

CHAPTER 10: READINGS

Relates to: Chapter 1, "Introduction and Orientation"

School for New Learning: Purpose and Philosophy

By Pat Ryan, School for New Learning Resident Faculty

One of the nine colleges of DePaul University, the School for New Learning (SNL) is an alternative and experimental liberal arts college for adults. Established in 1972, SNL expresses DePaul's Vincentian commitment to personalism and the University's role as a metropolitan educational institution. SNL teaches adults, frequently full-time workers, who have been absent from the academic world for some time. SNL incorporates their experiences to fashion an education to attain the knowledge, skills and capacities to succeed as educated adults. The purpose is carried out through a set of components designed to facilitate adult learning.

- 1) Courses and counseling offered at a time and place available to working people.
- 2) Teachers and counselors who understand and can communicate with adults.
- 3) A dynamic and flexible curriculum which engages adults in diverse learning experience in liberal arts and career areas.
- 4) A competence framework that recognizes valid prior learning, provides for diverse goals, and believes in differing learning styles and paces.
- 5) A committee for each student that helps him or her to tailor the framework to utilize background and to achieve a specific goal.
- 6) A commitment to dialogue and negotiations that enables the adult learner to own her or his learning.

Just as the whole world is a school for the whole of the human race, from the beginning of time to the very end, so the whole of life is a school for every man, from the cradle to the grave... Every age is destined for learning, nor is man given other goals in learning than in life itself.

John Amos Caimans

The SNL undergraduate program is based on experiential learning theory that has its roots in the philosophy of John Dewey and the psychology of adult development. In this theory, the compartmentalizing of learning and its separation from work and other life activities is detrimental. It minimizes both the life and the learning. At its worst, it subjects people to non-analytic routinizing of the everyday with little resources available for learning *from* and *for* their experience. Experience, in and of itself, varies widely in its impact on the group or individuals and its utility for dealing with future experience.

Education is itself an experience that should be measured by its impact on the learner and its utility to his or her past experience and learning as well as her or his future experience and learning. Utility in this sense is more general than usefulness or use and is meant to denote adaptation to produce a valuable result. The process of learning from experience and planning experiences that instill learning is at the core of SNL's educational program. Beginning the learning process with experience can supply both the

stuff (sense data) and the motivation of the experience. It can also sharpen learning skills that can be used in a variety of contexts.

David Kolb provides a structural format for the process of experiential learning. The movement from experience to reflection to generalization to experimentation engages the learner as an agent of education rather than the passive recipient of education. (David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, 1984.). The SNL framework and faculty guide and evaluate this process but the learners (students) are the primary agents in the process – *their* experience, *their* generalization, and *their* experimentation.

SNL certifies and awards competence credit not for the experience itself (I went to China; I was a camp counselor; I like plants) but assists the learner in determining and evidencing the knowledge and skills developed in that experience. Since learning, especially in the SNL context, is a lifelong process, the experiential aspects are not limited to those already part of the learner. They also form the basis for new learning in the form of courses, independent studies, fieldwork, and independent projects. These planned experiences enable the learner to use theories and methodologies to deal competently with specific problems and concerns in the practical (practicing) world of business, family and community affairs. In SNL, the disciplines of traditional college education are used in the process of reflecting, generalizing, and testing experience.

Finally, adults have multi-dimensional lives and commitments that enrich as well as complicate the learning process. Learners must prioritize and work out these complexities. SNL, for all its individual emphasis, is a college, an institution that must maintain standards so that it is a valid agent in the educational process. SNL advisors and faculty are themselves engaged in lifelong learning as well as in their personal and institutional lives which means their expertise and availability are limited, that is to say, human. As reflectors on history and group relations come to discover, ideals on governmental, philosophic, theological and other levels are lived out day to day. An experiential competence-based learning program must realize that the learning experience will differ for each learner, that outcomes will be measured but achievements will not always perfectly replicate desires.

To paraphrase a powerful adage, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” A life with its reflected-upon experiences is a terrible thing to waste. This forms the heart and purpose and philosophy of SNL – to enable diverse adult learners of a metropolitan area to develop and demonstrate their competence as individual workers, citizens and persons.

Americans seem to be in their own land as pilgrims, prodded by a dream. They are always on the move – available for new tasks, prepared for the possible loss of what they have. They are not settled, installed...
Jacques Maritain

Relates to: Chapter 1, “Introduction and Orientation”

On the Outcome of a Liberal Education

By Morry Fiddler, School for New Learning Resident Faculty

One of the unusual features of the SNL program is the extent to which the curriculum (or course of study) is designed to provide goals for each learning experience in which you engage (whether a course, demonstration, a prior learning, or independent project) to help you develop a context in which to place your learning, to provide a set of outcomes to help you measure your learning and your development. The Competence Framework defines the curriculum and, as you are coming to learn, you will help yourself over the next quarters in further defining and shaping that curriculum.

As you become increasingly familiar with the Competence Framework, you will find the statements are directed at the demonstration of specific skills, abilities and use of information (i.e. competencies). There are, by the time you develop your Learning Plan, 50 discrete statements of competence. If you look across these 50 statements, however, you will find that there are certain skills and abilities that ‘cut across’ them all, that, in more general terms, can be viewed as a set of general goals or outcomes of successfully working through the program. These more general goals are described as:

1) Communication skills; 2) “processing” of information, experiences, and learning abilities; 3) Information collection; 4) inquiry skills; and, 5) self-direction abilities.

One of the designs of the program is to provide the opportunities and resources for you to both develop these outcomes and apply them in a variety of ways as you progress toward your degree. One of the first opportunities where you will be asked to do this is in the design of your Focus Area. You have made, or will be making in the near future, some critical decisions about your career, work, or focus of study. With the help of your Committee, you will be determining the kinds of learning experiences you already had, and those you will need to have while at SNL in order to complete your Focus Area design and move toward your goals. You will be drawing upon those five general skills described above in order to do this effectively. As you continue to develop these abilities and recognize these outcomes of your SNL experience, you will undoubtedly develop your Focus Area with great intention, sophistication, and satisfaction.

However, there are other considerations that are worth addressing at this moment. You have engaged yourself in a program that leads to a Bachelor of Arts degree. SNL has chosen to view this outcome as being described by two phrases: ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘liberal learning.’ Taken together these notions will no doubt take on specific and individual meaning to you, both as you proceed toward the degree and, more importantly, after you have graduated. It will probably be most helpful to be thinking about what these terms are coming to mean to you as you take classes, engage in independent study, and do whatever work will bring you towards the degree. Putting your learning in this light should add a dimension and set of outcomes to your schoolwork that will cut across the statements and areas.

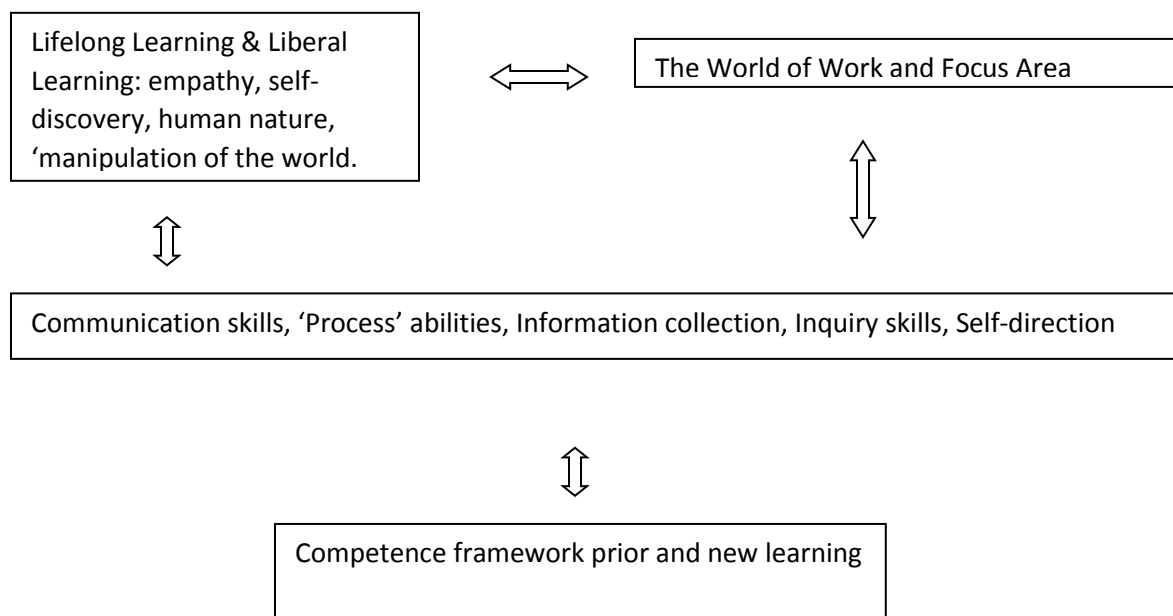
You will be asking the following questions: Are there outcomes or qualities of my education not stated by any single competence statement in the framework and to which the entire set of statements and knowledge are contributing? And, what are the outcomes or qualities? As you answer these questions you will provide meaning and definition to the terms, ‘liberal learning’ and ‘lifelong learning.’

For example, below are four possible qualities or outcomes of the cumulative demonstration and development of the competencies, including those you will design in the Focus Area:

- 1) Empathy: capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas.
- 2) Self-discovery: process of obtaining knowledge about one's self (e.g. motivations, history, preferences) leading to the development of a 'point of view.'
- 3) Conceptualization of human nature: formation of (tentative) generalizations describing the qualities and characteristics that a) all human beings display and b) differentiate humans from other organisms.
- 4) Skills for 'manipulating' the world around you: knowledge and processes to alter the state of relationships and the environment to meet desired ends.

Not every competence statement in the framework will contribute to each of these outcomes. With thought and intention on your part, however, any single competence can be approached with an eye toward development of one or more other, more general outcomes. The extent to which these outcomes become valid for you over time is indeterminate at this point. It is strongly suggested, however, that as you proceed in your degree program from this point on, you periodically consider these general outcomes, perhaps on your way to eliminating one or more and replacing it (them) with notions of greater value to you. Bear in mind as you go that others have and will be doing the same and the sum of those understandings will give broad meaning to liberal and lifelong learning beyond a personal, self-centered way.

Take a look at the diagram below that summarizes the thoughts developed to this point.



Consider if you would, the extent to which you are developing these outcomes as you proceed toward your degree at SNL. You will probably find these outcomes developing without your even realizing it.

"Education should not aim at a passive awareness of hard facts, but at an activity directed toward the world that our efforts create." Bertrand Russell

Relates to: Chapter 2, Section A, “Demonstrating Competence”

Practicing the Liberal Arts

By Corinne Lally Benedetto, School for New Learning Resident Faculty

The liberal arts form the core of the academic programs here at DePaul University’s School for New Learning. Our competence outcomes in the program’s three liberal arts areas (Human Community, Scientific World, Arts & Ideas) represent a nearly limitless spectrum of learning, and echo the medieval vision of liberal learning as a journey without end. Happily, a student’s time here *does* end. We hope the value and memory of the learning journey does not. As exciting as the prospect of never-ending knowledge appears, we need to remember to ask ourselves why we’re pursuing this level of knowledge. The answer hinges, in part, on history.

In Western medieval society, the key social institutions (particularly the Christian Church) valued education in the liberal arts for its privileged members as a way to explicitly link the wealth of human knowledge to the immanence of God’s presence in the world. Education had a functionalist purpose: the furtherance of institutional order because its very center.

As will happen when institutional interests collide with the things individuals need and want, certain key conflicts developed around the liberal pursuit of knowledge and education. One of these conflicts erupted with some early practitioners of science. First Copernicus, and then Galileo challenged the functionalist vision of liberal arts learning igniting a terrific controversy within the culture around the meaning of knowledge and its connection to individual learners. Both Copernicus and Galileo were working with the functionalist value system of the Church, and rather unwittingly challenged it when their equations and observations of the natural world failed to fit cosmological assumptions about its order and origin. The cultural shifts which followed produced the intellectual and political milieu we now call the Enlightenment. During this period, the liberal arts matured within a humanist cultural frame where the individual mind and its inherent potential to know truth was elevated beyond the intermediary influence of religion or religious institutions. In this new, “modern” context, literate people were free to pursue learning for its own sake.

However, when formal knowledge de-coupled from the ancient framework of religious meaning, there appeared a distinct lack of overriding vision about its purpose. What did it really mean to pursue learning “for its own sake”? Why was this activity so valuable? To gain social and economic power over others with less learning? To fuel the epistemological base of science as it took shape in opposition to the religious paradigm? (Yes, on both counts.) To provide each individual person with a way to a greater understanding of his or her own thoughts, actions and relationships to others? (Only rarely.) Yet, it is precisely this vision of relational learning that informs the liberal arts today. The School for New Learning acts from this premise; our competence grid is structured in a way that encourages interdisciplinary learning. The boundaries between disciplines are like the boundaries between social institutions – they separate and divide things that are much more effective when unified. We ask the students who work with us to move beyond familiar demarcations in the knowledge they acquire. The ‘old’ liberal arts encouraged these divisions between fields of knowing; we encourage their integration.

The stories of Copernicus and Galileo (only the barest outlines of which have been given here) like the story of the death of Socrates (read [Apology](#) and [Crito](#) from any good collection of Plato), illustrate how

the interests of an institutions do not automatically dovetail with the interests of an educated person. Yet, the unbridled pursuit of knowledge and information greatly misses the point of knowing anything at all. Why does a person pursue great learning?

The birth of a new century and the demise of an old one marked by unparalleled violence to all life on earth revitalizes the significance of this question. It burns for an answer. SNL learners, who embark quarter after quarter on an educational pilgrimage shaped largely by the liberal arts, are uniquely positioned to answer it. The energies of self-motivation and intellectual flexibility that empower adult learners to succeed in this nontraditional environment make it possible to live the answer through reinvigorated personal and professional connections to others.

As one understands after reading Plato, Socrates' pursuit of knowledge led him into fatal conflict with an institution (the Athenian State) whose vision of itself contained no room for individual wisdom. We conclude from this (and a myriad of similar cases) that a model of *partnership* between the institutional and individual levels of learning is necessary before each one's respective actions and interests can begin to approximate a worthy response to this essay's central question: Why pursue great learning? Educational institutions engaged in the pursuit of a learning partnership with their students will make the wider community a central player in the formation of their own vision and interests in the future. Both DePaul University and the School for New Learning are committed to educational partnership and honor and acknowledge its roots in the tradition of the liberal arts. At SNL, we share a vision with learners of an educated community; individuals shaped through liberal learning precepts and united in purposeful, progressive activities. We ask our graduates to envision a role in which each person channels an important element of her or his formal learning back into the community. We ask our beginners, the students in Foundations of Adult Learning, to begin creating the base of this contributory role right now.

Relates to: Chapter 2, Section A, “Demonstrating Competence”

Liberal Arts and Business: An International Perspective

By Miriam Ben-Yoseph, School for New Learning Resident Faculty

International business is of vital importance to most countries. No country, including the United States, can survive pretending that the rest of the world does not exist. Many observers point out that American parochialism is understandable to an extent that the U.S. has such a big domestic market and in light of the country’s political and technological dominance. Some observers stress, however, that the fierce global competition of the 21st century makes parochialism self-defeating.

Along with the increasing importance of international business and the growing demand for people who can function effectively in foreign environments, data suggesting that somewhere between 20 and 50 percent of Americans sent abroad return home prematurely or fail, have gained prominence in recent years. Researchers estimate that direct costs of failure can run in some cases well over \$200,000 for each overseas employee and family returned home prematurely. While it is difficult to estimate the cost of lost business and damaged reputation caused by the high failure rate of Americans assigned overseas, it is assumed that the figures are threatening.

Bad news for business, you may say, but what does this have to do with liberal arts?

Although a major requirement for success in an overseas assignment is expertise in an area of business such as marketing, finance, or management, research findings indicate that failure overseas rarely results from professional or technical incompetence. It is deficiency in skills normally fostered by the liberal arts that causes failure: breadth of knowledge, tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, adaptability / flexibility, empathy, and communication skills.

It is quite obvious why professional or technical competence is one of the primary determinants of success in overseas assignments. In fact, as one author pointed out, this factor is even more important in international assignments than it is domestically. The individual is separated by time and space from headquarters and, therefore, cannot consult as readily with other experts on matters related to her or his job.

What seems to be less obvious, however, is that in order to succeed overseas one must know not only the job but also the history, culture, language, economic conditions, and social and political life of the host country and of other countries as well.

Although I do not wish to suggest that such knowledge is exclusive to people with a liberal arts education, compared to most individuals with a strictly business background, a person with a liberal arts education has a broader knowledge of more things. In an overseas assignment, this knowledge greatly influences the probability of success because it increases one’s awareness toward people whose value systems, customs, beliefs, assumptions, manners, and ways of doing business may be greatly different from one’s own. An understanding and appreciation of these differences will increase one’s ability to function effectively in a foreign country.

It has been noted that many professional schools and the corporate world in general frequently assume that the “right answer” exists and there is a “best way” of doing things. Business, however, is not a science; issues are rarely clear-cut and, therefore, the ability to work effectively in ambiguous and frequently uncertain situations is an important determinant of success in any business environment.

Some observers think that liberal arts graduates are better prepared to deal with ambiguities because of the content and methodologies of their disciplines. They have learned from literature, history, and philosophy that things can be interpreted in more than one way, that everything is in fact relative and somewhat uncertain.

Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty is even more important in a foreign assignment than it is domestically because, as one author points out, factors considered relatively constant at home are different abroad. The legal, economic, and political structures of the host country may be very different from the ones the individual is used to from his or her own country. Host nationals may also have their own version of the “right answer” and the “best way” of doing things and who is to say that they are wrong?

Closely related to tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty is adaptability along with its close associate, flexibility, as one of the most important criteria for success overseas. In this context, “adaptable” and “flexible” suggest the ability to get used to and react positively to new, different, and at times, unpredictable situations.

Recent research suggests that the non-specialized, non-vocational curriculum of the liberal arts prepares graduates more effectively to adapt to new environments. While emphasis on specialized education is useful in the early years of one’s career, when advancement into more complex areas of responsibilities occurs, a narrow view of the world can be detrimental. In an international environment, narrowly educated people could lose the advantage of their specializations very quickly. If they cannot adjust to change and are incapable of picking up clues that people are giving about their interests, problems, or needs, whether they are subordinates, bosses, or customers, technical or professional expertise will not prevent them from failure.

This brings me to another skill that is an important determination for success in international assignments: empathy. This relates to the ability to see a situation from another person’s perspective. As pointed out by one specialist in cross-cultural training, most people, whether they are at home or abroad, work better with those who seem to be able to see things from their perspective. Obviously, because of greater differences it takes more effort to empathize with a foreigner than it does with someone closer to one’s own cultural background. The effort has to be made, nonetheless, to limit somehow the myopia caused by viewing situations strictly from one’s own point of view and thus missing the point. Empathy is not necessarily exclusive to people with a liberal arts background. In fact, I know some PhDs in the humanities with an amazing lack of empathy toward business people in particular. Persons with a liberal arts education, however, are used to studying questions of point of view or asking why, for example, a character in a play or novel acts in a certain way and this type of inquiry is useful in the world of business. While a typical business person is inclined to rely mainly on numbers to analyze a certain situation, a person with a liberal arts background will tend to look at the situation from a customer’s or foreigner’s standpoint and use the insights gained from that perspective accordingly, and a combination of approaches would probably achieve the best results.

Last but certainly not least, I want to stress the importance of communication skills in international assignments, including both language and nonverbal behavior.

Persons with a liberal arts education are certainly not the only ones with good communication skills, but lack of communication skills seems to be the most frequently mentioned problem of business school graduates. They may be experts in marketing, finance, or computer technology, but if they cannot express it, who will ever know?

Whatever the international assignment, the job will always require the ability to communicate with bosses, with subordinates, suppliers, customers, and government officials. As we all know, communication does not always result in understanding even among people with similar cultural backgrounds, but the chances for miscommunication increase significantly among individuals of different cultures. The greater the difference between cultures, the greater the chance for cultural miscommunication.

A major issue in communication is language. Knowing the language of the country in which a company is conducting business is a critical element in facilitating communication. Although English has become the world's major language, it is a mistake to assume or expect that most people speak it. One can certainly not force all workers to learn the language of the foreign owners and this means that in many instances, management and workers must communicate in the workers' language. In as much as dealing with foreign governments is concerned, protocol normally dictates that communication be conducted in the national official language. Since speaking the customer's language is the most important rule of marketing, it is certainly in the best interest of an American doing business overseas to ease the barrier by learning the native language of the customer. The ability to communicate in the local language also plays a major role in adjusting to the social environment and in increasing one's chances not only to survive an overseas assignment but to enjoy the experience as a whole.

While language fluency is an important factor for success overseas, knowledge or at least awareness of nonverbal behavior is also very important. In fact, as several researchers have pointed out, the more fluent one is linguistically, the more critical the nonverbal fluency becomes because people assume that the linguistically fluent person knows all aspects of communication, including nonverbal behavior. Needless to say, acquiring nonverbal skills is much more difficult than learning a language because, to name only a few reasons, unlike language, there are no dictionaries for nonverbal behavior; much nonverbal behavior cannot be controlled, and the mistaken notion still persists that nonverbal behavior is universal.

I hope to have shown that a successful career in international business takes a much broader individual than just someone with strictly business skills. The individual most likely to succeed in international business will have a background that combines business with liberal arts skills. This has obvious implications for both universities and US multinationals. Universities will have to reexamine the educational mission of their various schools and take steps to prepare their students for this dual competency. US multinationals will have to develop a longer-term orientation with regard to hiring and developing their people. The traditional short-term orientation of most US companies is no longer compatible with the trend towards globalization, which requires most individuals with cognitive skills and broad perspectives, capable of dealing effectively with people from a variety of cultures.

Curriculum revisions on the one hand, and the breaking of the cycle that compromises long-term interests of companies for the sake of expediency, on the other hand, will not only enhance

employment and advancement opportunities for individuals interested in international business, it will improve the competitive position of the US in the world marketplace.

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Relates to: Chapter 2, Section A, “Demonstrating Competence”

Finishing College at Sixty – So Much More than Finally Getting That Degree

By Shirley Paolinelli, SNL Graduate, Individualized Undergraduate Program

I always knew that someday I would finally finish college. What I didn't know was how profoundly my life would be affected by doing so during these past five years. I think it was going back to school in earnest at this particular time of my life, and at this particular university, that made all the difference.

I had made starts and stops throughout my twenties, thirties and forties, but life's situations and circumstances always seemed to get in the way of getting my degree. Certainly, I had learned many a life's lesson throughout the years, being a mother and grandmother, entering and ending relationships, falling in and out of love (mostly out), and working in various areas of corporate America. Yet the desire to further my formal education was always with me, an inner call, sometimes just a whisper, other times a strong and clear voice. A line from a novel I read recently expressed one of the reasons for my increasing sense of urgency to achieve this goal, “Time takes care of all our aspirations, one way or another.” It seems most of us have one or two aspirations that must be fulfilled, which seem to be essential to our life's purpose, and if ignored, will be taken care of by time in the saddest of ways – by turning them into our life's biggest regret.

I vowed years ago, I did not want to look back on my life with any regrets. Well, okay, that was a bit unrealistic, but the older I became the more I felt that going back to college was, for me, that one essential aspiration I needed to act upon.

When I did make the move to register as a college student at SNL, I was surprised at my initial nervousness and feelings of insecurity. After all, I was there solely because I wanted to be; there was no outside pressure whatsoever. Upon reflection, I suppose part of the reason was due to the normal apprehension one feels when beginning something new and different, wondering if the experience was going to be as fulfilling as I longed for it to be, hoping that it would not be too much work for me to handle, or that I would become disappointed or disillusioned somehow and eventually lose interest...then what? My fears quickly subsided as I entered my very first classroom, which happened to be in the Art Institute on a sunny, Sunday afternoon in September 2004, surrounded by adult students just like me, sitting on folding stools inches away from glorious original masterpieces, listening to a quirky and passionate professor telling fascinating stories I had never heard before about the artists and their works. I knew then that I was exactly where I was meant to be, and that the “someday” when I would finish college may have truly arrived.

My enthusiasm never left me; in fact I began to feel more alive, full of energy, eager for the next course to begin. I was being intellectually challenged, an unfortunately rare occurrence for me at work where the day-to-day routine had placed me in a comfortable, but often dull rut. My reading materials and habits had gone from a few chapters of a mystery paperback during my daily train commute and right before I fell asleep, to the voracious absorption of everything available to me as a college student, from textbooks, research studies and scientific journals to the writings of such profound thinkers as Malcolm X, Emmanuel Kant, the Dalai Lama, and so many others. The knowledge and truth I was searching for was right before me for the taking! And I excelled, whether it was in a class to learn more about subjects that were of keen interest to me like Analyzing Major Social Movements and Social Psychology,

or one that I had enrolled in just to satisfy a needed competence like Quantitative Reasoning. My self-esteem and self-confidence were steadily increasing. This realization came to me at work when I started to notice that people I worked with in executive management were looking at me differently, engaging me in decision-making, attentively listening to me when I spoke, taking into consideration my opinions and ideas – and acting upon them. Now, this was a major turn of events! Initially, I wasn't quite sure where these different reactions were coming from. I didn't appear to *look* any more formidable; I hadn't started wearing power suits or donning three-inch high heels or some such thing. No, this was a change of substance, from within me at a deeper level. I knew it was my educational experience that was transforming me...providing endless opportunities for self-discovery, self-awareness and growth.

I have learned that I am not alone in having such a positive and beneficial experience as an older student returning to college. In an article, "The Advantages of Being an Older Student", author and adult student, Vickey Kalambakal, shares many similar observations made throughout her experience of earning a BA at UCLA later in life. She writes of the "incredible advantages" older students have over other students: "You can focus. Now, your attention span is probably longer; your ability to concentrate greater. You've got a 20-year running start on general, cultural knowledge and a sense of perspective that they will not achieve until they're your age."

Since people are living longer, the author sees this extended time as being much more productive for those achieving their degree in later life. She states, "The extra years will be more fun for you because your education will pay off financially and spiritually". And on the increased self-esteem which so especially affected me, Kalambakal confirms: "More important is what you'll be worth to yourself. Once you actually go back to school, your self-esteem – which seems so fragile on that first, scary day – will soar. Your own children, your friends, your co-workers, and your classmates, may well be in awe of your drive and determination." (Kalambakal)

At SNL, my self-esteem was indeed growing, along with self-awareness – not always the rosier of experiences – and a few often uncomfortable lessons in humility. Like when I received my one and only "B" at SNL, my final course grade for a Criminal Justice class. The instructor was a Cook County judge, rather old-school in his teaching methods, who gave a final written exam, something I had heard was not the norm at SNL. Now, a) I was not going to have a 4.0 GPA upon graduation, a personal goal I had decided I wanted to achieve early on; and, b) I guess there is some truth to that factoid I had read that one's ability to memorize data, especially involving numbers, starts to gradually wane in later years. I was quite discouraged at first, but, as I also learned to do at SNL, I took my "ego" out of the picture, accepted and learned from the situation, and moved forward (and I must admit, since then, have always checked classes' syllabi for *any* mention of tests or exams before registering for a course). I was also humbled by my fellow students, their diversity, intelligence, tenacity, power, courage, hope and generosity. I have not felt such a connection with anyone as I have, in each and every class, with my fellow adult learners at SNL. I have learned as much from them as I have learned from the outstanding professors and instructors.

I must interject here that attending more than a few classes where the teachers were younger than me was a reality that all adult-learners returning to college after 30+ years face, and took a little getting used to. Being given assignments and receiving evaluations and critiques from someone young enough to be one's son or daughter was rather off-putting, and another humbling occurrence. However, as it turned out, one of the most stimulating educational experiences, and the most instant teacher/student connection I made were with one of the younger instructors at SNL. Who knew?

As a much older student returning to college, I have discovered how much I really do know, the talents I do (still!) possess and the skills I have developed, and how very much there is yet to learn and experience. I took comfort in the realization that there were other women and men, fellow adult learners as well as teachers, who felt as strongly as I did on issues – intellectual, social, political, spiritual – that have always been and continue to be important to me. My preconceived notions, ideas and opinions were continually challenged and expanded through classes such as Critical Thinking, Real Life Ethics, and those on Diversity, Social Change, Creativity and Spirituality. I also began to work better and smarter at my job, taking and using what I had learned from classes like Collaborative Learning in the Workplace, Discovering the Leader Within, Exploring the Internet and Psychology for Managers. I started to feel I could “intellectualize” with anyone – I was writing research papers, interpreting and analyzing others’ research, citing sources and knew the value of a peer-reviewed article from a scholarly journal!

Foundations forced me to examine and focus on where I was headed and why during my educational journey, not an easy task for someone who *talked* idealistically, but too often had placed *doing* on the back burner. And it was the *doing*, making a commitment, understanding the importance of acting to make a difference that I learned from my Academic and Professional Advisors. It was also in Foundations that my focus area was determined, Human Spiritual Growth – a “major” I don’t think I would have been able to pursue forty years ago as a young student at a traditional university. Searching for truth and nurturing my spirituality have always been of great importance to me. These were life-long pursuits, essential to my happiness, yet seemed to be lofty and undefined, and I was unclear how to truly attain them. My educational experience at SNL has provided the environment I needed, at the right time in my life, to see and think with the clarity necessary to find the knowledge and truth that I had been seeking. And through a truly transformative learning experience in a focus area class, Introduction to Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation, I have found the path that is right for me toward lifelong nurturing of my spirituality. I firmly believe in its power to not only enhance my spiritual growth, but to also change the world. (Mingyur)

In an article posted on AARP’s website, “Back to College”, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, the Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor at Harvard Business School, discusses trends revealed from surveys’ results on what baby-boomers are doing, and hope to do, now that they are in their fifties and sixties. Not surprisingly to me, or to anyone involved in DePaul’s School for New Learning, the article states that baby-boomers “are planning to step up to their next productive years of significant service. They have drive and energy; they have a treasure trove of wisdom, experience, and connections.” A survey by Civic Ventures cited in the article shows that “a majority of Americans between the ages of 50 and 70 want to benefit their communities by helping the poor, the elderly, and children, or by improving quality of life through the arts or the environment.” On the trend of boomers returning to school, the author states, “College campuses – once the source of boomers’ zeal for change – could be the launching pad to leadership and to improving the state of the world”. (Moss Kanter) Sounds exactly like what one would see and hear from the students and faculty in the classrooms and halls of SNL on any weekday evening from 6:00 – 9:00 p.m., myself proudly included.

There is a shift as one reaches their fifties and sixties toward growing introspection. Personally, I had experienced a gradual realization that the main roles in my life, those of mother and grandmother, were becoming less of a full-time position, and more of an on-call or “as needed” one. And, in this youth-oriented culture, a woman in her fifties or sixties experiences a startling sense of becoming invisible. She is no longer the targeted demographic of ad campaigns, for example, in fact she seems to represent what society should avoid at any cost – becoming old. The harsh reality of this cultural phenomenon

can be painful, depressing and isolating. It can also be a new beginning. When emphasis on the external, physical and superficial is removed from center stage in your life, you are almost forced to look inward, and there-in, I have found, lay the wonder of unexplored territory. We can turn our attention to learning to love the person we have become, to developing our sense of self. For me, going back to college was a solid step toward achieving this.

According to an 2007 study, “Framing New Terrain: Older Adults and Higher Education”, by Mary Beth Lakin, Laura Mullane and Susan Porter Robinson of the American Council on Education, the three top factors which motivate older adults to participate in higher education are intellectual stimulation, sociability and skills enhancement. And in similar surveys of older adults learners: one with participants mostly in their 70s and another of adults aged 55 to 96; the prime motivator for returning to the classroom was the “joy of learning”. (Lakin) There are a host of other benefits acknowledged by adults who have returned to school later in life. In “Degrees of Opportunity” a 2006 study by Lyungai Mbilinyi, MSW, MPH, PhD, of the views of American adults about the value and feasibility of pursuing higher education in adult life, the top benefits listed are: personal sense of accomplishment; developing talents/pursuing interests; earning a higher income; changing careers/industries; becoming expert in their field; and, being a good role model for their children. (Mbilinyi) And for me? I am right there with the older segment, ages 55-96, of adult learners: the joy of learning and learning for learning sake – the discovery I made at SNL, that it is the *learning* that is my real passion.

Now that I am about to graduate, I am enjoying a new sense of fulfillment and accomplishment, and a calm that comes from feeling I have taken care of longstanding, unfinished business. I have stilled that part of me that felt I was missing something, that felt like maybe I wasn’t quite good enough. This SNL graduate (did I mention my GPA is 3.97 and counting?) will continue to feed her passion – I will keep on taking classes in any and all areas of interest to me, and travel further down the path to spiritual enlightenment with a mind and heart more open and ready than they have ever been for all that awaits me.

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Relates to: Chapter 7, “The Independent Learning Pursuit (ILP) & Learning From Experience”

Experience, Learning and Knowledge

By John L. Rury, former SNL Resident Faculty

The relationship between experience and learning is a puzzle of sorts, one that you will be asked to think about in the School for New Learning. It is also a good question to consider it the rest of your life, since it is relevant to practically everything we do. In this essay, we examine some of the pieces of this puzzle. I use the ideas of the philosopher John Dewey as a point of departure, and try to explore many of the questions his writings raise for students today. I don't pretend to have answers to all the various sides of this issue. But maybe this discussion will help you to begin thinking about experience, and some of the ways you can use it to learn.

Let's begin with the question “what do we learn from experience?” The answer is “virtually everything,” of course, since we are born with relatively little instinctual knowledge (such as how to breathe) and everything else can be classified as one form or another of experience. Even reading books and sitting in classes are forms of experience, even if not always exciting ones. But this is not usually what we mean when we say we learn from experience. Perhaps the question is better put this way: what do we learn from experiences we encounter in “real life,” away from school and books? Many of us feel that the lessons we have learned from life are very valuable, and as adults we have gained a great deal of knowledge and insight from our many and varied experiences. In the School for New Learning (SNL), we recognize the value of experience in adult learning, and we want to acknowledge the skills and knowledge you have gained from prior learning, in school and out. But first we should take a look at the question of experience and knowledge, and consider how experience is related to learning. After that, we can consider some ways for you to begin thinking about your own experiences, and how they may be helpful in a program such as SNL.

Educative and Miseducative Experiences

As you know from reading John Dewey, not all experiences are equal. Some teach us more than others. But what is it about an experience that makes it “educative?” Addressing this question is an important step in figuring out the relationship between experience and learning.

If we take as our premise the idea that all learning is derived from the “external world” (that which is outside of our own mind), then we can begin with the proposition that all learning is based on experience. We know from reading Dewey that not all experiences result in learning, or at least not in the same types or degrees of learning. Dewey is quite clear on this point that some experiences are “miseducative,” which is to say that they do not contribute to further growth. Examples of such experiences are not difficult to imagine. My two sons, for instance, spend too much time watching television. They are entertained, and they may learn incidental details about life from particular episodes of their favorite shows, or from movies they enjoy. But these experiences generally do not lead them to do new things, or to look at their lives differently. For the most part, in that case, these episodes of TV watching cannot be considered educative experiences. In fact, they may well be miseducative, if the boys draw the wrong inferences from them, or come to hold misinformed beliefs as a consequence of watching them. They may assume, for instance, that social problems really do not exist, or do not matter very much, because the TV characters rarely confront them. They may come to assume that life is really about saying cute or funny remarks, or beating the bad guys (or the good guys), and not about work, difficult challenges, and occasional compromise. In this instance, there is learning

from these experiences, but it is a potentially miseducative type of learning. This is an important point: the fact that an experience results in learning does *not* mean that it is educative.

This example helps us to see one of the primary dilemmas about experience: it is difficult to see the educative value of a particular experience when it is undertaken, without looking at things from a much broader perspective. It is possible to acquire a great deal from an experience, after all, and to have the experience ultimately be miseducative. As Dewey suggests, all experiences must be evaluated in terms of what they contribute toward future growth, further learning. And to do this, you must consider all that life has to offer – including its challenges.

Let's consider another case. A woman works at the same company for fifteen years, performing a variety of jobs and moving her way up the career ladder into management. She has learned the "corporate culture" of her organization quite well, and has acquired the requisite skills as she has taken on new tasks. In many respects, this has clearly been a series of educative experiences, as it has prepared her for new experiences inside this organization. But what about the larger world? If this person were to lose her position one day, (say her company was bought by another), how could she be sure that her skills and knowledge would be recognized – or even applicable – in another organization? It is possible, after all, that the company she worked for was quite idiosyncratic, or simply did things differently from other companies. This person may find that she has to "relearn" a number of tasks, simply because she led a somewhat sheltered life in her old company, and did not know how things were done elsewhere.

Here too, although there was a great deal of learning in her previous place of employment, not all of it was educative in terms of the woman's future. Much of it may have been miseducative, in fact, simply because it did not help this person prepare for different circumstances. She may not have planned to leave her initial organization, but life does not always allow us to stay in the same situation indefinitely (in fact it rarely does). For this reason, it is wise to plan with the whole world in view, or as much of it as possible.

So we can see that while learning often results from experience, the educative value of an experience can vary quite widely. As Dewey suggests, truly educative experiences are those that prepare us to perform the broadest range of new tasks in the world. But even this deceptively simple statement is a very tricky guideline. To understand it we need to explore some other sides of the experience and learning puzzle.

Making Comparisons and Generalizing

Another way of expressing Dewey's principle is to say that educative experiences prepare us for an extensive range of future experiences. But what is it about these educative experiences that is so beneficial? And how can we judge the educative potential of an experience while it is happening, or help enhance the educative quality of a particular experience?

The second example above introduced yet another dimension of learning which helps us to determine the educative quality of an experience: comparison and generalizability. This is a rather simple concept, but a very crucial one, particularly in evaluating your own skills and knowledge. Here is one way to think about it: an experience can be considered educative when a person learns something new about the larger group or class of problems this experience represented. This is what it means to be able to generalize, and to do it one must necessarily compare one's experience with others. I realize that this is a tall order, for most problems we encounter are large and complex, and many have a long history. This makes comparison and generalizing about them a challenge. But even if the learning leads to insight

about the limitations of the immediate experience (how it doesn't apply to other situations), that is telling us something about the larger problem it represents.

To be able to compare, of course, implies that there has to be a connection between different experiences. This is what Dewey described as the principle of "continuity." There has to be a significant common component for comparison to be fruitful, to yield generalizations. There is an old saying that you can't compare apples and oranges, and it applies to experiences too. There should be a connection between experiences—a similar problem, method or subject matter. Experiences that are too dissimilar offer little insight.

If the woman in the example above had worked in several different companies instead of just one, for instance, she may have been much better prepared for her new situation (as long as she dealt with similar problems or performed like tasks). She would have realized that there are often many different ways of doing things, and that being a good manager means more than simply following a certain formula or enforcing company guidelines. She certainly would have had a wider range of experiences to draw upon in assessing her new situation. She could *compare* her various experiences to see what the common elements were, and to begin to derive general principles about being a good manager. These general principles are building blocks of generalizations. The wider the range of experiences she has to draw upon, the better her principles (and generalizations) ought to be. In short, generalizations are constructed from comparison of different experiences, and analysis of their common and differing elements.

If you are a manager, for instance, your ability to manage in a variety of different settings will depend on what you have learned. If you have managed people in different settings, and you have compared these experiences to derive certain principles from them, then these generalizations ought to help you cope with new situations you encounter. One such generalization may be the principle that people respond positively to acknowledgement of good work. This could be a principle that you have derived from direct experience, or one learned from the experience of others. Like all generalizations, however, it is continually subject to new tests in direct experience. In each new situation, you refine this principle, test the limits of its application (does it work with all kinds of people, for instance), and derive new generalizations. After a variety of different experiences, these generalizations or principles begin to become codified into a body of knowledge. Mastery of this can make you more effective at accomplishing your goals, and can help to make your subsequent experiences educative. The act of forming generalizations from comparison of experience, in that case, is a critical step in the process of learning from experience.

This process of reflecting on experience to draw conclusions and build generalizations is an important part of what Dewey described as analytical thought. It is a critical step in thinking, which is the entire act of forming generalizations and testing them. This too, of course, is a form of experience. It is different from the direct experience of physical events, or what Dewey referred to as "primary experience." The process of thinking about such events Dewey described as "secondary experience," or the forming and communication of concepts or ideas to describe and assess primary experiences. These ideas are very important, for they determine which experiences are meaningful and what we learn from them. In considering the educative quality of an experience, in that case, we have to weigh both the primary and secondary dimensions of the experiences in question.

There are other things to consider also. How much a person learns from a particular experience depends, of course, on what the person knew before the experience. If an experience helps us to see

something about other similar problems that we did not understand before, it is certainly educative. This is because it adds to our understanding of a problem, and enhances our ability to solve it (or related problems).

In this way, we employ the comparative method, the way in which virtually all knowledge is constructed. This is how we derive generalizations. It is through the knowledge (ideas, concepts) we have learned in a particular experience that we can learn about the larger problem; that knowledge it must not remain context specific only. This is to say, it must apply to a variety of different situations. Or, put differently still, it is knowledge that should be *transferable* from one setting to another (a term used by psychologists who study learning). If we learn something from an experience, and we can then understand things in other situations, we have achieved a degree of generalizability. And that contributes to the educational quality of an experience.

I realize that the discussion has gotten a little abstract, so let's consider another example. I have spent a large portion of my life driving cars. I am a former New York City cab driver and – as I have mentioned before – I now have children (need I say more?). I should add that I view a car simply as a mode of transportation, and that I do not particularly enjoy driving. Even though I have a lot of experience with cars, I know relatively little about them. My knowledge is very situation specific, largely because I have had a rather narrow range of experience with cars. Indeed, I would venture to say that most of my driving experiences in the past two decades have taught me little about cars that I did not know already. As a consequence, it is very difficult for me to say anything about the larger subject of automobiles. When I am in the company of people who enjoy the subject, and who have a wider range of experiences or who have studied cars, I often find myself at a loss for something to say. Such people compare the various qualities of cars, and talk about handling, power, braking, and the like. I am generally lost in such conversations, because it is very difficult for me to generalize – to make comments about the larger subject of cars in general – without a wider field of experience and knowledge to draw from – even though I may have spent more time behind the wheel than many test drivers. (I probably learned more about child psychology while driving than I ever did about cars!)

This example points up yet another principle about learning and experience. The amount of time one spends dealing with a particular problem or issue is not necessarily a good indicator of the educative quality of the experience. To generalize about some topic (or problem), it is often necessary to have a wide range of *different* experiences with it. After all, this is what makes comparison fruitful. Having varied experiences is difficult, of course, because life rarely affords us the opportunity to deal directly with many problems or issues in different settings or contexts. This one reason why travel is often such a profound learning experience: it offers an opportunity to see things in an altogether different set of circumstances. Of course, if one always stays at the same types of hotels, eats at the same restaurants, and spends time with the same sort of people, travel can be as miseducative as my children's TV watching. But traveling is one way to change settings, get out of the usual routines, and therefore see a particular issue or problem quite differently. Traveling can be educative simply because it puts us in *different* settings and thus allows us to compare, and ultimately to generalize more effectively about certain subjects (provided, of course, there are points of comparison or continuity at play.) Having varied experiences is a key to learning from experience.

Educative experiences, in that case, permit us to make comparisons and to generalize. They offer a wider field of vision, and in this way, prepare us to take advantage of new situations. This is how we learn and grow. And there are a number of ways to accomplish this.

Varieties of Learning Experiences

What kinds of experiences are likely to lead to learning? As we have seen, having a wide variety of different experiences dealing with a particular issue is one way to learn a great deal about them. But this can be time consuming and expensive – like travel. What are some other ways of broadening our knowledge about something, widening our experience and augmenting our learning?

Fortunately, directly experiencing a wide diversity of situations is not the only way to learn about something. There are other ways too. One is to compare your experiences with those of other people who have had different experiences dealing with similar problems. This takes us into the realm of “secondary experience,” which is essential to education and learning. Many people, for instance, participate in professional organizations, which allow one to share experiences with others in the same field of work. Yet another way is to take a class – outside of your immediate context – in which you can see how others have dealt with the problem in different situations and in the past. Still another way is to read a book on the topic of interest, to see how the author describes her or his experiences and those of other people.

But wait a minute, you say. The last two examples are not learning from experience, they’re taking *a class*, and reading *a book* (and that is “book-learning”). This sounds quite different from the other examples of experience discussed above.

True, taking a class or reading a book are rather unlike other types of experience, but they too are experiences – even if they often don’t feel like it. It’s just that the emphasis in these settings is on “secondary experience.” But the information offered in classes and books is the result of primary experience also; it has just been refined and organized into ideas, concepts and relevant data or information. If we go back to the opening premise – that all knowledge is derived from experience – it follows that the content of formal classes and books is based on previous experience that has been synthesized and summarized, subjected to generalization, and prepared for communication to an audience. Of course, when it is delivered in this fashion, it doesn’t feel like primary experience any more. We are used to receiving such experiences through all five senses (or at least several of them), and to being an active participant—with all of the attendant stimulation and emotional responses. In classes, we receive experience through just two senses usually and sometimes just one (hearing), and with books it is usually just through sight alone. And the experience we are told about has been organized into broad principles, rules, or lessons to be remembered or for use in solving abstract problems. It does not seem the same as *lived* experience, and it is often more difficult to understand or make sense of. Typically, it has been rationalized, measured, divided and otherwise rearranged. But we must strive to remember that it is based on experience nonetheless. And sitting through a class or reading a book, and trying to use the knowledge gained from everyone else’s experience, is yet another way of expanding upon your own.

This is not to say that these forms of learning are always as easy or fun as other types of experiences. They often require more concentration and cognitive effort than other experiences, and lack the stimulation that comes with more physically active forms of learning. But they hold great potential for finding out about many more experiences than you could possibly encounter personally. And this is an important key to learning: expanding your own realm of experience through as many avenues as possible. There is also a connection between these different ways of learning and what you may have heard of as “learning styles,” a concept often discussed in SNL. Simply put, people grow accustomed to learning in different ways – due to a variety of factors, but primarily prior experience – and these have been classified as various preferred “styles” of learning. There are many schemes for classifying learning

styles, but let's consider just two broad categories. People who have a great deal of experience with learning by doing things can be said to have a "hands-on" learning style. They enjoy the stimulation of direct or primary experience, and the challenge of moving from one situation to another. However, persons who enjoy reading about things as a way to learn are said to prefer "abstract conceptualization." They may be less interested in direct experience, somewhat risk-averse, and perhaps a little shy and prefer books and ideas to interacting with people. These people particularly enjoy secondary experience. Of course, I am making very broad characterizations here, and these descriptions probably do not apply to any particular person perfectly. But they do represent tendencies we all have felt at one time or another. Both of these "styles" offer routes to educative experiences and to learning, but different ones. The trick in learning to be a more effective learner is to draw upon the strengths of all the various ways to learn, and not to be limited by a single approach.

Different types of experiences, in that case, offer distinctive varieties of learning. Direct experience is often stimulating and inherently meaningful because it is connected to problems you encounter day-to-day. The dilemma is that it is difficult to control these experiences, and to see a problem or issue from many different sides or in new settings.

Classroom or book learning, on the other hand, is often more demanding because it is abstract and detached from the excitement of daily living. But it also can be an efficient way of assessing many other experiences, and gaining insight into particular problems and issues. To become a more effective learner, it is necessary to combine the advantages of all these approaches to the problems we face, and thus to heighten the educative quality of our experiences.

Enhancing Your Experience through Reflection

Experiences can be a powerful means to advanced learning once we comprehend ways to enhance their educative quality. Doing this, however, requires us to use all of the various sources of learning at our disposal. And this often means overcoming old habits and stereotypes, and to begin learning in new ways.

Direct experience and "book learning" are often opposed to one another in many people's minds. Persons who prefer one method sometimes denigrate the other, suggesting that those who rely on the other approach are missing something vital. Advocates of direct experience, for instance, say they have graduated from "the school of hard knocks," or something similar, and suggest that the "bookworms" don't understand how to get things done. However, devotees of reading and formal analysis (research and specialized training) claim that the direct experience crowd is parochial and too close to daily problems to see the big picture ("can't see the forest for the trees" or other similar phrases are used). Clearly there is much room for misunderstanding in such characterizations. And they show the danger of privileging one form of learning over another.

My own academic field of work is history, and I occasionally encounter this type of reaction in students: "Don't tell me about the Second World War." An older student once said to me, "I was there and you weren't." This student was a veteran, and he did not care for my characterization of a particular issue that was a point of controversy during the war. The implication of the student's statement was that his direct experience during the war was more valuable than anything I may have learned about it afterwards through books or from others who experienced it (which are actually the same). Of course, this is a problematic position to take without any qualification, for the student's experience may have been isolated or unusual, and he may know little about what happened elsewhere. This is not to say that there wasn't great value in his experience, and he may have acquired tremendous insight into certain

facets of the war as a result, things I may know little about. But as a general proposition, the fact that his knowledge was based on direct or primary experience does not ipso facto mean that it is greater or more valuable than that represented in books or other sources of information and insight about the same topic. And of course my book-based knowledge is limited also, as books are written from certain points of view or may have favored certain types of experiences over others. There is nothing inherently superior in one form of learning over another, even though we all may have preferences in the ways we learn. In the end, all knowledge has to be assessed against new sources of information, regardless of its source.

The idea that direct experience is a superior source of insight, however, is a familiar one. This is an argument most of us have encountered many times in life, and it underscores the slippery relationship between experience and knowledge. People tell us that we cannot possibly know as much about a topic as they do because our experiences are different, or perhaps because our experience is not as great as theirs. We hear it applied to a wide variety of topics and issues: management, sales, parenting, and relationships, even how to plan a party or a vacation. But remember the examples we have seen above: they suggest that there is not a fixed relationship between experience and knowledge. A given amount of experience with some problem or topic does not automatically translate into knowledge. Some experiences teach us more than others, and the most educative experiences are those that allow us to compare different perspectives to build general principles and generalizations.

As a rule, the only way to tell the educative value of a particular experience is to assess how well it conveys such principles. In the case of the student I described above, his experiences during the war need to be compared to those of others, and weighed in the light of the sum total of experience gained in that time. This is a process that Dewey described as *Reflection*, and it is essential to making experiences educative. This, of course, is the realm of secondary experience. In short, the educative merit of a primary experience depends to a great degree on the quality of reflection associated with it. That is to say, both primary and secondary experience must be used.

Reflection, in that case, is a critical component in learning from experience. In many respects, reflection is the process of comparison and analysis of experiences alluded to earlier. To reflect on an experience is to compare it to other experiences in order to extract certain ideas or principles about the problem or subject at issue. But like experience, reflection itself varies in quality, and can be better or worse depending on certain conditions.

As suggested earlier, for instance, a diversity of experiences with the same subject usually affords greater knowledge through comparison and analysis (reflection) than a large amount of very similar experiences (such as my cab-driving). On the other hand, the quality of reflection also depends on the effort and ability devoted to the mental operations of comparison and analysis. Having varied experiences does one little good if care isn't taken to extract proper principles from them. It is possible, after all, to draw misleading conclusions from some experiences, regardless of how much potential for learning they offer. So the process of reflection is itself an important step in determining the educative quality of a particular experience.

How can we improve the process of reflecting on a particular competence? This is a crucial question, and one that lies at the very heart of your work in the School for New Learning. Obviously, learning from other experiences you draw upon, the better the potential quality of your reflection, all other things being equal. But there is more to it as well. It is also crucial to interpret these experiences properly, and this is the task of analysis, with all of its component operations: division, measurement, comparison, and

generalization, to just name a few. We should question our experiences. Was the experience unusual or typical? What factors accounted for the outcome? Can future experiences like this be expected to be the same? Why? Here the observations of others is also useful, for you probably are not the first person to confront the issue or problem at hand, and other people have provided an analysis which may prove useful to you. This is not to say that you should borrow their ideas wholesale, or copy them. All the ideas you encounter should be carefully weighed against the evidence you have compiled – experiences of various sorts – and then assessed. But the analysis performed by others can prove helpful; indeed, it often provides a powerful tool in reflection.

For this reason, it is crucial to share your experiences with other people, and to draw upon their experience and learning in comprehending your own. This is one reason why Dewey always maintained that learning (and education) was at heart a social process, not a solitary act. More than that, employing the reflections of others is probably the best way to guarantee that your own experiences will be educative rather than miseducative. Naturally, this requires you to consult sources that do not necessarily agree with your own point of view, and this is not always a pleasant or easy task. Your friends, for instance, are not always the best people to turn to for expansive reflection, although there are times when they are. And it is always possible to get bad advice (we all know the world is filled with it). The very best sources, as suggested earlier, are those that draw upon more and wider experience than you can. But how do we find these people? They are not always waiting at our beck and call. One way is to consult experts of various sorts, those who analyze certain questions for a living. Universities are filled with such people, as are many other organizations. Of course, yet another way to gain expert perspective is to read. This is probably the easiest way to determine the value of a particular experience. And like the other sources of insight mentioned above, it is a key to reflection.

To learn the very most from experience, in that case, we must be willing to engage in serious reflection. This means that the sometimes silly distinctions among different types of learning must be set aside. We always must be willing to assess our experience against the knowledge and reflections (or analyses) of others. We sometimes have to consult people with different views, and we have to read to gain the widest possible perspective. In this way, we enhance our experiences, expand upon them, and begin to make them truly educational.

Experience and Knowledge at the School for New Learning

You no doubt have heard the claim that SNL awards credit “for experience.” Of course, I’m also sure that your *Foundations* instructor has informed you that the proper expression of the School’s policy is to offer credit for *learning* from experience. This is a crucial distinction, and one worth exploring at some length. As we have seen above, there is not an automatic or direct connection between experience and knowledge. Several steps are required to transform experience into meaningful experience.

At SNL, you have probably encountered the term “college-level learning.” This is yet another critical term, one essential for you to consider in thinking about your own experience and the SNL program. What is meant by that phrase, and why is this important? Basically, college-level learning is a standard of achievement that represents the learning normally accomplished in college courses. For SNL to certify that the learning you or anyone else has gained from experience is worthy of college credit (or competence in the case of SNL), we have to be certain that it meets this standard – otherwise the DePaul degree earned through SNL would not be worth very much! This means that the learning should encompass the significant ideas and theories in a given field, and some familiarity with the differing points of view regarding the problem or issue at hand.

In other words, the experience should have led to the formulation of principles and generalizations, and an awareness of how relevant questions have been addressed by people in different settings and contexts. This, of course, usually requires rather broad experience with a given issue or topic, or a willingness to augment experience with additional investigation (i.e. reading) and reflection.

How does this work in practice? Let's consider another example. A few years ago, my wife and I visited Oaxaca, a lovely provincial city in south central Mexico. I had never been in this part of Mexico, and found myself quite captivated by Oaxaca's old colonial architecture, its quaint zócalo (or central square) and its friendly people. We toured the surrounding countryside, visiting a number of the neighboring villages and observing farmers at work in plush fields with oxen and donkeys. Nearby we found fascinating archeological sites, and partook of breathtaking views from mountains towering over the region. Even though our accommodations were Spartan by North American standards, and we both managed to catch mild cases of "Montezuma's Revenge," it was an unusually memorable trip because we both learned so much, both about this part of the world and ourselves.

But what, in fact, had we actually learned on this trip? Clearly we learned a great deal, but most of our learning was unavoidably conditioned by our prior experiences and knowledge. As a historian and social scientist, I was especially sensitive to evidence of the rich history of the Oaxaca region, and signs of its present state of economic and social development (problems I had studied in graduate school). My wife has traveled extensively in Europe and other parts of the world, including Spain and Caribbean, so she was able to make many comparisons with other cities she had visited. For both of us, earlier experiences guided our learning and helped us to see things we otherwise might have missed. Had we taken time to read about Oaxaca before the trip we probably would have learned even more. The quality of our learning experience, in that case, was dictated in part by our prior knowledge.

There were yet other factors that made our Oaxaca trip a rich learning experience. My wife's mother, who is a frequent visitor to the city and has lived there for months on end at times, met us and served as an unofficial guide. We also met another friend traveling through the region, and she offered still more perspective. Both of these women served as translators for us (neither my wife nor I speak Spanish), but we also encountered a number of friendly residents who spoke English and helped to guide us as well. These people also expanded and shaped our learning experiences.

Altogether this was a very rich learning experience, one that I have vividly recalled almost daily in the ensuing years. As I suggested earlier, travel is an unusually potent source of learning, as I learned about this new place (for me) through all of my senses: seeing the people, architecture and countryside; smelling the fresh earth and rich fields, and the aromatic markets; tasting new foods, dishes prepared with fresh, locally grown ingredients; hearing the language, the music, and the other sounds of a bustling regional city; touching the products in the market, the ancient stones of monuments, and the fixtures in our unadorned hotel. The totality of these impressions left me with a feeling for this place, a knowledge that is difficult to describe, but which probably could never be fully communicated through a book or an oral description. It was a heady form of experiential learning, which has remained fixed in my mind and body. But it was not college-level learning.

It is not hard to see why this learning experience would not qualify as "college level" by itself, even if we leave aside the sticky question of how one might focus it on a particular competence. First, it was a singular experience, at least for me. To make generalizations about any facet of the experience requires comparison, and this calls for a stock of other similar experiences. But even if I had traveled longer, or

made several trips, there still would be a question of perspective. How can I know that my experience in Oaxaca was representative of this place, or similar places? This requires comparing my own experiences with those of others, particularly through reading. This is the realm of secondary experience. Then there is the matter of forming generalizations. Upon reflection, I would want to compare my own generalizations with those of others who have traveled in this region and studied it. Are there significant perspectives that I missed? Is it possible, for instance, that the apparently cheerful campesinos (or peasants) we saw were actually quite unhappy, and that some of them were organizing against the government (we did see a small demonstration one day, and there was an anti-government rebellion in a neighboring province several years ago). How do we check whether our impressions are well founded? Here too, consulting with others who have examined this area is necessary, people with a great deal more expertise on these particular issues than we have. Only when we have started to address these questions do we begin to demonstrate college level learning about this particular topic. Primary experience alone, as rich and powerful as it may be, is not enough to achieve this goal. It must be augmented with reflection, and the tools of writing and analysis provided by others are very helpful in this regard.

It is possible, of course, for reflection and analysis to occur *before* an experience to produce a college level of learning. I could have applied the various theories of development I had learned years ago in graduate school to reflect on my Oaxaca experiences. But this would not have been new learning, and it would have confined my rich array of experiences there to a set of categories that may or may not have been wholly appropriate. There is no doubt that my prior knowledge helped to enrich my learning experiences in Oaxaca, helping me to see things that my wife and others missed completely. But the best method for learning from experience calls for additional reflection and analysis *after* the experience itself. As Dewey suggests, this is a critical step in the learning process, one in which many of us ordinarily invest too little time and energy.

As a practical matter, in that case, all experience requires reflection to get the best possible quality of learning from it. For “college level” learning, a particular kind of reflection is called for. This ordinarily includes reading the “authorities” in relevant areas of knowledge, to determine that the principles and generalizations derived from experience are representative of the broadest range of experience, and that a variety of perspectives are examined. This is what college level learning is supposed to provide, after all, and in SNL, we have to demand it of all our learning experiences. To do less would undermine the very point of having a college built on the premise that learning from experience is just as valuable as other forms of higher education.

Exercise: Turning Experience and Learning into Knowledge

Here is an idea for helping you to begin thinking about experience and its relationship to learning and knowledge.

1. Identify a significant learning experience from the past several years. This could be something you did at work (a project, a new assignment, an accomplishment), a trip to a new place, something new you did with friends or family (playing or coaching a sport, for instance), or an experience with an institution (a role you played in church, a volunteer association, or a political campaign, e.g.).
2. Think of a competence statement that expresses what you learned from this experience, and what you now can do as a result of it.

3. Identify factors that prepared your learning in this experience. What earlier knowledge was most important? What people influenced you the most during the experience? Were there other factors – readings, other forms of assistance - that you found useful in learning? What senses did you employ in the learning process? How does the experience “feel” to you today?
4. How did this experience compare to other experiences you had? Do you have similar experiences to compare this experience with? Do you have experiences like this in different settings or contexts? What general principles or generalization about the problem or issue at hand would you form based on this experience?
5. Tell us how you would go about reflecting on this experience today. What steps would you take to expand the learning you started with this experience? How would you bring the learning from this experience up to “college level standards?
6. Identify some resources you would use to reflect on your experience, and describe how they would assist in the process of reflection.

Suggested Readings in Adult Learning

By J. Warren Scheideman, SNL Resident Faculty

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By Michelle Navarre Cleary, Resident SNL Faculty

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