Emerson, Experience, and Experiential Learning

STEVEN WEILAND

Reevaluation of the relative merits of traditional and innovative teaching styles is now a permanent feature of higher education. Dispute and debate focused in the past decade on classroom strategies, complex relations between teachers and students, and selection of instructional materials appropriate to a rapidly changing curriculum. All of these we might term *internal* issues since they bear on the student's life within educational institutions. But no observer of higher education can ignore now what we might call a critical *external* issue, demand for recognition of experience—features of daily life outside the classroom, laboratory, or library—as a substitute for traditional credit-bearing activity. *Experiential learning,* the term applied to educational activities undertaken outside the college or university, is the latest in a series of claims in favor of an expanded curriculum, one less dependent on traditional features of liberal education and more pertinent to interests and aims of new and nontraditional students. Indeed, important traditions remain at stake in the debate over experiential learning, one likely ignored if the discussion is not enhanced by attention to issues in a way which recognizes their permanence and complexity.

Educators face a dilemma likely not resolvable by simple revision of degree requirements and by new forms of credentialing. Our definition of education does need to expand to account for substantial learning occurring in everyday life. At the same time, those kinds of learning dependent on books, lectures, laboratory experiments, and classroom exchange need reaffirmation to preserve their unique role in higher education. But enthusiasm for educational change has created a new orthodoxy of experiential learning and has undervalued needlessly styles of thought and instruction critical to a full and fit education. Experiential learners and their administrative and faculty supporters require a rationale free of slogans of curriculum reform, one based instead on careful consideration of implications of changes they propose and interest in experience considered apart from its utility as an argument for credit.

Ralph Waldo Emerson acknowledged the dilemma when he wrote in his journal in 1839 that "the reason for my deep respect for the farmer is that he is a realist and not a dictionary." He recognized the limits of an education which prepares the mind for abstract thought at the expense of interest in everyday activity. Emerson also wrote,

> We are shut up in schools and college recitation rooms for ten or fifteen years, and come out at last with a bellyful of words and do not know a thing. We cannot use our hands, or our legs, or our eyes, or our arms. We do not know an

STEVEN WEILAND *is executive director, Federation of Public Programs in the Humanities, Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

edible root in the woods. We cannot tell our course by the stars, nor the hour of the day by the sun. It is well if we can swim and skate. We are afraid of a horse, of a cow, of a dog, of a cat, of a spider.[1]

Such a view likely will cheer the experiential learner but the matter remains more complex than many new apologists for experience allow, and even Emerson himself provides evidence for the centrality of traditional styles of learning in any revised curriculum.

"Everything Good Is on the Highway"

Serious study of experiential learning is just now catching up with its rapid adoption by colleges and universities. The Cooperative Assessment for Experiential Learning project, originally sponsored by the Educational Testing Service, provides important leadership in this effort and offers a useful survey of the field.[2] Contributors from several disciplines consider a number of reasons educational institutions undertake experiential learning programs: recognition of learning that occurs outside the classroom, improvement of access to higher education, its utility as part of a strategy to arrest decline in enrollment, preparation of students for particular careers, and enhancement of an already-liberalized curriculum. Many institutions, of course, pursue several objectives at once and adopt techniques of experiential learning as their functions change and educational goals undergo review.

A revealing feature of the CAEL survey is the apparent disagreement about the nature of experiential learning, its essential character and objectives. The most frequently used definition is the simplest one: "learning which takes place outside the classroom." But sociologist Melvin Tumin recognizes the social policy role of experiential learning in the adaptation of degree requirements to the insufficient preparation characteristic of educationally disadvantaged students. Tumin, for example, writes that

our earnest determination to make schools and colleges equally appropriate and fitting for all learners, whatever the differences in their backgrounds and prior training, has raised the question of whether experiences other than traditional classroom exercises will help the less academically inclined become more motivated to learn, feel more comfortable in the learning process, and tap more deeply their reservoirs of talents and abilities.[3]

Tumin asks the question now typically posed by those suggesting experiential learning as an instrument of social reform through education:

Through various extracurricular and noncurricular experiences, in and out of academic institutions, can some functional equivalents of what is supposedly learned in the traditional curriculum be made more accessible to students who find the traditional academic curriculum unattractive or to others who are alienated from the learning experiences required for some version of normative success in this society?[4]

[1] All quotations from Emerson are from Stephen Whicher's excellent edition of his essays, journals, and poems, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957).

[2] Morris T. Keeton and Associates, *Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics and Assessment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975). CAEL has also produced a useful guide to the subject in Jane P. Stutz and Joan Knapp, eds., *Experiential Learning: An Annotated Literature Guide* (Princeton: Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1977). For additional bibliography see the ERIC/Higher Education report by Carol Herrnstadt Shulman, "Implementing Experiential Learning for Adult Students" (Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), and Arthur Chickering, *Experience and Learning: An Introduction to Experiential Learning* (New Rochelle, NY: Change Magazine Press, 1977).

[3] Keeton, p. 43.

[4] Keeton, p. 43.

Tumin's answer is a cautionary "perhaps," but other CAEL writers enthusiastically endorse the usefulness of experiential learning as means of improving access to higher education by breaking down certain social and psychological barriers in the process of redefining academic activity and success.

Some analysts see experiential learning as a valuable tool for transforming curriculum into an instrument of personal development. Educational theorist Arthur Chickering asks:

> How many teachers in the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social and behavioral sciences help students not only to acquire basic concepts, competency and knowledge, but also help them to use those learnings to make some sense of life and of themselves, to generate personal insights through subjective and dialectical processes?[5]

The answer, of course, is few, and the solution to this pedagogic problem is experiential learning which, according to Chickering, means the learning that occurs when changes in judgments, feelings, knowledge, or skills result for a particular person from living through an event or events. Such a definition, indeed, does shape the simple learning which takes place outside the classroom by specifying a certain set of psychological and moral objectives. Such goals do not interest much those persons supporting experiential learning for its cost effectiveness, also a part of the CAEL study, but do suggest the variety of views about its most appropriate rationale.

Differences in definition, however, do not mean that theorists of experiential learning do not share a view that practical learning based on nonclassroom experience needs to be recognized and valued in new ways. They assume that the traditional curriculum is dominated by education in abstract thought and that job-related skills and interests are acknowledged and rewarded insufficiently. Many observers of the dwindling interest in general liberal education and rapid growth of vocational programs—accounting is now the most popular course on many campuses—might find this judgment dated. But to enthusiasts for education by experience, a properly organized curriculum would rest on Emerson's suggestion that "the great gifts are not got by analysis. Everything good is on the highway." Experiential learning, hence, provides opportunity to expand curriculum, to force it to focus on everyday life and work, and to extend chances at credentialing for nontraditional learners.

Experience, Intellect, and Tradition

No adequate history exists of the role of experience in schooling and higher education. Cyril Houle suggests in the CAEL survey some of its deep traditions in early systems of advanced learning: apprenticeship in guilds, chivalry, and self-directed study of priests and scholars. But as universities came to dominate advanced learning, they gradually excluded experience in favor of books, lectures, and disputation and debate on abstract subjects. The complex history of nineteenth-century higher education, however, reveals an increasing awareness in educators of a broad gap between the two styles. Houle cites the example of John Stuart Mill who provided, in his inaugural address as Rector of St. Andrews University in Scotland, a forthright rationale for learning which is close to daily life. Education includes, Mill claims,

> whatever we do for ourselves, and whatever is done for us by others, for the express purpose of bringing us somewhat nearer to the perfection of our nature . . . whatever helps to shape the human being—to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being what he is not—is part of his education.[6]

[5]Keeton, p. 92.
[6]Keeton, p. 27.

The British example reflects, finally, important changes in American professional education which stress the need for direct experience as the critical complement to classroom learning. Houle cites late nineteenth-century medical education and the land-grant college movement as salient examples of a native deep tradition.

The historical argument should certainly recognize John Dewey, whom Houle ignores. In his *Experience and Education* Dewey, perhaps, first used the terms with their current connotations. He believed that "every experience was a moving force" and that to neglect the lessons of students' everyday life needlessly limited the potential of formal instruction and denied the possibilities of satisfying learning:

> The trouble with traditional education was not that educators took upon themselves the responsibility for providing an environment. The trouble was that they did not consider the other factor in creating an experience; namely, the powers and purposes of those taught. It was assumed that a certain set of conditions was intrinsically desirable, apart from its ability to evoke a certain quality of response in individuals. This lack of mutual adaptation made the process of teaching and learning accidental.[7]

Dewey defended "collateral learning," frequently experiential, as more lasting for many than instruction in theory. He pointed to the gap between classroom and workplace or home in a way now familiar to educators and students:

> In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience. But it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of a certain amount of arithmetic, geography, history, etc., which is taught and studied because it may be useful at some time in the future, had this effect, and it is a mistake to suppose that acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired.[8]

Certainly Dewey, though he wrote in this century and concentrated on primary education, qualifies for a place in the deep tradition because of his profound influence on all levels of education.

These traditions, however, are not without their own complexities. Mill, for example, though he certainly endorsed an expanded form of experience in advanced learning, devoted himself as well to requirements of disciplined theoretical study in all important subjects. Experience was not a substitute for inquiry and, in fact, was subordinate to it in the most demanding kinds of education. Dewey also held a more qualified view of experiential learning than his recent supporters acknowledge. He admired genuine intellect and noted that the objects and events of fresh experience are valuable only if they are "related intellectually to those of earlier experiences, and this means that there be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas."[9] Hence Dewey demonstrated an early interest in what theorists of experiential education now call assessment and evaluation:

> Unless experience is so conceived that the result is a plan for deciding upon subject matter, upon methods of instruction and discipline, and upon material equipment and organization of the school, it is wholly in the air. It is reduced to a form of words which may be emotionally stirring but for which any other set of words might equally well be substituted unless they indicate operations to be initiated and executed. Just because traditional education was a matter of routine

[7]John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 45.
[8]Dewey, p. 47.
[9]Dewey, p. 75.

in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation.[10]

For Dewey, the routines of education likely would depend always on traditional techniques and materials. And the inevitable interplay between traditions and new estimations and applications of experience requires a thoughtful calculation of education values.

"Hands and Feet to Every Enterprise"

The power and dilemmas of experiential learning perhaps are represented nowhere better than in Emerson's work. His 1844 essay "Experience" provides the support for experiential learning innovative educators delight in discovering in historical and reputable sources. For Emerson, indeed, declares the need to act rather than think: "Do not craze yourself with thinking," he says, "but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical but sturdy." He designates the immediacy of experience as the key to a full life, since "intellectual tasting of life will not supercede muscular activity." Unlike his friend Thoreau, however, Emerson was never really active except in thought. His muscular inclinations are unexpected and dramatic but not necessarily convincing.

"Experience" offers frequent direct endorsement of the primacy of action in learning as preparation for productive living:

> If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat he would starve. At Education Farm the noblest theory of life sat on the noblest figures of young men and maidens, quite powerless and melancholy. It would not rake or pitch a ton of hay, it would not rub down a horse, and the men and maidens it left pale and hungry.

This point of view is now a common one in higher education and, as is well known, there has been a deliberate effort at many institutions to revise the undergraduate curriculum to render its benefits more practical by relating its contents more closely to student experience. Emerson, in fact, did insist that experience is "hands and feet to every enterprise," but he added that "he who should do his business in this understanding would be quickly bankrupt." Such a qualification is a critical one: Emerson's enthusiasm for experience he balanced by his devotion to careful study. He sought their combination: "I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies"—not subordination of critical thought to experience or mechanical application of experience to education.

Emerson outlines a program for education in his essay on "The American Scholar" delivered as the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837. His use of the term *scholar* for student and citizen suggests an important assumption. We now use the term only for college and university professors, and perhaps not all of those, whose organized study complements the labors of the classroom. This definition of specialized activity in modern form exemplifies the social problem Emerson recognized in his essay. He objected to the idea of the student or scholar as "Man Thinking," and hence the delegation of functions (i.e., intellect, farming, business, religion) which threatened to divide education. He complained that "the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man." Emphasis in education on practical goals alone meant capable workers but incomplete citizens:

> Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather

[10]Dewey, p. 28.

food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form, the attorney a statute-book, the mechanic a machine, the sailor a rope of the ship.

Hence, Emerson identified the critical problem in education, the relation of learning to living, as an opportunity to unify study and experience in a program of truly American scholarship considered as the fullest form of learning.

According to Emerson, an ideal American scholar is educated by nature, books, and action. He saw experience and thought as permanent complements: "The mind now thinks, now acts, and each fit reproduces the other." Experience is inevitably the material of education, a fact which Emerson acknowledges in eloquent testimony to the relation between the two:

If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action. Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors, in town, in the insight into trades and manufactures, in frank intercourse with many men and women, in science, in art, to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and stones for the masonry of today. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.

Like Mill and Dewey, however, Emerson valued experience because he valued equally its relation to formal study: "Man is not a farmer, or a professor or an engineer," he insisted, "but he is all. Man is priest and scholar and statesman and producer and soldier."

Conclusion: Emerson's Headache

That education must prepare for all parts of life was a characteristic idea of nineteenth-century social philosophers associated with Emerson through their influence on him or through similarity of thought: his colleague Thoreau, of course, but also British writers like Carlyle and Ruskin. Rapidly developing urban-industrial culture demanded, it seemed to many, practical training instead of what came to be called *liberal education*. In the twentieth century, tension between the two styles has been a well-known feature of public and higher education. Emerson and others criticized mere training requirements, education as preparation only for work, as incomplete ones, untrue to human nature, and unsuited to human culture. He warned students of "a paltry empiricism," of the limits of experience as a form of education.

This view also belongs to the deep traditions of experiential learning. Recently Martin Meyerson has restated it by asserting higher education as a critical civilizing agent because it is flexible and able at its best to unify liberal means and practical ends:

To be effective, both liberal and professional education must strive to connect rather than separate the elements of knowledge. The ablest minds will be attracted to those environments in which all learn from one another, in which professional education becomes intellectual education and in which the humane and scientific are not regarded as ornaments, but are valued as socially useful and necessary.[11]

Like Emerson, whose essays blend idealism and pragmatism, many modern critics of

[11] Martin Meyerson, "Civilizing Education: Uniting Liberal and Professional Learning," *Daedalus,* 104 (Fall 1974), 179. See also John B. Stephenson and Robert F. Sexton, "Experiential Education and the Revitalization of the Liberal Arts," in *The Philosophy of the Curriculum: The Need for General Education,* ed. Sidney Hook, Paul Kurtz and Miro Todorovich (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1975)

education remain cautious in their view of experiential learning, wary of its potential for education built on insufficient method and narrow interest.

Emerson was always a sharp critic of American optimism. He admired the political orator who compared party promises to western roads "which opened stately enough, with planted trees on either side to tempt the traveler, but soon became narrower and narrower and ended in a squirrel-track and ran up a tree. So does culture with us; it ends in a headache." In fact, much of Emerson's enthusiasm for experience, for attention to the present rather than the future, derives from such skepticism: "Unspeakably sad and barren does life look to those who a few months ago were dazzled with the splendor of the promise of the times." The often extravagant optimism of experiential learning enthusiasts and its uncertain results perhaps give similar headaches to reformers and observers of higher education. There will never exist, of course, a system or curriculum at once perfectly balanced and suited to all students. Yet the high standards offered by Emerson and others, together with the intrinsic and proven value of traditional styles of learning, mean that we can find a role for experience suited to its own acknowledged virtues.