

# Disney, Dewey, and the Death of Experience in Education

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*“Every philosophy is under the illusion that it has no illusions because it has discovered the illusions of its predecessors.”*

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1938)

*“The only ground for anticipating failure in taking this path resides to my mind in the danger that experience and the experimental method will not be adequately conceived.”*

—John Dewey (1938)

## **Introduction**

The role of experience in progressive education has a rich and varied theoretical history beginning with Rousseau’s *Emile*, continuing through the work of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and arguably best enunciated in the pragmatic tradition of William James and John Dewey. In 1938, John Dewey published *Experience and Education*, one of his last, and most concise, explications of his philosophy of the role of experience in the curriculum. Progressive educators since Dewey have used his ideas to further develop and argue for the social nature of learning, the role of democracy in schooling, and the design and purpose of the curriculum. This article will examine one particularly recent offshoot of this tradition, experiential education, and the implications of its approach on notions of democratic schooling. Specifically, I will argue that Dewey’s construction of experience has been misunderstood within this field; hence, clarification of his work and the potential transformative role of experience in the curriculum is timely and needed.

Generally speaking, experiential education emerged from the writings and work of Kurt Hahn in the 1940s and 1950s in Germany and England. Hahn’s Salem and Gordonstoun schools are consistently referenced in the foundational narratives of the field (Miner and Boldt, 2002). Outward Bound, a widely known outdoor education program, was founded by Hahn in England and continues to

be a cornerstone in the experiential education field both in the United States and internationally. Perhaps the best exemplar of the nascent field is its organizing body—the Association of Experiential Education (AEE), which was founded in the 1970s. AEE’s definition of experiential education reveals the connections between Deweyan constructions of experience and “experiential” education. “Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values” (AEE website, retrieved 9-10-04). There are many definitions and discussions of what defines an educational activity as “experiential.” The following discussion by Proudman seems archetypal.

Good experiential learning combines direct experience that is meaningful to the student with guided reflection and analysis. It is a challenging, active, student-centered process that impels students toward opportunities for taking initiative, responsibility, and decision making. . . . Whatever the activity, it is the learning and teaching *process* that defines whether a learning experience is experiential. (Proudman, 1996, p. 241)

This theoretical and practical strand has produced an entire industry of applications including ropes courses, adventure education, therapeutic wilderness programs, expeditionary learning schools, place-based learning initiatives, and service learning programs, among others. Despite significant obstacles against their implementation, both historically and in the modern context, experiential approaches remain a significant, if marginalized part of the educational landscape. Indeed, experiential programming and curricula have expanded significantly in recent years—particularly among groups traditionally labeled as disadvantaged or “at-risk”—as educators seek novel ways to engage students who do not experience success in more traditional educational environments.

The arguments on the effectiveness of such programs are well-intentioned. They get students out of the confinement of the four-walled classroom (Keen and Howard, 2002). They acknowledge and recognize individual differences and the importance of group learning (Rubin, 2000). They stress “real-world” application and relevance to what is taking place in kids’ lives (Smith, 2002). Often, and rightly so, some of these approaches are championed as examples of innovative thinking and practice in curriculum development (Lee, 1976; Sizer, 1992; Meier, 1995; Fried, 1995). Examples are legion of students whose lives have been transformed by such educative experiences. Laudable outcomes include improved self-efficacy, increases in trust, accelerated relationship-building, and enhanced problem-solving, communication, and leadership skills. By all accounts, John Dewey should be quite proud of this manifestation of his philosophy. But, despite the lack of substantive critique of these approaches,<sup>1</sup> those who care deeply about the democratic and transformative role of experience in the curriculum ought to be uneasy.

I hope to achieve a delicate balance in the pages that follow. As an individual who thinks about curriculum matters and their consequences to our society, I would like to question and contest some of the modern manifestations of Dewey's educational philosophy. As an advocate (and practitioner) of experiential approaches, I also hope to further legitimize and enhance the position of such pedagogy in the discourse on curricular reform. This might be like attempting, as one of my old teachers once remarked, "to rebuild a ship while at sea." Nevertheless, despite its obvious perils, I believe the project is worth doing, and, more importantly, essential for the long-term health and sustainability of progressive approaches to schooling.

I will begin with a vignette and an operational definition of the experiential education approach, briefly outlining its potential as an educational construct. I will follow this with a discussion of the salient ideas of John Dewey related to the role of experience in education. This will be essential as a "litmus test" toward examining the kinds and types of programming that occur today in experiential education. While some have questioned the transformative potential of Dewey's educational approach (Diggins, 1994; Noddings, 1995), I am more inclined to believe, with others, that Dewey's democratic and transformational vision can continue to direct us today (Hewitt, 2002). I will then move to a discussion of the modern applications of Dewey's philosophy and, drawing from the work of George Ritzer and Henry Giroux, question the degree to which some of these experiential curricular approaches are democratic, transformative, or even educative at all. I will conclude with what I believe to be the potential costs of such curricula and advocate for a re-construction (to borrow a phrase from Dewey) of the philosophical and ethical approaches to experience in education.

### ***Experience-as-Technique***

*Several years ago, my undergraduate class in education worked with a local junior high by student teaching for approximately one hour twice a week. The students came in and led "challenge education" activities—experiential activities and initiatives that focused on problem-solving, teamwork, and trust. The teachers at the local school loved the novelty of the activities and how they helped to break up their school day. The junior high school students seemed to respond well to the experience as a whole, constantly asking the teachers when the "big kids" were coming back to "lead more games." Discussions with the students were attempted after the activities to help facilitate educative reflection, but this was hampered by the short time frame we spent with the kids. In the end, our students felt like they had done little more than "babysit" for two hours a week. The teachers at the local school, however, were thrilled at the results and asked if we would consider doing this long-term.*

The vignette above reveals one of the ways that experiential education is applied in school environments. In this conception, experiential processes or activities are used as a technique available to the teacher (among a wide variety of

other techniques such as direct instruction, Socratic seminar, cooperative jigsaws, etc.). I see at least six ways experience-as-technique is manifested in the curriculum. (1) “Hands-on” activities are used to break up the monotony of direct instruction or to bring to life elements within the curriculum. (2) Field trips, possibly within the context of service or place-based learning, are used to “get kids out of the classroom.” (3) Experiential activities can be seen as accessing a type of intelligence (Gardner, 1983) or learning modality that teachers ought to use to reach a variety of different learning styles. (4) Learning-by-doing may be used to help cement certain concepts or principles (such as in a science lab or exhibition). (5) Alternatively, bringing personal experience into the classroom can be used as a “hook” to heighten student engagement in the material (Fried, 1995). (6) Finally, experience can be honored in the classroom through the conscious use of narratives and stories as part of the social process of schooling (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988).

What the vignette and many of these curricular approaches above have in common is the manner in which experience is technically applied. That is to say, meaningful activity is tightly bound (in both time and space), rationally constructed, and efficiently controlled. Experience becomes not organic, interactive, and continuous but rather something scripted, timed, and located. Normalized classroom or school activity stops, and experiential activity then begins for a bound and specific time frame. This purposive-rational approach becomes, then, a kind of “science of technique” and allows for experience to be both controllable and controlling. Drawing from Jürgen Habermas, the experience-as-technique approach can be viewed as a type of technocratic consciousness (Held, 1980). In this construct, control is “achieved through the application of techniques generated by science to social problems for the realization of specific goals. . . . The technical values of efficiency and economy tend to dominate the selection of the means” (Held, 1980, p. 265). Within this consciousness, then, experience becomes “experiential”—a technical solution designed to solve specific curricular problems. The “means” of experience become secondary to the dominating influences of economy, efficiency, and control. I believe this techno-rational framework and its manifestation through experience-as-technique represents a growing trend in experiential education. This shift, by association, also has something to teach us about threats to the democratic role of experience in education on a broader level.

While there is serious cause for concern with experiential approaches, which I will discuss at length in this piece, it should also be noted that they are not without merit. Research supports the educational effectiveness of novelty, emotion, and challenge often associated with experiential environments (Caine and Caine, 1994). Teaching techniques that support cooperative interaction and active student engagement have been championed in the popular literature on educational reform (Sizer, 1992; Meier, 1995; Fried, 1995). Certainly, many effective teachers understand the importance of mixing it up in the classroom and

providing opportunities for students to learn in a wide variety of styles and methods, one of which may be experiential. Educators have long relied on the experiential approaches mentioned above (and many others) to create enriched learning environments for students.

To summarize, experiential education is particularly vulnerable to a techno-rational framework. Experience becomes “experiential” in its technical application. Activity is tightly operationalized with a primary focus on the elements of control, economy, and efficiency. Experience-as-technique is popularly manifested in the curriculum through such activities as ropes courses, discrete experiential classroom initiatives, environmental and adventure education programs, and service-learning events. The paradigm views experiential processes as a useful tool in the hands of the teacher, something that can be utilized in small chunks, isolated perhaps from the content or at least not directly connected to it. I will now turn to an examination of John Dewey’s philosophy of experience to shed light on the possible differences between Dewey’s vision and this experiential approach.

### ***Dewey’s Pedagogy of Experience***

John Dewey has consistently been held up (and rightfully so) as the “father” of experiential education among practitioners and theorists in the field. It would be difficult to find an article or paper on the role of experience in education that does not cite him. In his writings on the role of experience, Dewey constructs a richly textured pragmatic approach that lays the moral foundation for the creation of a democratic classroom and, thus, a more democratic society. Cornel West, perhaps our most provocative modern American pragmatist, sees in Dewey’s philosophy a clear, ethical calling. “For Dewey, philosophy is a mode not of knowledge but of wisdom. And wisdom is conviction about values, a choice to do something, a preference for this rather than that form of living” (West, 1989, p. 86). Dewey believed that schooling was the cultural institution that served as the engine for creating this form of living and at the center of this ought to be experience.

Thus we reach a technical definition of education: it is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. (1) The increment of meaning corresponds to the increased perceptions of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 76–77)

It is here that we see the key elements of an educative experience for Dewey. It must achieve continuity—where the past and present transact to create the future. And the meaning of such a transaction is directly correlative to the connections we make in the process. This “continuous reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 80) defines what is essential in the educational endeavor

and, as a pedagogical approach, is separate (and superior) to alternate notions of education—as preparation for future living, as recapitulation of the past, or as an unfolding toward definitive goals (Dewey, 1944).

Yet experience and education are not equated in Dewey's philosophy. Not all experiences are educative. Some may simply be non-educative; others may be mis-educative. "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25). We see here in Dewey the importance of individual agency or autonomy<sup>2</sup> as part of the educational endeavor. Individuals must be able to direct themselves (through habits formed by experience). But just as all experiences are not of equal worth, neither are all habits. To Dewey, individuals can lose their autonomy through the formation of certain habits brought on by mis-educative experiences.

An experience may be immediately enjoyable yet promote the formation of a slack or careless attitude; this attitude then operates to modify the quality of subsequent experiences so to prevent a person from getting out of them what they have to give. . . . Each experience may be lively, vivid, and "interesting," and yet their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits. The consequence of formation of such habits is inability to control future experiences. (Dewey, 1938, p. 28)

The worrisome part of this cautionary tale is that mis-educative experiences do not simply affect an individual in the present; such experiences create habits that affect an individual's ability to experience a sense of agency in future endeavors. To Dewey, when we entertain students with "lively, vivid, and interesting" experiences that are "disconnected" we run the risk of developing in them habits that negatively impact their ability to direct their own futures. Thus, it is in the connection of the individual to the democratic community that we see the true moral implications of mis-educative experiences.

One of the purposes of schooling in any culture is to socialize its members. Yet, it is not education but what *kind* of education that one must consider when thinking about the ethical consequences of schooling. Dewey connects this ethical concern to the socialization process of schooling through the construction of habits. "Any education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group" (Dewey, 1916, p. 83). The way we educate depends in large part on the habits and aims we hold as a society. Certain habits or aims might lead to a model of education as reproduction (education as recapitulation of the past), others to a model of social production (education toward a definitive goal). To Dewey, however, education and schooling in a democracy must strive for something else:

The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting on popular suffrage cannot

be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. . . . *But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience.* (Dewey, 1916, p. 87 emphasis added)

Habits and aims must therefore not become static or universalized in the pragmatist philosophy that Dewey articulates. They must be reconstructed and reorganized through associated living and “communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). What are the ethical consequences of a society trained (through schooling and other institutions) on mis-educative experiences and careless habits? To Dewey, it is the very opposite of organic democracy—it is a universal, homogenous, and lifeless world.

The more activity that is restricted to a few definite lines—as it is when there are rigid class lines preventing adequate interplay of experiences—the more action tends to become routine on the part of the class at a disadvantage. . . . Plato defined a slave as one who accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct. This condition obtains even when there is no slavery in the legal sense. It is found wherever men are engaged in activity which is socially serviceable, but whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in. (Dewey, 1916, p. 85)

This, to me, is an astonishing and provocative claim. When we restrict and limit activity and the possibilities of experience to those young citizens we aim to educate, we entertain the very real possibility of producing what amounts to a society of slaves, unconscious of the meaning of their service either to themselves, their community, or society as a whole.

For Dewey then, educative experience is both a foundation to a democratic society and a catalyst for future progress. It is in the meaningful transaction between the individual and her community (through experience) that encourages and promotes a diversity of growth and development and creates responsibility. “The obstacles which confront us are stimuli to variation, to novel response, and hence are occasions for progress” (Dewey, quoted in West, 1989, p. 88). In a world filled with political, economic, and social injustice, how will we seek to create the good life? For Dewey, it is a process achieved, in part, through the democratic potential of the school. It should be deeply troubling that the current political discourse on school reform appears to be attempting to achieve some of the same ends (equality, opportunity, liberty) through vastly different processes—standardization, quantification, and high-stakes accountability. It should be more troubling that the transformative potential of Dewey’s philosophy is, as he feared, being misapplied by those who might be in the best position to offer meaningful alternatives to the current dominant narratives of school reform.

There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subjected to the tests of intelligent development and direction.

Hence the only ground I can see for even a temporary reaction against the standards, aims, and methods of the newer education *is the failure of educators who professedly adopt them to be faithful to them in practice . . . the greatest danger that attends its future is, I believe, the idea that it is an easy way to follow, so easy that its course may be improvised.* (Dewey, 1938, p. 90, emphasis added)

### **Would You Like Fries with That?**

It is clear that, for Dewey, experience was seen as the center of the educational endeavor, not something to be technically applied. Yet, I hope to argue that some experiential approaches are not simply a harmless (if less-effective) step-sibling of Dewey's pedagogy of experience. Perhaps that is what they can be at their best. However, the shift from "experience" to "experiential" has a potential dark side, one that does not merely miss the mark of Dewey's democratic and transformative aims, but actually subverts them. Importantly, this is not a conscious act on the part of educators and curriculum planners, but is rather the product of a cultural process. This process, in my mind, is exemplified in the work of George Ritzer (1996) and Henry Giroux (1999) in relation to two modern cultural icons: McDonald's and the Walt Disney Company. Using both, I hope to show how experience has become co-opted and commodified in our schooling processes.

To Ritzer, institutions and other areas of society can be co-opted through the icon of McDonald's and what he calls the process of McDonaldization:

McDonaldization can be defined as the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. McDonaldization affects not only the restaurant business but also *education*, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family and virtually every other aspect of society. McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process by sweeping through *seemingly impervious institutions* and parts of the world. (Ritzer, 1996, p. 198, emphasis added)

Ritzer goes on to identify four dimensions to McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (1996). First, just as the fast-food industry has organized itself around the minimization of time and extraneous effort and the maximization of productivity, so too have other sectors of society begun to value and adhere to the modes of efficiency. Second, Ritzer also sees society reifying calculability, the desire to quantify things and the tendency to rationalize value from quantity rather than quality. "Quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good" (Ritzer, 1996, p. 199).

Third, McDonald's emblemizes consistency and predictability—the idea that the product you get from one place to another will be the same. For Ritzer,

this goes beyond a guarantee that the Big Mac one eats in New York will be the same as the Big Mac one gets in Los Angeles (or Buenos Aires, for that matter). Predictability also permeates into organizational structures and human resources through the concept of scripting. Employees are expected to follow scripts in their interactions with customers (Leidner, 1993) in order to ensure consistency with worker-customer interactions. Finally, there is an element of control. Ritzer emphasizes the role of technology in this dimension of McDonaldization: “. . . control, especially through substitution of nonhuman for human technology, is exerted over the people who enter the world of McDonald’s” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 201). By controlling the amount of human influence on the product, McDonald’s is able to control the quality and level of service, thus contributing to a consistent product to the customer.

Finally, Ritzer is quick to point out that a critique of McDonald’s and the process of McDonaldization does not necessitate a Pollyanna return to a simpler time. His focus is progressive—on the possible consequences of this process for the future. “The future in this sense is defined as human potential, unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems. This critique holds that people have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well rounded than they are now” (Ritzer, 1996, p. 203).

### ***The McDonaldization of Experience***

*My phone at work rings at 10:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning. “Hello?” “Jay, hi! It’s Brian Waterston, the principal over at Middletown Junior High School. We’d like to do the ropes again this year with our seventh-grade class. Just like last year—three hours in the morning of the low ropes and then two hours in the afternoon on the high ropes. You know, the team-building, trust stuff—you guys do such a great job with all that. We’ll have about 70 kids this year. Have your fees gone up? Just send me over the contract and I’ll get it processed right away. Thanks again, Jay, the kids are so excited to come—they just love it every year.”*

This is a scenario that I have experienced countless times in my earlier career as the director of an experiential education program. And it is one that is not limited to those of us who are involved with orchestrating ropes-course programs for youth. It plays out in myriad ways in service-learning programs, at-risk and intervention activities, and alternative education projects. I have been asked by colleagues of mine to “do some team-building” for their classes (usually for an hour or two). I have taken part in ten-day “learning how to learn” programs that use experiential approaches with at-risk youth burned out from traditional schooling, and I have seen service-learning designed as a discrete unit in course curricula. I myself have mixed up my own classes with liberal sprinklings of initiatives, hands-on activities, and interactive games. Throughout these experiences and observations, the nagging feeling that we are not living out Dewey’s vision consistently bothers me. And worse, I am beginning to believe

that these experiences are actually mis-educative. The subtle shift from experience to experiential and the resulting difference in educational perspectives leaves experiential approaches vulnerable to issues of commodification and co-optation. The four domains of McDonaldisation (efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control) can function within this approach to create educational outcomes potentially quite different from those originally intended.

This is not a new worry in the examination of experience in the curriculum. Theodore Wichmann (1995) points to a key “heresy” in modern experiential education—the “Learning By Doing” heresy. In the Learning By Doing heresy, Wichmann views experiential theorists and practitioners falling into the trap of “blind faith, activity cookbooks, and . . . process-centered theories [that are, in the end] mis-educative” (Wichmann, 1995, p. 115). Wichmann also states a concern for the “cultural homogeneity” embedded in experiential education and notions of educational reform (1995). Dan Garvey, current president of Prescott College, in a speech entitled “The Future of Adventure Education” given at the 2002 Rocky Mountain Region Conference of the Association of Experiential Education, discussed four areas that he believed are radically changing within the field of experiential education. In one area, “Learning What We Teach,” Garvey argued that we are experiencing a problem of “over processing” in modern applications of experiential theory. So many young people have now attended a number of experiential learning programs that they have become programmed in both what to expect and how to respond to placate the teachers. This portion of the speech, in my view, is so revealing, it is worth quoting at length:

We may have to change the message we are delivering to our younger participants. I think we’ve got a generation of kids that has been overly processed. Many young people have attended a number of experiential activities, and they’ve learned that some instructors will accept any reasonable response when the student is asked to reflect upon the experience. They know what we want them to say. I joke that many of our current participants know there are two things they can say when they reflect on the power of an experience, no matter what the experience is. First, they say that they have learned trust. If they don’t get the appropriate approval, they add the word communication. *We have a generation of kids who will give us exactly what they think we want to hear.* (Garvey, 2002, p. 29, emphasis added)

Both Wichmann and Garvey are correct in worrying about the ethical consequences of such a delivery-based, product-oriented curriculum. However, both Wichmann and Garvey fall short of questioning the pedagogical foundations that allow such a curriculum to emerge in the first place. In their view, it is assumed that experiential activities are powerful and educational and that it is simply a question of improperly applied technique that produces the inadequate result. This, to me, is a fundamental problem with the experientialist paradigm:

it tends to see experience through a techno-rational lens, as an isolated activity, or technique, to achieve specified and prescribed objectives.

In the attempt to bring what happens “outside the classroom” into the curriculum, experiential approaches have changed a transformational ethic of “curriculum is life”—“life is curriculum” to a homogenized “curriculum of life,” packaged and delivered top-down from teacher to student; commodified into Ritzer’s four domains. The experiential approach is often based on efficiency; most educational experiences in this paradigm are short-term in duration and structured in such a way as to maximize production (hands-on time) while minimizing effort (just pick up the phone and schedule a ropes course). It is based on calculability; students have many experiences (emphasis on quantity), but the quality of such experiences and the degree to which they are continuous and connected are less clear. Predictability exists with “canned” and almost scripted experiences marketed and out-sourced by various companies and organizations (alternative Spring Breaks, environmental education programs, adventure guides, etc.). In a sense, many of these experiences have taken the place of the venerable “field trip” to bring novelty to the traditional academic week. Finally, Ritzer’s domain of control emerges through programs that use activity at the expense of real learning. For Ritzer, control occurs through the substitution of non-human technology for human technology (Ritzer, 1996). In the experiential paradigm activity can easily substitute for real human interaction. Students “experience” a product delivered to them. They rarely have control over its construction. This is pronounced in its difference from Dewey’s definition of control. “Control, in truth, means only an emphatic form of the direction of powers, and covers the regulation gained by an individual through his own efforts quite as much as that brought about when others take the lead” (Dewey, 1916, p. 24). Yet experiential education is not only vulnerable to processes of co-optation as typified by Ritzer’s McDonaldization, it also can function as an amplifier of other hegemonic processes, such as commodification.

### ***It’s a Small World After All***

For Henry Giroux, it is Disney, as opposed to McDonald’s, that best represents the power of a cultural icon and its ability to shape societal values and actions.

Questioning what Disney teaches is part of a much broader inquiry regarding what it is parents, children, educators, and others need to know in order to critique and challenge, when necessary, those institutional and cultural forces that have a direct impact on public life. Such inquiry is most important at a time when corporations hold such an inordinate amount of power in shaping children’s culture into a largely commercial endeavor, using their various cultural technologies as teaching machines to commodify and homogenize all aspects of everyday life—and in this

sense posing a potential threat to the real freedoms associated with a substantive democracy. (Giroux, 1999, p. 11)

For Giroux then, questioning Disney is as much about keeping a critical eye on the social forces of commercialization and its effects on real lives as it is about deconstructing the iconic meaning of a Mouse. As our public spheres become increasingly commodified, the ability of individuals acting in those spheres to participate in shaping the future becomes more and more limited. In a sense, we become an entertained populace rather than an educated one. “None of us stands outside of the cultures of pleasure and entertainment that now hold such sway over American society. The test of such cultures . . . may lie . . . in their capacity to offer narratives of pleasure without undermining the basic institutions of democracy” (Giroux, 1999, p. 12). As the language and operational values of business and entertainment culture continue to seep their way into our public spheres, it should be no surprise that our schools would be affected. Indeed, educational researchers have begun to focus more attention on the “mis-educative” effects of mass-marketing in our schools (Molnar and Reaves, 2002). In summary, the rise in corporate sponsorship and the business-like reform discourse of “accountability,” “consolidation,” and “achievement” all indicate the vulnerability of schools and educational institutions to the processes of commodification represented iconically by Disney. This commodification can be amplified through various processes. It is my suspicion that experiential approaches can function in just this way.

### ***The Disneyfication of Experience***

Mitch Sakofs uses the metaphor of candy to explain how experiential activities can become trivialized in their application: “I was seeing powerful activities used indiscriminately, without thought, resulting in an unintentional outcome of trivializing them through overuse and/or misapplication. In effect, and in a metaphoric sense, making them candy-sweet and desirable, but with no substance or meaning, or robbed of substance or meaning” (Sakofs, 2001, p. 5). Sakofs goes on to say that a second metaphor may help illuminate the problem—that of antibiotics. To Sakofs, overuse or misapplication of experiential activities can lead to “resistance” or even immunity to the powers of the educational process. He concludes by advising practitioners to better discern when they are being asked to deliver “candy” and when they are being asked to actually educate. While recognizing the need for people in the business of experiential programming to “make a living,” he encourages practitioners to resist the temptation and hold themselves to a higher ethical standard as purveyors of “education” not “recreation” (Sakofs, 2001, p. 5). Again, similar to Wichmann and Garvey, Sakofs correctly identifies a concern with the techno-rational paradigm, the Disney-like “edutainment” that can occur with experiential programming. But he

falls short of critically examining this “Disneyfication of experience” and its potential to sanitize and trivialize transformative pedagogies.

To summarize, the experiential construction of experience functions to amplify its commodification and it makes the broader pedagogy more vulnerable to co-optation and criticism. Gone from this construction is the Deweyan legacy of placing experience at the center of the educational endeavor. In its place is deliverable product, easily made into candy. In its place are students thoughtlessly regurgitating “what they think we want to hear” (Garvey, 2002, p. 5). Recently, the United States has experienced tremendous growth in experiential programming at both the secondary and post-secondary levels (Punzon, 1999). Ropes courses, climbing walls, service-learning trips, expeditionary learning programs, environmental education units, and other approaches have become standard in many localities. Organizations have sprung up around the country to offer summer programs, often targeted to at-risk youth who attend as an option to jail time or whose parents send them as a “last resort.” Interestingly, these courses have become known as “hoods-in-the-woods” programs, a term that reveals much about the hegemony embedded within experiential education today. The vast majority of these experiences seem to be limited in timeframe—a few hours in most cases to a few days or weeks for the rare exceptions. Almost all programs of this type tout the importance of reflection (or the processing of the experience after the fact). But, in reality, and as the speech from Dan Garvey suggests, these reflection “sessions” are mechanical, formulaic, and often devoid of true meaning. “What was that last activity about, kids?” “Trust!” “Eric, what did you learn from our service day today?” “That I can make a difference!” The responses spill forth like cheers at a pep rally—well orchestrated, but perhaps devoid of real feeling. We convince ourselves that our students have learned something of worth.

Lest one think this type of educational approach only pertains to the world of outdoor education, I offer a specific example from higher education. At the institution where I currently teach, we have decided to require a new course for all first-year students entitled “Living and Learning in Community.” The idea behind the course is to teach essential life-skills and values to help entering students navigate college and this major transition in their lives. Communication, leadership, and decision-making skills are discussed along with attempts to develop relationships and community (with a small dose of service-learning thrown in for good measure). The faculty teaching this course often use experiential techniques to illuminate the material. Yet, a first-year student, providing feedback on the course, remarked, “I would like it to include real life controversies that happen in the dorm instead of always talking about the hypothetical.” How could a course, designed specifically to bring ideas of the community into the curriculum, still not address “real life” for this student? This response, I would argue, is a direct result of an experiential paradigm that sees “life-skills” and experience as something to be taught in isolation, moment to moment.

“Today we will be discussing leadership. Thursday we will do service.” It falls prey to the false dichotomy that real life exists outside the classroom, but what we do “in here” is artificial.

### ***The Ethics of Experience***

What are the ethical consequences of such an educational approach? Two come immediately to mind—one specific, the other general. My specific concern relates directly to the field of experiential education and the ideal of hands-on learning. In the words of Katy Haycock of the Education Trust, “are we giving the very kids who need more, less?” Experiential education is often targeted at historically marginalized groups: “at-risk” students, adjudicated youth, alternative educational programs, etc. These are the students who often do not succeed in more mainstream educational environments. Yet, if the experiential approach leans more toward Disney than Dewey, we may be reproducing existing stratification rather than ameliorating it. What is needed are orchestrated experiences that transform both the subject and the student. Yet, it seems more often than not, what needy students get is watered-down content and disconnected and superfluous activity that succeeds only in getting them further behind. There is evidence to support this fear. A study believed by its authors to be “the best records yet reported for a follow-up program for troubled youth” who participated in a short-term adventure therapy program indicated that the youth in question seemed to end up in a worse situation emotionally and educationally than prior to enrolling in the program (Durgin and McEwen, 1993, p. 325). Additionally, research suggests significant variability in program quality and instructor qualifications for such programs (Matthews, 1993; Rosol, 2000). Finally, the effectiveness of hands-on methods in the classroom has been questioned.

The research suggests that such methods are uncertain, unfair (not all children learn from them), and inefficient, and therefore should be used sparingly. Caution is especially required when the phrase “hands-on” is used to imply disdainfully that visual and verbal learning is artificial and unengaging. Antiverbal prejudices spell disaster for disadvantaged students, who have not been exposed to the breadth of verbal learning outside the school. (Hirsch, 1996, p. 253)

While some in the field have begun to articulate a social justice approach to experiential education—going so far as to claim it as an “emancipatory practice” (Warren and Loeffler, 2000, p. 87)—sustained efforts in this regard are currently lacking. Better research into the impacts (both negative and positive) of experiential approaches is needed. Deliberation on the theoretical and practical meanings of experience in education in addition to louder self-criticism from within the field can also help guard against the co-optation of experience.

My general concern relates to the kind of citizen we produce under the experiential paradigm. If we are to concede that commercialization has a growing

presence in our schools, there is a clear and present danger to our democracy. Our sense of unity and solidarity becomes based upon consumption rather than creation and participation (Molnar and Reaves, 2002). And for Dewey,

it may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice, that is, at the mercy of impulses into whose formation intelligent judgment has not entered. A person whose conduct is controlled in this way has at most the illusion of freedom. Actually he is directed by forces over which he has no command. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 64–65)

Thus, in a general sense, the experiential paradigm becomes part of a larger problem, rather than a potentially powerful and transformational curriculum response. Pre-packaged and sweet (like candy), efficiently and predictably managed (like McDonald's), and slickly produced (like Disney), it can give us only the illusion of freedom. If our nation is to address real concerns of inequality, marginalization, hegemony, and injustice, we must learn a new sense of civics—one that is based upon the ideals of participation, deliberation, community, and responsibility. And we can best achieve these ideals through our public schools. But only if we *practice*. Experiential education, as currently constructed, does not allow for enough of this level of “deep play.”

## **Conclusion**

So, what is the alternative to the experiential approach? Or, more fairly, what is the deeper pedagogy we ought to be advocating? I would argue for a return to the Deweyan notion of placing experience at the center of the educational endeavor. Rather than seeing it as the application of technique, we ought to be exploring the richness and complexity of experience in the curriculum in both theory and practice. This may not please educators looking for the “right” experiential curriculum. I would argue that the project is not about foundational guidelines or technical models but rather a dynamic, relational reconstruction. This, I believe, holds true to Dewey's pragmatic roots—that curricular solutions ought to emerge from localized, empirical considerations.

This stress follows from pragmatism's shift away from first principles, self-evident truths, and epistemic foundations to effects, fruits, consequences. The contingency of self, community, and world as well as the revisability of theories, knowledges, and moralities leads Dewey to quip, “What should experience be but a future implicated in a present!” In this sense, experience is experimental. (West, 1989, p. 90)

To play off of the notion of the “revisability of theory,” what does it mean to place experience at the center of the educational endeavor? That question, rather than the more ubiquitous “what activities can I do?” ought to be our mission. When considering the first question, synergies with many recent works

come to mind. Parker Palmer's construct of the role of the teacher (1998), Gail McCutcheon's idea of solo and group deliberation (2002), David Orr's distinctions between "slow" and "fast" knowledge (2002), and work from the brain-based learning field (Caine and Caine, 1994; Roberts, 2002) all speak to the theoretical idea of experience at the center of the curriculum. Such an open, theoretical approach can even reveal individuals that have never been considered as part of the experiential paradigm (Dorothy Lee's incredible collection of essays, *Valuing the Self*, comes immediately to mind here). In terms of practice, the agenda for those who care about the transformational role of experience in the curriculum includes reflecting on the local successes and failures of our experiential practices while resisting the desire for a universal experiential approach. While models exist such as Deborah Meier's community work in New York and Boston, Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools (1997), and James Beane's (1997) work with curriculum integration, caution must be exercised in normalizing these approaches. Meier herself speaks to the value of difference:

If all schools are not required to follow the same fads, maybe they will learn something from their separate experiments. And that will nurture the two indispensable traits of a democratic society: a high degree of tolerance for others, indeed genuine empathy for them, as well as a high degree of tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and puzzlement, indeed enjoyment of them. (Meier, 1995, p. 30)

Education is messy. I do not believe that a unified, operational definition of "good" experiential education is possible, or even desirable. The critiques I have developed here are intended to encourage deliberation and careful consideration of the *variety* of forms of experience in education and their potential ethical consequences. My suggested agenda here is to continue to think it out and practice it out—admittedly, not a ready-made, easy solution or fix. But Dewey did not believe this new education to be easy. "I admit gladly that the new education is *simpler* in principle than the old. . . . But the easy and the simple are not identical. To discover what is really simple and to act upon the discovery is an exceedingly difficult task" (Dewey, 1938, p. 30). Placing experience at the center of the curriculum is not easy, and it is no surprise that we haven't quite got it "right" yet. But may we forever keep trying.

## Notes

1. A notable exception would be E. D. Hirsch and his critique of "hands-on learning" and "learning by doing" in *The Schools We Need and Why Don't Have Them*.
2. It is important to note here that Dewey's definition of autonomy is bound in social interaction and should not be confused with more modernistic, Kantian constructions of the atomized and rational individual. In this sense, Dewey was interested in a person's ability to act on circumstances and events rather than to control them.

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