challenge old

patterns of learning. It is only through give and take with others that critical reflection can be promoted.

Using the model

The description above is a brief outline of the model's main features. It has been formulated to emphasise the culturally-embedded nature of learning, the potential scope of agency on the part of the learner and the internal and external barriers to learning which exist and which may be able to be addressed. It can be used with an emphasis on different features. At one level it draws attention to the need to consider particular issues in designing learning activities, at another it can emphasise critical reflection and the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions (Walker & Boud 1992).

In use, it is necessary to take the generic features described and translate them into specifics which relate to particular learning goals, groups and contexts. For example, if the learning event is a student work placement, then it would be necessary to establish activities prior to the placement that enabled learners to focus on what they bring to the placement, what the particular environment they will enter has to offer and what strategies they will deploy in the midst of their placement to ensure that they are actively pursuing their learning goals; they can then use the framework of noticing, intervening and reflection-in-action as a tool to keep track of their learning during the placement with whatever checklists, diaries, time out strategies they have organised; and following the placement there will be opportunities for debriefing with colleagues about their shared and unique experiences, what these mean to them and what the implications are for their future learning.

Specific applications to particular contexts examined so far include those to informal workplace learning (Boud & Walker 1991) and to the pastoral placement for students training for the ministry (Walker & Boud, in press). Others have used it in the context of nursing practicum and adventure training. The earlier version of the model, focusing on reflection after the event, has been used in many sites in Australia, the UK and New Zealand in nursing, teacher education and management development.

A personal postscript

It is with some trepidation that I have presented this framework. Models seem to be out of fashion at present, ditched with the debris of psychological and mechanistic ways of thinking. More than ever in the complex, uncertain post-modern world we operate in, we still need to work with learners, we still need to think systematically about what we are doing and trying to influence and we need some basis for identifying some practices as more appropriate than others in a given context, with particular learners. It is important, of course, that we do not take these artificial constructs too seriously and ask them to carry the full weight of deciding what we should do. We need a focus for debate about what is important which goes beyond fruitless arguments about what counts as or who is 'critical' or just who is oppressing whom. We all use mental models to guide our thinking whether we are conscious of it or not. Let us make these explicit so we can make informed choices about what is worthwhile and what we want to change ands so that we can make some of our decision-making processes open to critical scrutiny. Learning from experience is for us, not just something we help others with.

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