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# Down the rabbit-hole: Routinised Practices, Dewey and Teacher Training in the Lifelong Learning Sector

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## Abstract

*This article explores the ideas of John Dewey on experience and experiential learning through the lens of data arising out of recent research with trainee teachers participating in initial teacher training (ITT) within the Lifelong Learning sector in the United Kingdom (UK). The research methodology is qualitative, interpretive and, reflexive in that both congruence and dissonance are being revealed in the data in relation to several theoretical perspectives.*

*Trainee teachers participate in classroom practice by developing firstly a situated understanding of the concepts and principles surrounding teacher knowledge, secondly strategies for using these in a future situation and thereby assimilating, accommodating and negotiating shared beliefs, identities and values from the practices of a situated community (after Kim and Hannafin 2008 p 1838). Ottesen (2007 p 42) interprets this as knowledge and experience of concepts as taught, derived from knowledge and experience of practice as applied. Being open to possibilities, having time to notice what is or may be significant, to take risks resembles Dewey's notion of experience as relational and constituted. The environment allows for possibilities, providing an education, a transformative education. Increasingly, given the heavily regulated nature of the lifelong learning workplace, trainee teachers are constrained by a limited "fund", or repertoire through which to sift for appropriate strategies to employ in a specific situation. Examples of trainee teachers' responses to synoptic tasks, interpreted through the lens of Deweyan perspectives on experience and experiential learning support the premise that both a broad based and situated course is desirable in order to counteract the routinised nature of much of current practice in the sector.*

**Keywords:** John Dewey; initial teacher training; lifelong learning; UK; experience; participation; routinised practices

## Deweyan perspectives on experience and experiential learning

“In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. The rabbit-hole went straight on like a

tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well. Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs". (Carroll 1865 p 12)

This section seeks to explore and contextualise Deweyan ideas on experience and experiential learning. The following section uses examples from trainee teachers' responses to synoptic tasks towards the end of their course as a lens through which to interpret Deweyan ideas. The data reveals both congruence and dissonance in relation to the conclusion that both a broad based and situated course is desirable in order to counteract the routinised nature of much of current teaching practice in the Lifelong Learning sector in the UK.

Central to Dewey's writing is the notion of a democratic education. Stott (1995 p 31) describes his philosophy thus

"Surely Dewey was right that humankind is implicated in an organic-material world open to intelligent and creative scientific research."

For this he has been both castigated and revered, often in the same breath, by those wishing to influence educational values at a political and philosophical level. In terms of this research a pivotal notion surrounds his argument for growth as an end in itself, rather than growth towards a pre-determined end.

Dewey employs the word experience in the same sense as life continuity through renewal. Human beings recreate beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery, and practices. Where individuals in a social group eventually pass away, through education the social group continues (Dewey 1916 p 6). This suggests an emphasis on education as an affordance for life continuity through social groupings. Moreover, without education this renewal is impossible. Initiation into social practices, in

addition to mere physiological preservation, requires mature members of a group to educate the next sole representatives of the social group. The suggestion is that with the growth of civilisation there is an increasing gap between the original capacities of the immature members and the standards and customs required to become mature members. It is broad based education, rather than simply mastery, which spans this perceived growing gap. The threats to the continuity of whole social groups, and the lack of capacity of the young, bring Dewey to a justification of education as a fundamental social necessity, rather than a private, individual activity (Dewey 1916 p 3). Education, defined by Dewey as transmission through communication, not only ensures continuity of existence, but existence itself. Dewey (1933) argued strongly for experience to be favoured over instruction, in that whereas all genuine education derives from experience, not all experience is positive in the sense of being able to take an individual forward educationally. He was particularly interested in the nature of reflection, and the non-linear process of learning. Indeed for Dewey reflection is about problem solving -the embodiment of learning as a holistic activity, taking into account the accumulated experiences of both parties.

"An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation; or the toys with which he is playing; the book he is reading [.....]; or the materials of an experiment he is performing." (Dewey, 1938, pp 43-44).

Teachers develop their knowledge about teaching and learning situations through repeated classroom teaching experiences and interactions with teachers (Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986; Shulman, 1986 in Kim and Hannafin 2008 p 1837), and this has resulted in an increasing alignment of the teacher education curriculum to capitalise on the situated nature of learning for trainee teachers. This formalised nature of experiential learning resonates with Dewey's justification of the importance of

context for education. Kim and Hannafin (2008 p 1837) scope a framework for a situated perspective on learning and knowing, and thereby teacher knowledge, and this helps us to consider experience in the light of Dewey's imperative for Education. To better understand the situated nature of trainee teachers' learning, it is useful to set this alongside an explanation of participation in Higher Education, especially for the majority of in-service trainee teachers in the Lifelong Learning sector, some of whom have no prior experience of Higher Education. It is already known that there are varying levels of participation in lifelong learning by for different groupings in society, such as socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. (Gorard et al 2006). It follows that these inequalities will be reproduced in ITT courses, but interestingly for in-service trainee teachers, particularly those following a Certificate route their entry into formal education at HE level (professional courses are considered to be at this level) can be the result of significant overcoming of many of the recognised barriers to participation. Gorard categorises these barriers as situational, Institutional, and dispositional, with the proviso that the use of the term barrier reduces the scope to fully appreciate the many and varied factors which influence learning trajectories for individuals. If we can understand these barriers more fully from the perspective of what is known about HE participation, we can begin to decide firstly if there is a link between the barriers to participation faced by trainee teachers and professional development, whether these barriers are significant in both constraining and facilitating this development, and whether a greater understanding of these barriers has a potential to break the cycle of reproduction and inequality for their own students. How trainee teachers experience HE through their participation in professional development is central to the argument for a broad based educational provision, rather than one focused on mastery, or competency based learning. Current

teaching practice in the UK lifelong learning sector is characterised by increasing accountability and regulation (Orr 2009), providing teachers with a long list overarching professional standards (LLUK 2006). These standards, far from serving to professionalise the teaching workforce have resulted in narrow competences from which new ITT qualifications have been derived. Teachers are encouraged to formulate, conduct and judge their professional practice according to a set of rubrics imposed by external authorities, such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). It is the researcher's premise that regulation has served to funnel professional practice, to make it safe for viewing by others.

According to Kim and Hannafin (2008 p 1837) Trainee teachers participate in classroom practice by developing firstly a situated understanding of the concepts and principles surrounding teacher knowledge, secondly strategies for using these in a future situation and assimilating, accommodating and negotiating then shared beliefs, identities and values from the practices of a situated community. Vygotsky would have these development of the first two as interacting lines, interpreted by Ottesen (2007 p 42) as knowledge and experience of concepts as taught, derived from knowledge and experience of practice as applied. Ottesen (2007 p 34) invokes the Vygotskyian idea of cultural mediation in relation to reflective practice. He recognises that "concepts mediate student teachers' understanding of practical experiences, while at the same time, the meaning of the concepts are developed". One danger of an over reliance on experiential learning for trainee teachers lies in the routinised nature of many of these practices especially as they become so through audit, inspection and standardisation activities, and fixed within a specific context. This is not to suggest that regulation is necessarily unwelcome, indeed for one trainee teacher discussed in this article (Wyn) the "constant monitoring" is a function of her

improvement in her classroom practice. Another danger rests in the current emphasis, in most teacher education curricula on reflective practice, where trainee teachers are “taught” to reflect on their classroom practice, reliant on ‘a certain fund or store of experiences or facts from which suggestions proceed’ (Dewey, 1910, p30). Many trainee teachers have a limited “fund”, or repertoire of experiences on which to sift for appropriate strategies in the current situation, leaving their capacity to reflect fairly fruitless without the help of others, for example mentors. Trainee teachers, as with Dewey’s notion of the immature members of a social group, need education in a broader sense, rather than mastery skills, to counter these dangers. Moreover, the process of communicating an experience through conversation between experienced, mature members of a group and novice, or immature members educates both the recipient and the communicator in a vital, shared and social sense. Lingis, when writing about communities, provides an insight into the role of conversation, which is pertinent here:

"To enter into a conversation with another is to lay down one's arms and one's defences; to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculcation. It is to risk what one found or produced in common. (Lingis, 1994, p. 87 in Biesta 2004 p 307).

For the trainee teacher this exposure to the risks of surprises, contestation and inculcation provides on the one hand an imperative for seeking mentors and expert colleagues in the staffroom and beyond, and on the other an inhibition that can stifle growth. In this respect, and current research points to this as a feature of trainee teachers' participation in a Certificate in Education as part of their professional development, learning becomes problematic, especially when there is a significant length of time and space between the learning and situated experience. Classrooms are economically viable, traditionally recognised places of learning, but wholly

inadequate in their attempts at mirroring any sense of reality. For expediency, the knowledge required by the trainee teacher can be distilled into a classroom setting, bringing together groups of trainee teachers, but knowledge into action requires individuals to collaborate, and to participate also requires a group of individuals with a shared purpose. Wenger described such a group as a community of practice, a seductive concept which allows a myriad of interpretations, but as Wenger puts it

“We all belong to communities of practice. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies – we belong to several communities at any given time. And the communities of practice to which we belong change over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere”. (Wenger, 1998, p 6).

Many of the routinised practices also serve to form tradition, which, according to Halpin et al (2000 p 142), is “a mode of understanding the importance and worth of these practices as well as the medium by which they are shaped and transmitted across the generations”. Halpin et al frame tradition as “one means through which continuity is conferred upon experience, and whereby the past is able to speak to the present.” (ibid p 142). Going back to Dewey’s notion of experience as continuity and renewal this is a useful device to explain how, when applied to educational institutions, particularly schools, traditions “crystallise” around the history and culture of the school. They are functional, in that thoughts, actions and allegiances (policies and procedures) are implemented from the symbolic nature of the individual and institutional identities shaped by traditions. Dewey prefers a transformational role for experience rather than a functional one, and the difference in perspective could derive from the comparison between what Dewey calls experience as unfolding, as against experience as continuous, and reconstructive.

“In learning an action, instead of having it given ready-made, one of necessity learns to vary its factors to make varied combinations of them, according to change of circumstances. A possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed good for use in other



situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn". (Dewey 1916 p37)

Dewey notes the difference between perfecting instincts in order to take appropriate action as opposed to experimenting with reactions in order to achieve flexibility and varied control over time. Where it is useful to utilise instinctive reactions (mastery techniques) to adjust to tasks, the adjustment is limited and specialised, rather than varied and transferable to new situations. It may take longer to develop habits and gain from many experiences without immediate success but it is more successful in the long term as the process of learning (learning how to learn) creates adaptability. In one example of reflective writing given below Carol is unsure whether it is her increased knowledge of teaching generally, or her increased confidence derived from classroom practice over time which has enabled her to improve her classroom management and relationships with her students. The problem, as Dewey would have it, is that Education is not a scientific discipline, and is not susceptible to theorising - mainly because we humans do complicated things. This may suffice until the context fails to match the idealised position, which is important for theory to take hold.

Dewey's ideas rely on education as a democratic ideal whereas the prevailing discourse in the Lifelong Learning sector is culturally monolithic, managerialist and performative (Simmons 2008). Dewey claims that a society that not only changes but also has the ideal of change will have different standards from that which seeks to perpetuate customs (Dewey 1916). For trainee teachers and their teacher educators this dilemma is a real one.

### **Routinised practices: interpretations and observations**

"She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed; it was labelled 'ORANGE MARMALADE', but to her great disappointment it was empty: she did not like to drop the jar for fear of killing somebody, so managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it". (Carroll 1865 p 20)

This section attempts to place Deweyan ideas into context, using three examples of student reflective writing taken from research conducted with trainee teachers in the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). What is revealed is an uncertainty, a struggle between what is taught on a teacher education course (knowledge and experience of concepts as taught), and what is applied in practice (knowledge and experience of practice as applied). The wider research from which this paper derives explores participation in ITT, how it impacts upon or interrupts constructions and assumptions of personal and professional identity, and as a consequence how teacher educators can seek to both challenge and construct professional knowledge and practice for the benefit of trainee teachers and ultimately their learners. This section interprets data arising out of synoptic tasks undertaken towards the end of an ITT course over the period 2007-9. The research methodology is qualitative, interpretive, reflexive, marshalling situatedness in favour of an empirical, dispassionate perspective. What is actively sought, and welcomed are examples of congruence, dissonance, conflation and confusion in relation to several theoretical perspectives, one of which is Dewey's ideas on experience and experiential learning. All three teachers work in the Lifelong Learning sector, and attended their teacher-training course between 2007 and 2009 on an in-service basis, i.e. whilst in a paid teaching role. Jenny teaches Catering to groups of Entry to Employment Skills (E2E) learners within a large further education college. Wyn teaches family literacy to parents in a Family Learning setting in schools and Carol is a sixth form teacher of Psychology.

Jenny attempts to apply Donald Schön's theory of Reflective Practice to her teaching. She recognises the role of the professional, not just as a technician but as a creator and innovator.

"..and the professional knowledge demonstrated very much through reflection-in-action I have continually had to think on my feet, being spontaneous in a

variety of situations. I feel it is a part of me as a person not as a professional, however it's a style that works well in an educational setting".

Jenny appears to reflect the argument of applying experience in its broadest sense, where herself as a person rather than herself as a professional is making best use of her professional knowledge. This provides us with an ontological distinction, between what it is to be a person and a professional. For Jenny, her personal identity is privileged, over her professional identity when applying her professional knowledge in her classroom practice. She goes on to agree with Schön that "it (reflective practice) can create vulnerability and can take you off course during a session". Interestingly she comments on her own learners' experiences of being taught to reflect:

"I am a great believer in self evaluation I encourage all my learners to complete a form when they have finished a set task. I want the learner to reflect on their method of work, content or theory and the finished product as a whole, this promotes ownership and individuality, however getting learners to reflect completely depends on the time and frame of mind they see it as "you ask me to make a sandwich and I have made a sandwich.""

Her learners' own honesty and directness is refreshing to read when reflecting on similar difficulties faced by teacher educators attempting to inculcate reflective practice among trainee teachers. Jane responds to a synoptic task in a final assignment in an equally honest and direct manner as she reflects on the course and what she has learned:

"I have also leant about different theories...This I have to say has been difficult to understand and I have needed guidance on what to read...I have found this hard to motivate me at times"

She goes on to acknowledge that:

"However it has become apparent that some of the learning theories and models are more suited to the learners I teach and relate to my particular specialism, namely Kolb's models of experiential learning theory and the reflective model developed by Schön. It has helped me to understand the learning journey learners receive... and my own journey over the past two

years I have learnt to reflect in a more structured way and praise myself when praise is due”.

For Jenny, the value of the course lies not in providing knowledge and skills but in providing “confidence and reassurance and confirmed to me that I do my job acceptable to meet the required standards.” Where those standards predicate routinised practices it may be that Jenny relies on her prior experience and personal confidence to support her professional practice, in preference to a restricted range of professional knowledge.

Wyn, when reflecting on the course in her synoptic task appears to see a causal relationship between making mistakes and improving her practice: “I have found that constant monitoring of my own teaching...has helped my teaching to be of better quality”. For her it is the “constant monitoring” which is a function of her improvement in her classroom practice, where she learns from direct experience, as do her learners. Dewey cautions against the conscious recognition and explicit statement of method (Dewey 1910 p 113), preferring unconscious and tentative methods, an inductive approach which proceeds from a number of single events into a method which works best after abstraction and analysis. In Wendy’s case the review of her single case mistakes is externalised in the form of others “monitoring” her teaching and she seems to prefer this to her own “inquiry of doubt, of tentative suggestion, of experimentation” (Dewey 1910 p 112).

Carol enjoyed a traditionally academic journey - from school through to sixth form and university. Her own academic achievements are impressive, and she has returned to teach in the same sixth form where she studied. For Carol there is an easy alignment between her own trajectory and that of her learners, particularly the ones’

who complete their studies, and until she embarked on her teacher training course, despite having a learning mentor role in the sixth form she had not considered how learner identities impacted on their successful completion of their studies. Over time she recognised the importance of her relationship with her learners, and this is recorded in a reflection on a teaching observation:

“ I do think that this was the best observation I have had to date and I am not sure whether it is my increasing knowledge regarding teaching and learning or increased confidence/classroom experience. I think that my classroom management has improved significantly and my presence in the classroom has also, again I think this is because my relationship with the learners and the rapport that I have developed with the students has become much better”.

It is interesting that she names the event under reflection as an observation, rather than a lesson that was observed. This suggests an externalised view of her professional development, as distinct from her everyday classroom practice. Was she looking for an explicit method to perfect her techniques from the observation feedback (knowledge and experience of concepts as taught)? If so she is unsure whether this is what made the observation a success, or rather that the development over time of a fund of experiences served to increase her confidence.

Carol acknowledges the journey that she has made with regard to understanding her learners:

”I feel that.. I understand my learners more and that I emphasise with them also; attending the personal skills workshops has really opened my eyes to the kinds of barriers that some learners struggle with. Had I not been involved with these I feel that I wouldn't have been a very effective teacher.”

The workshops to which she refers were in fact serendipitous, offered in response to offers of expertise from within the community of practitioners in the field. Their content changes over time, inevitably, and for Carol to lay such store by what is an ephemeral aspect of the course creates an immediate tension for the teacher educator. It also highlights Dewey's imperative for education, which, while written in relation

to democratic values in schools, has a resonance here, when considering the responsiveness to need, circumstances, prevailing culture and available resources. None of them, it is argued can be neatly categorised within a standards based approach to learning.

## **Conclusion**

“..when suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over”. (Carroll 1865 p12)

This paper has explored the ideas of John Dewey on experience and experiential learning using examples from recent research conducted with trainee teachers. It has explored Dewey’s views on being open to possibilities during the learning process. Alice, in falling down the rabbit hole had time to consider, noticing what is significant in her environment, to take risks and to be open to what may happen. The interacting lines, as interpreted by Ottesen (2007 p 42) of knowledge and experience of concepts as taught, derived from knowledge and experience of practice as applied is used to reveal that what is taught in the HE teacher education classroom may fail to interact with the applied practices of trainee teachers. Dewey argued for education as a social rather than private, individual activity where learning in collaboration with others would be encouraged. Such interactions could be considered risky, uncertain and inhibiting in that they reveal or expose limitations in the thinking and experience of trainees.

Professional development such as teacher training evidently needs to be relevant and worthwhile to participants as they attempt to improve their practice, but **broad** in nature to allow trainees to have a transformative, flexible experience. This, in turn, encourages the development of skills that can be adapted and applied to new situations. However, current HE teacher education itself appears to be steeped in a

regimented, standards-driven and competency-based culture and this, combined with routinised practices in the workplace serve to restrict the possibilities of education as growth.

Evidence from research shows trainees attempting both to perfect instincts using regulatory monitoring learned in the relatively unreal, and potentially prescriptive environment of the HE teacher education classroom, as well as reacting in an experimental manner based on their own limited professional knowledge. The examples given and the interpretations made appear to support the premise that both a broad-based and situated course is desirable to counteract the routinised nature of much of the current practice in the sector.

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