

Sticky Bombs!

Coughlan O'Meara

Abstract: Changes in personal perspectives can occur through Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). A learner's reflections on real-world experiences, with understanding towards action, can assist future experiential learning course designers. Experiential Learning Theory provides teachers with opportunities to facilitate personalized approaches to teaching and learning in and outside of a classroom. Teachers as scholars and practitioners can, through experiential theory and practice, increase their ability to engage students in learning.

Keywords: Experiential Pedagogy; Educational Theory

On a sunny and crisp morning, my daughter and I left her grandparents' house and headed down Nichols Lane to play at a park in the center of town. I relished the time I had to spend with my daughter, to be outside and in the world of a 6 year-old. As a parent I find the demands outside of my family extending beyond the "workday," this opportunity to be completely present with my daughter was a gift. I thought too that I would "check-in" about her year in first grade. She grabbed my hand as we turned the corner for downtown; I started with my questions about school, "Do you enjoy working with the math materials or listening to Ms. D talk?"

By now we were next to a hedge along a sidewalk leading to town, letting go of my hand and running ahead of me, she replied, "I like journaling and writing down what Ms. D says about Africa." I thought for sure I knew my daughter as an active learner; but she identified herself as a watcher, listening and recording information from her teacher (Kolb, 1984). As I recovered from this surprise, I realized that I no longer held her hand and she was well in front of me, and I needed to catch up.

A bit out of breath, I said, "What about the college students who help you with science? Aren't you going to do demonstrations soon?" She replied, "That will be fun when we go outside." I thought, perhaps an experience through sensory stimulation might finally ensure that the learning cycle I committed my professional life to studying was recognized through my first grader.

As I reflected on what just transpired, my daughter took a quick turn to the left, and directed me down a secret path my wife showed her the previous summer. As we made our first moves along the path in the direction of the park she said, "The last time Elle (her cousin) and I walked through here, we

picked up sticky bombs. "A trip I missed last summer was being brought back into focus; "sticky bombs," I said bewildered.

For the first time on our new path between the hedges, my daughter turned to face me. As she looked at me her eyes became bigger and she declared, "STICKY BOMBS," with great authority, as if I should have already known of their existence. Displaying a slight smile, she continued, "Mom and Uncle Jack told Elle and me not to touch them, but we did." "Oh," I said still fixated on our earlier conversation about first grade and where I went wrong with my attempt to explore learning with my daughter.

Before I could reflect further on my missteps my daughter said, "Uncle Jack and Mom told Elle and me that we learned our lesson picking up sticky bombs." In my family, Black walnut trees are known for their dark brown yellowish stain created by squeezing the greenish, sometimes brown depending upon the time of year, skin surrounding the nut. A sticky glue like substance oozes when the circular "bomb" is squeezed, and is where the name "sticky bomb" originates. A moment alone with my daughter to reflect on learning in school during a sunny walk to play in the park dashed by STICKY BOMBS!

A concrete sensory experience, touching a sticky something between the hedges along Water Street, converged new memories with old as she led me down her secret path. The result was a warning about sticky bombs and recognition of their importance by my daughter. My earlier questioning about the formal environment where learning is supposed to be obvious, school, took a left turn between the hedges.

Personalized learning through abstract conceptualization and active experimentation was now my guide along a "secret path." Where did I go wrong

in my earlier line of questioning? I had little time to further contemplate, as we moved to Follow the Leader, I watched as my daughter set a course and we exited the hedges.

As a new parent I developed strategies to provide for my daughter, learning to meet her needs out of survival. Now, as the father of a 6 year-old I learn through shared experiences, watching and reflecting, to determine future actions. Life experiences become moments for learning and a model of experiential pedagogy. Teaching and learning in more traditional environments can become disconnected from students' interests and desires. The somewhat sterile line of questioning used in school: "Take out your textbooks, turn to page 165; who has questions about the wonderful Aztec Civilization?" Learners, at whatever age, would rather explore THEIR world through THEIR eyes, not someone else's world through someone else's eyes. As education looks to engage in learning outside of school, educators must find moments where learning occurs naturally and make it purposeful. I did not ruin my daughter's moment of sheer "play" as we moved closer to town and our destination.

My daughter grabbed my hand as we prepared to use a crosswalk, and I said, "Mom and Uncle Jack know a lot about walking in between the hedges, you and Elle are lucky." She turned to me and said, "Yeah, I bet they got in a lot of trouble!" We arrived safely on the other side of the road, and she hopped like a bunny, sometimes on one foot and flapped her hands by her side like a bird. I followed behind mimicking these behaviors as we continued with Follow the Leader. By this point my lesson about sticky bombs had ended. But my daughter taught me a great deal about learning through seemingly trivial acts. I now know that she must understand the meaning of her own experiences, meaning that she can converge with information outside of school and within its walls.

I have grown increasingly concerned about the lack of engagement I've seen and experienced over the last 14 years as a public school educator. What if educators were able to facilitate learning through students naturally occurring experiences? Allowing them to explore their areas of interest through THEIR EYES? Teachers, as content experts, would recognize learning born through a path designed by

their students. As a student explored learning through personalized means, "the content," and processes of thinking would emerge as it did on my walk to play at the park downtown with my daughter. In a moment last summer my daughter's interests took over, and she touched a sticky bomb. This experience became part of her memory and she was able to retrieve it during our walk into town. She assumed a role, during our walk, from which to actively experiment as my guide between the hedges, teaching me about sticky bombs.

Experiential learning provides any age student moments to reflect and integrate the theoretical into their lives. Experiential learning was designed for: active involvement, reflection on the experiences, conceptualization and comprehension of experiences towards the investigation of new ideas (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning involves naturally occurring processes of the brain: (sensory cortex) accessing ideas, (temporal cortex) making sense of ideas, (prefrontal cortex) generating new meaning from ideas, and (motor cortex) taking action based on ideas (Zull, 2002).

The biology of learning explains Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential education. To gather, analyze, design, and act are characteristics of experiential pedagogy and the brain's natural learning cycle (Zull, 2002). A 6 year-old and a 16 year-old learner participates in experiential learning using the four regions of their brain connecting experiences to content while developing/reframing their perspectives. Experiential learning, facilitating instinctive phases of thinking, is pedagogy fit for the novice and skilled learner.

Equitable pedagogy in a classroom understands acts of engagement in and outside of school through the predictable and unpredictable. Experiential learning provides new learning spaces within a classroom and a learner's community. For example, in my classroom, as a need arose for reliable transportation in the community, students studied possible sources for transportation, surveyed populations to determine transportation preferences, identified ways to address secure transportation systemically in the County, and sourced sustainable transportation options for reliable transportation. Experiential learning in communities draws students into a discipline, helping them to see the real-world application of a course's content.

Forms of experiential learning include service-learning

(academic learning combined with service in communities), cooperative work experience (arranged work experience by school and employer leading towards an occupational goal), internships (coordinated experiences allowing students to participate in the workplace for a period of time), apprenticeships (on-the-job training to gain a license to practice in a regulated profession), job shadows, and various paid or unpaid work (Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Moore, 2010, 2013).

A father-daughter walk into town to play at the park became an occurrence, one I hadn't anticipated, in what's most important in learning. My efforts to recognize my daughter as a learner in first grade became a lesson in sticky bombs and Follow the Leader. Simply put, the capacity to be purposeful about learning within seemingly insignificant experiences provides instances to construct knowledge.

References

- Bailey, T. R., Hughes, K. L., & Thornton Moore, D. (2004). *Working knowledge: Experiential learning and education reform*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2002). Campus-community partnerships: The terms of engagement. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(3), 503-516.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Moore, D. T. (2010). Forms and issues in experiential learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 124, 3-19. doi:10.1002/tl.415
- Moore, D. T. (2013). *Engaged learning in the academy: Challenges and possibilities*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Zull, J. (2002). *The art of changing the brain: Enriching the practice of teaching by exploring the biology of learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- About the Author:** Coughlan O'Meara, Ed.D., is a Social Studies Teacher and Curriculum Leader, Middlebury Union High School (comeara@acsu.org).