Is "Dewey's Experience" Synonymous with the Current Usage of the Term?

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Abstract

One of the most amazing aspects of higher education, in nearly all cultures, is that while it is generally viewed as valid or important in at least some context, it generally derives its credibility from the external milieus. Thus if intellect is popular, so is higher education – and visa versa. Importantly, this extends well beyond popularity. It includes aspects of acquiring and valuing knowledge that sometimes have the curious effect of putting higher education in the strange position of placating ideas and beliefs that are known (via research and scholarship) to be wrong. While in some ways this is just a political problem that any organization might encounter – it becomes a problem if the results are curricula that lack integrity and ultimately utility. For many fields the key to this problem is the idea of experience. Additionally, there are two aspects to the issue of experience for many curricula. First is the idea that experience is important and necessary as identified externally (beyond higher education) and the second is the idea that some knowledge may not be gained without experience. The following discusses John Dewey and his work, creates a broad description of the concept of experience in higher education for the purpose of further illuminating the aforementioned problem, and provides an initial attempt at a framework for considering the use of experience in curriculum.

Introduction

In order to provide aid to those who wish to consider these issues the following steps are planned. First the American Philosopher John Dewey considered this issue for education generally at the beginning of the twentieth century. He is sometimes thought of as the founder of the American Pragmatic School of Philosophy. The first step in this effort is providing the highlights of Dewey's work in this area with special attention to his book *Experience and Education*[1].

The second step is a discussion of the current usage of experience in higher education. The intention of this discussion is to anecdotally illustrate how views of experience that are external to higher education can create curriculum integrity problems. A metaphor for this might be the idea that it is nice to be fashionable, but the fact that a Lincoln Versailles was once a popular car does not make it a great automobile. This discussion is needed to provide dimension and clarity for the establishment of a framework.

The third step will be to build and present a framework for dealing with this area. The result will be a two by two matrix. Hopefully, many of the issues and tradeoffs for experience can be brought alive is a visual representation of the ideas.

Dewey and experience

Some might classify John Dewey as a social scientist. His first work is on psychology, published three years after earning his PhD at Johns Hopkins University. He is a contemporary of Freud (they never met) and is sometimes discussed with Freud and Skinner as representing one of the three approaches to social thought in the United States. Freud and Skinner would represent the other two[2]. The problem with classifying Dewey as just a social scientist is that it is simply not accurate. Dewey's work can be described as at least 25 books spanning 1887 to 1949; and 41 noted pamphlets essays and other shorter works from the same period. His work can also be descibed as subjects including psychology, philosophy of education, moral philosophy, ethics, education, logic, democracy and even Liebnitz. In fact, by any measure, it is an amazing career. Fairly described, Dewey is a Phiosopher. In his works Dewey discusses experience on may occasions, and his philosophy on experience directly relates to our current environmnet.

One of Dewey's lifelong efforts is the improvement of education. It is likely that Dewey was unimpressed by the educational practices of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, he makes the following observation in 1902;

The source of whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum.[3]

This is a good introduction to what Dewey's concern with experience is about. In effect, he observes that we learn by experiencing. His observation for education is that the system in existence at the time of his work is based on an important fallacy. This is that the experiences designed by adults – and particularly to be credible to adults – to teach children were failing. Further, they were failing because these experiences assumed that the child's experience would be the same as the adult's experience.

As one might assume, this is a liberating idea for professional educators. Of course like many liberating ideas, the liberation soon began to resemble anarchy. To get an idea of how this might have looked in the 1920's, one can view the play or movie Auntie Mame. The title character is left to raise her nephew and chooses several avante garde schools for him, until this is curtailed by the executor of her brother's estate.

Dewey was not a proponent of this approach. In fact, he indicates that these efforts were also based on fallacy. That is "experiences" alone – without any vision will not produce an educated person. He spends a significant portion of *Experience and Education*[1] addressing this problem.

So, what is experience? The idea is, in effect, the interaction of a learner and its environment[4]. While this is good news to those who like to advocate a hands-on approach to teaching and learning, it is more complicated in practice.

Current experience issues

One issue that Dewey did not discuss is the impact of the growth of knowledge. In effect, thanks to the "information explosion" there are two additional problems. First, what set of knowledge is appropriate for a "college educated" person in our times. Secondly, education, particularly higher education, is bigger. This is partly due to the information explosion – but raises questions about issues such as a single approach to all of the subjects in higher education. Finally, there are more expectations on higher education – and credibility (the problem first encountered by Dewey) is more important than ever.

The problem for much of higher education is restated as the credibility of graduates. In effect, a program is considered good if it is credible with external validation. Of course a well known approach to this problem is to require more background of the students when they are admitted. Many MBA programs require five years of business experience before one can be admitted to the program. This certainly makes the graduates credible, but the nagging question that remains is what did they learn in the program that they did not already know?

There is also a problem for knowledge that "must" come from interacting with the artifact. While this would definitely be knowledge gained from experience, and something Dewey would likely endorse, what happens if the experience is not credible? This is often witnessed in computer programming. What is the best approach to teaching programming? There have been groups that advocate that you use a language that is designed to teach programming. Others advocate that you teach a language used by a relevant community to help the students adapt to that community. While this might seem minor – consider the idea that there are computing programs in existence in the United States that taught COBOL and only COBOL for more than twenty-five years. Also consider the idea that there is a body of discussion about how COBOL is the worst language to use for teaching programming. Who was right is not a matter for this paper, however, the question "Would COBOL have been an introduction to programming language in any program if it were not for the availability of external validation?" is an important question.

Framework

From both the work of Dewey, and the experiences of our own times two aspects of experience appear as very important. The first is the hope of experience that will increase knowledge. The second is the idea of the experience being credible with some external validation. This seems like an ideal application for a 2x2 matrix[5], along one axis increasing knowledge and along the other increasing credibility.
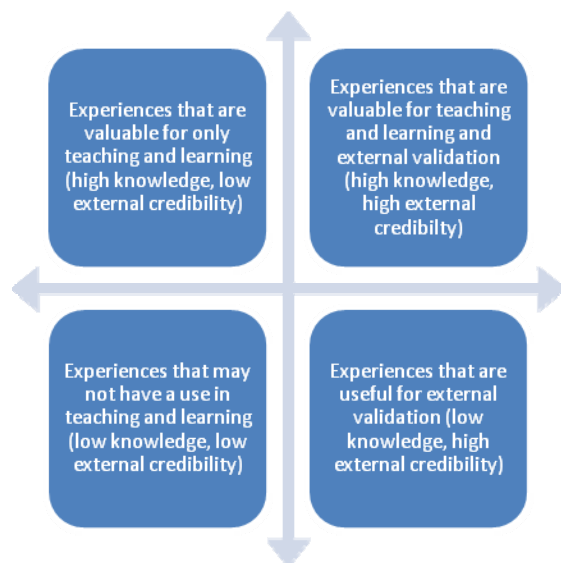
Figure 1 - A 2x2 Matrix of Knowledge and Credibility

The quadrant that has experiences that are likely to require the most attention is the upper right. These are experiences that both increase knowledge and increase credibility. An interesting example of such an experience in programming might be competing in (and perhaps winning) an interschool programming competition.

The most difficult quadrant for teaching and learning is the lower right. In that quadrant the experience has high external credibility and has a low potential for increasing knowledge. A programming example (for the sake of programming and not other purposes) might be building WEB sites for an external organization. This is very likely to have high external credibility (and could even earn some publicity), however, the likely increase in programming knowledge is low.

Another difficult quadrant for teaching and learning is the upper left. In that quadrant the experience has a high potential to increase knowledge, and a low potential for external credibility. An example from programming might be the use of the Scheme programming language. This choice is likely to provide several advantages for teaching and learning, however, it is unlikely to have an external interest. This is particularly the case if there is no external user of the language near where the language is taught.

The last quadrant on the lower left appears easy. These experiences do not have much potential to increase knowledge, and do not have much credibility. A programming example might be teaching an application – for example Power Point. This is unlikely to increase knowledge about programming, and is unlikely to have external credibility for programming. Interestingly, this can happen.

The most likely use for this framework is to provide a means of classifying experiences. However, this can also be used to balance experiences – particularly making sure that most of the experiences increase knowledge. Additionally, the increase must make sense in terms of the development of the student.

Conclusion

The intended outcome is a guide for this issue. Thus, those that are on occasion confronted with these issues have a quick reference resource to at least help in formulating questions for a refined discussion and perhaps an improved situation in their domain.

This work is mainly intended to aid curriculum discussions. However, given both the growth of knowledge and the observations made by E. O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*[6] this is particularly important in those instances where disciplines must combine and cooperate for the purpose of building new knowledge! Thus, academic and nearly all knowledge workers could find a utility in this discussion.

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