

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND INQUIRY LEARNING



Direct and authentic experiences provide some of the best opportunities for adolescents to learn and practice the critical and reflective-thinking skills that accompany inquiry learning. It has been my experience while working with 13- to 15-year-olds that when they are taken out of the confines of chairs, desks, and whiteboards to places where they feel free to explore and express their abilities and overcome their limitations, deep learning and understanding are likely to occur.¹ While these experiences may also be of relevance for other age groups, this group is my area of expertise and research.

In this article, experience is conceptualized as a continuum with vicarious experiences at one end and real-to-life (direct and authentic) experiences at the other. The metacognitive moments afforded by direct and authentic experiences provide the richest opportunities for reflection and critique.

The Wilderness Experience and Real Life

The Bible contains numerous examples of great leaders and prophets of God going through wilderness experiences in preparation for their life's work. For example, Moses and his years caring for sheep, David and his experiences as a shepherd, and John the Baptist and his experiences in the desert immediately come to mind. Jesus' experiences also provide examples, such as when He "was led by the Spirit into the desert" and He "went out to a mountaintop to pray and spent the night praying to God."² The writings of Ellen White also mention our inherent need for time in the natural world.³ And Adventism has a rich tradition of using experiences in nature for personal development, spiritual connection, and discovery as typified by the worldwide Pathfinder program.

The Need for Direct and Authentic Experiences

Experiential Education (EE) is an overarching term that encompasses Outdoor Education (OE), Experiential Learning, Environ-

mental Education, Adventure Therapy,⁴ Service Learning, and numerous other programs. These forms of education are generally based on philosophical foundations in which individuals construct new ideas and generate meaning from the interaction between current and past experiences.⁵ These approaches offer helpful insights into how we might best learn and then transfer these new understandings into new and different contexts.

The term "Experiential Education," as used in this article, is defined as direct and authentic experiences in learning environments outside the classroom. OE, as a subcategory of EE, can thus be applied to direct and authentic experiences in natural environments outside the classroom.

The literature contains numerous examples supporting the value of direct and authentic experiences in changing people's attitudes about the natural world. For example, Rodger Jones, in *The Journal of Adventist Education's* special issue on Environmental Awareness,

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pointed out the value of environmental education for “changing people’s perceptions and perspective by encouraging them to feel a sense of dependence upon, and responsibility for, nature.”⁶ Jones believes that only as people experience natural environments will they change their view of how to interact and care for nature. It seems the farther we are removed from the natural world, the less likely we will be to take responsibility for it.

In another example, Richard Louv describes the need for young people to get into the outdoors more often to alleviate “nature deficit disorder.”⁷ He sees a significant correlation between humanity’s growing detachment from the natural world and the increasing incidence of mental health and spiritual decline. Comments such as “Time in nature is not leisure time; it’s an essential investment in our children’s health [and also, by the way, in our own]”⁸ highlight the value he places on direct and authentic experiences in the natural world.

In Scandinavian countries, there is a name for this outdoor connection: *friluftsliv*.⁹ Historically, this has referred to the deep-seated relationship between humans and the natural world. Without this bond, people feel unfulfilled and broken. The only way to achieve a sensation of wholeness is to

spend time in direct and authentic experiences in the natural environment.

An Experiential Education (EE) Program in Practice

The Gilson College¹⁰ Learning 4 Life (L4L) EE¹¹ program has been designed to minimize the enervating effects of early adolescence on academic learning. Numerous teachers who work with young adolescents will attest that classroom-based learning is not high on the agenda for many in this age group. In fact, one author was moved to write:

“Many teachers believe they should receive hazardous duty pay for teaching adolescents. Adolescence is for many—adolescents, parents and teachers alike—a time of turmoil, rapid growth, and learning, as well as shifting emotions and searching for personal and social identities.”¹²

Authors such as Cole, Mahar, and Vin-durampulle¹³ have detailed the significant mental, emotional, and social changes 13- to 15-year-olds undergo in the normal course of adolescence. In their second paper on this theme, they suggested possible ways to minimize the effects of this turbulent time; for example: finding a location where students feel able to develop a sense of ownership, offering opportunities to build strong relationships with their teachers, creating a curriculum that

fosters deep engagement with their learning, and providing experiences that enable students to take on adult-like roles.¹⁴

The L4L program is organized with this framework in mind and includes three components: expeditionary learning, urban learning, and service learning. A group of Year 9 teachers cares for most of the curriculum and also coordinates, implements, and participates in each aspect of the program. The planners structure the following components:

- An expeditionary component encourages self-confidence, environmental awareness, and spirituality. It comprises a day walk, a five-day base camp experience with an overnight backpacking walk, a four-day navigation camp, and a seven-day expedition.
- An urban component fosters group awareness and dynamics within an inquiry-learning context. It requires students to go on five-day trips to the Melbourne Central Business District (CBD), where groups gather data relating to a self-determined inquiry-learning theme.
- A service component enables participants to see themselves as part of a community that contributes to the greater good through giving back to their neighbors. Students spend three service days in the local

area and attend an 11-day service camp in Warrnambool near Victoria, Australia, when they work with local councils and community groups in various voluntary capacities.

Wherever possible, within the general learning areas, units of work are integrated with the three program themes. Before the commencement of each year, the whole program is mapped out with multiple curriculum areas aligned to the applicable program component.¹⁵ For example, while expeditionary learning is taking place, the students work on units relating to mountain landforms, mapping, and navigation in their geography course. Another example involves students, as a part of their history studies, in writing a creative essay imagining themselves living in one of the areas they visit when it was at the height of the bustling gold-mining boom of the 1860s. They research the cultural and geographical nature of the area around that time as they identify primary and secondary data sources to include in their story.

During the urban-learning component, students focus on a group-determined inquiry, within an assigned broad area, such as transport or iconic buildings. Working in self-selected groups of four or five and before the first visit to the urban center, the group members determine what data to collect, how to collect and obtain the information, how the data assist in answering their inquiry, and how their findings will be presented. When a learning engagement framework is used, students gain the benefits of experiential learning and also learn to apply principles of Self-determination Theory¹⁶: competence, relationships, and autonomy.¹⁷

A detailed description of the L4L program is provided in *Experiential Education and Learning Engagement for Year 9 Students: A Case Study*,¹⁸ available free online.

Research

Kolb¹⁹ and colleagues' work on Experiential Learning, while contested by some authors,²⁰ provides a useful model for practitioners to help change student attitude and behavior. As an activity or experience draws to a close, or if there has been a significant incident, participants are given an opportunity to reflect on and write about what they have learned from the experience(s). They are then asked to look for ways to transfer and

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implement their changed understanding in other contexts. This method has been widely praised in many EE and OE contexts over the past two or three decades.

The growing body of literature in this area provides evidence that direct and authentic experiences enable positive personal and spiritual development, and enhance environmental awareness.²¹ Researchers have found evidence of heightened metacognitive skills in students who have participated in EE or OE programs. A case study of the L4L program²² provides proof that participation in authentic outdoor activities in natural environments achieves this goal. As one respondent commented:

"It helped me realise that my learning is up to ME, and no one else.... Say I was climbing a mountain, for example, in the Walls of Jerusalem, Tasmania. Let's say I'm

over it all.... I feel exhausted.... I want to give up.... At this point, there is NOTHING the teacher/guide could say to make me move... unless I hold the desire in myself to keep going. It's the same with my learning. It taught me a lot of intrinsic motivation and reaching my own goals. I realised that I can do anything if I put my mind to it... [be it mountain climbing, or Chemistry, study- lol]... It's all a state of mind."²³

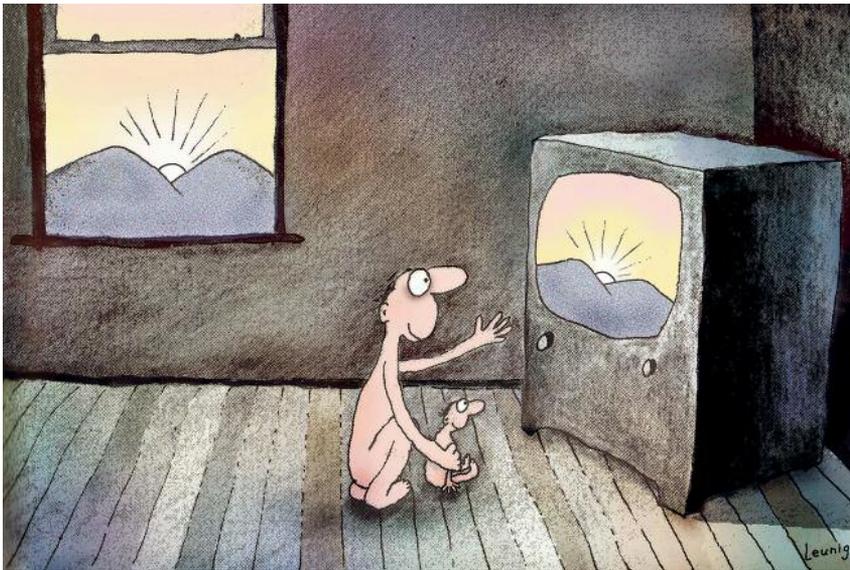
It is evident that this participant has applied to life and classroom learning lessons learned in outdoor experiences. The thinking about thinking reflected in this comment shows that, for this participant at least, time spent in authentic outdoor experiences in natural environments can be life-changing and lasting. The depth of insight displayed by this young person's reflection on the OE experiences demonstrates the value of such opportunities for critical thinking.

Additional respondent comments from this study appear to support this conclusion:

"Going through this program, just in general, has changed me on the inside to a certain degree. It has taught me to be more grateful for the small things in life, to be more humble, to receive things with gratitude, the importance of friends and family in your life, but most of all, how much we need and how important God is in our lives."²⁴

L4L, like similar experiential programs, provides opportunities for participants to develop their thinking processes and encourages metacognition.²⁵ More recently, participants in the L4L program have been asked to complete questionnaires that encourage them to reflect and comment on their experiences. One question asks students to rate how much participation in the program has helped their thinking skills and processes. Of the responses collected, 164 respondents overwhelmingly reported that participation had improved their thinking processes. Nine respondents reported excellent improvement in their thinking processes, 66 reported very good change, 82 reported some improvement, six reported little change, and one reported no improvement.²⁶

There is little doubt that student participation in programs that offer direct and authentic experiences with an inquiry learning focus has the capacity to improve their critical-thinking skills.



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Figure 1. "TV Sunrise" by Michael Leunig.

Cultivating a Healthy Relationship With Nature

While there is substantial evidence to support the effectiveness of OE and EE programs in transforming the ways students engage with the outdoors, there is a related concern that deserves consideration: that people may regard the natural world as somewhere to escape to and/or return from. In this thinking, our direct and authentic experiences in the natural world are detached from the reality of our lives. The natural environment is but another location we visit to "mine" its resources for our personal benefit.

In this view, the natural environment is a place where one escapes from the competing demands of "real life." Then, after a period of time, participants return to the place where they ordinarily live their lives—wherever they call home. In "real life," people are surrounded by things that have been designed and created to separate and protect them from the reality of the natural world: houses to keep them dry and warm; motor vehicles to transport them to destinations in detachment and comfort; televisions and computers to enable them to connect and communicate without leaving the security of their home or office.

The illusion of what it might mean to live one's life in this way is well captured in the whimsical, yet profound, image by Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig,²⁷ in which he depicts a father and son sitting in front of a tele-

vision watching a sunrise [see Figure 1]. To the side, there is a window through which one can see the very same event occurring! This simple image makes an insightful statement about the way we have come to view the world in which we live. We have allowed our technology to so detach us from the reality of the natural world that we have come to believe the illusion. Our experience of the sights, smells, sounds, and sensations "out there" are mediated and interpreted through our technology, and the view that we can experience the world in a vicarious manner, and be convinced we have a healthy relationship with it, is deeply disturbing. This convinces us that we are in control of our lives and our destiny, and may make us suspicious or afraid of the natural world.

This view runs very deep in the human psyche. For thousands of years, we have been taught to equate this artificial way of life to progress and improvement. Jack Hobbs,²⁸ in a discourse on the history of Western art, refers to this change in how humans related to the world around them: "hand in hand with science and the art of appearances came an attitude of detachment from nature, signifying that the Greeks and Romans were no longer participants in but witnesses to the drama."²⁹

Consequently, we have come to view the world "out there" as a scary place against which we need protection. We reject the natural connection that we all require in order to

feel whole because we cannot control it and feel insecure while immersed in an outdoor setting. There is little wonder then, that many educators are reluctant to embrace the notion of direct and authentic experiences with the natural world. The reasons are complex and profound, and only briefly alluded to here, but a growing body of literature in the public domain explores the value of direct and authentic experiences to ensure that learning is both emancipatory and lasting. The research shows the value of encouraging educators to engage their students in as many direct and authentic experiences as possible. Planned learning experiences in natural environments provide opportunities for students to strengthen the natural connection to the outdoors, feel confident in natural surroundings, and develop a healthy relationship with nature.

Conclusion

This article has presented the case for the importance of providing direct and authentic experiences outside of the classroom for adolescent students in Adventist schools. Research and experience with this age group show that such opportunities afford students rich learning experiences with lifelong impact, as well as improved engagement and meta-cognitive learning outcomes, when offered with an inquiry learning context. While there are obvious economic and time-related costs involved in the development and implementation of such programs, the personal development, learning improvement, and teacher-student relationship benefits will far outweigh other considerations. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Matthew 4:1; Luke 6:12 NIV. Scripture quotations credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

3. Ellen G. White wrote in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 7: "Nature is God's physician. The pure air, the glad sunshine, the beautiful flowers and trees, the orchards and vineyards, and outdoor exercise amid these surroundings, are health-giving—the elixir of life. Outdoor life is the only medicine that many invalids need. Its influence is powerful to heal sickness caused by fashionable life, a life that weakens and destroys the physical, mental, and spiritual powers" [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948], pages 76 and 78.

4. Adventure therapy uses indoor and outdoor games, activities, or challenges in rural (wilderness) and urban environments to promote cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual growth, rather than for recreation alone. Participants build interpersonal skills, strengthen leadership skills, and learn to set goals and make decisions [Association for Experiential Education, "Definition of Adventure Therapy," <http://www.aee.org/tag-best-p-defining-adv-therapy>].

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

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27. Michael Leunig, "TV Sunrise." Image courtesy of Michael Leunig. Used with permission.

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