

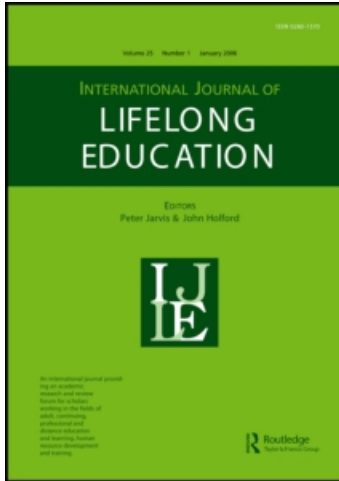
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## Experiential learning in youth work in the UK: a return to Dewey

Jon Ord<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University College Plymouth Marjon, UK

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# Experiential learning in youth work in the UK: a return to Dewey

JON ORD  
University College Plymouth Marjon, UK

Experiential learning has explicitly, since the publication of the Kolb 'treatise' been a cornerstone of youth work practice in the UK. It is the contention of this paper that there is a significant misinterpretation of Kolb's theory by those who have applied his theory to youth work. Not least that experience is framed as: 'concrete experience' and therefore something 'other' or additional to the life experience of those being educated. This concrete experience is interpreted in youth work as the undertaking of discrete activities upon which, via subsequent reflection, learning is elicited. What is argued in this paper is that what is required is a return to the formulation of experiential education conceived of by Dewey which locates 'lived experience' at the heart of the educational process. For Dewey experience involves a dual process of understanding and influencing the world around us, as well as being influenced and changed ourselves by that experience, what Dewey referred to as 'trying' and 'undergoing'. This important aspect of experiential learning is omitted from the interpretation of Kolb as a simplistic four-stage learning cycle, though not ironically from his own theory. Finally learning by experience is according to Dewey necessarily concerned with growth and therefore lifelong education—in addition a commitment to Dewey implies rather than denies a curriculum in youth work, a point that those who advocate experiential learning tend to deny.

## Introduction

This paper sets out to critically analyse experiential learning in youth work. Whilst there appears almost universal acceptance of the concept as a cornerstone of youth work (Smith, 1988, Blacker 2001, Jeffs and Smith 2005, Young 2006), there are some important theoretical problems about its incorporation which I will address. Most notable of which is that experiential learning when applied to youth work is in the main attributed to Kolb (1984), and not to Dewey (1900, 1916, 1938). This is significant because, firstly, the representation of Kolb is a simplification of his theory, and one which ignores underlying complexities and so misrepresents experiential learning. Secondly Kolb himself attributes much of his theory to Dewey, and therefore one cannot ignore the architect of experiential learning. More importantly, Dewey offers a number of significantly different aspects to experiential learning which are absent from the simplistic interpretation of Kolb.<sup>1</sup>

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*Jon Ord* is senior lecturer at the University College Plymouth Marjon, and is programme leader of the PG Dip MA in youth and community work. He is author of the book *Youth work process, product & practice: Creating an authentic curriculum in work with young people* (Lyme Regis: RHP, 2007). Correspondence: jord@marjon.ac.uk

The purpose of this paper is to argue that it is John Dewey's theory of experiential learning which should be both acknowledged and utilized as one of the key theoretical constructs of youth work and its curriculum. The paper will comprise of three sections. Firstly an appraisal of the existing literature on experiential learning in youth work, to establish whether, and how, Dewey's theories and experiential learning per se have already been applied. Secondly an exposition of Dewey's theories will be provided followed by a detailed critique. Finally the implications of Dewey's 'educative experience' as a key theoretical principle of the youth work curriculum will be assessed.

### Experiential learning in youth work

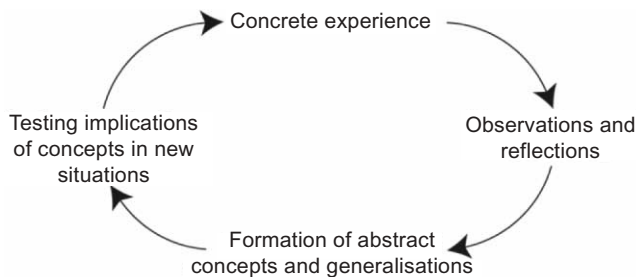
The earliest reference to experiential learning appears to be from Mark Smith in *Creators Not Consumers* (1980) where he characterizes youth work as 'Learning by doing'. Experiential learning, he suggests, is based on three assumptions:

- People learn best when they are personally involved in the learning experience.
- Knowledge has to be discovered by the individual if it is to have any significant meaning to them or make a difference in their behaviour.
- A person's commitment to learning is highest when they are free to set their own learning objectives and are able to actively pursue them within a given framework. (Smith 1980: 16)

Smith also refers to the common depiction of Kolb as a four-stage model of experiential learning (below). This is invariably the model of experiential learning which is attributed to Kolb (Blacker 2001, Young 2006) as well as later by Smith himself (Smith 1988, Jeffs and Smith 2005).

Despite his conversion to informal education from social education, as the basis for youth work, Smith (1988) still places a firm emphasis on experiential learning. Citing Houle he suggests:

For many practitioners, informal education is synonymous with a pattern of learning that might be described as experiential, 'education that occurs as a result of direct participation in the events of life' (Houle 1980: 221). Such a pattern starts with concrete experience, with people doing things. (Smith 1988: 130)



**Figure 1.** Lewin's experiential learning model (cited in Kolb 1984: 21. Reproduced with kind permission from Pearson Education, Inc. © 1984.)

Smith (1988) also still maintains that the model proposed by Kolb provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this educational practice.

Similarly Young (2006) also locates youth work with experiential learning: 'Learning [in youth work] is seen as a dynamic process, which leads to action. In other words, to be meaningful, learning needs to be tested in reality. This process is reflected in Kolb's experiential learning cycle' (Young, 2006: 79). As does Blacker (2001) who likewise articulates Kolb's four-stage process. It is also in the list of specific criteria defining youth work by Tom Wylie, recently retired chief executive of the National Youth Agency (NYA), who maintains that:

... youth work is the application in work with adolescents of a form of practice which has three defining characteristics—their personal and social development; the deliberate use of experiential learning and transformative relationships; and adherence to a set of values (which *inter alia* puts the interests of young people first). (Wylie 2008: 54)

In addition experiential learning is explicitly cited as a key feature of youth work in official guidance on youth work from the NYA (2007: 1).<sup>2</sup> The above literature does not mention experiential learning explicitly in relation to curriculum. It is, however, one of the features of Merton and Wylie's (2002) conception of a curriculum, which was subsequently incorporated into the DfES's Transforming Youth Work Strategy (DfES 2002).

Jeffs and Smith (2005) in their account of experiential learning do make some reference to Dewey, utilizing his suggestion that the 'business of education might be defined as an emancipation and enlargement of experience' (Dewey 1910: 340). They suggest that the enlarging of experience is as much about a deepening of an understanding of our experiences as it is them building up: 'We work with people so that they may have a greater understanding or appreciation of their experiences'. In so doing learning by experience is liberating: 'We interpret what is going on and this sets us free' (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 58).

They also refer to Boud *et al.* (1985) and their three facets of experiential learning: returning to experience, attending to (or connecting with) feelings, and evaluating experiences; as well as to Schon (1983) who distinguishes between 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'; as does Blacker (2001). However importantly with regard to the process of youth work Jeffs and Smith still make specific reference to Kolb's learning cycle, regarding this as a useful model for conceptualizing the process of experiential learning, suggesting that: 'this is a helpful way of looking at the situations we face as educators' (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 66). Although they admit it is not without its problems. Not least that learning is not necessarily sequential in the way it is presented within the cycle. They claim we: 'should not rely too heavily on the mechanical sequence' (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 66).

Jeffs and Smith's interpretation of experiential learning is however problematic as they seem to equate experiences exclusively with 'exploratory activity', for example when they contrast it with 'giving information' or when 'individuals or groups may only need or want knowledge or advice—not exploration'. As we shall soon see when we look at Dewey in more detail, he would be wary of a distinction between experiential learning as specific activities and formal learning as the transmission of useful and relevant information. Any relevant knowledge or information is 'in some sense' experiential as it relates directly to the lived experience of the individuals

concerned (Dewey 1916, 1938). This is further exemplified by Jeffs and Smith's explicit contrast between ideas and experience, and between thoughts and action. They maintain that:

To build theories about an experience we need to draw on a repertoire of ideas and images... Book-learning and teaching can give us access to a range of theories and ways of making sense. In other words we need to recognize that a 'starting point' for a lot of our efforts may not be concrete experience. (Jeffs and Smith 2005: 67)

Dewey, as we shall see shortly, would have disregarded such dualistic notions implicit in Jeffs and Smith's separation of 'concrete experience' from 'theories and ideas'. Dewey's instrumentalism<sup>3</sup> (1896, 1910, 1916, 1938) would insist that theories and ideas can only make sense in relation to the lived experience of individuals and communities and as such, they necessarily inform and enlarge experience; and thereby thoughts and ideas must be experiential if they are to be meaningful.

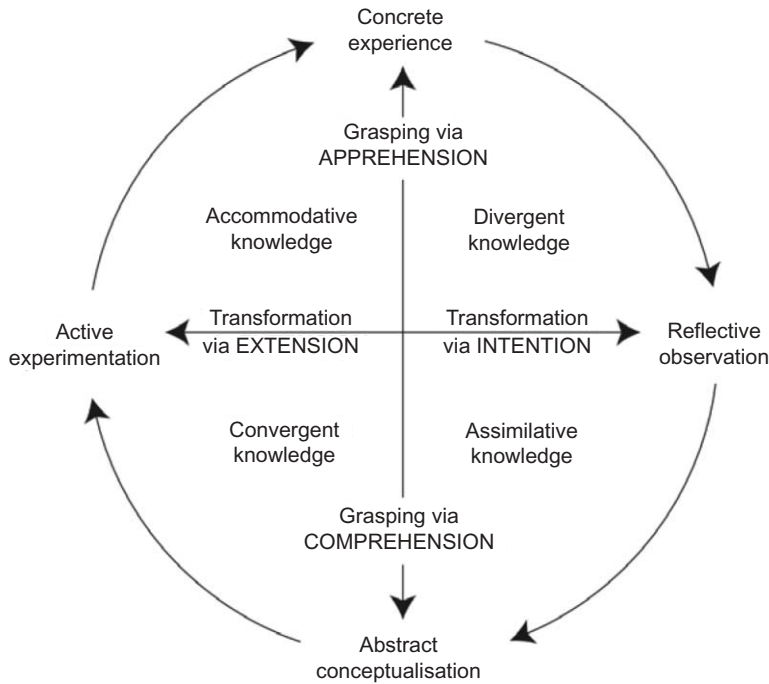
Young also makes some specific reference to Dewey when she claims:

... youth work is an educational activity and education following Dewey, is a liberating experience that encourages reflective behavior and promotes growth and health, developing the individual and supporting their participation in society (Dewey, 1916). (Young 2006: 78)

She also refers to Dewey in relation to the development of critical thinking (Young 2006: 81). But she does not go into any depth in relation to Dewey's theory of experiential learning.

Interestingly, little if any reference is made to experiential learning prior to the publication of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (1976), for example in Brew (1943, 1946, 1950, 1957), or in the seminal text by Davies and Gibson (1967), *Social Education of the Adolescent*. Neither does experiential learning appear in the government's Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education 1960) which marked the 'boom years' of youth work with the unparalleled government funding which in turn led to the large scale building programme of youth clubs in England (Davies 1999). Experiential learning seems to have gathered a pace following the publication of Kolb's treatise *Experiential Learning* (Kolb 1984). This is significant; and there is at least a correlation between the explication by Kolb and the incorporation of experiential learning into youth work.

It is not the purpose of this paper to explore the theory of David Kolb<sup>4</sup> in detail, suffice to say it is presumed that the four-stage cycle as a model of experiential learning is problematic for youth work or any other form of learning; indeed the four-stage model is not even one which Kolb himself exclusively advocated (Kolb 1984; Ord 2007). The model of experiential learning which Kolb himself proposed (see Figure 2 overleaf) did contain an outer four-stage cycle but importantly it contained an inner 'dialectic' which Kolb himself explicitly credits to Dewey (Kolb 1984). It is to Dewey therefore that we must look for a more legitimate conception of experiential learning. We will return to some of the issues raised here later, where it will be argued that in fact what has happened with the incorporation of experiential learning in the light of (the misrepresentation of) Kolb is that it is actually a rather crude version of learning through 'involvement in and reflection on activities' that is being



**Figure 2. Structural dimensions underlying the process of experiential learning and the resulting basic knowledge forms (Kolb 1984: 42. Reproduced with kind permission from Pearson Education, Inc. © 1984.)**

conceived of as experiential education, which is a pale imitation of an educative experience conceived of by Dewey.

**Dewey on experience and education**

For Dewey education and experience are almost synonymous, as education is defined entirely in relation to experience, as the following makes clear:

The concept of education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative. It reaches that end—the direct transformation of the quality of experience... We thus reach a technical definition of education: It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. (1916: 59)

However it is important to ask what Dewey means by experience, and Garforth offers some useful observations:

He [Dewey] does not mean by this [experience] the stored up product of the past; nor does he mean simply the immediacy of the experienced present; nor

the mere acceptance of environmental impact by a passive recipient; nor does he contrast experience with thought or reason. Experience is continuous from past through present to future; it is not static but dynamic, moving, in process. It is not unilateral but, as Dewey would say, 'transactional', for the experient is modified by his environment and the environment by the experient in a constant reciprocal relationship. (Garforth 1966: 13)

For Dewey a defining feature of an experience is therefore the engagement of the individual with their environment, he refers to this as the 'transaction': 'An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment' Dewey (1938: 43). As is suggested above by Garforth, for Dewey, this process is dynamic and two way; the interaction involves an impact on the environment by the individual as well as, in turn, an impact on the individual by the environment. The two aspects of this process are referred to by Dewey as 'trying' (Dewey 1916: 104) on the one hand and 'undergoing' on the other (Dewey 1916: 104). 'Trying' refers to the outward expression of intention or action. It is the purposeful engagement of the individual with the environment or, in Dewey's words: 'doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like' (Dewey 1916: 104). In action an attempt is made to have an impact on the world. 'Undergoing', the other aspect of the 'transaction' in experience, refers to the consequences of experience on the individual. In turn, in attempting to have an impact, the experience also impacts on us. 'Undergoing' refers to the consequences of the experience for us. We may choose to clear litter from a local beauty spot, and by so doing the area is visibly improved (a consequence of 'trying') and at the same time we feel good about the deed that has been carried out (a consequence of 'undergoing'). For Dewey experience necessarily contains these two distinct aspects:

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return: such is the peculiar combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness of experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience. (Dewey 1916: 104)

### **Dewey: education as growth**

For Dewey experience is both a means for, and an end to education: 'education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing' (Dewey 1897: 12).

Dewey also refers to the educative process as pertaining to 'growth'. 'The educative process is a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity of growth' (1916: 43). Growth for Dewey is in part grounded in a conception of childhood as a period of 'potentiality'. 'Immaturity designates a positive force or ability—the power to grow' (1916: 34).

For Dewey the educative process and growth are synonymous and importantly both involve the transformation of experience and a reconceptualization of one's relationship to the world. As Pring clarifies:

Growth or [the] 'educative process'... involves not just more of the same (like a river which gets bigger) but a 'transformation' of what one previously was. One thinks, experiences and feels differently. 'Experience is transformed.' One's understanding of the world is 'reconceptualized'. (Pring 2007: 26)

Growth importantly is not a 'fixed end point'. Dewey wishes to make this explicit, making a distinction between growth as ongoing development and the incorrect interpretation of his ideas as advocating a process of progressing from one fixed state to another, from immaturity on the one hand, to the final destination of maturity on the other. In this sense he suggests: 'growth is regarded as having an end, instead of being an end' (1916: 40).

Pring summarizes this well when he says according to Dewey:

The learner is a living, social organism, who lives by constant adaptation to the conditions—material and social—in which he or she survives. A significant part of that adapting lies in the reconceptualizing of the circumstances in which one is living, and of the 'ends in view' of one's activities, in the light of experience. Such a reconceptualizing has no end; it is part of what it means to live. (Pring 2007: 48)

For Dewey the educative quality of experience is founded on two related principles: continuity and interaction: 'Continuity and interaction in their union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience' (1938: 45). Though Dewey claims these principles don't operate in isolation, to elucidate them further we must look at them separately.

Dewey refers to the first principle as the 'category of continuity or the experiential continuum' (Dewey 1938: 33). By this he means the relationship between past, present and future experience, but in particular the ability of the 'educative' experience to inform and develop future experiences. Dewey's elaboration of continuity is at times confusing—as he wants to use it to distinguish between educative and mis-educative experience—and yet he suggests: 'there is some kind of continuity in any case since every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences' (Dewey 1938: 37). He goes on to suggest that indeed in that sense: 'Every experience is a moving force, its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moves toward and into' (Dewey 1938: 38). Dewey is aware of the problem here that the question is begged, a move toward what or into what? and that the same argument can be applied to the problem of growth: 'Hence it is argued that "growth" is not enough; we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends' (Dewey 1938: 36). Dewey uses the examples of the burglar, and of the corrupt politician, and suggests that though it appears that they 'may grow in efficiency [he argues that] the question is whether growth in this direction promotes or retards growth in general' (Dewey 1938: 36). That is, for Dewey, it is not so much a question of whether the burglar has become improved in the art of burglary, or the politician has become more expertly corrupt; the specific improvement in ability or 'growth' of each, must be seen in the wider context of the lives of the individuals and the community and society in which they operate.

According to Dewey one can only fully comprehend the continuity principle unless it is aligned with the other principle which underlies the educative quality of



experience: 'interaction', as he suggests: 'the second chief principle for interpreting an experience in its educational function and force' (Dewey 1938: 42). Two factors underlie 'interaction'. They are what Dewey refers to as 'the internal and objective conditions'. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a '*situation*' (Dewey 1938: 42). The objective conditions relate to the factors external to the individual which influence the experience: 'The sources outside an individual which give rise to experience' (Dewey 1938: 42).

An important factor relating to the objective conditions is the link to wider bodies of knowledge and to social practices. He uses the example of feeding babies and stresses that the mother does not regulate the feeding and sleep patterns of her baby in isolation but in the light of existing knowledge—in that 'the responsibility is fulfilled by utilizing the funded experience of the past' (Dewey 1938: 42). This is important for Dewey as he locates social practices to the established scientifically verified forms of knowledge. Not of course that the mother blindly abides by these. The mother is at liberty to apply those forms of knowledge, as well as amend, adapt and reform them, in relation to her own experience; according to Dewey's own principles.

### Criticisms of Dewey

Bantock, as Entwistle points out, was 'Dewey's most persistent English critic' (1970: 35). He criticizes what he calls Dewey's 'anthropocentric scheme', claiming it is 'highly subjective'. He refers to the study of geography and claims: 'That the geographical structure of the world might form an order of experience independent of man's purpose and desires does not seem to occur to Dewey' (Bantock 1963: 31). Bantock goes on to criticize the pragmatic basis of Dewey's epistemology. Claiming that formulating knowledge exclusively within man's practical engagement with his immediate environment, both overemphasizes the importance of 'problems' in the search for knowledge as well misrepresents knowledge itself. Bantock's criticism appears to have some weight and defining knowledge acquisition and human activity as a whole exclusively in relation to an active experimentation with the world, and therein 'problem solving', does appear untenable. There would certainly appear to be a case for knowledge 'not' to be framed exclusively in relation to problem solving. This does not however undermine the central argument of this paper that it is experience and its reconstruction which should be at the heart of the educational process.

It is, however, to the principle of continuity that we should turn our attention, not least because it is that which has sustained a consistent level of criticism (Cohen 1954, Bantock 1963, Garforth 1966, Woods and Barrow 2006, Pring 2007). As eluded to earlier, when analysing the role of experience within Dewey's scheme, experience is both the means and the end of an educational experience and this is justified in terms of the experiential continuum: that is experience is educational if and only if it leads to 'continuing reconstruction of experience'. To clarify what is meant by this Dewey often refers to the reconstructing or expanding of experience as 'growth', as we saw earlier.

Gutek clarifies this further:

Education as a process has no end beyond growth. In evaluating experiences, particular experiences should be assessed to the degree that they contribute to

growth, or to the having of more experience... growth in Dewey's context, means that the individual is gaining the ability to understand the relationships and interconnections between various experiences between one learning experience and another. Learning by experience, through problem solving, means that education, like life, is a process of continuously reconstructing experience. (Gutek 1997: 105)

As alluded to earlier, this is problematic. Dewey's reluctance to identify any ends beyond further experience undermines the integrity of his philosophy. He cannot distinguish between educative and mis-educative experiences without recourse to additional criteria. His instrumentalism<sup>5</sup> prevents him from entertaining the possibility that anything can be contemplated independent of human experience, but ultimately a basis is required for making that judgement. Dewey tries hard to avoid this, offering some tentative explanations as to why certain experiences are more educational than others: 'If an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficient to carry a person over dead ground in the future, continuity works in a very different way' (Dewey 1938: 38). As Gutek suggests Dewey claims: 'Desirable experiences lead to further experience, whereas undesirable ones inhibit and reduce the possibilities for subsequent experience (Gutek 1997: 105). But the notion of 'dead experiences' implies a qualitative judgement.

The problems of growth and continuity are therefore one and the same. And it would appear that they are insufficiently robust as criteria for identifying the quality of experience in themselves and lead to undesirable consequences. Dewey himself uses the example of a spoiled child to illustrate his point and claims that continuity 'works in a very different way'; in that the sorts of experiences that the spoiled child has undergone are unlikely, by inference, to 'arouse curiosity or strengthen initiative', etc. However though Dewey tries hard to avoid recourse to any 'yardstick' beyond the instrumentality of the experience, it does not ultimately stand up. The difference between the kinds of experience a spoiled child has and a child that is not spoiled is because we do not value the kinds of attributes, characteristics and behaviours of spoiled children that those experiences bring about. As Bantock (1963) makes clear, underlying Dewey's philosophy there are a number of implicit value judgements.

This does not mean however that Dewey's theory is fatally flawed. As Pring (2007) rightly suggests it is possible to introduce the notion of 'ends in view' to Dewey's scheme, to suggest those temporary end points in the learning process which can operate as additional criteria, whilst maintaining that there are no ultimate end points, as 'growth' is ongoing.

### Methodological criticisms

In relation to the selection of subject matter, Garforth suggests that one can equally well apply Dewey's reluctance to identify any additional criteria to justify the quality of experience to his treatment of the subject matter of education. Implicitly Dewey is averse to the identification of qualitative differences of subject matter *per se* and an implication of this is that: 'push pin may be as valuable as poetry' (Garforth 1966: 38). However according to Garforth: 'Dewey's statement can be refuted from his

own premises... judged in terms of future growth and by Dewey's own twin criteria it seems impossible to deny that some subjects of study are educationally more valuable than others' (Garforth 1966: 38). That is, one cannot maintain that all experience is equally valuable and then introduce criteria upon which to distinguish them by.

In response, Dewey is not claiming that all experience is valuable. It is not even clear whether he is maintaining all educative experience is equally valuable. The judgement about whether push pin is more valuable than poetry will be dependent on a number of criteria made explicit by Dewey, not least their ability 'to enlarge and expand experience'. By this he means the extent to which they link to both past experience, and develop future experience; as well as develop the interests of both the individual, and the social and community setting within which the individual is located. It would seem that Dewey can consistently argue that push pin is not the equal of poetry from within his own criteria of experience. That is, he applies the principle of continuity.

In relation to enquiry methods, Warnock (1977) makes this observation: 'If enquiry is correlated with 'discovery' then a good deal of education must be enquiry based' (Warnock 1977: 65). However she maintains that a 'pretence is involved if a teacher has to pretend that he is not providing his pupils with the answers, or at least dictating their questions, when he really is' (Warnock 1977: 66). The scenario of the educator attempting to ensure that the pupils discover the answers for themselves, when in fact he or she, as well as the pupils themselves, knows full well that the teacher has a 'full knowledge of the facts', would at best reduce the teaching to a ritualistic exercise. Far from ensuring an effective educational environment, this would more than likely undermine the motivation and commitment of the pupils. As Garforth makes clear: 'to dispense entirely with the authoritative transmission of knowledge is impossible' (Garforth 1966: 34). Warnock does not however dismiss the value of discovery methods, particularly in relation to contentious issues, or issues related to how one should live one's life. Furthermore, and in line with Dewey, she makes the point that for them to be successful they must align with the interests of the pupils: 'there is likely to be something unrealistic and absurd about pupils attempting "discovery" or "free enquiry" about subject matter, suggested to them... but about which they have no actual desire to learn' (Warnock 1977: 66). This is particularly relevant to the process of youth work and there is nothing more frustrating for young people than being left to flounder when they know the youth worker could resolve the problem because they have the knowledge and experience that the young people lack.

A further criticism is levelled by Berkson (1965) in that Dewey's: 'dominant interest in change, process and growth leads, unintentionally perhaps, to depreciate the value of enduring ideas and structural beliefs which direct a well as condition all thinking' (Berkson 1965: 104). He goes on to suggest that: 'science is far removed from common experience' (Berkson 1965: 105) and that despite Dewey's wish to unite the cognitive and conceptual with the practical and operational, that is to unify abstract thought with common sense experience, in Dewey there is an:

... underestimation of the part played by abstract thought in the development of the sciences: failure to give due weight to previously accumulated organized knowledge and formulated principles; and inadequate consideration of

speculative, imaginative constructions but little related to direct experience, or even which seem to contradict human experience. (Berkson 1965: 104)

Berkson admits that this mistake on Dewey's part is not total: 'he is aware of such factors—achievements of past experiences and vision of future possibilities' (Berkson 1965: 104). Dewey refers to this as 'the consciousness of the race' (1897, 1916). But ultimately Berkson concludes that 'failure to give adequate consideration to the conceptual aspects of mind is a neglect of them' (Berkson 1965: 104).

### Further criticisms and responses therein

The solutions to a number of these criticisms of Dewey and their relative strength are dependent on interpretation of Dewey. This is certainly the case with Berkson's (1965) criticisms. It is plausible to read Dewey and see his philosophy as overwhelmingly 'practical', being specifically concerned with the concrete engagement; in providing practical solutions to tangible problems. Although it could be argued that this simplifies the complexity of Dewey's formulation of the problems and misrepresents the complexity of his notion of 'inquiry' as a solution to them (Pring 2007). It should be remembered that the problems are experiential and that experience is ultimately much more than concrete activity. Experience is related to action—what one does in the world—but it is much more than mere practical activity. Pring uses the example of 'the meaning of mathematics [which] to the young person may be different to the professional mathematician. It *means* boredom, frustration and a sense of failure' (Pring 2007: 29). How one experiences the world, in this case mathematics, therefore impacts directly on how one acts. Importantly experience also relates to a reconceptualizing of one's position within the world. If an interest in mathematics can be generated either through successful communication of its relevance or through support in acquiring the basic skills, a number of factors will change in relation to how the student both experiences the world, at the very least the maths lessons will become more meaningful. The student may well see themselves differently—not conceiving of themselves as a failure, and thereby realizing a hidden potential. Educative experience is therefore as much about how we understand the world, as it is about acting in it. It is as much about meaning making as it is a concern with the solutions to 'practical' problems. Thus Pring suggests Dewey 'argued in *Experience and Education* there is an "organic connection between education and experience"' (1938: 25). Education is part of that search for meaning—that trying to make sense. 'Hence, inquiry is an attempt "to make sense", but in the light of what other people have concluded in similar circumstances' (Pring 2007: 65). Or as Dewey puts it: 'his activity shall have meaning to himself' (Dewey 1900: 23).

A similar response could be made to Garforth's (1966), criticism that Dewey's conceptualization of human life lacks cosmic significance; however this is not the case if the reconceptualization of experience is framed as a search for meaning; though of course, according, to Dewey, it would not be an individual quest in isolation from the context of social and community life.

That many of the problems attributed to Dewey are down to a problem of interpretation is further evidenced by a contemporary critique offered by Egan (2003). He suggests that it may be as fruitful to 'start with what they can imagine' (Egan 2003: 445). Although he is: 'not arguing for ignoring students' prior knowledge and

everyday experiences. Rather, I am arguing that these have been taken as implying greater restrictions on children's learning and curriculum possibilities than is warranted when we consider their imaginative lives' (2003: 445). Although not a paper specifically about Dewey, Egan cites Dewey as one of the primary movers in the argument for basing educative practice on prior experience alone. However, this again misrepresents Dewey. In fact, he quite explicitly refers to the objects of the imagination as constituents of the external or objective conditions of experience:

The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with the personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities to create the experience which is had. Even when a person builds a castle in the air he is interacting with the objects he constructs in fancy. (Dewey 1938: 44)

A later critique of Dewey can be found in the work of O'Hear (1987, 1991). Essentially an argument for the importance of the established bodies of knowledge extant in any given culture as being the primary bases of any given education, it is both (what he sees as) the child centred ideals of Dewey as well as the ideals of the New Right that he is criticizing:

What is wrong with both the stress on an education that is aimed principally at being relevant to the needs of industry and with the notion which stems from Dewey... that a genuine education can somehow arise from the current experience and expressive ability of the child. (O'Hear 1987: 108)

It is possible with O'Hear's 'conservative' view of the almost absolute authority of bodies of knowledge located in traditions that there is some daylight between his and Dewey's positions but there is in fact less daylight than O'Hear gives him credit for. As for Dewey, as has been shown, the reconceptualization of experience is necessarily in the light of past experience and importantly this past experience is in turn linked directly to traditions and collective notions of knowledge (although they are framed as 'warranted' as they are always revisable in the light of new experience).

Dewey is also criticized for his child-centred education. For example Bantock suggests that Dewey:

... is giving further currency to a conception which has exercised a profound influence since the time of Rousseau; and, to the extent that modern educators have been led to consider much more than heretofore the natural aptitudes and abilities of the individual child. (Bantock 1965: 52)

This does however misrepresent Dewey's position as Woods and Barrow (2006) and Pring (2007) concur. For whilst Dewey does suggest the starting point is the interests of the child, this comes with a number of important educational caveats. Firstly it is not mere whim, which counts as an interest, interests link to motivation and what is intrinsically in the 'developmental' interests of the child. In addition the interests may not be extant, it may be necessary for the teacher to develop interests in the pupils as much as it is for the teacher to respond to the pupils' own articulated interests. Pring sums this up as: 'Interests are not what should be used; they are what should be educated' (Pring 2007: 85).

## Implications for youth work

### *Framing' experience*

What is evident from an exposition of Dewey's theory of experience is that it differs markedly from the simplistic notion of experience characterized by the 'interpretation' of Kolb's theory of experiential learning. As we saw earlier it is Kolb's theory, or at least the interpretation of his theory, which has dominated youth work for over two decades. There are however significant differences between the interpretation of Kolb (Ord 2007) and the theory of experience proposed by Dewey. However both within Kolb's theory (1984) as well its popular (mis)interpretation, experience is often framed as 'concrete experience'. This implies that it is a particular type of experience; it is 'concrete' as opposed to some other type of experience. If this is not the case it would be unclear why the prefix concrete has been used? When Kolb (1984) describes concrete experience however he often makes no such contrast, referring to both James and Dewey he makes comparisons between experience and consciousness: 'we are all aware of the continuity of consciousness and experience to which James and Dewey refer, and take comfort from the predictability and security it provides' (1984: 27). When Kolb talks of experience it is often synonymous with our 'life experience', the conscious awareness of our existence and the medium through which we engage and interpret the world, what Dewey would term the totality of experience.

At other times Kolb does make some contrasts between the concrete aspects of experience and, what he describes in his model as, its polar opposite 'abstract conceptualization'. It should be remembered that Kolb (1984) is principally concerned with the exposition of 'learning styles' than experiential learning per se and it is only in relation to learning styles that 'concrete experience' and 'abstract conceptualization' are given some clarity. 'An orientation toward concrete experience focuses on being involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way. It emphasizes feeling as opposed to thinking... an intuitive "artistic" approach' (Kolb 1984: 68). In contrast 'An orientation towards abstract conceptualization focuses on using logic, ideas and concepts. It emphasizes thinking as opposed to feeling; a concern with building general theories... and manipulation of abstract symbols' (Kolb 1984: 69). For Kolb then concrete experience is a learning mode. It is an attempt to characterize a propensity, which according to Kolb, inclines those susceptible to it to immerse themselves in experiences rather than stand back and either observe, reflect or analyse those experiences. It is not a description of an experience. It is a learning style. The degree of engagement in 'concrete experience', remembering that no one in Kolb's theory is lacking completely in any of the four learning styles, is dependent on the dominance of that particular mode, of relating to and engaging with one's experience, in the individual.

This is not a paper about the subtleties and complexities of Kolb's theory but it has been necessary to explore Kolb's to offer some insights into the way in which the theory has been misinterpreted. Importantly following Kolb concrete experience has been exclusively misinterpreted in youth work as being synonymous with 'activities' or 'doing' (Smith 1988, Blacker 2001, Jeffs and Smith 2005, Young 2006) the providing of 'experiences'. Whilst clearly youth work does involve activities (Spence 2001); and these activities are often provided as an additional stimulus or vehicle for

learning. However to conceive of youth work exclusively as the simplistic provision of discrete activities and the subsequent reflection upon the impact of them, misrepresents the educational basis for youth work. More importantly defining 'experience' in learning as something 'other' fundamentally misrepresents experiential learning as Dewey conceived of it.

Youth work it is argued is more accurately described with reference to the theory of experiential learning provided by Dewey.<sup>6</sup> Youth work as articulated through informal education is often described as 'learning through life as it is lived' (Jeffs and Smith 2005, Deer Richardson and Wolfe 2001). Experience is central to this; however, it is not experience as something 'other', which is provided additionally by the educators, but experience as the life experience of the participants. This correlates directly with the conception of experience provided by Dewey.

Dewey would therefore provide a more appropriate theoretical framework for youth work. Implicitly this is the theoretical approach taken by early theorists who embraced the critical reflection on the lived experiences of the individuals with whom they worked (Macilster-Brew 1946, 1957, Davies and Gibson 1967, Button 1971); indeed Button's book was entitled *Discovery and Experience* and attempted to communicate an approach to group work which worked with the experiential dynamics of the youth groups in ordinary social settings.

Another important implication of a Deweyian basis to experiential learning would be an explicit incorporation of his notion of trying and undergoing, what in fact Kolb refers to as the dialectic relationship between assimilation and accommodation (Kolb 1984: 29–32); and this can be related directly to youth work:

The dialectics of experience is important in theorizing experiential learning as it places a different emphasis on how we conceive of experiential learning. An example of an application of this dialectical tension of experience in youth work could be illustrated with reference to the experience of young women. Their experience can be seen as a tension between the demand to 'accommodate' themselves to the stereotypical expectations of their gender and femininity, in contrast to the extent to which they conceptualize or 'assimilate' the world as an oppressive environment which restricts their own authentic development irrespective of the environmental demands. Similarly the dialectical tension in peer groups could be characterized by the extent to which young people adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of the group, or free themselves through a process of assimilation of information about the experience of peer groups and peer group pressure. They realize that their desires, beliefs or values run contrary to the expectations of the group; discovering that they actually have a choice to conform or not and that this does not necessarily undermine their relationships with their peers. (Ord 2007: 71)

### *The experiential curriculum*

One of the important implications for youth work, which is derived from an acceptance of Dewey's theory of educative experience, relates to curriculum. Many of those who make reference to Dewey—Jeffs and Smith (2005), Stanton (2004),

Young (2006)—also oppose a curriculum for youth work. Not that they argue directly from Dewey, but they do consistently argue against a curriculum for youth work and at the same time utilize experiential learning in part to inform and articulate the educational practice of youth work. However, commitment to Dewey's approach implies curriculum rather than denies it. Dewey (1900, 1916, 1938) did argue against the rigidity of the traditional school curriculum but he did explicitly advocate a curriculum. For Dewey the curriculum was a combination of his internal and objective conditions. The interests, desires and inclinations of the young people on the one hand, as well as the propensity and direction for growth, advocating a 'shifting of the centre of gravity' to the child (Dewey 1900: 34). However on the other is the skilful manipulation of the physical and social environment which included the provision of information and advice which Dewey (1900) refers to as 'guidance'.

Neither as we have seen is Dewey opposed to the notion of subject matter; the problems only arise for Dewey when: 'The material is not translated into life terms, but is directly offered as a substitute for, or an external annex to, the child's present life' (Dewey 1900: 202).

In relation to the specification and organization of curriculum, as well as to the specification of subject matter, the responsibility for the organization of relevant material remains with the teacher. They do not abdicate their responsibility, as we saw above, and this responsibility relates specifically to one half of what Dewey refers to as 'the objective conditions' of experience. It is beyond the remit of this paper to go into detail about what a justifiable content would be.<sup>7</sup> What is important to say is that for Dewey method and subject matter are inextricably linked, and a failure to take account of this is fundamentally problematic and is symptomatic of the kinds of formal education he was critical of (Dewey 1900, 1916, 1938). A failure to appreciate this distinction, and the abstraction of subject matter from the lives of the pupils, will render the experience of the classroom meaningless. As Dewey suggests only when 'method, purpose, understanding, shall exist in the consciousness of the one who does the work, that his activity shall have meaning to himself' (Dewey 1900: 95).

What is also the case for Dewey is that the curriculum must accord with the current problems of individual and social life, and provide for the possibilities for growth in relation to both. For Dewey it is therefore the relevance of the curriculum which is most important:

A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insights and interest. (Dewey 1916: 142)

Dewey is opposed to what he regards as the dominant form of education as transmission: 'formation from without' (Dewey 1938: 17) by which 'the subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the next generation' (Dewey 1938: 17). Dewey uses the word 'guidance' to refer to his notion of the educators facilitative role, and 'guidance is not external imposition. It is the freeing of the life process for its adequate fulfilment' (1900: 195). What is alluded to here is the relationship to Dewey's fundamental concept



of growth which consistently underpins his educational rationale. In addition what also underpins Dewey's formulation of 'guidance' is the need for the educator to understand the child (Garforth 1966). In Dewey's terms, the 'psychological' aspect (Dewey 1896, 1917).

Though consistent with and based upon pupil's interests, the teacher in Dewey's rationale must be a facilitator of meaningful experiential situations which engage in genuine attempts to solve pertinent problems to the children and society at large. In this sense he was therefore categorically opposed to education as 'preparation'; whereby the ends of the education process are conceived of as being deferred to some future date: 'Preparation is a treacherous idea' (Dewey 1938: 47). School life for Dewey must be lived experience: 'education, therefore, is a process of living and not preparation for future living' (1897: 6).<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the teacher and the school group is also different according to Dewey. Firstly the school group itself is different in that it is much more akin to a community group than a traditional classroom of disparate individuals: 'The principle that development of experience comes through interaction means that education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group' (Dewey 1938: 58). The fact that the group of students form a community group has implications for Dewey in that the teacher is regarded as a member of that group: 'It is absurd to exclude the teacher from membership in the group' (Dewey 1938: 58). This has further implications in that: 'The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities' (Dewey 1938: 59). Note that though Dewey is aware of the need for the teacher to become 'a part' of the group, he is quite clear about the distinction between educated and the educator, clarifying this by identifying the teacher as leader; thereby the teacher retains their educational responsibility.

Dewey's educational method is best summed up by the following quote:

Traditional education tended to ignore the importance of personal impulse and desire as moving springs. But this is no reason why progressive education should identify impulse and desire with purpose and thereby pass lightly over the need for careful observation, for wide range of information, and judgement if students are to share in the formation of the purposes which activate them. In an *educational* scheme, the occurrence of a desire and impulse is not the final end. It is an occasion and a demand for the formation of a plan and method of activity. Such a plan, to repeat, can be formed only by study of conditions and by securing all relevant information. The teacher's business is to see that the occasion is taken advantage of. (Dewey 1938: 70–71)

Dewey's rationale is not one which puts the educator (teacher or youth worker) at the centre of the process, but one that places the child at the centre. In this sense Dewey describes this as 'a change or revolution not unlike that introduced by Copernicus' (Dewey 1900: 34). A shift from a situation where the focus is on: 'the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself' (Dewey 1900: 34). Dewey argues that the 'centre of gravity' needs to shift whereby 'he [the learner] is at the centre' (Dewey 1900: 34). Dewey is often referred to as a child-centred educationalist (Bantock 1963, Garforth 1966, Entwistle 1970, Darling 1994, Woods and Barrow 2006, Pring 2007); and at times it is easy to see why this conclusion is

arrived at. For example Dewey himself suggests that indeed the starting point should be, in his terms, the 'internal conditions': 'The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education' (Dewey 1897: 4). However, whilst it is clearly the case that Dewey is child-centred in the sense that he requires the educator to take due regard of the desires, interests and inclinations of the learner, this can be overstated. Education for Dewey is not 'laissez faire' and at the whim of the individual, or an unregulated permissiveness. For example he is critical of the erroneous implementation of some of his ideas in the early progressive schools being aghast that: 'Some teachers seem to be afraid even to make suggestions to the members of the group as to what they should do' (Dewey 1938: 71).

Another important caveat that should be applied to Dewey's 'person-centred curriculum', is that he is not denying the 'expert' role of the teacher or in the importance of externally provided stimulus by the teacher through a dynamic curriculum, which is relevant, or made relevant, to the lives of the young people. What underpins Dewey's version of the child-centred curriculum is however a detailed knowledge and understanding of the young people who are being taught 'their interests'. Neither does the 'person-centred' curriculum of Dewey deny the importance of the objective conditions—the external bodies of knowledge. Importantly this provides a theoretical basis for youth work's long-held assertion about the importance of the relationship between a youth worker and the young person (Deer Richardson and Wolfe 2001, Harrison and Wise 2005, Davies 2005, Young 2006). Within Dewey's theory one needs to 'get to know' the young people, education is not something that takes place outside their immediate sphere of understanding but must be relevant to it. Education is not separate from the young people's homes and communities (Dewey 1900) but connections must be made to them. As such the educators would need to get to know and build relationships with the pupils in order to understand their experiences. As Pring points out: 'It takes an experienced teacher, therefore, and one who knows the child well, to identify what the interest really is—indeed, to help the young person to recognize the nature of the interest, which is only dimly perceived' (Pring 2007: 82)

Finally however problems still remain as Jackson makes clear Dewey gave very little indication of the practicalities of his method: 'Nor did he anticipate providing practitioners with precise directions about how to teach or how to run a school' (Jackson 1990: XXV). One is left therefore with broad principles which need to be made more specific in their translation into educational practice. Although one can't criticize Dewey for not doing something which he did not set out to do: his overriding intention was to provide a philosophical basis for an education based on experience which in broad terms he achieved. Furthermore it is these broad principles which in part provide an appropriate theoretical basis to the youth work curriculum. White poses the question therefore that we are still left with the dilemma of whether we 'do what the child is interested in or what is in the child's interests' (White 1977: 54). No doubt Dewey's response would be 'both', and this is the necessary tension which imbues a dynamic curriculum which both embraces and attempts to reconceptualize 'experience'. Importantly one cannot balance the potential problem of 'interests' until one engages in with '*situation*' (Dewey 1900, 1916, 1938) within which the young people are located and begin to understand their lives.

## Notes

1. Though it will be shown that, indeed, a fuller reading of Kolb does show that he acknowledges Dewey's dual aspect of experience, with his reference to accommodation and assimilation.
2. 'Youth work methods include support for individuals, work with small groups and learning through experience' (NYA 2007: 1).
3. This is explained more fully later—but suffice to say that for Dewey thoughts were never abstracted from experience they always served some function in relation to the lived experience of the individual. Instrumentalism therefore refers to the role or function to which thoughts, ideas or feelings are attributed.
4. See Ord (2007) chapter 3.5 for a critical examination of Kolb's theory (1984) and the inappropriateness (and possible mis-interpretation) of Kolb as a simplistic model.
5. Dewey's philosophy is often described as 'instrumentalist' (Garforth 1966, Tiles 1988, Campbell 1995, Gutek 1997, Boisvert 1998, Pring 2007). Indeed to understand Dewey's pragmatism one needs to comprehend this aspect of his philosophy. For example as Garforth points out: 'Thoughts are not opposed to experience but is a part of it—a product of the transaction between the individual and environment and at the same time an instrument in the modification of environment... Instrumentalism describes the function of mind or intelligence within this processive, transactional concept of experience' (Garforth 1966: 14). Instrumentalism is directly related to the evolutionary process of sustaining and developing life: as Dewey himself points out: 'knowledge is not something separate and self-sufficing, but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved' (Dewey 1920: 87).
6. Ironically Kolb himself bases much of his own theory of experience on Dewey—and his definition of learning is similar: 'that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984: 41).
7. Although clearly as previously shown it must accord with the needs, desires and inclinations of the lived experiences of those being educated. Dewey did elaborate in some detail how certain subjects like history and geography can inform education and, if organized appropriately, embrace the experiential reality of children's lives (see Dewey 1900 and 1916, especially chapter 13).
8. In his later work Dewey presents an argument that claims education as preparation actually contradicts itself in that, if the present educational experience does not take full account of the interests and potentialities of those being educated, it lacks the ingredients to genuinely prepare those pupils for their own futures: 'When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a supposititious future. When this happens, the actual preparation is missed or distorted' (Dewey 1938: 49).

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