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Two views of experiential education

John Dewey and Education Outdoors: Making Sense of the 'Educational Situation' through more than a Century of Progressive Reforms

Quay, J., & Seaman, J. (2013).

Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishing.

£28.00 (pbk) 120 pp.

ISBN Paperback: 978-9462092136

Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education

Roberts, J. W. (2012).

London: Routledge.

£29.99 (pbk) 144 pp.

ISBN-10: 9462092133

ISBN-13: 978-0415882088

It was a pleasure to read two excellently written and thought provoking books that apply educational theory and philosophy to support a deeper understanding of outdoor education or, as both books point out, the many forms of outdoor educations. These books offer a valuable lens onto and a critique of education as practiced in western societies and, increasingly, further afield.

Roberts offers a philosophical analysis of the 'currents and counter currents' in the stream of experiential education focusing in particular on what he considers to be significant influences from romantic, pragmatic, political and market trends. The author sees value in all the 'currents' he reviews. However, he also sees dilemmas. The romantic trend, widespread as an influence in European practices, is questioned for its emphasis of the individual and for a lack of reflection. Whilst pragmatism brings in, in Roberts' view, the social dimension, he claims that it does not address sufficiently issues of power and voice important in a student-centred approach that seeks to support the development of our democratic society. Roberts turns to a less often explored 'minor current' of political approaches for solutions to this before critiquing what he views as a major 'counter current'. Exploring this fourth trend he is critical of recent market led, neo-liberal developments and challenges experiential education when it is tempted to collude with these. He is in support of outdoor education as a 'field' and not an 'industry'.

Quay and Seaman critique outdoor education from historical and contemporary perspectives through the theoretical ideas of John Dewey. The authors' central metaphor is of 'cycles' of development in the field that revolve over time from student-centred to subject focused approaches before the next student-centred innovation emerges in response. This is a compelling analysis supported by a fascinating case study of the development of nature study in the USA. In the view of the authors this cycle applies as much to education in general as it does to outdoor education. They suggest that the

outcome of these iterations is a steady growth in approaches to (outdoor) education unhelpfully crowding and competing for the limited space and time available in the school system. For these authors Dewey offers a potential solution, discussed further below, to what they see as a conundrum inhibiting outdoor education as well as education more widely.

To contribute another metaphor the two books are like different slices through a Swiss Roll. Cut one way the roll reveals spirals of jam between the layers of sponge. Cut the other way the jam forms stripes. Nevertheless both views are revealing of the same phenomenon and can be complimentary as well as intriguingly contradictory.

For example, for Roberts experiential education is concerned with the meaning, identity and purpose of an individual whilst learning by doing (which he separates out from experiential education) is concerned with simply acquiring skills and knowledge in a practical way. He dismisses 'learning by doing' as useful and sometimes complimentary but argues that experiential education is concerned with the experience of the journey made by canoe rather than learning (by doing) the craft of paddling. This is important, Roberts claims, because experiential education defined this way recovers the student-centred process of meaning making and an engagement with a democratic model of education.

Quay and Seaman, on the other hand, contradict Roberts' theoretical approach to Experiential Education. They seek to reintegrate Dewey's concepts of 'doing, knowing and being' as 'modes of experience'. In their view aesthetic experiences, which engage doing, knowing and being in intuitive actions, are holistic forms of experiential education that can also become reflective when problems are encountered. In Dewey's model, they argue, knowledge and action are inseparable and without hierarchy or sequence. According to Dewey, they suggest, the separation of knowledge from action, as has been and still is widespread in contemporary school systems across the world, leads to dysfunctional forms of education that also exclude emotions as of any relevance. The authors argue that outdoor education readily falls into this trap and so ends up conforming to rather than challenging poor practices of education. The case study they make of the history of nature study in the USA offers an excellent example of what they mean.

The authors believe Dewey offers a solution. By offering an education built around 'occupations' (by which is meant a broader idea of roles than simply vocations e.g. student, friend, sibling, playmate, etc) that are relevant to the young person but also helpful preparation for adult life they argue that knowledge and action, as both aesthetic and reflective experiences, can be reintegrated into educational practices. Countering Roberts' view that pragmatism pays insufficient attention to issues of power and voice, they suggest that the social construction of the 'right' occupations within a community will lead to a dynamic re-engagement of young people and the

wider community with individual and collective purpose and citizenship. However, any discussion of the dimensions of 'right' values, 'appropriate' meanings and who might form the 'wider community' that might be relevant to this process are left unexplored and the issues of power and 'whose voice' are left to the reader to consider.

Reading both books invites some intriguing questions. For instance Roberts' discussion of 'romantic' and 'pragmatic' influences as separate 'currents' in experiential education sheds light on Quay and Seaman's analysis of Dewey's holistic approach to aesthetic and reflective forms of experience, a view that seems to intermingle the currents, a process, it has to said, that Roberts would readily embrace. This mixing up of the philosophical lens's left me wondering at the degree to which Dewey should be understood as a pragmatist. Perhaps the notion of 'occupation' has been narrowly interpreted or, at least, is worthy of a new interpretation. For example, could it perhaps embrace the 'occupation' of the (romantic) appreciation of nature without this having a utilitarian intention? Much is at stake around the choice of words, 'meaningful', 'useful' and 'relevant' here. From Quay and Seaman's interpretation of Dewey, highlighted more visibly by Roberts' analysis of romanticism and pragmatism, the 'occupation' of appreciating nature in its own right and for its own sake is potentially 'relevant' and 'meaningful' to the education of a young person without the need for it to be 'useful', Maybe 'the mountains (can) speak for themselves' and be heard or felt for ourselves without the need for a neo-liberal 'outcome' from the experience for it to be relevant to education?

On the other hand there is much to be done to engage young people with the political issues surrounding the environment and our communities; for 'meaningful' 'occupations' that have a social context and relevance to the everyday lives of young people. The concept of 'occupation' sets the imagination running with possibilities for outdoor education that take the profession beyond the confines of outdoor sports and nature study and without taking it into the realms of Roberts' market driven approaches.

Whether the craft of paddling should be separated from the idea of experiential education as learning by doing, as Roberts would have it or whether it should be understood, as Quay and Seaman argue Dewey would put it, as inseparable from the holistic nature of aesthetic experience provides another thought provoking conundrum. On the one hand Roberts makes an excellent case for the link with a democratic education. On the other Quay and Seaman argue convincingly for a holistic approach reinstating the aesthetic and emotional, i.e. the body, as relevant domains for education. These are typical of the contradictory but intriguing insights to be found from reading the two books.

Both books seek to offer views that the authors see as helpful in supporting or reclaiming the tradition of outdoor education as a movement for emancipation and democracy, a progressive education. They leave it up to the reader to

reflect on what this might have to say about current practices in outdoor education or on how (outdoor) experiential education should interact with mainstream practices. Likewise, they make no comment on the implications for these ideas within the institutions of education and beyond. Quay and Seaman argue that Dewey's concept of 'occupation' integrates the personal with the social and the environmental. However, apart from Roberts' chapter on the political, power remains largely unexplored and neither book engages with the problem of giving the environment agency or voice. This runs the risk of leaving nature as backdrop or, at best, instrumentalised as simply context for otherwise meaningful educational experiences and 'occupations' (Consider Bonnett (2004) for a similarly thought-provoking discussion on environmental education).

To challenge your thinking on learning cycles, domains of learning, the role of education, the structure of schools and the practices of outdoor education both books are invaluable and a significant contribution to the field. As aids to reflecting on current practices and developing new programmes they would be inspiring and thought provoking providing valuable frameworks with which to think. Both books will be influential. I suggest reading them both, together with Bonnett (2004), for the greatest impact. I am recommending them as core reading for students.

Bonnett, M. (2004). *Retrieving Nature: education for a post-humanist age*. Oxford: Routledge.