

Name of Student

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Subject

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## Introduction

Education has been universally recognized as one of the important facets of the life of an individual. It is widely regarded as the key to human development. The paper intends to discuss the importance of experience in learning. Moreover, it intends to present the aspects of experiential education proposed by John Dewey, who is known to be an education reformer. By using the teaching philosophy and classroom dynamics of a non-conformist teacher in the movie *Dead Poets Society* as an example, the paper will compare and contrast unstructured education which highlights experience as a major factor of learning and traditional classroom education which is structured and disciplined. By relating the arguments to Dewey's perception of good education, the paper seeks to explain how experience affects the learning process of students.

*Dead Poets Society* is a movie that features Robin Williams portraying the role of John Keating, the new non-conformist teacher in Welton Academy. Keating's unorthodox teaching techniques and philosophy will greatly affect the lives of his students and will cause them to learn meaningfully from their own experiences.

Dewey's thinking regarding education advocates unstructured progressive education where teachers are not rulers but leaders who have and share deeper knowledge and experience. Further, Dewey views teachers as guides of students in activities that are structured towards optimal learning.

Thus, the paper assumes that past experiences of students should be evaluated and considered by teachers in preparing subject matters which aim to provide the former with new favorable experiences that will, in turn, enable the students to grow personally and substantially contribute to society.

### Dead Poets Society

In the 1989 movie, *Dead Poets Society*, the new teacher John Keating, portrayed by Robin Williams, veers away from traditional methods of teaching. He is liberal, outgoing and non-conformist. For instance, on the first day of class, he took the students out in the hallway and told them that they are powerful individuals. This scene potently shows how different Keating is from other teachers. Most of the teachers will not let the students think that they are powerful because in the traditional, structured and overly ordered classroom setting, the teacher is the ruler and students are like slaves who just obey their ruler ("Thinking in Education" <http://ilt.columbia.com>). In the next class meeting, Keating ordered his students to rip the essay where mathematical criticism describes how to rate the quality of poetry. He also made the students stand on their desks to have a different view of the

world, something that other teachers would not do. In a later scene, Keating once again took the students out of the classroom and instructed them to kick soccer balls while reciting poetry.

The movie features students who are battling parental pressures. One of Keating's students, Todd, who wants to be a lawyer, was pressured by his parents to attend Welton Academy and become a lawyer just like his brother. Neil, another student, wants to be an actor but is scared to tell his father knowing that the latter will disapprove.

One of Keating's teaching practices is to analyze the characters of his students and to determine their needs. He encourages pupils to follow their passions and to think for themselves. He tells the students that the purpose of education is to equip students so that they can think for themselves. He tries to teach his students to be self-reliant and responsible enough to stand up for what they believe is right.

### Experiential Education

In Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, a chapter was dedicated to tackle his thinking in education. From Dewey's point of view, schools should develop students' ability to think and schools can do this by integrating experiential education with conventional forms of learning.

Thinking is considered in philosophy and education as somewhat slashed off from experience. Moreover, Dewey regards experience as a prerequisite stage of thinking. For one to think effectively, he or she must be equipped with experiences which will enable him to cope with complexity ("Thinking in Education" <http://ilt.columbia.com>).

Moreover, Dewey is known for being a proponent of experiential education. He emphasizes in his writing that students' experience should be balanced with the knowledge that traditional teaching delivers. He also perceives a type – an older type – of education to have the tendency to depict the teacher as a ruler. He then notices another type – a more recent type – of education where teachers are seen as insignificant aspects. Dewey sees teachers as leaders who have wider and more profound knowledge and experience. It is the job of the teachers to share to their students knowledge and experiences. In addition, it is also the responsibility of the teachers to come up with outdoor activities which can supplement knowledge and experience to canned subject matters and methodologies.

Dewey asserts that education must engage with experience. It must also enlarge experience (qtd. in Smith 2001). In addition, a real classroom for Dewey is one that provides active community life and not just a plain space designed for learning lessons in books (qtd. in Hechinger 1990). In school, students often think of ways on how they can meet the requirements or standards of their teachers or parents. Students often study unconsciously aiming to meet the convention of teachers, the school system or society, in blind compliance.

Moreover, Roberto Waldo Emerson, an American philosopher, criticizes the way of dictating and teaching the youth to be someone they do not want to be. For him, this is not man-worthy. He emphasizes that teachers should teach students to aim to be who they can actually be, believe in their capabilities and give them adequate training. He added that the main goal of education is to teach students to trust themselves. Emerson also argued that teachers should respect students and let them decide for themselves because too much control over their decisions will hinder them from developing and preclude openness ("Education" <http://rwe.org>).

There are various attempts to define experiential education because more and more educators are practicing it, thus complicating how it ought to be defined. In experiential education, students are actively involved and are expected to make decisions. They can take the role of leaders and practice decision making. Through experiential education, they have a chance to apply and experiment on their new knowledge ("Experiential Education" <http://www.actforyouth.net>). The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) describes experiential education as a method of teaching where teachers connect with learners using activities that will provide direct experience. The students should focus, reflect and analyze the experience to learn new knowledge and develop new competencies (Martin).

Experiential learning through experience is the process of directly acquiring knowledge. The person applies theories and concepts in a realistic situation. After reflecting and analyzing, he should make a decision. His decision will provide him new experience while learns from the results of his decisions ("Experiential Education"

<http://www.principalpartnership.com>). However, Itin said that learner should take initiative and responsibility in making decisions (qtd. in Adkins, Carol – Simmons and Bora, 2003).

Moreover, Rogers (1994) identified two types of learning: 1) cognitive or meaningless; and 2) experiential or significant. Cognitive learning refers to academic knowledge such as learning vocabulary or mathematical equations while experiential learning denotes applied knowledge such as learning to repair a machine.

On the other hand, David Kolb illustrates the learning cycle as a continuous process which stages involve experiencing, reflection, interpretation or conceptualization and application or experimentation (qtd. in “Experiential Education” <http://www.actforyouth.net>).

Experiential education begins with experience that should be processed to be transformed into knowledge which students imbibe as learning in the end (“Experiential Education” <http://www.principalpartnership.com>). AEE further asserts that experiential learning happens when experiences are supported by reflection, analysis and synthesis. Personal basis for future experience and learning are the results of this process (qtd. in Adkins, Carol – Simmons and Bora, 2003).

Dewey argues that experiences are unavoidable. The challenge is how to decipher the meaning of every experience (qtd. in “Experiential Education” <http://www.principalpartnership.com>). Dewey further asserted that participation and sharing in an activity is an alternative to just supplying convenient subject matters to

students. He says that education and democracy are closely related. A student should be educated to have a purpose in society and for himself. He advocates the free unstructured and student-directed aspect of progressive education. He criticizes the disciplined ordered and structured characteristic of traditional education which he perceives as excessively focused on the subject matter and lacking holistic understanding of its students.

Dewey's Theory of Experience asserts that experience should be judged by the effect of experience on the individual's present and future. He added that experience should be evaluated through the way the individual becomes part of and contributes to society. Experiences will also give the students access to future growth experiences that might expand the students' possible contribution to the society. In order for the teachers to devise a liberating experience, they should understand past experiences of students. Further, Dewey describes an effective teacher as one who makes sure that students thoroughly use previous lessons to understand the present lesson while current lessons may be used to give more value to past lessons (Hickman and Alexander 50).

Dewey rejects Harris' stance that a subject matter should be emphasized at the expense of the individual peculiarities of students. Dewey also declines Hall's view that personality and character of students are more important than the subject matter (Hickman & Alexander 49).

Conclusion

Education is the key to human development and is a crucial facet in one's life. In Rogers' dissection of learning categorizes it into two kinds. However, he might be quite sweeping to say that cognitive learning is meaningless. The other kind of learning is described as experiential, which is deemed more potent in instilling learning than cognitive learning. Cognitive education seems of no value if these are not applied in real life contexts where true learning is culled from. Experiential education involves the application of learned theories and concepts into pragmatic, real life situations.

Dewey states that education is important for students in order for them to attain freedom or democracy. However, before freedom is attained, students should first reflect, interpret and apply the knowledge they got from their experiences as David Kolb indicates in his Learning Cycle. Further, Emerson's argument supports Dewey's claim that the main goal of education is to teach them to trust themselves. In the movie, Keating succeeds in this part by sharing his educational philosophy to his students. That is, by telling them that he always thought that the purpose of education was to teach students how to think of themselves.

In the movie, the students are trapped from pressures coming from their parents and other people who surround them. In the end, because of experiential education brought by Keating, the remaining students were able to veer away from norms and expectations. Instead, they live, study and think for themselves. For Dewey, a student should be educated to have a valuable purpose in society and for himself. In order to do this, the student must

know what he wants and be trained to have the necessary skills and knowledge needed to self-actualize.

Further, Dewey describes a wise teacher as one who makes sure that his students utilize knowledge learned from previous lessons to understand the present subject matter. Moreover, a teacher must also ensure that present lessons will be used to give more value to past lessons. Keating tries to teach students another lesson when they misuse the concept of non-conformism, by publishing obscene protest statements and abusing the name and mission of the Dead Poets Society. By taking into account the experiences of the students, a teacher can organize the subject matter in a way that will provide students with experiences. These experiences aim to help the students open up, thus allowing them to fulfill their potential to become valuable members of society. However, in order for the teachers to devise a liberating experience, they should first understand students' past experiences.

Keating, once again, did his part as a great teacher with his unusual teaching dynamics. He analyzes the character and situation of the student before coming up with advice.

From the foregoing, one can conclude that the past experiences of students should be evaluated and considered by teachers in preparing the subject matter, which could then provide the former with new favorable experiences. Ultimately, students are handheld towards becoming valuable contributors to societal growth.



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