

# Pause for Something REAL

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**Abstract:** Learning, authentic and relevant, is life. A pause for reflection allows life's lived experiences to become moments for learning. The break between the end of a school year and the beginning of the next, summer vacation, is when parents, students, and educators "pause" learning. But these moments during the summer are far from a pause—they instead provide the basis for learning linked to life as something REAL (Relevant, Experiential, Authentic Learning).

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The final day of school for another year and it's off to summer vacation! Students and their parents prepare for different routines and new experiences as "learning" winds down. The transition from formal learning inside of schools to environments outside takes shape from June through August. There are often reading lists and reminders to practice arithmetic and world language skills, but these are moved aside for the outside.

In contrast to flashcards, reading challenges, and summer writing assignments, parents look for their children to have experiences in nature, the visual and performing arts, athletics, and sleep-away camps. There is value placed on these experiences as they come at a financial cost. Parents select to pay, at times with input from their children, for these semi-structured opportunities to learn. How is it that these experiences, deemed so important that they are paid for beyond the cost of a school year, are priorities during summer vacation?

Yes, summer jobs exist, but with less and less frequency. Today's economy requires a skilled workforce, restricting young people's chance to earn extra cash during the summer. Summer vacation now consists of service trips, journeys abroad, and other enrichment experiences. These are opportunities for self-discovery; to consider experiences as processes for deep learning is encouraged during the summer.

The pause between the spring of a school year and the following fall sets a premium on moments of play, self-discovery through exploration, and new experiences that the school year attempts to emulate. Seemingly disconnected moments of summer "fun" provide learning experiences. Curiosity, self-discovery, and play exist in the water, sand, and woods during the summer. As I spent time with family and friends this summer, it was in our moments in the sand at the beach that I learned as a student.

As a career educator of only 17 years, I refer to the century-old pedagogy of experiential learning to guide teaching and learning. Our lives are made of many experiences. Humans, with innate curiosity, look to engage in learning through events occurring naturally, made intentional through lived experiences. As a 23-year-old immersed in curriculum and instruction for the first time, I was introduced to Experiential Learning Theory. I became enamored theoretically with

John Dewey and then practically with David Kolb. Experiential Learning Theory became my mode to create for students as I found my vocation designing learning.

Educators consider inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, place-based learning, flexible pathways, and personalized learning in the setting of a school. Educators must pause to recognize the principles of this age-old learning framework, to understand the theory supporting this pedagogy, to build the capacity to leverage points of departure for naturally occurring learning inside and outside of school. With an understanding of Experiential Learning Theory, teachers as guides can create “summer-like” experiences as moments to spark the curiosity to a lifetime of learning.

The creation of a purposeful experience provides an opportunity to apply learning theory to one’s life. The responsibility for those working with students, both in teaching and coaching roles, is to support students’ lived experiences as the story arc for the process of their learning. As learning emerges through nonlinear means, it is necessary that constructivist and cognitive theory are understood by participants engaged in learning.

Experiential Learning Theory, with a focus on how learning presents in context and its importance in varied environments, allows “play” to be “educational” (Kolb, 1984). Experiential Learning Theory is the theoretical basis for understanding learning—and thinking about one’s thinking—through self-discovery.

In a district in Southwestern Vermont, High School Prep is a free experience for any incoming secondary student for one week or two in July. Teachers and students engage in REAL education during a first exposure to high school with the intent to connect with adults, other students, and personal interests.

Kolb (1984) understands acts of engagement in and outside of school through the predictable and unpredictable. A learner’s interest in dogs exposes them to their use in law enforcement during High School Prep. As the school year begins, dogs are provided for physical and emotional healing in school. This leads to research opportunities on canine service training for the learner. These experiences provide “play” and self-discovery during a “summer program,” and later moments to complete needs assessments for local animal shelters in a school-wide effort to collect identified items for shelters. In school, healthy dog treats are made during a school-wide community service day to be distributed to a local humane society. To demonstrate understanding of media literacy, public speaking, English, and science requirements, a Public Service Announcement and other materials are prepared for the community about the importance of animal ID tags, microchipping, spaying, and neutering to possibly be aired on the local access channel.

Why is it a priority that students explore their interests and the “natural world” during the summer? Why is nonlinear learning the accepted—and preferred—method for learning during this season? Why do parents put a premium on curiosity sparked through naturally occurring moments from the end of a school year until the start of another?

I often wonder, how is it that “school” from September through June is not following “the natural order of things”? Equity, access, and opportunity are an aim for most educators. However, experiential learning opportunities are often paid for by those with resources during the summer and not readily facilitated as a form of equitable education in our schools. How can “paid-for experiences” become the preferred means to engage in learning, seeking equity, during the school year?

Experiential learning takes place on-site and in classrooms as something new is explored, not a replication of something already underway. I have facilitated students’ efforts to research and build worm composting systems, develop plans to raise mercury collection awareness, educate the public about illegal trash burning and dumping, propose viable food security systems for counties; helped facilitate the redesign of a garbage truck to separate organic waste from non-organic waste during collection; and established and tested a cost (financial and physical) analysis for firewood processing in my community. Feasible solutions to community challenges can be developed through experiential pedagogy. Relevant, Experiential, Authentic Learning (REAL) can provide models as solutions to identified needs and conclusions from “tests” shared for feedback from community partners.

Facilitating experiential learning takes a great deal of planning. Educators may need to meet with members of the community to arrange visits for students inside and outside of school, explain how the content of a course connects with experiences to motivate and engage students in interactive activities, and arrange for travel to and from learning sites. As well, there is necessary reflection on “why” married with learning objectives “what and how” to be paired with action “what if?” For some, the methodology will prove too challenging, and others will reap the satisfaction of facilitating equitable education.

Through Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), students and teachers can leverage experiential opportunities with a focus on the contexts and environments in which students learn, how learning comes to exist, and the impact that learning has on those environments in which they occur. Life experiences, “summer programs” and otherwise, become moments for learning and a model of experiential pedagogy. As education looks to engage in inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, place-based learning, flexible pathways, and individualized and personalized learning, educators must find moments where learning occurs naturally and purposefully blend these experiences in with those naturally occurring outside of school.

REAL (Relevant, Experiential Authentic Learning) education will require a pause for reflection.

### **References**

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