

Experiential Education – Why Students Should Learn by Doing

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"Where is the book in which the teacher can read about what teaching is? The children themselves are this book. We should not learn to teach out of any book other than the one lying open before us and consisting of the children themselves."

- Rudolf Steiner, *Human Values in Education*

The best approach to learning cannot be considered before asking these essential questions: "What is learning? How do we learn? Why do we learn?"

Experiential learning, in a general sense, is the process of learning through experience. But more specifically, experiential learning looks at optimizing the learning process itself by focusing on the individual's involvement (experience) with the learning material. This is an important distinction between other types of experience learning -- such as [action learning](#), [free choice learning](#),

cooperative, or [service learning](#) -- which focus on the experience *around* learning vs. the experience *with* learning.

Experiential learning is an active approach to a subject's lesson; "active" meaning an approach to material which uses different senses, tactics, and manipulatives to stimulate [multiple forms of intelligence, as defined by Harvard researcher and professor Howard Gardner](#). At its heart, experiential learning is a very natural and intuitive way to learn vs. the passive, lecture-and-note style of learning most children experience. Simply look at how lifelong learning happens everyday for those not in a classroom. They learn in workplaces and at home by doing; and the learning is always directed towards something.

In this way, experiential learning in the classroom means students learn through doing, such as gardening to learn botany. But it is important to note, that experiential learning goes beyond an active methodology. Experiential learning is about cultivating a keen awareness of the lesson's meaning and relevance to the individual... it is about bringing lessons from the abstract to the concrete.

When a child asks, "Why do I have to learn math?" They are not requesting examples of how math may be relevant to a particular future job. They are asking, "Why does this matter right now? How is this relevant to my immediate reality?" This is why a major component of bringing successful experiential learning into a classroom involves making lessons immediately relevant to the student, so that they can respect the process of learning.

Let us take, for example, the simple lesson of subtraction in a Waldorf first grade classroom.

The young students are told an engaging story, say, about a squirrel collecting acorns for her nest. In this example, there is already relevancy and truth embedded within the story itself. It is fall outside the window where the children direct their gaze, they have collected acorns for the nature table and have recently seen a squirrel's nest in the tree line by the playground. As the squirrel in our story collects her 20 acorns, the children draw each of 20 acorns into their main lesson book. It takes time and concentration. Then they hear in the story that the squirrel is dropping the acorns as she climbs the tree. They cross out each acorn that she drops from their drawing of the 20 acorns. Then they must count the ones crossed off, 10 in total, and draw them at the bottom of their sketch of a tree.

It is only after this process that the teacher presents the formula that is subtraction. Instead of all this literal representation of "taking away," the teacher explains, there is a formula in math -- a way to use symbols and numbers -- to represent the acorn story. We need not draw 20, cross out 10, and count the remaining. We can write $20-10$. We can determine the acorns dropped with this process called subtraction.

Now, the children will not ask, "Why do I have to learn this?" They already have their answer: because it is more efficient than drawing, crossing out and counting, and because it relates to the squirrel outside and to my own immediate experience.

In this example, the students are transformed by their interaction with the learning material, and the subtraction lesson will remain with them during the next week when they are told a story of multiplication and must layer this established knowledge with a new learning experience. The layers and depth of experiential learning not only make learning stick, but also cultivates what Waldorf educators often call, “a love for lifelong learning.” The word “love” could easily be replaced by the word “purpose.” Students learn that learning is a necessary, value-laden process that has direct relevance and benefit in their lives.

This is why those looking to bring experiential learning into the classroom, must not simply focus on an active methodology but must also strive to bring that transformative, immediate relevancy to the lessons of students.

To return to our initial questions:

What is learning? It is transformation and growth.

How do we learn? By interacting in a meaningful way with lesson material.

Why do we learn? Because the lesson at hand is relevant to our lives and adds *immediate* value.

And so, experiential learning *is* children learning times tables by jumping rope. It *is* learning physics (friction, mass, gravity, Newton’s second law) by crafting an in-class pulley system. But it is more than the interconnection of senses and subjects. Essentially, experiential learning is a call to engage in a process of transformation for both the self and the greater world.

Photo credit: [Detroit Waldorf School](#)