

Learning through experience: troubling orthodoxies and intersecting questions

Tara J. Fenwick, 2003
Florida, Kreiger Publishing
ISBN 978-1575241968

Tara Fenwick's central premise for this book- not a new text, as it was published in 2003 - and impulse behind its subtitle, 'troubling orthodoxies and intersecting questions' is to 'disrupt and resist individualised notions of experiential learning and pose alternative concepts' (p.5). Fenwick acknowledges experiential learning is one of the most significant areas for current research and practice in adult education, which is her specialist field. Additionally, the breadth of the term and its multiple definitions can sometimes be too broad to be useful or, indeed, too restrictive. She also raises the question of what we actually mean by 'learning' and notes that the many answers to this question are frequently contradictory. How then can educators position themselves within this field to best help engage learners?

In questioning the theoretical base of experiential learning Fenwick offers perspectives familiar to higher education (HE) practitioners such as constructivist and situative orientations and also those which derive from psychoanalytical, critical cultural and complexity theories. The most prevalent understanding of experiential learning is reflection based on experience, which 'casts the individual as a central actor in a drama of personal meaning-making' (p.22). Fenwick claims a purely reflective orientation excludes issues of identity, politics and the way human experience is actually produced through particular cultural images and language. A situative view roots learning in a situation in which a person participates. Fenwick broadens the debate in suggesting the importance of the workings of unconscious thoughts and desires; of power relations and 'structures of dominance'; of ecological systems and complexities of change within them.

Fenwick contextualizes the focus of experiential pedagogies in capturing learning in workplaces, or otherwise, outside institutions yet also draws attention to critical debates which suggest that such pedagogies are becoming more institutionalised and regulated. At a time when the currency of certain disciplines, and so related orientations towards learning, are being devalued in the face of governmental economic priorities, such expansiveness in debate is welcome. For practitioners in HE, I would say that questions Fenwick asks are liberating and make cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary sense in enlarging not only educators' conceptions of learning but providing discourses that may enable such understandings by students across programmes of study.

However, the 'orthodoxies' are indeed 'troubling'. Fenwick argues that six critiques in particular appear to be most crucial in considering the future of experience-based learning:

1. Critique of the educative notion of building a coherent self.
2. Critique of the belief that individuals exist separately from their social contexts.
3. Critique of models representing experience as concrete.
4. Critique of educative emphasis on cognitive reflection in experiential learning.
5. Critique of experiential trial and error as useful learning.

6. Critique of the notion that adults are empowered through actual reflection on experience.

In attempting to explore theoretical and pedagogical issues that lie at the heart of these questions, Fenwick is centring ways of understanding the relations between the individual situation, society and environment, the nature of the mind in action and the ethical role of the educator. This again is no easy feat. She categorises possibilities for types of role linked with predominant orientations, for instance, whether to be a facilitator, coach, guide; whether to be an interpreter or deliberate agent of change; mapmaker or storyteller.

Fenwick recognizes though, realistically, that roles for educators are not tidily fixed within distinct perspectives and are far more fluid. She cites several examples of mixed-mode pedagogical approaches like, for example, Cope and Kalantis (2000), who offer a model that combines roles for educators as facilitators of dialogue and mentors, and environmental designers helping to create opportunities for learners to participate in everyday problem-solving and project creation immersed in a community. She further acknowledges that her work reflects a small part of larger ongoing debates such as those around social learning, critical reflection and identity construction as explored by Vandenabeele and Wildemeersch (2000).

There is clarity, pragmatism and intellectual depth in Fenwick's approach. One chapter is devoted to consideration of the roles of adult educators in how they might mediate between contesting positions; how to bring to the fore the various selves a learner may have: rational, gendered, intellectual, interior and exterior and to, as Fenwick puts it, 'enable the personalisation of their learning through meaningful experience', which is also socially embedded.

In this coherent and purposive work she helps us do just that by posing questions that we might ask and steering us deftly through evidenced arguments about place and purpose of experiential pedagogies. She is direct in assertions that she is not trying to cover all ground. Fenwick's stance is informed by her particular research about the nature of experiential learning and the changing context of work in Canadian HE institutions and others, but it has reached beyond its immediate context and should be of practical and theoretical use for adult educators in the UK.

References

- Cope, B. and Kalantis, M. (2000) *Multiliteracies: literacy learning and the design of social futures* (London/New York, Routledge).
- Vandenabeele, J. and Wildemeersch, D. (2000) Learning for sustainable development: examining life world transformation among farmers, in: M. Finger and T. Jansen (Eds) *Adult education and social responsibility* (2nd edn) (New York, Peter Lang), 117-133

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