

education in one region of Canada and provides important connections to school reform in other regions.

*Learning Through Experience: Troubling Orthodoxies and Intersecting Questions.* Tara J. Fenwick. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2003, 213 pages.

Reviewed by: *Patricia Gouthro*  
*Mount Saint Vincent University*

In this book Fenwick takes up a challenging task as she proposes to organize the literature on experiential learning into five general groupings. Systematically, she takes up each of these categories of learning and considers how these can be used to grasp the theoretical underpinnings of various educators who draw on experiential learning in their work. She assesses some of the strengths and criticisms of each perspective so that educators in each theoretical framework might be understood better and considers some of the pedagogical approaches that might be used in the context of these varying approaches.

In her preface Fenwick indicates that the book is designed primarily as an introduction to novices in the adult education field, so she is careful to explain concepts and does not assume the reader has a basic familiarity with the theorists who have been read widely in adult education (i.e., Freire, Mezirow). At the same time, her book might be of interest to those more established in the field of adult education and lifelong learning who are interested in broadening the scope of their perspective on experiential learning by being introduced to alternative frameworks on learning (i.e., communities of practice, ecological and environmental perspectives).

Fenwick begins with an overview in which she discusses five dimensions of experiential learning: purpose, interpretation, engagement, self, and context. She notes the complexity of each of these characteristics. For example, the *purpose* of learning may not always be readily apparent even to the learner. Psychanalytic theorists would argue "that ongoing psychic activity in our unconscious repulses or attracts us to particular knowledge" (p. 14). Through *interpretation*, "we actually *produce* our experiences because, among all the complex and contradictory dimensions in a given event, we are highly selective in what we notice and highlight" (p. 15). Our *engagement* in learning may be affected by our desires, level of participation, and our positionality. Understanding the connection between *self* and experiential learning is problematic as some theorists challenge the notion of a unitary sense of self. From a poststructural perspective, Fenwick notes that Foucault (1988) uses "the term *subject*, maintaining that what we think of as the self in fact is produced in a web of social practices and language" (p. 17). The *context* that shapes our learning experiences "includes historical location and meanings of an activity, its geographical space and movement, as well as its cultural meanings and

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Patricia Gouthro is an assistant professor interested in critical, feminist, and cross-cultural theory and pedagogy. She can be reached at [patricia.gouthro@msvu.ca](mailto:patricia.gouthro@msvu.ca).

socio-political dynamics" (p. 18). Changing dynamics in society and culture result in our experiencing varying contexts simultaneously, and our unique cultural contexts shape our responses to various experiences.

Once Fenwick establishes that experiential learning cannot be neatly packaged into a simple definition, she then takes up the difficult task of trying to explain how this concept has been used in various theoretical frameworks. One strength of the book is that it attempts to make explicit how experiential learning is grounded in theory, albeit a wide range of different theories. It is in exploring some of the varied theoretical orientations that one can begin to understand better the various ways experiential learning has been taken up and implemented as a pedagogical practice.

Fenwick uses five perspectives to organize theoretical frameworks for experiential forms of learning. She begins with the dominant constructivist perspective and then outlines four alternative conceptual categories that she defines as situative perspectives, psychoanalytic perspectives, critical cultural perspectives, and ecological approaches. Using these five theoretical frameworks she explores how people learn in experiential learning situations, giving examples for each category. Then she discusses the critiques and debates between the different theoretical frameworks, making it clear that knowledge is a contested ground. From this she assesses the roles for adult educators and then the practices for educators.

Fenwick explains that the *constructivist* theory of learning has a long history in the education field and entails reflection on concrete experience. In constructivism "individuals are understood to actively construct their own knowledge, not passively absorb already existing concepts, through interaction with their environments" (p. 23). Although there are varying beliefs and theories in this framework "all views share one central premise: a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of the relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world" (p. 23). Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) work where he examines how individuals *reflect on action* to learn as they are engaged in work is one example of this type of learning. Jack Mezirow's (1991) concept of transformative learning is another, whereby individuals reconstruct their meaning frames as they encounter new experiences that challenge them to rethink previously held assumptions.

*Situative* perspectives "argue that learning is rooted in the situation in which a person participates, not in the head of that person as intellectual concepts produced by reflection" (p. 24). Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of "communities of practice" is used to articulate how individuals learn through social contexts in interaction with others in their particular community. Elizabeth Tisdell's (1995) work raises some issues about learning that is capable of "understanding differences without colonizing them, by examining and critiquing the structured power relations and forms of resistance that unfold among a learning community" (p. 62).

*Psychoanalytic* theories focus on unconscious desires and fears that might shape the learning process. The struggle between the conscious and unconscious minds may create anxiety that "often generates resistance to learning, as for example when we fight concepts which, even if we suspect their value,

fundamentally challenge our existing beliefs or draw us in to questions we would rather not pursue" (p. 28).

Under the heading of *critical cultural* theories, Fenwick draws in a wide range of varied theories, including feminist theories, Marxism, Habermasian critical theory, queer theory, and postmodernism to argue that their commonality is the emphasis on resisting dominant social norms of experience. "To understand human learning we must, from a critical cultural perspective, analyse the ideologies and other structures of dominance that express or govern the social relationships, and competing forms of communication and cultural practices within that system" (p. 30).

The final category used by Fenwick is ecological theories that explore ecological relationships between cognition and the environment.

Based on complexity theory and enaction theory, this view assumes that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensori-motor capacities embedded in a biological, psychological, cultural context. Ecological theorists explore how cognition and environment become *simultaneously enacted* through experiential learning (p. 34).

In this perspective, connections to the natural world are made explicit as an integral aspect of any human learning experience. The ripple effect of one event that may trigger unanticipated consequences is explored to understand better the complexity of how humans are connected to their environment.

Although Fenwick appears a little self-conscious in the emphasis on pedagogy in her text, as she acknowledges in her introduction, this may be helpful for learners "encountering these perspectives for the first time" (p. viii). She outlines a variety of practical examples that reveal how educators have taken up experiential learning from varied theoretical orientations, and also discusses the varying roles that educators might assume. For example, in the constructivist orientation, Fenwick provides examples of outdoor adventure learning, problem-based learning, and mentorship. She cautions that "as most educators know, using someone else's pedagogical strategy is tricky despite detailed instructions because everything changes according to the particular mix of people, purposes, and politics" (p. 140). The examples she outlines, however, can serve as a good springboard for discussion among students and educators of the connection that can be made between theory and practice.

A strength of Fenwick's book is the breadth of material and various educative approaches that she takes into consideration in her assessment of experiential learning. This same characteristic, however, is one of the challenges of writing a book that attempts to provide such a sweeping overview. In my experience, all too frequently readers (particularly those who are new to a discipline) are accepting of information that is neatly organized and tabled. They gain a comfortable sense that they have a good understanding of a particular perspective when they truly need to explore it in greater depth to have a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues being explored. Fenwick seems to be aware of this potential problem, as on numerous occasions she stresses the limits to her presentation, noting that "although the examples are grouped to indicate certain theoretical allegiances, these classifications are very rough indeed. They should be viewed more as an organizing tool than as a theoretically reliable taxonomy" (p. 139).

Whenever you attempt to survey and chart out knowledge there is controversy over how you choose to categorize information. For example, the critical cultural perspectives include a diverse range of theory, including all types of feminism, postmodernism, critical Habermasian theory, queer theory—all of which Fenwick argues are categorized by their concerns with power. Yet how these varied frameworks take up power issues is often contradictory. A number of readers, especially those whose own work is located in a particular critical theoretical framework, may take exception to being grouped with some of these other positions.

Fenwick notes that “in this book, experiential learning is stretched to wider reaches than may typically be considered part of the field of adult education” (p. 76). Although no book can be expected to cover every topic, I would have been interested to see whether Fenwick thought about experiential learning in relationship to behaviorism or mastery learning: areas that have received a fair bit of attention in the adult education world.

Overall, however, the ambitious scope of Fenwick’s book is successful. Her writing style is clear and crisp, and concepts and explanations are substantiated with a number of examples. Fenwick celebrates the diverse approaches toward experiential learning while she explores the numerous debates between various theoretical frameworks. By addressing some of the critiques that each model might pose toward other positions, Fenwick provides a fairly balanced assessment that clearly indicates that experiential learning exists in a range of contexts. Her goal appears to be to complicate rather than simplify the reader’s understanding of what constitutes experiential learning. This makes this book an excellent introduction for readers to the literature that relates to experiential learning, which one hopes will entice them into exploring the field in more depth. Her book is also a good reminder to those of us who tend sometimes to concentrate on a particular perspective that there is value in being exposed to other frameworks and paradigms of knowledge. It appears that Fenwick achieves her goal to “trouble or disturb some orthodoxies, an endeavor that itself soon proves to be troubling in various conceptual, moral, and practical directions” (p. viii). Even if readers do not fully agree with some of the ideas and concepts raised about experiential learning in this text, they will certainly be challenged to reflect more deeply on their beliefs and understanding of the complexities of human learning experiences.