Lesson 10

Teaching Dewey’s Experience and Education Experientially

Mary C. Breunig

This lesson plan introduces learners to some of the experiential education theory found in John Dewey’s seminal book, *Experience and Education*. Key concepts from the book are taught experientially, with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle used as the framework for this mixed-methods approach (lecture, experience, and guided discussion) to teaching about experiential education theory.

Background

According to the Association for Experiential Education (AEE 2006), experiential education is both a philosophy and a methodology in which educators purposefully engage learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. Central to this definition is the distinction between experiential learning as methodology and as philosophy. This distinction between experiential education as methodology and as philosophy highlights that there is a difference between experiential learning and experiential education.

Clifford Knapp, a prominent experiential educator, helps to highlight the differences between experiential learning and experiential education. Knapp (1992) defines experiential learning as consisting of four distinct segments: (a) active engagement, (b) reflection, (c) transfer, and (d) application of knowledge. This cycle helps to illustrate how experiential learning occurs.

Many of my own early experiences in learning about experiential education theory were as a student and as a professor, where we rooted ourselves in Dewey’s experiential learning cycle. Kolb’s cycle (1984) and the experiential learning cycle as presented within the book, including the experiential continuum, student-centered teaching and learning, freedom of experience, and educative and miseducative experiences among others. Dewey is often cited as one of the founding fathers of experiential education, and much of the early work of the progressive educators laid the groundwork for our present-day understanding of experiential education theory (Breunig, 2005).

That said, many experiential educators learn about experiential education and alternative pedagogies but have done so largely through reading and discussion. My own knowledge about some of the key theoretical concepts in *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938), one of the seminal books related to experiential education theory, and other experiential education theory was acquired through a fairly traditional teaching methodology that was predominantly didactic. When I started teaching Dewey’s book myself, I initially replicated my own experiences with this method of learning, employing lecture as a means to transmit aspects of the key knowledge found within the book. But students did not always “get it,” because many outdoor recreation students are predominantly kinesthetic learners rather than visual or auditory learners. There is a different, more engaging approach to teaching experiential education theory—one that employs a mixed-methodological approach to teaching and learning experiential education theory.

*Experience and Education* can be learned through an experiential approach that is in sync with the theory being taught and that appeals to the primarily kinesthetic learning style of students. This can occur while one reads Dewey’s (1938) advice not to reject the old in reaching for the new. In other words, we can combine mini-lecture, experiential activities, and guided discussion as a means to teach about experiential education. In this sense, we bring the theories of experiential education into congruence with experiential teaching practices as they relate to *Experience and Education.*
RESOURCES


Lesson Plan

PURPOSE
To introduce students to some of the experiential education theory in Dewey’s seminal book, Experience and Education. The goal is to acquaint students with this theory using an experiential methodology that appeals to the bodily-kinesthetic learning style of many outdoor recreation students.

OBJECTIVES
As a result of this lesson students will be able to . . .

1. Cognitive and psychomotor: develop and teach a lesson, using experiential processes, about Dewey’s theory as explained in Experience and Education.

2. Cognitive and psychomotor: discuss and correctly describe at least three key elements of Dewey’s theory.

3. Cognitive: develop their own classroom strategies to teach experiential education theory as a result of their own participation in an experiential process of learning theory.

DURATION
80 minutes

GROUP SIZE
15 to 15

LOCATION
Indoor space with room to move

EQUIPMENT
- One retied dynamic climbing rope
- Shoelaces or cordelette (one per person)
- Flip chart paper and markers
- PowerPoint projector

RISK MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS
None

STUDENT PREPARATION
- Students should have already learned about Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and be able to identify and define the four components of the cycle (experience, observation and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing implications in new settings) in addition to a fifth (added) component (preparation). See slide 2 of the PowerPoint presentation.

- Students should also have an understanding of the three learning styles: auditory, visual, and bodily-kinesthetic.

- Students should read Dewey’s Experience and Education prior to the lesson and prepare a written reading response for the day of the lesson, highlighting some of the key concepts in the book and defining some of the specialized vocabulary in this lesson.

INSTRUCTOR PREPARATION
None

LESSON CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Review Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle (see slide 2 of Power Point presentation on the CD-ROM). Ask students if they have impressions, comments, or questions about Experience and Education. Answer any initial questions if there are any.

Inform students that the day’s lesson will take an experiential approach to learning elements of the theory contained within the book.

Activity 1: Graffiti Walk

Have students write on the flip chart paper, or the chalkboard, some of the key theoretical concepts presented in Dewey’s Experience and Education. Explain that this is a graffiti walk and that they should try to cover the paper or board with as many concepts as possible.

Circle those concepts that are most relevant, in your view, to experiential education and those that the lesson will focus on. Mention that it is not possible to cover all of the topics. This lesson focuses on the following key theoretical concepts: overt action, rules and social control, impulse and desire, freedom, movement or activity as a means but not an end, and educative versus mis-educative experiences.

Define miseducative and educative experiences (slide 3) and emphasize that this is a central theme throughout Dewey’s book.

Activity 2: Overt Action

Have students divide up into pairs. Ask one of the students in each pair to take a shoelace or piece of cordelette. Ask the other student to write down on a piece of paper how he or she would instruct someone verbally about how to tie an overhand knot. Then, without using any demonstration, this second student reads the directions to the first student, asking that person to follow the directions exactly as given. Ask students to show their results.

Now have students reverse roles and ask the student who just wrote the directions to take the shoelace or cordelette. Ask the student who just tied the overhand knot to use any form of communication he or she chooses (demonstration, verbal communication, drawing, etc.) to inform the other student about how to tie an overhand knot. Ask students to show their results.
Dewey (1938) emphasized that educative experiences cannot be either/or. They must combine objective conditions and overt action. He suggests that the experiential continuum (see slide 5) is one way to achieve this combination. More recently, Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle has helped to frame this idea. Together these resources provide educators with a means to consider how to plan lessons or how to instruct trips. Slide 5 lists the components of the experiential learning cycle alongside the experiential continuum in parentheses.

**CLOSURE**

- If time allows, have students form small groups and try to design a lesson plan or plan a trip using the experiential continuum or the experiential learning cycle. Using slide 5, provide students with a sample lesson to illustrate. For example, Brock University, where I teach, is located on the Niagara Escarpment, and we have the Bruce Trail running through campus. To teach students about the geology of the area, I tell them that the Niagara Escarpment is a World Biosphere Reserve (the preparation stage of the cycle). At the escarpment we examine the layers of rock and make observations about the nature of the escarpment (the experience stage of the cycle). We then reflect on the next stage of the cycle on the unique qualities of this area, and then discuss the implications for ways of preserving the area (formation of abstract concepts and generalizations). Students are then encouraged to consider how their individual actions can affect the nature of this particular area and any area in which they may live or travel. Students are asked to identify what they can do to help protect fragile areas (testing implications in new settings).

- If time is too short to do the first suggested closure activity, ask students to discuss some of the implications of the experiential continuum or the experiential learning cycle for their own learning and future teaching experiences. How could they use these ideas in practice? What do the experiential continuum and the experiential learning cycle address various learning styles? How does the experiential learning cycle address some of Dewey’s concerns as explained in *Experience and Education*? Depending on the group of students, the instructor may have to ask additional questions or use various prompts to help students make these connections. Remind students of some of the concepts that were presented during the lesson and some of the other concepts within Dewey’s book that also relate to experiential and adventure education (slide 6).

- Another possible closure activity is to have students do the graffiti walk again, seeing if they have additional comments or insights about the concepts as compared to what they learned from the first walk. The relevant PowerPoint slides can be used to reinforce Dewey and Kolb.

**ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING**

- Ask each small group from the final discussion, just described, to record their responses and to report them back to the class. Or, ask them to actively apply one of the concepts that they have learned to an upcoming experience and then report back to the class, either orally or in writing.

- A quiz can be given on some of the key theoretical concepts.

- Ask students to design lesson plans, as a graded assignment, using the experiential continuum and experiential learning cycle framework.