

Education Through Experience – Experienced Education

by Dietrich Esterl

Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

For centuries it has been asserted that we do not learn for school, but rather for life. In reality, school has been, for the majority of children, just drill and cramming, arousing anxiety and boredom. Educational reform of the past century attempted to open school up to life, in order to make way for deeper discoveries, more exciting experiences and more interesting learning. Where do schools stand today, and can their everyday routine be penetrated with experiences?

Earlier and earlier, more and more expanded

For the past twenty years or so, the trend has developed to break up the daily routine of the school schedule with special activities, and these take place earlier and earlier as well as more and more extensively. At one time, an excursion into the nearby environs was seen as the high point of the whole school year. A week-long class trip to a school camp at the end of eighth grade or twelfth grade was the highlight of one's entire school experience. Today there are special programs from the fourth grade up, and the upper grades have practical field trips to farms, businesses, social institutes, and relief actions taking place over several weeks, and all over the world.

This has consequences for the main lesson blocks in the high school grades. To be able to have a four-week block, which is meaningful for pedagogical reasons, becomes an infrequent stroke of luck, while the shorter blocks increase in number and grow even shorter, interrupted by all kinds of festivals and finally, by the free Saturdays, which in their own way broaden the experiences of children and young people.

The impressions from the special activities fade quickly. They awaken boredom when they happen too often and become the "norm." And then what happens in the rest of the everyday schedule? What about a normal history main lesson? What happens in an English class?

What is the meaning of “experience”?

Let us look into the meaning of “education through experience” [*Erlebnispädagogik*], a concept that is used for various pedagogical “projects” from simple object lessons to circumnavigation of the globe. To begin with: What creates experiences out of life? [In German, this is a play between *leben* and *erleben*.] From the etymology, “experience” [*Erlebnis*] is active living, a life directed outward. Or one might say, through experience a human being makes something out of his life. But today “experience” has more the character of something that happens to a person, working inwardly from the outside.

Life in modern society is being shaped by extremes to a greater and greater degree. Rapid results and intensity of “sensations” have increased enormously. For those who can remember the complaints of teachers from the end of the 1950s, speaking about sensory overload through advertising, magazines, radio, and the noise of boogie-woogie and rock’n’roll, these seem almost harmless in comparison to the kinds of experiences that are offered and sought out today.

One can observe something similar in the possibilities for individual expression. Adventures in self-awareness border on the achievable, the bearable, and the edges of violence, and become mass movements, for example, a hundred thousand people running a marathon.

The causes for such phenomena lie, to begin with, in the lack of true experiences, even the deprivation of experiences, in a “normal” life. To be sure, what are the conditions for being able to experience something? Here we are in the domain of pedagogy, the education of capacities.

A few conditions for having experiences

Here it has to do with how the relationship between the human being and the world is shaped. This relationship does not play out in a particular “condition,” but rather in a rhythmical swing from the inside outwards and from outside inwards. We live in the alternation between taking in and giving out, between breathing in and breathing out, between going to sleep and waking up, between surrender and control. These are all the bodily, soul, and spiritual foundations of our experiences. Here are a few principles that can be established in this connection:

- The movement between the human being and the world must be learned, taught from the beginning of one’s biography.
- These are phenomena of balance or equilibrium; every instance of one-sidedness in one’s life leads to disturbances and sicknesses.
- The human needs and seeks greater and lesser movements in these pendulum swings.

We can look at four different aspects of the educational process that foster [a life of experience], which all work together, but take place one after the other in the course of a lifetime.

1. For children and young people who are still growing, there is a subjective side of experience, namely the capacity to perceive the outer world, to engage with something and stay with it. Through repetition and practice, this builds the capacity to “digest” something.

2. The objective side has to do with the type of world-content. Just as, for example, different foods can make one healthy or sick, so also can one say that soul and spiritual impressions can have positive or negative effects, shaping the capacities for experiences.

3. The human beings in [a child’s] surroundings, the parents, caregivers, and teachers, all have an important role in this shaping process. Through their being and their actions, they affect and shape the way a child’s capacity to experience develops.

4. The subjective side of this interplay is the methodical consciousness and actions of the adults, through which the form and content of the experiences are shaped, for themselves as well as for the children.

These four aspects have been brought into question in today’s educational thinking. [It is said that] instruction should “make one fit” for specific professional or vocational tasks. Eligibility for higher education and the corresponding social status become the motivation for learning. The content is based, above all, on what can be “used.” The role of the adult “facilitator” moves more and more into the background, as the “expert” and organizer.

The problems with this situation are mirrored in the discussions about the results of the PISA exams [the Programme for International Student Assessment], and about standardizing and modularizing education from kindergarten through high school. Gradually more and more resistance is arising, as from a grassroots movement of students, teachers, and parents, against this system. Just like a hundred years ago, there is a loud demand for a paradigm shift to one in which schools should meet the needs of the children, be more appropriate for young people, be more human, and more socially organized.

For a long time educational reforms have cultivated experiential education.

Waldorf schools and other schools of the educational reform movement have introduced many different kinds of educational experiences. The broadening of intellectual schooling through handwork, artistic activities, and community-building activities has been an essential characteristic of these reforms. These elements in particular have proven to be fruitful for the development of young human beings, as they address them in all their expressions of life and possibilities of experience.

In reformed schools, and also in Waldorf schools, the deeply ingrained object lessons of the “Lernschule” movement* determine the pedagogical practices. Because of this, and in spite of other intentions and goals, a certain kind of artificiality often arises in the course of normal instruction. This in turn awakens in the students and the teachers a need for “real” experiences. But cannot the everyday schoolwork become an experience?

How can everyday school become experience?

The central question has to do with how the relationship between the adult and the child is shaped and lives. This has to do with presence, presence of spirit. Young people have a very fine sensitivity for feeling whether their “presence” is merely outwardly ordered and directed or whether they are really perceived, whether a meeting between human beings is taking place, and not just between role-players.

In many classroom visits I have observed that all mastery of, or expertise in, a subject and methods sets up distance and lack of connection in the atmosphere of the classroom. Instead, relative chaos and improvisation can bring about lively, involved participation in the class.

These are very simple things that play a part here. For example, I have always completely avoided greeting the students as a group, or with a number, until I have first greeted each individual student. In the course of the class period, each individual should be directly addressed, and not just for disciplinary reasons—perhaps, in the case of discipline, not at all! [There should be] no hour without laughter, without moments of being affected, without total silence, without relaxed comments. The interplay between expression and inwardness, between concentration and letting loose, between devotion and distance, all make “experience” possible even in the most everyday course of instruction. These kinds of things that the teacher brings to the lesson make education into a real art, moreso than the content of the subject.

An ideal method for asking questions

The following is a personal experience from a lesson. It was in a German and History main lesson with Herbert Hahn, having to do with the art of asking questions about the relevant events or reading material. After a time of silent thought, he would ask a particular student for an answer [to his question]. Then, often after a patient wait on the part of the teacher and the class, would come a more or less stammering attempt at an answer. The answer always evoked a

**Lernschule* [Study School] seems to stand in contrast to vocational schools, or old-fashioned liberal arts schools. It was one option for education in discussions of the early twentieth century. –tr.

joyful affirmation from Hahn. Then he would take the formulated answer and “add” to it, so as he repeated what was said as a relevant statement, he clarified the question and often set it in a broader context. We students were struck with amazement over what was summarized as our answer. That [this clarification] was tucked into our green stammerings, and could be spoken [with meaning] like that! Trust was awakened for our own relationship to the subject. In this way, actors, philosophers, and self-confident partners in conversation were born. How very different was the effect of this [method] from that of pointing out the shortcomings of the answer and providing correction.

The enthusiasm of the teacher

A further, strongly effective catalyst for experience in the classroom is the connection the teacher has with the subject matter. Students have an exact feeling about whether the teacher is just acting as a facilitator or whether he is really involved in the subject. Joy, enthusiasm, and an open, questioning attitude on the part of the teacher are all much more important for the intensity of the students’ experience than the content of the lesson. When one can successfully link the material with current world events and also with the inner questions of the young people, then it is really “experiential teaching.” Areas of interest, sometimes even including the choice of a major in school or a profession, are often inspired by such learning experiences.

The significance of art and handwork

In the artistic and handwork classes, the qualities of experience are much more concretely and intensively cultivated than in the “onlooker” subjects. The will and feeling life connect directly with the “matter,” with wood, stone, color, movement, and so on. The activity practiced over many weeks during a block of stone cutting, for example, trains the capacities through attention, care, feeling for form and for material, perseverance, concentration, and distancing oneself from the work. Through repetition and through the required endurance, the connection of the young person to the world is intensified. Out of “heart and hand,” sense perception, alertness, and judgment are built.

On twelfth grade class trips I could observe over and over again that young people who had not exercised these capacities did not have an eye for the landscape, for works of art, or for local points of interest. Thus it appears that the person who cannot bring experiences to everyday activities cannot perceive what is special.

On the other hand, one of my most astonishing experiences was to see what ten days of stone cutting in Azzano near Carrara could bring about in the students. What they were able to experience afterwards on an excursion to Florence—in perceiving the statues of Michelangelo, in observing the buildings,

what they expressed and what was discussed—proved in the highest degree that the essence of human experience is presence of mind [presence of spirit, *Geistesgegenwart*].

The world today hinders experience.

Young people have to come to terms with two conditions of our world today. On the one hand, everything that surrounds them is finished, perfect, and arranged, can be used, operated, or thrown away. But they cannot really “start” anything with these things; they cannot engage themselves with them. On the other hand, they are overwhelmed with impressions that can scarcely be taken in, let alone grasped or digested.

In this area the school takes on a growing task: to shape a situation in which a human being can make a connection to the real world. This can happen in every math lesson as well as while playing music or on an excursion. But even here the basic principle of life holds sway: to find the right measure and the healthy rhythm in little things as in large things.

About the author: Dietrich Esterl was born in 1934 and studied philology, German, history, political science, and philosophy. From 1963 to 1999 he taught German, history, Latin, and art history in the Free Waldorf School in Uhlandshöhe, Stuttgart.