



# Book Report on Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education

**Roberts, J. (2011). *Beyond learning by doing: Theoretical currents in experiential education*. New York, NY: Routledge, 129pp. ISBN: 9780415882088.**

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**Abstract:** The book by Jay. W Roberts, *Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education* takes a metaphorical plunge in organizing the cluttered notion of two key concepts- 'Experiential Learning' and Experiential Education'. The author has taken an adventurous and focused attempt to unravel the assumed homogeneity in these terms by figuratively using different forms of rivers as his 'meaningful anchors' (p. 1). As we go through the book, we will see how the placement of river plays an important role in his educational tour to understand the real meaning and implication of experience in education. Jay W. Roberts is an Associate Professor of Education and Environmental Studies at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana.

**Keywords:** *experience, learning, education, river, currents*

## Chapter 1: The River of Experience

Roberts frames his discussion by portraying a visual impression of the following rivers- The River of Experience and Headwaters and distinctive currents in the river namely the Romantic current, the Pragmatic current, the Critical current, the Normative current and lastly the Hopeful current. Considering himself a fisherman, Roberts finds comfort in fishing at the east-fork of the Whitewater river which he symbolizes as his 'home water'. Similarly, he finds experiential education as his 'home water', a place he perpetually comes back to find answers and satiate his curiosity. He suggests "The field of experiential education appeared long on practice and very short on theory" (p. xi). Stepping into the River of Experience, his first chapter, he uses his imagination to analyse the present scenario of the experiential education standing on the rim of the Colorado river when viewed thousand feet above the Grand Canyon. The field of experiential education is unexplored until one hikes down and ventures the dynamic flowing water currents and counter currents which forecasts a bigger story. As he says "So rather than an assumed single and relatively stagnant theoretical current, I will contend that this river of experience is made up of many, sometimes contradictory currents and perspectives" (p. xii). As Whiteman describes, I am large, I contain multitudes" (p. 2). He tries to clear up the muddy water between Experiential Learning and Experiential Education. He suggests Experiential Learning is a method or technique employed by educators to meet certain instructional objectives. Whereas Experiential Education implies a broader perspective and he prefers calling it a 'field'. The author aims to break the homogeneity of this field by bringing in a broader and potentially deeper articulation of experiential education in the subsequent chapters. Each chapter explores the theoretical scaffolding that holds up each particular construction of experience.

## Chapter 2: Headwaters- From Experience to Experiential Education

The historical roots of experience in education is focused on, in the second chapter Headwaters. The most classic epistemological argument in the philosophy of Rationalists and Empiricists is seen to be brought to an understanding by Immanuel Kant regarding the subjectivity of the senses. Jay (2005) in his book 'Songs of Experience' writes that "Kant boldly sought an answer by focusing less on the object of knowledge than the subject, a constitutive subject that was far more than the succession of its perceptions or site of habitual repetition" (p. 69). Author has taken a dig into multiple and contested meaning of the word experience by explaining Latin term 'experientia' (trial, proof or experiment), Greek term 'empeira' (simple empirical observation), German terms 'Erlebnis' (lived experience), and 'Erfahrung' (accumulated experience and inherited wisdom), but it fails to "escape the ambiguities" as mentioned by Oakshott (p. 9) it rather leads to a confused state of understanding. We get a taste of it when Roberts concludes this chapter by saying "...it is the realization that this river of experience is already complex and full of contradictions at its intellectual headwaters" (p. 26). Roberts highlights the philosophical contributions of women, Eastern philosophical traditions, and indigenous cultures to our

understandings of experience in education. A critical question framing the chapter is, who owns the knowledge gained from an experience: self, mind, society, or the community of animate and inanimate objects?

### Chapter 3: Experience and the Individual: The Romantic Current

The third chapter explores the first current- the Romantic current which involves thinkers Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Similarly, like 'experience', understanding the term 'Romanticism' has been chalked out by the author as a 'tricky terrain' (p. 28) as Isaiah Berlin (1999) describes it as a "dangerous and confused subject" (p. 1). Various writers and thinkers have described the essence and principles of Romantic period in vastly different and sometimes in contradictory ways. Despite the obvious perils, Berlin suggests that this is a noteworthy period which created a revolution in consciousness. Roberts felt that the influence of Romanticism has been quite unexplored in the field of experiential education. The romantic legacy plays high value on letting the "mountains speak for themselves" (Warren et al., p. 113) and allowing the individual learner to get engaged in unmediated experience. With Emile, experience becomes the central theme and Rousseau becomes the one of the first to connect the idea of 'learning by doing' to a transformational process working against schooling organized by the society. To Whitman, there lies a dichotomization between Nature as freeing and transformative and Culture as corrupt and constraining which forms the core feature of the Romantic Transcendental movement in the United States. The belief in the innate goodness of the child and the power of individual choice is present in many experiential curricula. The notion of redemptive and innocent quality of Nature is picked up by Henry David Thoreau and John Muir and embodies the path to liberation and transformation through 'wilderness'. The closer you are connected to Nature, the better educative it can be for any individual. The educational legacy of Romanticism runs deep in the philosophy of Existentialism as Berlin rightly notes that Existentialism is the "truest heir of Romanticism" (p. 139). The maxim of Existentialism "existence precedes essence" connects to the experiential curriculum in valuing inductive learning over objectified and universal truth. The book even highlights how critical theorists and post structuralists point to possible limitations in the Romantic construction of experience, including questions about the social implications of a focus on the autonomous individual and of constructions of nature and wilderness as separate "others." But Roberts does not cease back from saying "In each, a direct unmediated 'strange lands' experience is possible only through an immersive journey" (p. 40).

### Chapter 4: Experience and the Social- The Pragmatic Current

For the Pragmatist current, in the fourth chapter, we learn that experience is not just an individual phenomenon as per the Romantic current, but it can also have a shared, social element that asks different questions and demands different educational responses. It involves a variety of curricular projects which include adventure education, challenge education, place-based learning, service learning etc. Roberts summarizes work by Dewey, Mead, James, Addams, and Greene, among others. Their contribution to the experiential education includes the "value of shared, interactive experience...the conscious connection between the school and the community...and the sense that experience forms the genesis of social action" (p. 66). The main critique of the Pragmatist current comes from critical pedagogues who question whether the notion of "democratic schooling," as practiced, adequately addresses underlying issues of power and inequality. Diggins (1994) for example is concerned that Deweyan democracy assumes a kind of homogeneous community that simply does not exist in the world of structural and institutional inequalities (p. 5). Nel Noddings and Maxine Greene (p. 63) argue that social experience in school can be implicated in issues of unequal power and identity de-formation. Roberts refrains from putting a definite answer to this by saying "It is perhaps no surprise that leaving this current also means we carry with us unresolved questions and tensions" (p. 67).

### Chapter 5: Experience and the Political- The Critical Current

The third current in chapter 5 is considered 'the most influential counter current' in the river of experience. By this we mean the Critical current contrasts with the first two and aims "to signal the ways in which experience in this variation is embedded within the dynamics of power and social justice. A planned and organized social experience, if not critiqued, can unduly change the consciousness of students by devaluing their everyday lived experiences and replacing self-agency with predetermined, market-driven forms of knowledge. The joining of knowledge with power is the core theme in Paulo Freire's work and comes out strongly in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In describing his banking theory of education, Freire dismisses the assumed neutrality of mere facts and considers experience as defined and owned by knowledge producers. This means experience is equated with accumulated wisdom, something students learn from their teachers and not something lived or enacted. This recalls the German etymological distinction between *Erfahrung* (accumulated experience) and *Erlebnis* (lived experience) highlighted by the author in Chapter 1. According to the Critical current, the aim of education is to create a critical consciousness that promotes emancipation for oppressed groups and strives to correct injustice and inequality. Thus, experience in the political current locates the individual as an active agent of change. Unlike the Romantic current, the change is not located within the individual but rather connects the individual to larger social forces through the idea of praxis (informed action). Transformation in this sense is both individual and societal as individual is given tools of awareness to see through the distortion and act out in the world in a different way.

But experience in schools can also liberate and resist the undemocratic oppressive impulses in education. In support of this claim, Roberts points to bell hooks and her advocacy of storytelling, the "passion of experience" (p. 81) as a process of student self-empowerment and social critique. The educator must, therefore, help "make the invisible, visible" (p. 84).

## Chapter 6: Experience and the Market: The Normative Current

Probably the most provocative chapter, the Normative current sees experience as a consumable product, varying little from any other product in the educational marketplace.

In his exploration of "Neo-experiential Education," Roberts draws on Weber, Habermas, Ritzer, introduces market ideology into education which encourages a "McDonaldization" of experience. Ritzer (2001) describes how the society as a whole has taken on the characteristics of a standardized fast-food chain and goes on to identify four dimensions of McDonaldization- efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. It basically revolves around minimization of time and effort and maximization of productivity. As Ritzer (2001) says "Quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good" (p. 199) which undermines the potential for rich experience and reflection, and turning the field away from ethics of democracy and towards ethics of consumerism. To Dewey (1938) in his *Experience and Education*, "A person whose conduct is controlled in this way has at most the illusion of freedom. Actually, he is directed by forces over which he has no command" (p. 64). In this chapter Roberts concludes by saying that in a general sense the neo-experiential current becomes part of a larger problem, rather than a potentially powerful and transformational curriculum response (p.101).

## Chapter 7: Experience and Democracy: The Hopeful Current

The final "current" Roberts explores is the "Hopeful Current" where he considers how the field of experiential education might be strengthened. Experiential education is "fragile and incomplete" (pp. 103) and Greene suggests in his *Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), "We live in a historic period in which much of our knowledge is a form of technocratic rationality and much of our direct experience is privatized, consumerist experience" (p. x). Roberts wants to "organize things a little differently" in this chapter and goes back to his earlier experience of working as a camp counsellor in a summer camp where he met Alvin. Alvin's story is what Roberts considers as the teacher for this current. A boy amongst the at-risk youth, Roberts found Alvin the most vivacious and lively kid in that session of the summer camp. Any reader will be able to understand the author's deep sense of attachment when he writes "I'd take a thousand Alvins over one tired, dispassionate and cynical kid" (p. 104). Those few days of the camp created magic in Alvin's behaviour and personality. His energy and brashness turned from getting negative attention to positive encouragement and Roberts realized he was just a kid who needed love and affection. Roberts was his favourite teacher and after returning from the camp he could not forget him. He helplessly waded his hands for help when he called Roberts few times to express how lonely he was and things were rough at home. This is where Roberts is guilty of the fact that his professional training did not have any guidelines to work with such pain and conflict that Alvin was going through. This is where lies the fragility and incompleteness of experiential education. Roberts sets a hopeful frame where there needs to be ways to actively respond and reconstruct. This idea includes a shift in focus on processes rather than programs, opening up room for a wider array of voices and a renewed emphasis on the moral consequences of knowledge. Roberts argues that experiential education "has the ability to link disparate strands of progressivism and build a new vision of education--one that takes seriously the interactive role of the student, the teacher, and the community in the democratic process" (p. 111).

## Conclusion

Beyond Learning by Doing let the readers see how broader approaches direct to larger conversations and discourses in education, placing the field of experiential education in social and historical context. It has combined philosophical approaches with practical examples to create a thesis-driven argument about the current state of the field and its future possibilities and limitations. Roberts positions himself as an intellectual explorer on a journey to understanding. He invites the reader to be a co-explorer who can question his editorial decisions and conclusions and continue further investigation. Roberts provides much-needed intellectual rigor to the field and identifies specific areas for future investigation and development. One caution, this book offers no practical prescriptions. Instead it leaves the reader with hopeful, yet open questions about future directions the river might take. Roberts has been true to this when he says at the end of the book, "While it has not been my intention to arrive at the one true notion of experience here, I certainly had hoped for some semblance of thematic and argumentative coherence and not simply a cacophony of voices" (p. 113). The author needs to be appreciated for his courageous stance of taking up such a complicated, unexplored and unorganized territory of experiential education and his efforts to refine the knots and present it to readers as smooth as flowing stream of water with its distinctive layers. His work contributes significantly to the field and invites readers to engage with the diverse currents shaping this pedagogical approach.

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