

## Pragmatism

### A learning theory for the future

Bente Elkjaer

*Dane Bente Elkjaer holds a chair in learning theory at the University of Aarhus. She is also Editor-in-Chief of the journal Management Learning. Her main focus is working life learning, and her theoretical approach is inspired by the works of the American pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey. In 2005 she published a book, When Learning Goes to Work: A Pragmatist Gaze at Working Life Learning (in Danish). In the following chapter, which is published for the first time here, Elkjaer gives an interpretation of Dewey's understanding of learning grounded in his particular notion of the concept of experience. She discusses how a pragmatist perspective on learning can elaborate contemporary learning theory by being linked to the notion of practice-based learning as introduced by the works of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.*

#### Introduction

A theory of learning for the future advocates the teaching of a preparedness to respond in a creative way to difference and otherness. This includes an ability to act imaginatively in situations of uncertainties. John Dewey's pragmatism holds the key to such a learning theory and reflects his view of the continuous meetings of individuals and environments as experimental and playful.

That pragmatism has not yet been acknowledged as a relevant learning theory for the future may be due to the immediate connotation and the many interpretations associated with the term 'experience', which is at the heart of Dewey's educational thinking. Dewey defined experience in a way that is not well understood within educational research, and in a way that is easily confused with the term 'experiential learning'. The latter refers to the importance of participants' 'experiences' derived from bodily actions and stored in memory as more or less tacit knowledge.

Experience is, according to Dewey, not primarily associated with knowledge but with human beings' lives and living. In Dewey's terms, living is the continuous interaction (later: 'transaction') between individuals and their environments. Transaction holds the same meaning as experience, but also includes emotion, aesthetics and ethics as well as knowledge. To become knowledgeable is only a part of experience. Cognition and communication are

still important parts of transaction, and as such are part of experiencing and not merely an outcome of experience.

Experience is the relation between individual and environments, 'subject' and 'worlds', which are the terms I use to connote the socialised individual and the interpreted world. The subject-worlds relation makes experience possible. Experience is both the process of experiencing and the result of the process. It is in experience, in transaction, that difficulties arise, and it is with experience that problems are resolved by inquiry. Inquiry (or critical and reflective thinking) is an experimental method by which new experience may be had not only through action but also by using ideas and concepts, hypotheses and theories as 'tools to think with' in an instrumental way. Inquiry concerns consequences, and pragmatism views subjects as future-oriented rather than oriented towards the past. This is evident from subjects exercising playful anticipatory imagination ('what-if') rather than causal thinking based upon a priori propositions ('if-then'). The consequence of the orientation towards the future is that knowledge (in Dewey's terms: 'warranted assertibilities') is provisional, transient and subject to change ('fallible') because future experience may act as a corrective to existing knowledge.

The view of experience as encompassing the relation between subject and worlds, inquiry as experimental and instrumental and knowledge as fallible means that pragmatism can be called a learning theory for the future. This means a learning theory that helps educators and learners develop a responsiveness towards challenges through the method of inquiry and an open-ended understanding of knowledge. I believe, in other words, that taking a closer look at the Deweyan notion of experience may be helpful for the creation of a learning theory that answers the cry for creativity and innovation that, at least rhetorically, is in demand in contemporary knowledge societies.

This chapter contains a brief background on how pragmatism should be understood in its everyday and philosophical meaning. Then I introduce Dewey's notion of experience as based on transaction between subject and worlds as well as in the relation between action and thinking. Third is a section on the differences between a Deweyan and a traditional understanding of experience. This is to create some background for understanding what happens when a non-Deweyan definition of 'experience' is used. Dewey was (late in life) well aware that the use of experience as a theoretical term created a lot of confusion and he would have used the term 'culture' had he known. This would not have been of any help today, as culture is also a term with many definitions. The term 'practice' may be a candidate for a contemporary theoretical term for what Dewey wanted to say with his 'experience'. I return to this issue in my conclusion and discussion.

In a fourth section, I return to the relation between action and thinking, but as the relation between transaction (i.e. experience) and thinking. I show that inquiry into a difficult situation in experience can result both in resolution of the situation and in new possible avenues for solving future problems by way

of conceptual development. Fifth, I include a brief section on David Kolb's notion of experiential learning, because his use of experience is very different from Dewey's, although he is inspired by Dewey and often read like that.

In the final section, I discuss whether Dewey missed something when he talked about experience, inquiry, learning and becoming knowledgeable. I think that Deweyan philosophy is insufficient to describe how power is a key to understanding how learning is also a matter of access to participation in educational activities and to being able to respond to challenges (Biesta, 2006). I claim that a practice-based view of learning may help to incorporate the importance of power in theories of learning. Thus, a practice-based view of learning includes awareness of the need to include a conceptual understanding of the institutional order as transcending subjects' power to think and to act.

### A pragmatist and pragmatism

In everyday language, a 'pragmatist' is a person who is focused on results, someone who gets things done and finds solutions to problems despite ideological and political differences. The pragmatist is often criticised for her or his apparent willingness to abandon ideals and moral standards in exchange for results. This commonly accepted meaning of the pragmatism of a pragmatist is, of course, not completely wrong, but it is not entirely in accordance with the philosophical interpretation of pragmatism. In this latter domain, and despite inevitable debates, there is widespread agreement that pragmatism concerns the understanding of the meanings of phenomena in terms of their consequences. That is, meaning is not ascribed in a priori terms ('if-then'); rather, it is identified by anticipating 'what-if' consequences to potential actions and conduct. Thus, the everyday results-oriented pragmatist echoes scholarly definitions of pragmatism to the extent that both are concerned with the consequences of actions and the attributions of meanings to phenomena.

American pragmatism emerged as a philosophical trend near the end of the nineteenth century, at a time when the US was still a 'new world' filled with adventure and the promise of new ways of life. The immigrants were looking to the future and its possibilities, and not towards the past they had left behind. The class-divided society of Europe was based upon traditions and family relations, but in the New World, at least in a rhetorical sense, one had to prove one's worth through values and actions rather than any privileges bestowed by birth. The US was a country in which the boundaries towards the West were still open and fascinating, but also a country in which industrialisation and mass production were rapidly influencing the development of society. Philosophically, this period was characterised by a range of contradictions that set science versus religion, positivism versus romanticism, intuition versus empiricism and the democratic ideals of the Age of Enlightenment versus aristocracy. In this context, pragmatism served as a mediating or consensual method of philosophy that sought to unite these various contradictions (Scheffler, 1974 [1986]).

One important contributor to the development of pragmatism was John Dewey (1859–1952), whose philosophical interests spanned many areas, including psychology, education, ethics, logic and politics. He insisted that philosophy must be practically useful in people's lives rather than a purely intellectual endeavour. In his view, the promise of a better world rests upon people's ability to respond 'in an intelligent way' to difficult situations that need to be resolved. Dewey argued that inquiry is a method in which working hypotheses are generated through anticipatory imagination of consequences, which may be tested in action. This experimental way of dealing with change does not merely happen through trial and error, because anticipatory imagination guides the process (Dewey, 1933 [1986], 1938 [1986]). In Dewey's version, pragmatism is a method to think and act in a creative (imaginative) and future-oriented (i.e. consequential) manner.

Whereas the pragmatist in the everyday meaning of the term cares little for the ideological foundations of the results, Dewey's pragmatism examines how the use of different ideas and hypotheses, concepts and theories affects the result of inquiry. Thinking is to use concepts and theories to define a problem and, as such, is part of the result of inquiry. Thinking, i.e. critical anticipation of and reflection on the relation between defining and solving a problem, is part of pragmatism in the philosophical definition of the term. The pragmatist philosophical view of thinking is to help define the uncertainties that occur in experience. A pragmatist researcher cannot resort to general theoretical rules and maxims from the Grand Theories (Marxism, psychoanalysis, etc.) when s/he wants to understand a phenomenon. The situation determines which concepts and theories are useful for an analysis of a given problem. One can often use various theories and concepts as tools ('instruments') in an experimental process, the aim of which is to transform a difficult situation to one that is manageable and comfortable for the subject.

I have stressed the differences between an everyday understanding of a pragmatist and philosophical pragmatism because, in educational thinking, the latter is often associated with insufficient (theoretical) background. One example of this is when educationalists associate pragmatism with 'learning by doing' or as mere 'trial and error'. This view separates action from thinking, which for Dewey prevents learning in an informed (or 'intelligent') way. In order for learning to be still more informed, the use of concepts and theories are needed because they allow us to think about, anticipate and reflect on action and upon ourselves as acting. In the philosophical interpretation of pragmatism, cognition is closely related to action and is not to be understood by means of abstract and general theories. The understanding of learning as innovative is grounded in this open-ended and creative relation between thinking and action as both anticipatory and reflective. This does not mean that learning cannot be habitual (or 'reproductive'). This will indeed often be the case as most actions are habitual and only involve incremental adjustments. The philosophical pragmatism, however, provides a way to understand learning as an

experimental responsiveness to change and as such it facilitates creative action and thinking. The key to this understanding of learning is Dewey's notion of experience, which is closely connected to his notion of inquiry and knowledge.

### Experience as transactions between subject and worlds

Dewey worked all his life on refining his notion of experience and defined it first as interactional (resting on a principle of causal relations between subject and worlds) and later as a transactional concept (resting on a principle of mutual relations between subject and worlds) (Dewey and Bentley, 1949 [1991]). Experience concerns living, the continuous response to and feedback between subject and worlds, as well as the result of this process. It is within experience that difficulties arise and are resolved by way of inquiry. Experience is the concept Dewey used to denote the relation between subject and worlds as well as between action and thinking, between human existence and becoming knowledgeable about selves and the worlds of which they are a part.

Dewey laid the foundation for his concept of experience in 1896 with a groundbreaking article, in which he criticised how the concept of the 'reflex arc' was used to interpret the relation between action and thinking, between being and knowing (Dewey, 1896 [1972]). In this article, Dewey argued against the notion that it is possible to analyse human action as a mechanical sequence, a 'reflex arc', consisting of three separate events in the following order: sensory stimulus, idea and action. Dewey called the reflex arc a patchwork of separate parts, a mechanical juxtaposition without connection, instead of seeing action and thinking as parts of an integrated organic whole (see also Elkjaer, 2000). The 'organic' refers to the fact that subjects are always part of social and natural worlds, and it is as participants of these worlds that acting and knowing takes place. Action and thinking are not separate and clearly defined processes, but are integrated and connected. This integration of knowing and acting is mirrored in concrete action, both bodily and verbal.

Dewey argues that stimulus, idea and action are functional elements in a division of labour, which together makes up a whole, a situation or an event. Action and thinking are, in other words, elements of an organic coordination rather than a reflex arc. One example of the situatedness of stimulus is hearing a sound:

If one is reading a book, if one is hunting, if one is watching in a dark place on a lonely night, if one is performing a chemical experiment, in each case, the noise has a very different psychical value; it is a different experience. In any case, what precedes the 'stimulus' is a whole act, a sensori-motor co-ordination. What is more to the point, the 'stimulus' emerges out of this co-ordination; it is born from it as its matrix; it represents as it were an escape from it.

(Dewey, 1896 [1972]: 100)

A sound is not an independent stimulus, because the meaning of it depends upon the situation in which it is heard. Nor is the response an independent event that merely follows from a stimulus. The response is part of defining the stimulus, and a sound has to be classified as a specific kind of sound (from an animal or a violent assault) in order to be followed by a relevant response. This classification has to be sufficiently exact to hold throughout the response in order to maintain it. It is not possible to aim a shot, shoot and run away at the same time. The response is therefore a reaction within the sound and not to the sound. The solution is, in other words, embedded in the definition of the problem. This is why Dewey prefers the term 'organic circle' rather than 'reflex arc' as a metaphor for the relation between being and knowing.

Dewey's notion of the organic circle contains the outline of his work with defining his notion of experience. Thus, experience is a series of connected organic circles, it is transaction, and it is the continuous relation between subject and worlds. Experience is an understanding of the subject as being in the world, not outside and looking into the world, as a spectator theory of knowledge would imply. The subject-in-world is the foundation for becoming knowledgeable of the world and of selves, because it rests upon a bond between action and thinking, being and knowing.

### The equivocality of experience

About 20 years after Dewey wrote his article on the reflex arc, he made a comparison between his conception of experience and the commonplace meaning of experience. This led him to the following five differences between a commonplace interpretation of experience and his concept of experience (Dewey, 1917 [1980]). First, experience is traditionally understood as an epistemological concept in which the purpose is production and acquisitions of knowledge for example, through reflection on action (cf. Kolb). In contrast to this, Dewey's concept of experience is ontological and based upon the transactional relation between subject and worlds. The epistemological orientation of experience means that it is possible to overlook situations in which knowledge is not the primary content or purpose, and not be able to see that experience is also emotional and aesthetic. There is a difference between enjoying a painting because of its aesthetic value and studying the painting as an art reviewer (see also Bernstein, 1966 [1967]). There are no experiences without some form of knowing, but the meaning of the concept of experience is distorted if the paradigm for all experience becomes an issue of conscious thinking. Most of human lives consist of non-cognitive experiences as subjects continuously act, enjoy and suffer, and this is experience.

It is not possible to understand the meaning of Dewey's concept of inquiry if the value of the aesthetic and emotional experiences in Dewey's concept of experience is not recognised, because inquiry is an answer to a felt ('emotional') encounter with a conflict. Inquiry begins with an emotionally felt difficulty,

an uncertain situation, and inquiry is a method to resolve this conflict. When something is experienced with the 'stomach' or an emotional response is exhibited in a situation, then inquiry is a way to help define experience in a cognitive sense and create meaning. To do so, it may be necessary to activate former similar experiences by experimenting with different possible ways of attributing meaning to the situation at hand and, through that, transform the emotional experience into something that can be comprehended as a cognitive and communicative experience. This is how an emotional experience becomes a reflective one; it becomes a learning experience, and may become knowledge, which in turn can be part of informing experience in the next similar experience of an emotionally difficult situation.

Secondly, experience is traditionally understood as an inner mental and subjective relation rather than a part of the objective conditions for human action that undergoes changes through human response. When experience is interpreted as subjective, then experience is trapped in the privacy of subjects' action and thinking. There is no experience without a subject experiencing it but it does not mean that experiencing is solely subjective and private. Sharing experience is more than a metaphor, because the objective world is always woven into the subjective experience.

Third, experience is traditionally viewed in the past tense, the given rather than the experimental and future oriented. Dewey's concept of experience, on the contrary, is characterised by reaching forward towards the unknown. In Dewey's definition, experience is connected to the future because 'we live forward'. Anticipatory and forward thinking is more important for action and cognition than recollection. Subjects are not passive spectators who look into the world from the outside, but powerful and future-oriented participants in natural and social worlds.

Fourth, experience is traditionally viewed as isolated and specific rather than as continuous and connected. For Dewey, however, experience is a series of connected situations (organic circles) and even if all situations are connected to other situations, every situation has its own unique character. Experience, nevertheless, is so connected that it is possible to use experience as a foundation for knowledge and to guide future actions.

Finally, experience has traditionally been viewed as beyond logical reasoning. Dewey argued, however, that there is no conscious experience without this kind of reasoning. Anticipatory thinking and reflection is always present in conscious experience by way of theories and concepts, ideas and hypotheses. This latter is the most important contrast to the traditional interpretation of experience. By on the one hand stressing that experience is not primarily an epistemological matter, and on the other hand claiming that the systematic process of knowledge is one form of experience, Dewey wanted to show how inquiry is the only method for having an experience. Inquiry is triggered by difficult situations, and inquiry is the means through which it is possible to transform these situations through the mediation of thinking and action.

Further, experience and inquiry are not limited to what is mental and private. Situations always have both subjective and objective elements, and through inquiry it is possible to change the direction of experience. Subjects are living, acting and reacting in objective worlds, but these transactions are not automatic or blind. Experience is experimental and oriented towards the future, and subjects use concepts and theories as instruments to guide the process. Dewey viewed education and teaching as a means to support, through inquiry, the direction of experience. Figure 5.1 shows the two definitions of experience.

### Transaction and thinking

The notion of interaction, and (later) the notion of transaction, refers to the mutual creation and formation of subjects at work with their worlds. The worlds, however, live their own lives and are subject to their own relations, which are what subjects experience. The mutual formation of subjects and worlds reaches beyond the given worlds, because subjects are capable of inquiring and looking at themselves as well as the situation and changing both what is experienced and how it is experienced through reinterpretations and reactions. To live is to be engaged in the transactions that comprise experience, and experience is a process of life that changes continuously and in which new uncertain situations are an invitation to respond, an incentive to inquire and an opportunity to critically and reflectively think and have new experiences. Education, in the scholastic definition of the term, is a specific form of experience. In education, the purpose is to guide the process of experience and to make it more rewarding than if the subject was left to him- or herself.

Development of experience happens when habitual actions and values are disrupted by encounters with difficult situations. This disruption can be a

Traditional concept of experience	Dewey's concept of experience
Experience as knowledge	Knowledge as a subset of experience
Experience as subjective	Experience as both subjective and objective
Experience as oriented to the past	Experience as future oriented (consequence)
Experience as isolated experiences	Experience as united experiences
Experience as action	Experience as encompassing theories and concepts and as such a foundation for knowledge

Figure 5.1 Comparison between a traditional concept of experience and Dewey's concept of experience.

trigger to a closer examination of the situation, to inquiry, and thus new experience can be had and new knowledge may be created. Not all experience, however, leads to knowledge. Some experiences never enter consciousness and communication, but remain emotional and subconscious. Dewey talks about the aesthetic and emotional experience, and about happiness and sorrow as also being experience. To become knowledgeable is just one way of having experience; there are many other kinds of experience.

It is possible to learn from experience, because experience can be used to create connections to the past and to the future. Dewey writes the following about experience that points to the past and the future:

To 'learn from experience' is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction – discovery of the connection of things. Two conclusions important for education follow. (1) Experience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive. But (2) the *measure of the value* of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities to which it leads up. It includes cognition in the degree in which it is cumulative or amounts to something, or has meaning.

(Dewey, 1916 [1980]: 147)

The quote illustrates that Dewey's experience is a transaction ('an active-passive affair') between subject and worlds, and that 'we' as human beings anticipate the consequences of our actions. The quote, however, also shows that if learning is to be the outcome of experience, cognition is needed to create continuity in experience. Experience is had through experimenting with the world in which cognition is needed to create continuity in the experimental thinking and action. The dividing line between non-cognitive and cognitive experience fluctuates, but if experience is to become a learning experience in the sense that experience can inform future experience, experience has to get out of the bodily and non-discursive field and into the cognitive and conscious field of experience. In short, experience has to become reflective and communicated (with self and other) in order to later be used in an anticipatory way.

Subjects have experience because of how they live their lives and because of how they create relations to other subjects and worlds. It is impossible to avoid experience. Only through cognition and communication, however, can experience become learning experience. It is in this endeavour that education in its widest possible sense may be helpful, because a teacher or a more experienced person can open up avenues for hitherto unknown understandings and actions by introducing concepts and theories that were not otherwise accessible to the learner.

Inquiry is the process through which subjects become knowledgeable. It

is through inquiry that experience is had and knowledge may be created. In this process, ideas and hypotheses, concepts and theories are a part. Different hypotheses can be formulated and a mixture of ideas and thoughts from former experiences activated. Concepts and theories are used instrumentally and experimentally both in thought actions ('imagination') and in bodily actions in which they can be tested. When a problem is resolved, a feeling of control may replace uncertainty for a period. Figure 5.2 is a graphical representation of Dewey's process of inquiry.

Dewey's concept of experience is, as mentioned, different from a traditional understanding of experience in that it is an ontological construct. Dewey's concept of experience is anchored in the natural and social worlds, because experience is had in the subject-world transaction. Dewey's concept of experience is directed towards the future; experience is had in the active process of living and life is lived with an eye to tomorrow. Experience is, according to Dewey,

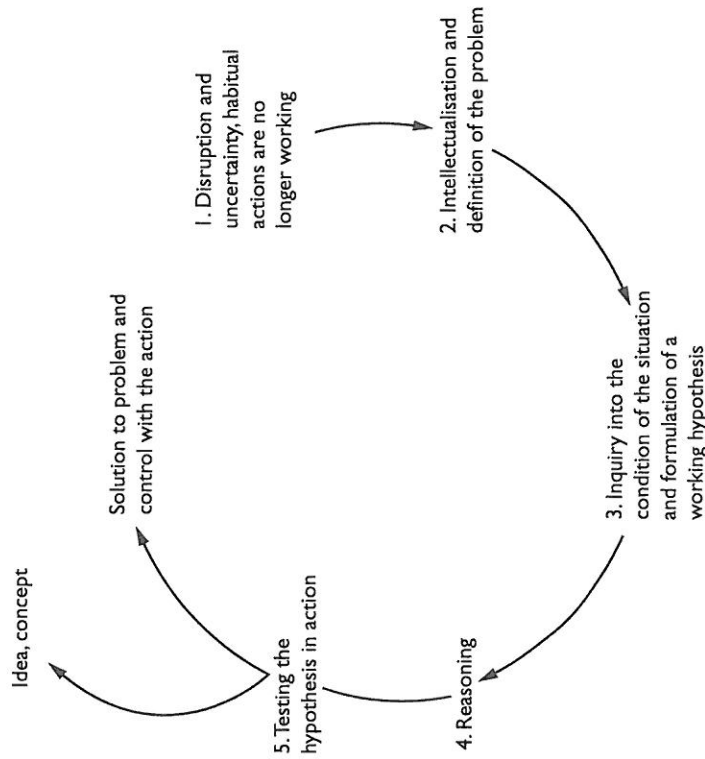


Figure 5.2 After Dewey's process of inquiry (Miettinen, 2000: 65).

a middle road between the total divide and constitutes a connection to the whole. It is out of experience (empirical data) that knowledge can be created, and it is through the subconscious experiences that thinking can be used to create connection to past and future and between action and consequence. Dewey's optimism lies in his belief in the value of developing individual and collective experience so that subjects can act increasingly 'intelligent' based on an increasingly informed empirical knowledge.

To use experience as defined above may cause some problems in educational research, because 'experience' is primarily used in the traditional sense, i.e. as an epistemological concept anchored in individuals' past and derived from bodily actions. David Kolb's definition of experience will be introduced to illustrate this alternate definition of experience (Kolb, 1984).

### David Kolb's definition of experience

Kolb's learning cycle based on the notion of 'experience' is one of the most cited in educational research and deserves mention. Kolb's 'working definition' of learning is: 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, 1984: 38). For Kolb, experience is not knowledge, but only a foundation for the creation of knowledge. Kolb says that he does not want to develop a third alternative to behaviourist and cognitive theories of learning, but 'rather to suggest through experiential learning theory a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior' (Kolb, 1984: 20–21).

Kolb's theory is best known for its model of experiential learning, which he calls the 'Lewinian Experiential Learning Model'. Kolb constructs his own theory from this model. See Figure 5.3.

Kolb stressed two aspects in his learning cycle. First, concrete and immediate experiences are valuable for creating meaning in learning and for validating the learning process:

Immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning, giving life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process. (Kolb, 1984: 21)

Second, the model is based upon action research and laboratory teaching, which are both characterised by feedback processes. The information provided by feedback is the starting point of a continuous process consisting of goal-directed action and evaluation of the consequences of this action. Kolb writes that each stage in the model fits into different forms of adaptation to reality or different 'learning styles'. A particular individual ability or learning style corresponds with each individual stage in the model:

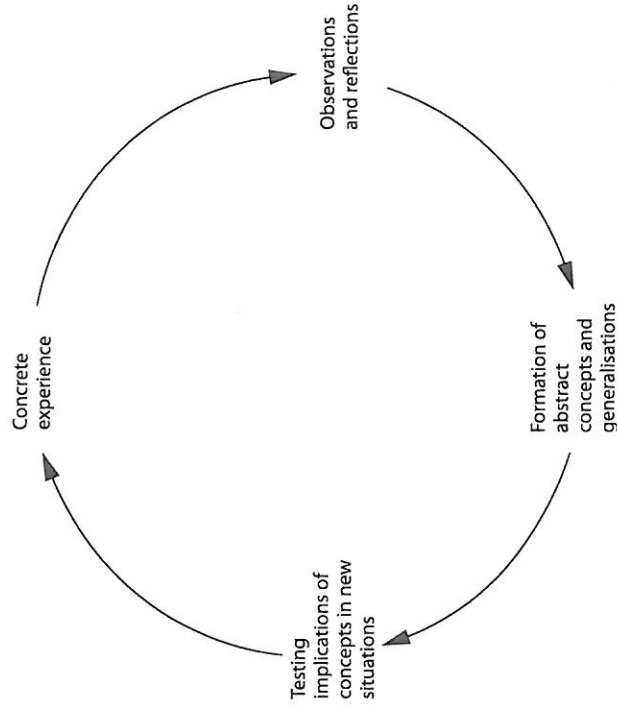


Figure 5.3 After Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984: 21).

Learners, if they are to be effective, need four different kinds of abilities – concrete experience abilities, reflective observation abilities, abstract conceptualization abilities, and active experimentation abilities. That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences. They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives. They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories, and they must be able to use their theories to make decisions and solve problems. (Kolb, 1984: 30)

Thus, in spite of Kolb's use of a circle, it is possible to regard each element in the circle with reference to a different individual ability. While Dewey talks about integration of action and thinking, Kolb makes a distinction in his learning cycle with reference to different abilities reflecting different learning styles needed for effective action and thinking. The focus on experiences as subjective and reaching backwards is, in Kolb's learning cycle, emphasised by the correlation of the stages in the model with different individual learning styles. This means that the stages in Kolb's learning cycle are not connected

with each other in an organic way. Kolb does not introduce a definition of experience that connects the stages, but he combines historical and theoretical elements in his model. He talks about a 'dialectic tension' between the experiential and the conceptual, but he resolves the tension by including both as separate stages in his model. The result being no dialectics, since dialectic logic would show how experience and conceptualisation are necessary for and condition each other (Miettinen, 2000).

When Kolb has won such a prominent position in many educational researchers' practice and research, I think it is because he says something that feels intuitively correct, namely that it is important to base teaching on participants' own experiences. This means taking the tacit knowledge derived from bodily actions into account. The idea being that it is by appealing to the participants' less articulated experiences that motivation for understanding the more abstract and general theories can be found. The problem is, however, that there are many different experiences in a classroom and that a teacher rarely is able to capture the attention of all the students by referring to their subjective experiences. From the vantage point of pragmatism and Dewey's definition of experience, Kolb distinguishes between action and thinking rather than seeing them as united, in spite of his stated outset in Dewey's concept of experience.

Dewey would probably have criticised Kolb's experiential definition of learning for focusing solely on individuals and their minds, just like he criticised Lewin for being 'mentally fashioned' (Dewey and Bentley, 1949 [1991]: 125, note 23). While Dewey's 'experience' connects subject and world, action and thinking, experiences for Kolb remain closed in a separation of the actions and thinking of subjects. Kolb wants to show that different learning styles are needed, and in order to do so he depicts learning as separate sequences in a closed circle. This happens at the expense of the integration of not only action and thinking, but also the mutual relation between subject and world. To Kolb, experience is an epistemological issue and not one of ontology, in spite of his view on learning styles. This also means that there is no room for emotion and aesthetics in Kolb's theory of learning (Vince, 1998).

### Conclusion and discussion

I began this chapter by saying that contemporary societies need a learning theory that can respond creatively to difference and otherness. I discussed Dewey's definition of experience, which is grounded in transaction between subject and world as well as in the relation between thinking and action, being and knowing. Experience occurs when habitual action and thinking are disturbed and calls for inquiry. Inquiry begins in emotion, but may develop into cognition if verbal language is used to define and resolve the disruptive situation. The process of inquiry concerns the consequences of different ways of defining and resolving uncertainties. Inquiry is an experimental process in

which ideas, hypotheses, concepts and theories are used instrumentally as 'tools to think with', and as such is a playful, creative and potentially innovative process. The result of inquiry, the new experience or 'warranted assertibilities' (knowledge), is therefore open-ended (fallible) and can be reinterpreted in light of new experiences.

The problem with using the term 'experience' is that it has several different connotations in educational research as illustrated by Kolb. Dewey knew that and suggested the term 'culture' to connote his more comprehensive understanding and use of 'experience'. Another problem with Dewey's understanding of experience is whether power and inequalities can be addressed. The term 'practice' may be a contemporary candidate to include power and at the same time to connote the content of Dewey's definition of experience.

One learning theory that has practice at its heart is described in the works of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger and their understanding of learning as 'legitimate, peripheral participation in communities of practice' (Lave, 1993 [1996]; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The understanding of learning as participation in communities of practice took learning out of the clutches of individualism. Instead, Lave and Wenger's notion of learning is anchored in access to participation in communities of practice with the purpose of becoming competent practitioners. To take learning away from inside minds to social relations is also to move learning into an area of conflicts and power. The social structure of a practice, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy, define the possibilities for learning (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). The key issue is the relation between the institutional order and the participants' experience (Holland and Lave, 2001). This is another way to describe the relation between subjects and the worlds of which they are a part.

I, however, have some issues with practice-based learning. It is difficult to see learning as more than induction to a community, i.e. as adaptation and socialisation. This means that it is difficult to understand renewal of practice, i.e. to understand creativity and innovation. An understanding of learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice tends, in other words, to overlook conservatism, protectionism and the tendency to recycle knowledge rather than critically challenge and extend it. Furthermore, underlying contradictions and inequities that prevent growth may be hidden (Fenwick, 2001). The potentially constructive ambivalences and resistances in learning may not be captured when the concept of community is strongly emphasised (Wenger, 1998).

It is also difficult to see how thinking, concepts and theories can be part of learning in a practice-based understanding of learning. Action is central in Dewey's concept of learning – not just actions understood as bodily actions, but ideas about action (imagination, thought experiments) and 'speech acts' (language and communication) are also important actions in Dewey's definition of learning. Concepts and theories have an important pedagogical function, because they may guide the formation of new experience and new knowledge

through a rigorous exploration of the past. This experience, in turn, can be used to inform the future. To paraphrase Dewey, a scientific mindset is, and should be, part of peoples' lives. This mindset is demonstrated by exerting still more informed inquiry and critical and reflective thinking. Learning is, however, not the same as transformation and change of conduct, because learning may result in a better understanding of a phenomenon, which cannot necessarily be observed as changed conduct.

Dewey's future-oriented and experimental concept of learning serves as a comprehensive and contemporary theory of learning that emphasises creativity and innovation. This leads to a greater need to educate for inquiry, for critical and reflective thinking into the uncertainties and the challenges of living in a global society with its constant demand of responsiveness to change. This means we must learn to live rather than to acquire a fixed curriculum. History is, obviously, not unimportant, but should not be transferred as a static 'body of knowledge' but as part of inquiry into contemporary challenges. We may, as educators, need to look for another term than 'experience' – a term that can be used today, and that captures the range of meaning that Dewey wanted with his 'experience' and later his interpretation of 'culture'. This means a term that captures the fact that learning is about living, and as such is 'lifelong'. The term 'practice' is a candidate, but it also comes with its own issues as indicated above.

## References

- Bernstein, R. J. (1966 [1967]). *John Dewey*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2006). *Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Dewey, J. (1896 [1972]). The reflex arc concept in psychology. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Early Works 5* (pp. 96–109). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916 [1980]). Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Middle works 9*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1917 [1980]). The need for a recovery of philosophy. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Middle works 10* (pp. 3–48). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933 [1986]). How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 8* (pp. 105–352). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938 [1986]). Logic: The theory of inquiry. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 12*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J., and Bentley, A. F. (1949 [1991]). Knowing and the known. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 16* (pp. 1–294). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Elkjaer, B. (2000). The continuity of action and thinking in learning: Re-visiting John Dewey. *Outlines. Critical Social Studies*, 2, 85–101.
- Fenwick, T. (2001). Tides of change: New themes and questions in workplace learning. *New Directions for Adults and Continuing Education*, 92, 3–17.
- Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D., and Odella, F. (1998). Toward a social understanding of how people

learn in organizations: The notion of situated curriculum. *Management Learning*, 29(3), 273–297.

- Holland, D., and Lave, J. (2001). History in person: An introduction. In D. Holland and J. Lave (Eds.), *History in person: Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities* (pp. 3–33). Santa Fe and Oxford: School of American Research Press and James Currey.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lave, J. (1993 [1996]). The practice of learning. In S. Chaiklin and J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 3–32). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Miettinen, R. (2000). The concept of experiential learning and John Dewey's theory of reflective thought and action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(1), 54–72.
- Scheffler, I. (1974 [1986]). *Four pragmatists: A critical introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey*. London and New York: Routledge and Paul.
- Vince, R. (1998). Behind and beyond Kolb's learning cycle. *Journal of Management Education*, 22(3), 304–319.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.