Making the most of experience

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Increasing interest is now focused on how adults learn from experience, but there is no adequate framework to assist learners and those who facilitate learning promote learning in the midst of experience. This paper provides a way of conceptualising experience-based learning which considers the personal foundation of experience of learners, their intent and their interaction with a learning milieu. Two elements of the learning experience—noticeing and intervening—are discussed in detail. The implications for the facilitation of learning are explored.

Most learning takes place outside of organised educational settings. Such experience is typically haphazard and unplanned, and difficult or impossible for the learner and those facilitating learning to control. One of the questions that arise from this observation is what can we do to enhance the possibility of learning occurring in any given situation? This is an important and enduring question for both learners and those who assist others to learn, and it applies equally to the informal learning which takes place continually throughout life as well as to formal, accredited learning within an institutional context. For many years, along with colleagues in the Australian Consortium on Experiential Education (Higgs 1988), we have been exploring ways of helping learners learn from their experience in a wide variety of situations. In our activities we have been attracted to the idea of reflection as one of the key processes in learning from experience, and to the notion that learning can be enhanced by learners attending to ways in which they can focus attention on events and extract meaning from their experiences through a variety of reflective activities. Our explorations to date are documented in Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985a). The focus of that work was on reflection following experience, rather than during it. It proposed a model for reflection and offered various strategies for reflecting on experience. The key elements of this model were 'return to experience', 'attending to feelings' and 're-evaluation of the experience', each of which was elaborated in some detail. This emphasis on reflection after the event attempted to provide a counterbalance to much current educational practice which does not leave sufficient time and opportunity for learners to process their experience before moving on. Since then, we have been exploring our model through applying it to a wide range of possible learning situations in which we have been involved (in staff development, adult education courses, conferences, retreats), examining the extent of its application and noting with interest the increasing literature on reflection and learning which has been stimulated particularly by Schon (1983, 1987) and by critical theorists (for example, Carr and Kemmis 1986).

We now wish to develop our ideas further and broaden the focus of attention to (a) how it is that we learn through experience, (b) how learners can influence the experience and, consequently, their own learning and (c) how others might facilitate such learning from experience. Our aim in this paper is to examine what learners can do to maximise opportunities for learning which might be available in any given situation, and to focus particularly on the interaction of the learner with the learning environment. We wish to restrict our concern to (a) deliberate learning, that is, situations in which learners have formed a specific intention to learn from their experience (Dewey 1916, Tough 1979); and (b) meaningful learning, that is, learning which is intended to be applied in a way which has meaning to the learner (cf Usher's 1985 thematised approach) (Note 1). We sketch a practical framework, for use by learners and those who facilitate learning, which focuses on key elements of the process of learning from experience. The
examples we use are drawn from planned learning activities though we believe that with some modification, the approach we adopt could be applied in less defined settings.

Many learners are not aware, or are only minimally aware, of the full extent of the interaction that is taking place, and of the influences being brought to bear upon them. Our purpose in systematically examining this interaction is to help both learners and facilitators raise their awareness of what is happening in the learning experience. We believe that a greater awareness of what is happening in, and a more deliberate interaction with, the learning milieu will provide greater opportunities for a more fruitful learning experience. There is no necessary correspondence between awareness of these interactions and learning. Nevertheless, we would expect that such awareness can help equip learners with a framework which can help them begin to appreciate the complex dynamics of the situations with which they are confronted.

One way to look at experience is to consider it as an interaction between a learner and a social, psychological and material environment or milieu. There is potential for learning in every situation and it is up to the learner to realise this potential. It is the learner's interaction with the learning milieu which creates the particular learning experience. While facilitators, and others, can help create the milieu, it is the learner who creates the experience. It can be helpful to distinguish between the event and the experience. The event is the whole situation as observed by someone detached from it, whereas the experience is the situation as it is known and lived by the learner. Reflection on experience, understood in this way, will focus on understanding the learner and the learning environment or milieu, and on the interaction which takes place between the two.

**Part 1**

In the first part of this paper, we will consider the learner, developing briefly the concepts of personal foundation of experience and intent. We will then present our view of the learning milieu and the learning experience.

**The learner**

**Personal foundation of experience**

What the learner brings to the experience has an important influence on what is experienced and how it is experienced. While it is obvious that a student from an aboriginal background is likely to have a very different response to a “field trip” to the land on which he grew up than would a student of European heritage, what is less apparent is that every student will have a unique experience in any given situation and that there may be very great variation even within an ostensibly homogeneous group. The learner possesses a personal foundation of experience, a way of being present to the world, which profoundly influences the way it is experienced and will particularly influence the intellectual and emotional content of the experience and the meanings which are attributed to it:

... although it is the individual who learns, this individual is one who has a language, a culture, and a history, one who is, in other words, situated within the social world of discursive contexts. (Usher 1989)

Writers in the transpersonal education tradition have termed the personal foundation of experience “consciousness” (Tart 1975); others, “personal psychological history”, or “roots of awareness”. We choose personal foundation of experience to distance ourselves from the connotations of consciousness for those outside the transpersonal tradition, to suggest that this foundation is not solely a psychological construct and to identify the influence of this human feature on experience. We also use this term in preference to 'consciousness' as that expression has other associations in the educational literature (Note 2)
This personal foundation of experience is a cumulation of the previous experiences of the learner. It is partly acquired from the social and cultural environment, and partly forged by the learner’s own awareness and effort. It contains the presuppositions and assumptions which the learner has developed in the past and predisposes the learner towards any future experience. It may be difficult or impossible for a learner to give an account of these. The different reactions which people have of the same event often have their origins in their personal and cultural past and, for this reason, no event is such that everyone will experience it in the same way.

Because of this personal foundation of experience, a person may approach a learning milieu in many different ways simultaneously, some conscious, others not. The learner can be sensitised or attuned to certain things within the event, or can interpret elements of the event in the light of certain presuppositions important in the individual's prior experience. This personal foundation of experience can also affect what is done, and how it is done; it can affect the confidence of learners, their ability to act in the presence of others, and how far they can be committed to involvement within this learning milieu. The cultural norms and mores which have been assimilated act as powerful constraints and form perceptual lenses through which the learner views the world and acts within it. Reflection on the actions, thoughts and feelings that have arisen in a learning event can often provide an insight into learners' personal foundation of experience, into themselves, and into their ability to learn from this particular situation.

Sometimes, arising from this personal foundation of experience, learners are affected by the milieu in ways of which they may be unaware. This can lead to thoughts, feelings, and actions, the origins of which are unknown to the learner. Reflection on these may bring an awareness of something that happened of which the learner was not aware, or only partially aware, during the event itself.

Intent

The other important element which the learner brings to the situation is learning intent. Intent can be regarded as a personal determination which provides a particular orientation within a given situation, a rationale for why the learner comes to the particular learning event. Intent is the foundation for self-directed learning; it prompts learners to take steps to achieve their goals (Boud 1988, Knowles 1975, Rogers 1983, Tough 1979). It involves a particular focus of consciousness, the direction of perception along particular lines. A particular intent can only be determined by reference to learners themselves (Houle 1961). For example, in a clinical placement a student's purpose may be simply to practice certain skills, or it may be to find out what life is like in the clinical setting with a view to deciding to make a commitment to a career in this aspect of the field. Intent can often be linked to core values and ideals. This is particularly so with more general life intents such as the desire for success and recognition, or personal religious or political commitments. However, it may also be an entirely pragmatic response to a situation. Sometimes, the learner may not be aware of a particular intent, but it is operative. It can only be recognized by the actions, thoughts or feelings that result from it. Often this can take place during reflection after the event. Learning intent, then, influences the way learners experience events. It acts to focus and intensify perception in relationship to certain parts of an experience, and at the same time play down, or eliminate others. The photographer with a zoom lens sees certain things more clearly, but in the process of doing so, eliminates other things from the frame. Intent can act as a filter, or magnifier. It can impose limits on an experience, which, at times, may need to be done. It offers a frame of reference or a perspective from which the experience is viewed. It can influence what learners notice, how they record, determine how much they do, how far they go, how much they invest in the situation and the specific outcomes sought from it. Intent can lead the learner to pursue certain observations at greater depth and help link together otherwise unconnected observations. However, the nature of learning from experience is such that intent never acts as the sole arbiter of outcomes: the learner has but partial control of events and,
while he or she may become more adept in dealing with them, the world provides its own challenges to continually provoke and stimulate the learner.

In some formal learning events, students arrive with little conscious learning intent or even commitment to being there. Unless the teacher can help the learner form an intent, the opportunities for learning may not be well utilised. The learner may view the task as one of simply satisfying the teacher, feeding back to the teacher that which it appears is required to satisfy the extrinsic constraints (Usher 1985). This may be an entirely appropriate response provoked by the circumstances. It does, however, point to the need for learning intentions of learners to be considered before events are planned otherwise outcomes may be artifacts of teacher expectations, not related in a meaningful way to the goals of learners.

The more dearly they understand intent, the more learners may be able to ensure that they will appreciate the experience, draw from it, and effectively evaluate learning in the light of it. Lack of intent in formal learning situations can lead to a superficial experience resulting in missed opportunities; lack of a clear understanding of intent can lead to loss of focus and openness to distraction. A particular intent can be changed by a situation; it can become focused or diffused, even transformed altogether, according to what is experienced. More often the situation has a greater influence on the strategies and use of resources brought into play by a particular intent rather than the intent itself. For example, students, on discovering that their contributions are valued by their co-workers, can invest renewed energies into the event.

Teachers or facilitators can play an important role in helping learners clarify their intent and developing strategies appropriate to it. However, as we have suggested, they need to be careful that teacher intents do not swamp or subjugate possible intents of the learners. Unexplored and unresolved discrepancies in intent between teacher and learner can often lead to disorganised and unproductive experiences and to considerable frustration on the part of both parties. A familiar example in the classroom context is the compulsory first year course taught by mathematicians to students who have enrolled to study engineering or medicine and who want to get on with studying the subjects which they see as directly related to their career goals.

The learning milieu

Every situation may be a learning milieu. The learning milieu has been defined in the formal educational setting as the social - psychological and material environment in which students and teachers work together ...[it] represents a network or nexus of cultural, social, institutional, and psychological variables. These interact in complicated ways to produce, in each class or course, a unique pattern of circumstances, pressures, customs, opinions and work styles which suffuse the teaching and learning that occur there. The configuration of the learning milieu in any particular classroom, depends on the interplay of numerous different factors... (Parlett and Hamilton 1972).

The notion of milieu can be easily extended to informal learning situations where there are no teachers or facilitators and no requirements of others that pertain to learning. There may still be norms and rules of behaviour and expectations of others, but other people present may not be aware of any learning content to their interactions. Students and teachers become learners and facilitators and classes or courses become opportunities for learning.

This definition captures the complexity of the learning milieu. The milieu is much more than the physical environment; it embraces the formal requirements, the culture, procedures, practices, and standards of particular institutions and societies, the immediate goals and expectations of any facilitator, as well as the personal characteristics of individuals who are part of it.
The focus in this paper is more on the interaction between the learner and the milieu than on the milieu itself, and is an effort to take a systematic look at how the learner interacts with the milieu. We are not concerned to redefine the milieu, but to single out several important aspects of the interaction that takes place with it. We take the learning milieu to be all those entities, human and material, which provide the context and events within which the learner operates. These consist of far more than the immediate players who may be present. They include the history, values and ideologies of the culture as well as the manifestations of these in particular events. Issues such as gender, race and class are all potentially significant elements of the milieu.

Learning is a function of the relationship between the learner and the milieu and is never something determined by one of these elements alone (Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle 1984). Learners' plans can be thwarted by an uncongenial milieu, and a particular milieu can promote particular kinds of learning. If, for example, a woman is made to feel uncomfortable in a group because she is a woman, she may abandon her plans for what she might do in the group.

**The learning experience**

It is learners' engagement with the milieu which constitutes the particular learning experience. The milieu becomes the context of learning by virtue of the learner's entry into it. In the clinical example given above, the normal work of the clinic continues but the presence of students changes this milieu into one which is more explicitly oriented to learning. Each learner forms part of the milieu, enriching it with his or her personal contribution, and creating an interaction which is the learning experience for his or herself and for others. However, the learner is part of the milieu as a reflective person able to stand back or withdraw from the immediate interaction to become aware of what is taking place, and to dialogue with it. Learners' construction of what is taking place in themselves and in the milieu is a necessary and crucial part of the on-going experience and the learning which flows from it. It is this interaction which lies at the heart of the on-going experience. Experience can be seen as a continuing, complex series of interactions between the learner and the learning milieu, unified by reflective processes which assimilate and work with the learning potential of the environment, and can move the learner to take appropriate action within the experience. (See Figure 1.)

In any experience there may be reflective activity occurring in which what the learner perceives is processed and becomes the basis of new knowledge and further action. Information is associated with previous knowledge, is integrated with it, and may then be tested in the event. Reflection is a normal on-going process which can, if desired, be made more explicit and more ordered.

**Part II**

While our previous work was focussed on reflection after the experience, the characteristics of it outlined in our earlier model capture something of what is happening in reflection during the experience: returning to the experience during reflection, handling feelings that arise, and re-evaluating the experience, which involves association of new data with previous learning, the processing and integrating of these associations, and the appropriation and testing of what is learned (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985b). Aspects of these may occur at any time, during a break in the action or even while learners are observing their own actions at the time.
Our interest here is not so much reflective processes in themselves, but two aspects of the interaction between the learner and the milieu which we believe are necessary to enhance the working of these processes. The first is noticing, by which the person becomes aware of the milieu, or particular things within it, and uses this for the focus of reflection. The second aspect is intervening, in which the person takes an initiative in the event. This may be an attempt to change it, in a major or minor way, or to check their understanding of what is occurring. Interventions can change the event so that the learner needs to look at it again. Noticing is essential to the initiation of the reflective process and can provide further evidence on which to reflect. Both noticing and intervening are required at various times for learning from experience. As Heron has put it another context  

... the complementarity or polarity is between noticing and trying out, between experiential receptivity and active agency.” (Heron 1981, p.160)

There can be a continuing cycle of noticing, reflecting, intervening, noticing, reflecting; however, there can also be many combinations of these activities interspersed with others which may appear to have no link with the learning task. The expression of a simple cycle does not capture the idea of reflection as inextricably linked with what takes place throughout, but it does highlight noticing and intervening as two important aspects of the learning experience which are necessary to the on-going reflective process. If attention is given to these aspects, then the whole process may be enriched. Learning crucially involves both what the learner perceives, that is, what is taken in and what is construed as taking place; and what the learner contributes to the situation, that is, what is done to change the situation in order to better understand or to contribute to it. We will now examine these two aspects in more detail.

A. Noticing
In approaching the subject of noticing, we will consider four aspects of its role.

a. Noticing and the learning milieu
Noticing is an act of becoming aware of what is happening in and around oneself. It is active and seeking, although it may not be formally planned: it involves a continuing effort to be aware of what is taking place in oneself and in the learning experience. It can also be casual and apparently unintended: learners can notice at unlikely times - travelling home, listening to music.
It is directed to both the interior and exterior worlds. Within the learner, it involves attending to thoughts and feelings. This can offer insights into how the event is experienced, and can sometimes reveal unconscious interactions that have taken place, or are taking place within the experience. By noticing what is taking place within, the learner may more effectively appreciate what is taking place in the overall situation. External to the learner, it requires attending to the nature of the event and its elements: the forms of interaction between participants, the use of language, cultural patterns, documents and objects used, declared intentions, the continuing change within the event, the presuppositions on which the action of participants are based, the emotional climate of the event, and a variety of other things. Noticing acts to feed information from the learning milieu into continuing reflective processes which are integral to the experience and enables the learner to enter into further reflective interaction with it.

The presence of others makes the learning situation more complex and volatile, and increases the need to be attentive to what is taking place within the event. Access to their experience is necessarily limited, but it can be useful to check with them that what is noticed about them, or about external events, is appropriately interpreted. In the clinical situation it is obvious that the student should be aware of and respond to the feelings of the patient as well as other clinical indicators. Other people in the situation can also assist the learner in this process of noticing. As has been said above attention is important for learning, and the supportive attention of others can be very helpful in enabling learners to notice what is occurring within them and their immediate environment.

Learners often notice much about the learning environment but ignore what is happening in themselves. In many situations, the latter is equally important. It is important for learners to focus on their own thoughts, feelings and actions throughout the experience, and their influence on the interactions with the environment. Observing how learners are acting, can lead them to reflect on what might be motivating them or what is provoking them to act. Being aware of what learners are thinking can alert them to what is influencing them within the experience. Being attentive to feelings makes learners aware of their emotional responses to the event. This is important as it involves being sensitive to the situation, seeking to detect the nuances and the affective tone, as well as the ostensible content. While it may be necessary at times to play down feelings in the immediate situation, neglect of emotional responses can lead to a build up of stress and a numbing of awareness which can inhibit the ability to act and distort learning.

The learner's ability to notice what is taking place within, particularly in the area of feeling and thinking, can help reveal unconscious aspects of interactions that have taken place, or are taking place, within the experience. If the learner becomes conscious of being preoccupied by a particular line of thought, it may be it has been unconsciously triggered by an interaction with the event of which he or she is not aware. Becoming aware of feelings which do not seem to be appropriate to the situation, may also point to interaction at the unconscious level. An example, is that of clinical students realising that they have been speaking to an elderly person in a way in which they would not act with someone younger and wondering whether they have been patronising in their approach and perhaps leading to a reassessment of their assumptions about older people. By noticing what is taking place within, the learner may more effectively appreciate what is taking place in the overall situation.

Griffin (1987) has drawn attention to the importance of learners naming the learning processes in which they are engaged. She pointed to the work of Boyd and Fales (1983) in which they found that when learners named the process, they had more control over their learning and experienced a surge of energy in the conduct of their tasks. While Griffin and Boyd and Fales were referring to learners naming their perceived learning processes, in addition the act of naming what they notice is also a way of learners taking power over a situation in which they may feel that they have little
formal control. The act of naming is a way of making familiar, of translating into common language occurrences which are perceived to have some meaning. In making this recommendation, we are also conscious of the limitation of prematurely labelling events and processes. This can lead to misinterpretations when the vocabulary and conceptual appreciation of the learner is restricted.

In many situations, particularly formal ones, it is not necessary, and in many ways not desirable, for noticing to be engaged in an exhaustive manner. Awareness of all the factors and influences at work in a situation may be inhibiting especially when one's intervention skills are limited. Trying to cope with too much information can be a difficulty: sufficient noticing needs to occur to allow meaningful interventions to be made and for learners to conduct themselves with some degree of confidence. In a group discussion, for example, opportunities for contributing can be lost if the learner pays too much attention to the dynamics of the group or the content of the discussion.

b. Noticing and the learner.

What the learner brings to the experience, the personal foundation of experience and the intent, can significantly affect what is noticed in two ways. The first is that noticing is a selective process, and the things to which the learner is predisposed by previous experience or intent will be more easily noticed than other things. The attention of the learner can be directed by what is brought to the experience, and this will affect what is noticed. It is important that attention not be totally absorbed by either what is expected or planned or by the immediate features of the event itself, but be open to the emergent and spontaneous (Note 3). Recognition of this possibility is a key step in not allowing it to happen. Secondly not only is what is expected to occur more easily recognised, but other aspects of the event are often interpreted according to the personal foundation of experience or intent of the learner. It is common for learners to read their presuppositions into events, and to interpret the event and its elements in the light of them. This means that the event is experienced as an expression of, and a reinforcement of learner's presuppositions. When this happens, learners may be fooled by their taken-for-granted assumptions and trapped by, and in, their past experiences. It is impossible for them to consider other ways of viewing their experience when such strong predispositions determine what and how they notice.

Developing noticing skills and strategies prior to the experience can help the learner to enter more fully into it. These skills and strategies can help to ensure that learners do not get so distracted by the dynamics of the event that they forget why they are there. They enable them to be fully involved in the event and, at the same time, constantly aware of what is happening, internally and externally, and able to act decisively in regard to the experience. Noticing strategies developed in advance may need to be modified in the light of the exigencies of the task, but they should not be omitted. Examples of such skills and strategies are maintaining a balance of attention, that is, to be able to take in occurrences which are observed, the processes which are enacted and, most importantly, to be aware of learners' own reactions to these and their internal affective state. Another simpler strategy is to prepare in advance means for prompting the focus of attention on particular aspects of the experience which might otherwise be neglected. These strategies could take the form of observation schedules, checklists, or timing devices to remind the learner of the need to shift attention at various points in the encounter.

Noticing strategies can also prompt learners to examine their assumptions about what they notice and attempt to view events from other perspectives. This can be particularly difficult in the press of the moment and it can be useful to construct in advance opportunities for stepping out of the experience and attempting to make sense of what has been observed and experienced. At the simplest level, this may involve reminders to “take a break” or make notes. An example of a more sophisticated device is finding someone who will listen supportively and talk about “what is happening” asking them
to repeat the question beyond the point at which one's immediate explanations are exhausted.

Preparing the learner to record what is noticed is another strategy that can help learning. It is not always possible or appropriate to make a tangible record of what is noticed at the time. However, in many cases, a mechanism needs to be found for capturing observations, thoughts and conclusions for later scrutiny. The flow of later events can overlay earlier experiences and only through making some form of recording at the time can they be readily recaptured. When different observations are seen in conjunction with each other, patterns may begin to emerge. Rarely will final and complete reflection on the experience take place within it. Subsequent reflection is usually needed to provide the fullest analysis and learning and this can be greatly aided by prompts about what seemed at the time to be, significant incidents. A wide range of techniques are available for recording, depending on the situation: writing and keeping notebooks (Bawden and McKinnon 1980, Walker 1985), making audio or video recordings, completing checklists, questionnaires or other pro formas, taking time out to reflect individually or with others, learning partners (Robinson, Saberton & Griffin 1985, Saberton 1985) etc. In some situations, it would be intrusive and disruptive to make full recordings, or indeed any notes at all for considerable spans of time so that noting has to be fitted into the interstices of experience.

c. Noticing and experience

It should be clear then that the activity of noticing plays a very important role within the experience itself. Noticing affects the extent to which the learner is involved in the experience. Those who are limited in what they notice may not know sufficient to enter into the experience; those who are preoccupied with noticing may also be inhibited in so doing. The development of the learner’s ability to notice is an important step in bringing the learner to a greater appreciation of learning from experience. Noticing helps provide the basis for entering fully into an experience whilst at the same time maintaining sufficient awareness of actions to make effective decisions about the experience and retain knowledge of it for subsequent reflection. There are times at which it is necessary for learners to completely immerse themselves in experience, and others in which they need to stand back and witness what is occurring. It is a paradox that the extent to which learners are in touch with the learning milieu will radically affect their ability to learn from it, while, at the same time, the extent to which they can also distance themselves from the experience similarly contributes to the extent to which they can learn from it.

The movement into and out of the learning experience are two particular aspects that require special attention. What is noticed at the initial stage is of particular importance in the interaction of the learner with the milieu: ‘first impressions are the strongest’. The person at this stage is often more susceptible to presuppositions which result from past experiences than at a later stage of the experience. Expectations can be self-fulfilling and it is best to try to enter with those which are most conducive to effective learning: ‘the experience will be a valuable one whatever occurs and I will be able to relate effectively with all those I encounter’. If the learner has reservations about the experience, these should be addressed as far as possible prior to entry.

Finishing can be as important as starting. A contrived experience is a step outside the normal world of learners to which they must return. Within the experience they may have undertaken new roles and engaged in strange and demanding tasks. They cannot just set these aside when their time is up. They need to complete the business which they started and disengage from the other participants and also disengage themselves from any roles which they have assumed. The latter applies not only to role-playing, but to any situation which may leave the learner disrupted in some way. Learners may find difficulty in reflecting adequately if they are acting in roles which are not their own. They need to take up their persona as learners and process what they have been
through. In the light of this disengaging from the experience, noticing plays the role of selecting important observations and learning which will be applicable in the usual world of the learner.

Reflection after the event is one of the most helpful means of drawing learning from experience. It can be helpful, after the experience, to return to it as the basis of reflection. What the learner returns to is basically what has been noticed in the learning milieu which becomes the basis of the learning experience. Remembering what took place is a form of retrospective noticing. Feelings noticed by the learner can be raised and may need to be processed before reflection after the event can be carried out. Only then can the matters noticed by the learner be associated with other data and integrated into the learning of the individual. We have suggested a practical way to approach reflection after experience elsewhere (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985b).

d. Facilitating noticing.

Learners can often benefit from the presence and intervention of someone whose role is to facilitate their learning. It is important however to distinguish between two categories of facilitation. The first is that in which the facilitator is acting entirely in the light of the intent of the learner insofar as this can be determined. The second is that in which the intent of the facilitator qua teacher is also considered and the facilitator has an agenda for the learner. The facilitator may have designed an event to enhance the possibilities of particular kinds of learning for example. Ambiguity about which of these roles the facilitator is undertaking can lead to frustration and miscommunication. A psychological contract between learner and facilitator in which matters such as these are made explicit and agreed upon can be helpful.

In a planned experiential learning situation, there are usually things which the facilitator has designed or recognized in the situation which the learner is expected to notice and dialogue with. In preparing for the experience, the facilitator can help by giving a general introduction to the learning situation, and point to particular aspects of it which are particularly relevant to the learning under consideration. The initial step of introducing the learner to the learning milieu is an important one, and can affect the whole experience. However, the perception of the facilitator and the learner can be vastly different, and a milieu is always richer and contains greater potential for learning than any one facilitator or learner can perceive. As a result, one cannot always be sure that the interaction of the learner with the milieu will take place along expected lines. Therefore, it is the facilitator’s role to help the learner negotiate the milieu and recognize the opportunities it offers. However, what the learner brings to the milieu may also open up potential and opportunities unforeseen by the facilitator.

Facilitation prior to the event can be very effective in deepening the noticing ability of learners. Helping learners to a greater appreciation of their personal foundation of experience is particularly important although it is not always seen as such by the learners. This can mean bringing to the surface presuppositions relevant to the present learning event, working with feelings that may dispose them to, or return them from, features of the present event, and reminding them of special skills or strategies relating to noticing that they already possess. It can also be helpful for the facilitator to sharpen learners’ awareness of their intent, and focus it in a special way on the learning milieu. It may also help if the facilitator helps learners surface other more general interests or intents which they have and which may be relevant to the experience. Time spent in preparation in these areas can significantly improve the learner’s ability to notice within the experience. For example, prior to learners entering the learning milieu, a facilitator might introduce activities to bring them into dialogue with their presuppositions and existing knowledge related to the event. One strategy would be for learners, in pairs, to ask each other questions without discussion such as ‘what would you think or do if...?’ or ‘why are you doing this...?’ and continue to ask the same question until all responses are exhausted. Facilitators can also assist learners by introducing them to
new skills and strategies that relate to noticing, which will help them to engage more effectively in the event and utilised the opportunities that may reside in it.

Sometimes a facilitator may be present during the experience to assist the interaction between the learner and the learning environment. The facilitator, as appropriate, can indicate aspects to be noticed, or direct learners in a general way which will lead them to notice things that might have gone unnoticed otherwise. An example of this is the “master class in the performing arts. The facilitator can be alert to feelings within learners, or the emotional climate of the event which are either inhibiting noticing or promoting it and can assist learners to address these. The facilitator may also call “time out” for reflection or recording within the experience. In some situations, it is possible for the facilitator to change the learning milieu from within, to help the learner relate more easily to it. When the experience is unplanned, the role of the facilitator is more opportunistic and may range from learner's companion and partner in learning (Robinson, Saberton & Griffin 1985, Saberton 1985) or more experienced co-learner, to that of personal counsellor. While some features of facilitation in a planned environment may be appropriate to draw upon in this situation the facilitator has not the same relationship to the learner and the learning milieu as in the case of a planned experience.

B. Intervening

The nature of intervening is considered in relation to the learning milieu, the learner, the experience as a whole, and facilitating interventions.

a. Intervening and the learning milieu

Intervening refers to any action taken by the learner within the learning situation affecting the learning milieu or the learner. Sometimes, it is a conscious action flowing from and influenced by a reflective process, more often it arises from a partially formulated intent in response to the unique features of the milieu. Our focus is on the deliberate actions of the learner, the strategic interventions over which the learner can exercise some influence on the situation. However, some reference will also be made to other types of actions, those unconsciously motivated, which may exercise a great influence on the learning and which may need to be the focus of attention. Intervening is usually an overt action by the learner, which can be noticed by observers of the event, but at times act of failing to make an overt intervention can affect the situation in significant can thus be regarded as a particular form of intervention, e.g. when there is an expectation to respond but no response is given.

In many situations, the more intense the interaction between the learner and the learning milieu the more potential the experience may have for learning. This potential may not, however, be realised. Learning from experience is an active process which involves the not only in noticing, but in taking initiatives to extend and test their own knowledge. These initiatives are a positive intervention in the learning situation and enable the learner to be fully engaged and to extend their learning from the vicarious to the visceral or, in Heron's (1981) terms, from prepositional to practical and experiential knowledge. These actions can change the situation, create new experiences within the overall experience, and determine how the situation will unfold.

An intervention can move learners from experiences in which they are learning from their identification with others to those which they actively shape to their own ends. However, depending on the nature of the intervention, it can also limit their involvement. When it is defensive, it cuts the learner off from further or deeper involvement in the learning event. Constructively, it is an entry into dialogue with the learning milieu; a movement from passivity to action. Looking on is no substitute for active involvement. Learners often need the skill to be players, not just spectators. If being able to act is part of any goal, this normally requires action as part of the learning process. An analogy is with learning a sport. Much benefit can be gained from
watching others perform; rules and strategy can be seen and even mental rehearsal practised, but no skill develops this alone, and no appreciation of the effects on the individual occurs without direct participation. Remember though that what appears to others to be inactivity can be a deliberate choice not to act, which is in itself an intervention.

Vicarious learning is important too, but in many areas it is insufficient and sometimes inappropriate. The significance of some actions cannot be appreciated until an attempt is made to emulate them; on other occasions, the lack of intervention implies tacit assent and others may form an unintended impression. Intervening can be a way of exploring further been noticed in the event. The learner who intervenes is adopting an active approach to the experience and is often more likely to be able to make the most of the potential for learning which can be generated from the context.

b. Intervening and the learner

Interventions may be limited by the learner's personal foundation of experience, which favours certain types of action, but ignores others. This can limit involvement in the experience, and at times it is necessary to help the learner to act contrary to common assumptions in order for them to become more involved in the experience. For example, to be bold and ask a challenging question, or reveal their feelings to others. Patterns of behaviour formed from past experience may even affect the learner's ability to act at all. Some learners carry assumptions from the past which can paralyse them, so that they are not able to perform. Strong feelings may arise in a given situation which prevent learners from expressing themselves, and the only way to help them intervene is to attend to the feelings which are blocking their ability to act. For example, clinical students may not undertake a particular course of action because of a lack of confidence arising from a past failure. On the other hand, they may well lean towards other types of actions because of past successes in them. In these cases, the actions taken may be more determined by the student than by the needs of the patient. Students (and others) may not be free enough to act solely out of the data provided by the situation as they bring their own limitations with them. Often the greatest barriers to intervention are feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment. These can so inhibit clear thinking that interventions are either entirely blocked or enacted so maladroitly that opportunities are lost. Similarly, feelings of confidence and willingness to 'give it a go' regardless can generate their own momentum and carry the learner through initial periods of discomfort.

Sometimes, interaction between the learner's personal foundation of experience and the situation can also motivate or prompt interventions, which may not necessarily be at a conscious level. It has already been mentioned above that action can be the result of unconscious noticing, i.e. stemming from something which has been detected unconsciously. These interventions, of which the learner may not be aware, or the motives of which may not be clear, can, if brought to the surface, offer a helpful insight into the personal foundation of experience of the learner, and may, on later reflection, be a fruitful source of information about how this particular person learns.

The way a learner acts within a situation can be influenced by the intent brought to the situation. Firstly, there may be some actions which the learner had decided on before entering the situation, and are performed at an appropriate time within the experience. Secondly, of the many options for action which arise from data collected within the experience, some will be chosen which relate to the reason for being in the situation. Intent can give rise to interventions which test knowledge, perceptions, skills, forms of behaviour, acquired either before or within the experience. It can cause the learner to focus on particular aspects of the learning milieu and to act in a way which explores those particular aspects more carefully than others. Sometimes, more general life intents, or interests which the learner has, can be activated within a learning situation,
and can prompt the learner to act in a way that is in keeping with them, but which seems contrary to particular intents articulated in relationship to this experience. These general life intents can be as significant as particular intents in affecting the way the learner acts within the learning situation. For example, discovering a member of the work team is also a parent facing similar problems to one's own may lead to the exploration of parental issues and away from the ostensible reason for entering the situation.

c. Intervening and experience
The learning milieu is dynamic: the influence of the learner upon it creates an on-going, developing experience which needs to be constantly monitored. This is particularly true when people other than the learner are part of the learning milieu. Intervention to test or challenge the presuppositions of others can so affect them that the situation can change significantly, and an initial approach can lead to a series of actions which transform the situation and create a potentially more creative context for learning.

Interventions always be affected by the milieu itself, just as they have the potential to affect it. A particular action already performed which brought about a particular effect, may not achieve the same effect in the changed situation. Even actions which are not directly focussed on the milieu itself can bring about a change in the learner’s relationship to it. For example, a student preoccupation to record the data being observed can result in them losing contact with the milieu itself and miss information which is available.

Perhaps the most significant influence on the actions of the learner within the situation are reflective processes that run through it. The active working with the data of the situation by the learner influences their actions, whether or not they are consciously thinking about reflection. Some actions may be simple responses to the situation. Others may arise out of a combination of the data fed in and the previous intents of the learner. Even where some actions have been decided on beforehand, or are being influenced by factors prior to the experience, the timing of them and the way they are actually performed will be influenced by the learner’s reflection within the situation.

Reflection within the situation can also lead to a recognition of the feelings and thoughts which accompany intervention. This can be an important factor in appreciating these actions. If the learner is aware of the feelings associated with a particular action, they can work with those feelings to enhance the action. The same is true of awareness of the intellectual activity associated with the action. It may well reflect presuppositions which limit or promote the action. Working with these thoughts can enable the learner to act more freely and effectively.

As with noticing, the initial and final stages of the experience can have special significance. In the initial stage, the person is often more susceptible to presuppositions and attitudes which result from past experiences than at a later stage of the experience. Anxieties and fears which inhibit action are more likely to arise at this stage, and need to be addressed. It is sometimes good to encourage learners to take action in this early stage to enable them to become comfortable with the situation. The sooner positive interventions begin the more quickly will the learner become involved in the experience. At the final stage of the experience, the learner may need to be conscious of how to make the transition from the learning event to other activities. Intervening may involve taking action to bring to completion certain aspects of the experience, record elements which may be needed for the future, or withdraw from particular involvement within the experience.

d. Facilitating intervening.
In intervention, the learner needs to make judgements about when and where to take the initiative and what should be the nature and content of the interventions. Prior to the experience it may be possible to predict what common situations may arise and hence
develop a range of strategies to deploy. The facilitator may also suggest particular interventions which the learner could implement, or ways in which the learner's own interventions could be put into practice.

Facilitators can help by arranging opportunities for analysis of typical incidents and rehearsal of suitable responses. This may involve the use of case study material, audio or video recordings of typical incidents, mental rehearsal of intervention strategies, organisation of role-playing sessions to practice appropriate intervention sequences and counselling of learners on their anxieties and uncertainties about entering unpredictable situations.

Learners can be more or less skilful in intervening in various situations. When the learning milieu involves interaction with people, a range of social and communication skills are required. Examples of social and communication skills required in intervention are: active listening, explaining, questioning, use of verbal and non-verbal communication assertiveness, and group interaction and leadership (see, for example, Carkhuff 1983, Egan 1977, Hargie, Saunders and Dickson 1987, Heron 1989, Mulligan 1988). The observer always influences the situation; at some times during the experience it is important to be unobtrusive and minimise this influence; at other times it is important to maximise one's impact depending on one's goals.

Heron (1989) has done much work in clarifying interventions at the micro level through his six category intervention analysis. Application of this analysis can be helpful in noticing and developing more appropriate types of intervention. Heron argues that any intervention by a person to a group or individual can be classified in one of six ways: informative, directive, interpretive, cathartic, catalytic and supportive. Analysis of the types of intervention which a person makes can raise their awareness of their taken-for-granted ways of intervening and allow them to make conscious decisions about the types of intervention they wish to make.

When the situation involves objects and things, various technical skills are needed. The skill demands of the situation will vary greatly and need to be assessed prior to entry so that there are opportunities for learners to develop what is required. For any given experience there may be very specialist skills which are necessary, for example, on a geological field trip, learners would be expected to have acquired certain abilities to identify and classify rock samples. There are also practical matters in any situation such as, planning, time management, and recording.

In addition to these two categories of practical skills, there is another which brings together noticing and intervening. This is the group of conceptual skills which is somewhat different in kind from the other two groups. Learners need to be able to develop conceptual frameworks which enable them to make sense of the experiences they have had and relate them to prior experiences and the world around them. Devices which are extremely useful in helping learners make such links are the concept map and the V heuristic (Novak and Gowin 1984) and the making of metaphors (Deshler 1990).

When present during the experience, the facilitator can positively assist the learner to take appropriate action within the experience. The facilitator may suggest interventions or advise on how the learner's interventions may be effectively carried out. Providing strategies, whose relevance may not have been recognized beforehand, could be a very helpful contribution of the facilitator. After the experience, the facilitator can help the learner bring to mind the action that was taken in the experience, and help process what was learned from it by the method suggested in Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning.
Conclusion

Learning from and through experience, as Usher (1985) among many others points out is an extraordinarily complex business. Unfortunately, there is relatively little to draw upon to help conceptualise basic ideas and processes. In this paper we have endeavoured to provide some practical help to those who wish to actively work with experienced based learning and also some thoughts which will, we hope, assist those who are researching in this area. We have tried to explore the nature of the learning experience itself, and emphasise important activities that can take place within that experience. By approaching the experience as an interaction between the learner and the learning milieu, we have focused attention on understanding what the learner brings to the situation, and how it is the learner's involvement with the event that constitutes the learning experience. In particular we have stressed the importance of the learners personal foundation of experience and learning intent which bear significantly on the nature of the experience. We have also named two important aspects of the interaction between the learner and the learning milieu—noticing and intervening—in the belief that further attention to them will assist the learning process. Clearly these areas require further development and we hope that by drawing attention to them within the context of experiential learning, others will be drawn to examine the role of these factors and continue the development of a framework to guide learning from experience.

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Notes

1. Usher (1985) uses the notion of a thematized conception of learning (after Säljö 1979). This is a conception of learning based upon a perspective dependent view of knowledge and a deep approach to using experience. Usher contrasts this with a reproductive conception of learning in which knowledge is seen in dualistic terms and a surface approach to using experience is adopted.

2. “Consciousness is nothing which we have which gazes idly on the scene around one or which has impressions made upon it by physical things; it is a name for the purposeful quality of an activity, for the fact that it is directed by an aim. Put the other way about, to have an aim is to act with meaning, not like an automatic machine; it is to mean to do something and to perceive the meaning of things in the light of that intent.” (Dewey 1916, p.121). What Dewey points to here as consciousness we have included in our discussion of intent.

3. There are some situations, highly technical or skilful ones, perhaps where this observation may have less force. For example, when observing a clinical procedure or when immersed in a flight simulator.

References

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