Youth Development

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A MONOGRAPH OF THE 4-H CENTER FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

Experiential Education for Youth Development

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This monograph is based on dissertation research which started with the question: What is experiential education? The purpose of this monograph is to share some of this research with UCCE personnel in order to emphasize that 4-H has the potential to be an exemplary form of experiential education, and that youth need us to work at realizing this potential.

I begin with a definition of experiential education as:

> education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum. Experience consists of senses (i.e., touch,
> smell, hearing, sight, taste), emotions (e.g., pleasure, excitement, anxiety, fear, hurt, empathy, attachment), physical conditions (e.g., temperature, strength, energy level), and cognition (e.g., constructing knowledge, establishing beliefs, solving problems) (Carver, 1996, 1997).

Experiential education engages participants intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally. It involves participants in purposeful endeavors that recruit emotional investment and create opportunities for students to develop rewarding relationships with themselves, others, and the curriculum (cf Proudman, 1995). This process requires reflection and communication (cf Kalisch, 1979). At its best, 4-H provides rich opportunities for youth to be supported in their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. The research presented here provides a backdrop for hanging behind the 4-H program so we can see how it looks in the context of experiential education at large. My hope is that seasoned youth development advisors and other key stakeholders who look at 4-H clubs and activities, in front of this new backdrop, will be able to see nuances that have not previously been clear, attributes of specific 4-H projects and programs that point to under-articulated strengths, and areas where development is critical.

Experiential Education in Practice

In researching this topic, I have come across a number of programs that look like examples of experiential education but are not usually associated with it. The choice of programs reviewed is based on findings from searches on ERIC, participation in the Service Learning 2000 conference, and consultation with researchers who are active in the National Society of Experiential Education and the Association for Experiential Education. Here, I will discuss both programs that are explicitly based on the experiential education philosophy, and those that are not based on a conscious application of the philosophy but none the less enact the principles of experiential education. In the category of programs that are explicitly based on experiential education, two types of programs stand out: service learning and wilderness- or adventure-based education. They stand out because they are popular and have historical roots that are inseparable from those of experiential education theory.

Service learning combines public service activities with meaningful learning opportunities for participants. For instance, students working to enhance the mobility of people with severe physical disabilities are engaged in service learning if their efforts provide a community service and the students learn from the experience. In that example, students may find the motivation and opportunity to develop and apply skills in mathematics, physics and basic engineering. As another example, students can develop communication skills and an understanding of statistical concepts while conducting research to develop strategies to combat a community problem (such as homelessness, racism, or a lack of preparedness for natural disasters).

The Service Learning movement gained considerable momentum in the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s due in part to the efforts of enthusiastic teachers piloting grass-roots programs, and in part due to the large amount of federal spending in this area of education. Service Learning advocates claim that the programs enhance the self-esteem of students and result in positive behavioral changes. Students who were non-participants in traditional classes have become enthusiastic learners while at the same time providing service to others. The experience of serving others provides meaning, challenge, and a source of motivation for some of these students.

Adventure-based wilderness programs also engage participants regardless of their achievement records in school. An example of such a program is the standard 21-day Outward Bound course which includes: a challenging group expedition, a two- to three-day "solo" and a public service project. A "solo" involves time spent by each participant alone in the wilderness. For the purpose of brevity, I will discuss in detail only one example of a program that is explicitly based on experiential education. It was chosen because Outward Bound incorporates service learning in a wilderness-based adventure program. Additional activities allow participants to further develop group problem solving skills, build a sense of community and have opportunities for personal growth through individual challenges. Outward Bound participants may be anywhere from 14 to 75 years old, and in special cases they may even be outside of this range. Outward Bound places a strong emphasis on compassion among participants and instructors. This emphasis dates back to its inception and is a response of Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound, to the fact that the personal training program he had developed at the Salem school in Germany before World War II was later used as a

training model for the Nazi youth movement (James, 1990). In fact the Outward Bound motto is "to serve, to strive, and not to yield" which is an adaptation of "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" from Tennyson's Ulysses. The modification places emphasis on service, which is interpreted as an act of compassion (Hoffman, 1992).

Service learning and wilderness-based adventure courses, along with environmental education programs, intensive scientific discovery courses, and travel programs, can be found in organizations that are devoted to experiential education. That is to say, in some but not in all cases, the institutional norms and organizational culture that are contextual factors for service learning and wilderness-based adventure programs are consistent with the philosophy of experiential education.[1] This stands in contrast to examples of experiential learning that takes place in a traditional school setting.

Experiential learning takes place in schools in the context of academic classes in which teachers (a) implement strategies known as constructivist teaching or the inquiry method of teaching, (b) organize classes so that students can engage in cooperative learning experiences, and/or (c) integrate a service learning project into the curriculum. Experiential learning also takes place during extracurricular school activities such as ropes course participation, or peer mediation as part of a conflict- resolution program. The point being made here is that despite the presence of experiential learning activities within schools, the institutional norms of public schools are not in synchronization with the philosophy of experiential education. In general, students are assessed for the purpose of determining how they will be sorted; they are expected to compete against one another for grades; teachers stand in the front of a classroom and provide information that students are expected to receive and learn to use or repeat at a later time; teachers usually work independently from one another and rarely participate in the learning activities in which their students are involved.

Organizations devoted to experiential education usually engage participants in several types of experiential learning activities. For instance, the Outward Bound schools, best known for their expeditions (hiking, sailing, cross-country skiing, snow-shoeing, canoeing, or rock climbing) also engage students in service learning activities and exercises designed to deepen students' understanding of interpersonal dynamics. Programs that are not usually associated with experiential education that nonetheless appear to enact its principles include Montessori schools, Native American and Native Canadian practices for educating children about their culture and enabling them to develop useful skills for living, programs run by Jewish youth organizations designed for the same purpose (such as the National Federation of Temple Youth), and community-based organizations that provide inner-city youth from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds with opportunities to participate in sports, art, media production, and/or political advocacy. A brief discussion of two examples — Montessori schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve urban youth, illustrate the point that these programs possess

1 [1]Science education is another area in which experiential techniques are popular, but frequently the activities based on experiential education take place within the context of a traditional school framework (even when they are located at science museums or other non-school sites). Technology education, when treated as a discipline, is also a strong example of an area in which experiential learning takes place but usually within a traditional school setting.

the fundamental characteristics of experiential education even though they are not normally associated with it.

Montessori schools primarily serve children between two and six years of age.The Montessori method is child-centered and revolves around active learning. Lessons usually rely directly on sensory perception (such as touch). This method is considered an effective means of educating and a way to arouse interest in cognitive learning (Kramer, 1978). In Montessori schools, children are rewarded by their own sense of mastery, and failure is only an indication "that the child is not yet ready for that particular exercise" (Bailey, 1915). Children are put in a "prepared environment" that includes guides (adults), other people, animals, plants, and objects that can be used for building, counting, expressing, decorating, researching, and exploring. Maria Montessori, who developed the model for Montessori schools, described this as a "nourishing place for the child" (Lillard, 1972, p. 50). A community structure is established around notions of shared traditions, goals, responsibilities, activities and discussion. Montessori students learn their roles as members of the school community. Children in Montessori schools are engaged in a process of drawing on their own experiences and internalizing lessons that can be useful to them in the future.

While Montessori schools primarily serve young children, community-based organizations (CBOs) offer educational programs that meet the needs of older children, teenagers and adults — including those who have dropped out, flunked out, or been kicked out of the school system, and youth who perform well academically and stay in school. The community-based organizations that are effective at engaging inner-city youth in educational activities provide safe places for youth to go and be a part of something — both community and activity (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Youth elect to become members (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Youth are valued as program resources, members of the community, and individuals with talents and needs (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Social control is maintained by the creation of group norms and mutual respect among participants and program staff (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). The program community functions more like a family than a bureaucratically regulated group (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994). Often considered by outsiders as mere providers of recreational programs, these CBOs offer youth crucial opportunities to further their education in a manner that is effective and positive from the perspective of youth (McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994).

The same factors that Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin identify as being common across the CBOs that help urban youth "duck the bullet" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby and Langman, 1994) are what characterize Outward Bound courses, Service Learning and Montessori schools as types of experiential education programs. Urban youth, at a conference called *Listen Up!* held at Stanford University in the summer of 1993, identified respect, relationships, and relevance as key factors that draw them to the community-based organizations where they choose to become involved (McLaughlin & Heath, 1993). They talk about being treated as valuable resources and being allowed to engage in meaningful learning activities. Youth asked for more of what is described here as experiential education and what is exemplified by 4-H programs that enact the principles and values discussed later in this monograph.

Theory From Practice

The programs described above are not only very different from one another, they each have a complicated story — a history, traditions, maxims and a culture. Yet, each

one is also an example of experiential education. A review of the literature indicates that the following set of concepts collectively characterize experiential education programs (only a fraction of which have been described above). Program characteristics include:

• ***Authenticity:*** Activities and consequences are understood by participants as relevant to their lives. Rewards are naturally occurring and directly affect the experience of the student (e.g., personal satisfaction). Students can identify reasons for participating in activities. Assessment is formative. The programs provide meaningful experiences within the context of the students' outlook on life.

• ***Active learning*****:** Students are physically and/or mentally engaged in the active process of learning. Physical activities may be used to address social, physical and emotional as well as cognitive development. The difference between mentally active learning and passive learning is that the former requires students to internalize the thought processes necessary for problem solving—searching for explanations, figuring out ways of understanding, using their imagination and being creative—whereas the latter involves accepting what is said and remembering it, so it can be repeated later.

• ***Drawing on student experience*****:** Students are guided in the process of building understandings of phenomena, events, and human nature by thinking about what they have experienced (i.e., what happened to them, how they felt, how they reacted, what resulted, what they observed). Educators create activities that provide opportunities for students to experience what it is like to interact with specific situations. They draw on both experiences students bring with them to a program and those that are shared by participants in the context of the program.

• ***Connecting to the future*****:** Students develop habits, memories, skills and knowledge that will be useful to them in the future. The formal process of getting students to reflect on their participation in activities or to reflect on their potential roles as community members is meant to make these experiences relevant to their future endeavors.

• ***Goal of positive socialization*****:** Programs aim to benefit each student and the communities of which they are members. Values shape the manner in which individuals and communities are affected. Experiential education programs tend to value caring, compassion, communication, critical thinking, respect for self and others, individuality and responsibility.

> Responsibility includes enabling people to respond, and creating a culture in which they hold each other and themselves accountable. Caring and compassion involve attending to the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical well-being of oneself and others as well as attending to other aspects of one's environment.

Experiential education requires risk-taking on the part of teachers and students. When an experience is educational, it is often the result of a positive struggle—one that involves facing

at least one challenge and resulting in participants being satisfied with their effort, whether because they have achieved their goal and/or because they believe they have learned from the effort something that is or will be of use to them. In addition to program characteristics, other key factors that shape experiential education programs are:

• ***Resources*** including people, time, space, access, authority and physical materials. The availability of resources is a key factor in determining the context in which a program operates; the recognition of resources, selection and organization of resources, and prioritization of resources are acts that play a significant role in characterizing the learning environments.

• ***Behavior*** of senior members of the communities that inhabit these learning environments. These people serve as role models for other participants. They also influence participant experience by communicating thoughts and feelings about participant behavior

• ***Language*** used to describe the programs, organizations, and learning environments in documents, speech, and products. This influences how participants construct knowledge about the educational opportunities and rewards offered by programs.[2]

The combination and interaction of program characteristics, language, behavior, and resources has an impact on both collateral and direct learning. There has to be consistency across categories in order for the use of each to be effective. For instance, in order for a program setting to be perceived by participants as *authentic*, expressions used to describe the program components (*language*) have to fit with the experiences participants have of both the *resources* available to them and the *behaviors* of staff.

There are three dimensions of student experience, and they are correlated with the goals of experiential education. Building student competencies, both academic and non-academic, is one of the goals. The other goals are for students to develop personal agency, and to feel a sense of belonging. By looking at experiential education in practice, I have found common educational goals (for which the specific objectives vary from case to case), program characteristics (most of which emphasize pedagogical principles), and characteristics of the settings in which educational activities take place. Tying these findings back to what educational philosophers offer, it is apparent that student experience, in addition to being both a process and an outcome is bound by three dimensions that respectively focus on Agency, Belonging, and Competence. More precisely, the goals of experiential education that point to the dimensions of student experience are:

1) to develop students' personal ***agency***—their recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and the use of this knowledge as a source of power for generating action;

2) to develop and maintain a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of

[2] Since language is a resource and its use is a behavior, the other two categories encompass what is depicted here. The reason I set language aside, despite the logical redundancy, is because it has a pervasive quality that is so apparent that to not explicitly mention it would be a failure to convey the essence of the experiential education environment.

belonging—affecting emotional status, interpersonal relationships and self-identification;

3) to develop students' ***competence*** in a variety of areas (e.g., cognitive, physical, musical, social).

The Potential Power of Experiential Education

Fostering the development of personal *Agency*, a sense of *Belonging*, and *Competence*, for both individuals and groups of program participants is what makes experiential education powerful. The goals of developing Agency, Belonging, and Competence are closely related to the goals of addressing the most fundamental psychological needs as identified in "a motivational analysis of self-system processes" by James Connell and James Wellborn (1991). After reviewing cognitive, social and motivational approaches to studying self-system processes, the authors conclude that "people have fundamental psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness" (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, p 51). They turn their attention to schools, as being critical to the development of self-system processes for children and youth. The authors relate contextual factors (structure, autonomy support, and involvement) with ways that the self-system is developed, and patterns of action that are cognitive, behavioral and emotional. They suggest that the extent to which the three psychological needs are met corresponds with the level of engagement versus disaffection that become evident in patterns of cognitive, behavioral and emotional action.[3]

The processes by which experiential education fosters the development of participants' Agency, Belonging and Competence (ABCs) usually reflect an implicit assumption that:

> [Personal] development is a process of participation in sociocultural activities. We regard individual development as inseparable from interpersonal and community processes; individuals' changing roles are mutually defined with those of other people and with dynamic cultural processes (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa & Goldsmith, 1995).

Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues were not writing about experiential education; they were describing pieces of a theory about learning communities. Although there is little evidence that experiential educators make conscious application of research on learning communities, in practice the bulk of experiential education takes place in learning communities as described by Rogoff and colleagues. In other words, experiential educators have been applying principles that have later been identified in research on teaching and learning. This is only one example of how the everyday practice of experiential educators, based on their intuition and what they have learned from experience and observation in the field, is in synchronization with what is recommended by researchers at universities who strive to identify more effective strategies for teaching and learning, and how their theories can be implemented within the practice of public school teachers.

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[3] The dimensions of student experience that I have pulled from the literature on experiential education (agency, belonging and competence) are also closely related to the dimensions identified by Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey W. McLaughlin (autonomy, belonging and competence) as being most salient to the experiences of urban youth participating in highly reputable community-based organizations (Mclaughlin, Stanford University, verbatim, 1993).

Experiential educators have been putting into practice principles that reflect an understanding of how people acquire knowledge and its implications on teaching and learning as described in "constructivist" theory (see Brown & Campione, 1990; Noddings,
1; Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Rogoff, 1993). These works establish the notion that cognition is distributed among members of groups. They focus on the manner in which the groups construct knowledge. A brief overview of earlier work on constructivism is included in the piece by Noddings (1991). Research in this area points to the significance of knowledge being something people construct, a product that is developed by way of a subjective process (as explained by Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Prawat, 1992; and Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992). As a result, the constructivist view of teaching is that it consists of preparing environments and modeling behaviors that help students construct their own knowledge (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy & Perry, 1992). Experiential educators act accordingly.

There may be other ways in which experiential education provides examples of how educational theory can be applied not by applying it but by showing how it is already being done. For instance, the efforts experiential educators make to connect learning to future situations is one of providing mechanisms for students to transfer their learning from one situation to another. When consistently successful, they may be intuitively doing what cognitive scientists and psychologists identify in theories of how to increase the probability of students' transferring knowledge. On the other hand, successful experiential educators may illustrate points that are not covered in these theories and thereby serve as subjects of a study that could lead to ways in which the theories could be strengthened. Anderson, Reder, and Simon (1996) discuss problems that are addressed in experiential education by practices that facilitate learners' building of connections among situations, and between situations and concepts. Also, Greeno (1997) critically respond to Anderson and colleagues pointing to differences between the situative and cognitive perspectives, and argue that the Anderson group incorrectly attribute claims in their arguments to the situative perspective. Both articles have bibliographies that could be useful for learning more about this topic. I am not claiming that experiential education is always successful at addressing issues of transference, but that examples of this being the case may be plentiful, and specific practices have been developed for this purpose that are integral to experiential education.

So far, what has been said about the potential power of experiential education applies to thinking about the education of any population, and one of the interesting benefits of looking at experiential education is that anything learned has implications for lifelong learning, but there are also connections between experiential education and efforts to reform schools within the current system of public education. Experiential education is compatible with many strategies for school reform (Westheimer, Kahne, & Gerstein, 1992). Schools based on experiential education involve school-based management (as suggested by Levin, 1987), integrated youth services (as discussed by Kirst & McLaughlin, 1989), systemic reform (as proposed by Smith and O'Day, 1990), and policies influenced by considerations of how students are part of the context for teaching (as described by McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Furthermore, experiential education theory has the potential to bring these strategies of school reform into a cohesive design.

Experiential education also offers a way to stop the focus of public education from swinging back and forth between "at-risk" or "disadvantaged" kids and "gifted and talented" kids (see Kirst, 1984, Chapter 2 for discussion about the cycles of education form) enabling schools to focus on the education of all youth all of the time. In fact, the distinctions between "disadvantaged," "regular" and "gifted and talented" students do not exist from the perspective of experiential education. The focus of experiential education is on student experience, based on the specific relationships among students and elements of their learning environment (Dewey, 1938). These relationships change over time, changing from situation to situation. In addition to its popularity among youth who are marginalized by the school system, experiential education is popular among people who are highly successful both at school and in the workforce. In other words, experiential education really can provide "education for all."

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