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## The Pedagogy of Experience: A Case Study of Pilgrimage as Experiential Learning

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# **The Pedagogy of Experience: A Case Study of Pilgrimage as Experiential Learning**

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**Abstract:** Findings from this case study of the extended pilgrimage of an ecumenical group of forty mid-career pastors to the Holy Land suggest how importance of an ecological understanding of experiential learning that includes insight, whole person learning, context, spirituality and transformation as aspects of experiential learning.

Experiential learning has long captivated adult educators since Dewey (1938) and Lindeman (1926) emphasized its importance in education. While there is a growing interest in learning from experience and experiential learning in adult education (Miller, 2000), both are highly contested in current theory and practice. Theorists distinguish between “using experience for learning” (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993), “learning from experience” (Miller, 2000), and “learning through experience” (Fenwick, 2003). Experiential learning is conceived variously as a process of individual cognitive reflection on lived experience (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007) where everyday life is the primary subject of learning (Usher, 1993). Some theorists emphasize affective (Yorks & Kasl, 2002), embodied (Michelson, 1999; Clark, 2005), and participative (Lave & Wenger, 1991) dimensions of experiential learning. Jarvis and Hirji (2006) view learning as a whole person experience in a social context that transforms the person’s biography. Others underscore the role of learning in social change (Finger & Asun, 2001). Experiential learning is viewed as both a philosophy and a practice (Boud, 2005). Scholars have tried to capture the complexity of experiential learning through metaphors such as Weil and McGill’s (1998) “four villages” and Saddington’s (1998) tree with “roots and branches.”

While experiential learning has been identified as “virtually the dominant discourse” in adult education (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 197), there is no clear understanding of the meaning of experiential learning, its application to adult learning, and relationship to adult education. Although Fenwick (2003) suggests that experiential learning is a complex ecology of “troubling orthodoxy and intersecting questions,” her depiction of five theoretical approaches holds promise for making sense of this core concept in adult education. These approaches to experiential learning include constructivist, situated, psychoanalytic, critical cultural, and complexity theories. Fenwick (2003) claims that “experiential learning needs to be envisioned with broader perspectives than self-improvement, skill development and productivity” (p. 192). The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of experiential learning from a broader perspective through an interpretive case study (Merriam, 2001) of an extended holistic learning experience.

## **Methodology**

Building on a subjective, interpretivist, postmodern foundation, the eight-month case study captured the experience of an ecumenical and culturally diverse group of forty

mid-career pastors who as a group, took a pilgrimage to a site that was holy for them. “A case study,” according to Yin (1994), “is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13).

Pilgrimage is an intentional learning journey usually made by groups of people to a sacred site and was chosen for this study because its holistic experiential emphasis has long been recognized as a transformative experience of learning in many world religions (Coleman & Elsner, 1995; Clift & Clift, 1996). The essentially holistic, heuristic, participatory, and bounded nature of pilgrimage makes it an interesting case for exploring the nature experiential learning. The forty participants in the study represented a diverse group of twelve women and twenty eight men, from seventeen states and Canada, all ordained pastors having served an average of eighteen years in ministry. Although the majority of participants were Presbyterian, participants also came from the United Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal Holiness, United Church of Christ, and the United Church of Canada denominations.

The pilgrimage took place in January 2006 and involved a two week pilgrimage journey to Israel where the group visited holy sites, engaged in group conversation, worship, times of reflection, and recreation. The pilgrimage was preceded by a three day orientation retreat where participants told and listened to each others’ life stories and prepared for the technicalities of the journey. The journey was followed by a second three day retreat where participants reflected on their experience and its potential applications. Surrounding these activities was a web of electronic communication involving participants, their families, congregations, and friends.

Data for the study were drawn from participants’ written reflections completed before, during and after the pilgrimage experience, notes from daily face-to-face meetings, participant observations, individual interviews, and field notes. Group interviews were conducted during the orientation retreat, on the pilgrimage itself, and at the follow up retreat. Additional data sources consisted of over 400 emails collected over the eight month period, a comprehensive journal compiled by participants, and personal reflection papers completed at the conclusion of the project. All data were transcribed and entered into QSR NVivo for analysis using the constant comparative method to identify the themes emerging from the participants’ experiences of making a pilgrimage. Research was participatory in that participants helped gather and interpret data. As researcher I also participated in the pilgrimage as group leader and as a pilgrim myself. Validity was strengthened using extensive member checking throughout the process. Limitations include the intensely experiential nature of pilgrimage which was highly subjective for both the researcher and the participants.

### **Findings**

Findings did not emerge as discrete themes, but as a narrative of experience and learning in context that had sensual and spiritual dimensions described as insightful and transformative. The following presentation of study findings is integrated with the literature as suggested by Bogden and Bilken (1992). In many cases themes were overlapping and interconnecting. The following story of one female participant is illustrative.

*The entire Temple Mount experience from the southern steps of Jesus' time to the excavations under Robinson's Arch, to Western Wall Tunnel and the prayer plaza at the Wailing Wall brought together the whole pilgrimage for me. At the Western Wall itself praying with so many devout, observant Jewish women as dusk began to fall I experienced a thread of the transient, temporary nature of human efforts fully encompassed by the infinite, eternal presence of God. Many of us placed written prayers in the crevices of the Wall, as has been the custom for many years. Thinking about my life, my family and my ministry experience, I was awkwardly trying to place my written prayers in the crevice when I caught a glimpse of a young Jewish woman next to me trying to do the same thing. She smiled a knowing smile. I wondered what her prayer was. With my hands on the cold stones of the Wailing Wall reflecting on the challenges of family and congregation amid a cacophony of Hebrew prayers and chants, I heard the Muslim call to prayer from a minaret overhead, soon joined by the deep drones of the bells from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Something or someone touched me. An unforgettable reminder of how all three of these living faith traditions are birthed from one place and one God and are lived out here at the same place in the lives of people from all over the world. I will never see my life, my faith or the religious faiths of others in the same way again.*

In this story, as with many others in the study, learning was a whole person experience (Yorks & Kasl, 2002), embodied (Michelson, 1999), and somatic or sensual (Amann, 2003). As one participant said, "I learned by seeing, doing, being, hearing, touching, smelling, remembering – all together." Learning was a "direct embodied experience... an immediate encounter in the here-and-now, planned or unplanned, involving us physically, emotionally, sensually, mentally, and perhaps spiritually" (Fenwick, 2003, p. 13). Another participant remarked, "God was in my journey – the conversations, and the smells, the tastes of food, and texture and feel of it."

Participants described themselves as enmeshed in the context of the geography of their journeys, their relationships with other participants on the journey, encounters with local people, and the sense of sacred space they encountered. As one participant said, "I can't just name one thing [a learning]; everything is connected to something else." The context of learning was physical, relational, and temporal – in a real sense inseparable from the person describing his or her experience. As one female participant noted: "It was as if those places somehow attached to me... like I was connected to the experience. It was me. The memories and experiences are not just in my mind, they're in my blood." Another said, "The people and their stories touched me... they changed me." For almost all participants the evolving relationships with other pilgrims were central to their own learning. As one said, "In our group meetings as I heard others tell about connections they made between the pilgrimage experiences and their lives, I too became aware of connections. In a strange way I was drawn into a deepening sense of community with these pilgrims that I did not even know a short time earlier."

Whole person learning included experiences that participants described as physical, emotional, and rational. Many of these experiences had a spiritual dimension that participants associated not only with religious ritual, but also with nature and place.

*The event that I will long remember from the pilgrimage was an evening walk to the Makhtesh Ramon Crater. A fellow pilgrim and I set out into the dark along the*

*edge of the crater. There was a strong wind blowing across the desert. As we walked along the lip of the crater, doing our best to keep from being blown away, we talked about our struggles and questions of faith, family and vocation. In the darkness, under the stars, the force and strength of this unseen force was spellbinding. My fatigue of spirit was very raw and real in the windy darkness of this holy and conflicted land. Our trek ended as we climbed "Camel Hill" a small hillock perhaps fifty or sixty meters higher than the surrounding landscape. On top the wind seemed to increase exponentially. A kind of giddy sense of awe filled my spirit. Perhaps it was the confrontation with the elements; maybe just a weariness of spirit that reached a point where something had to give. Crawling over the hilltop, we could feel ourselves being physically buffeted - almost lifted - by the wind. I was reminded of Jacob on the Jabbok River, wrestling God, wrestling self, wrestling hope, as the future laid waiting for him on the other side of the stream. I turned into the wind, and with a voice as loud as I could muster against the gale, I cried out, "Bring it on, you hoary bastard!" I really don't know why I used this phrase. It just spoke to me of the ancient reality of God, I guess, and a way of naming of my own bottomless, perhaps, unanswerable questions. Like Jacob, perhaps it was really me I was wrestling with. Many weeks later, I am still not entirely certain what that hilltop encounter meant, but I do know it changed me. I don't see my life in the same way. My real life pilgrimage began not in Jerusalem or some traditional holy site, but weeks ago that night on a non-descript little hill out in the middle of the desert during a windstorm. Never would I have expected to encounter God in such a way.*

Insight was an important element in learning. Insight occurred as both apprehension and comprehension, often leaping over the steps involved in cognitive reflection, leading to a new sense of reality, and leaving the participant straining for words to describe the experience. Insight had a spiritual dimension. As exemplified by the two previous stories, spiritual insight was described as inseparable from physical experience. Yet it was more than a physical experience. Participants described it as mysterious and powerful, transcending one's ability to understand and describe it. Often spiritual experience was described as a catalyst for change for participants. As one male participant said, "Somehow the Spirit touched me on that boat on the Sea of Galilee. I can't explain it but at that moment I saw my spouse and family in a totally different way and it changed everything."

Learning led to change according to participants. All but two pilgrims reported their experiences as transformational, which included expanding one's spiritual perceptions often in dramatic ways, overcoming physical challenges, and gaining new perspectives and greater clarity of their vision for life. For many the journey involved an awareness of disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006) viewed as dis-location associated with place, time, culture, religion, and ethnicity. Often this experience of disjuncture, closely associated with life changes and new perspectives, emerged in conjunction with what might best be termed "liminal experiences" (Turner & Turner, 1978) of heightened awareness, apprehension, and new insight that participants described as spiritually transforming.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of experiential learning from a broader perspective through an interpretive case study of an extended holistic learning experience. Each of the five learning perspectives identified by Fenwick (2003) was present in the findings from this study. The constructivist perspective focused on individuals reflecting on experience cognitively in order to make meanings of their worlds. Extensive evidence for this approach was found in individual journals, transcripts of group meetings, and interviews. The situative approach emphasized helping people to become fuller participants in a community of practice, in this case a group of pilgrims who created authentic conditions for participation as they learned to become a learning community. The psychoanalytic perspective was especially evident in journal reflections and transcripts of group meetings as participants made connections recognizing the complex dynamics of their life histories. Critical theory as an approach to learning was particularly evident in attempts to understand the complexities of the political situation, and in subtle ways to subvert the power dynamics surrounding the Palestinian / Israeli conflict. The ecological orientation to learning was present in the group's experience in living their way into the unfolding and complex systems encountered in the journey and its aftermath.

While each of the perspectives was present, and in a real sense each helps to illuminate the others in ways similar to those suggested by Fenwick (2003), findings underscore the greater theoretical strength of the ecological learning perspective in framing the overall learning experience, suggesting that the larger the contextual frame of reference for a description of learning, the richer the potential tapestry of learning that is perceived in the experience. The duration, scope, and participatory nature of this pilgrimage as a case study allowed the complexities of experience to become manifest. Findings also suggest a dynamic, intersubjective (Davis, 2004) relationship between the individual and the contextual environment, underscoring the need to move beyond traditional conceptualizations of learning with their attempts to foreground or objectify the individual or contextual dimensions of learning.

In this study participants described a fabric of learning with apparently disparate elements, which in fact were interconnected through experience. In ways similar to Davis (2004) learning in this study involved "expanding the space of the possible and creating the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined... broadening what is knowable, doable, and beable. The emphasis is not on what *is*, but on what might be brought forth. Thus learning comes to be understood as a recursively elaborative process of opening up new spaces of possibility by expanding current spaces" (p. 184). Although limited by the particularities of this case such as its focus on pastors, the Middle East, and a religious or spiritual focus, the case does offer important insights that offer promise for extending the understanding and practice of experiential learning in other settings.

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