A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning

Theory and Practice

Jennifer A. Moon

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This handbook acts as an essential guide to understanding and using reflective and experiential learning – whether it be for personal or professional development, or as a tool for learning.

It takes a fresh look at experiential and reflective learning, locating them within an overall theoretical framework for learning and exploring the relationships between the different approaches.

As well as the theory, the book provides practical ideas for applying the models of learning, with tools, activities and photocopiable resources which can be incorporated directly into classroom practice.

This book is essential reading to guide any teacher, lecturer or trainer wanting to improve teaching and learning.

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Contents

Preface

A practical and theoretical approach

This handbook is concerned with two topics that have normally been seen as separate, with their own literatures and their own experts who were not necessarily experts in learning as a general topic. There have been experts in reflective learning, experiential learning and student learning, with relatively little meeting of minds or ideas about practical issues. With changes in educational practice and, in particular, the developing emphasis on reflective learning in higher education, these experts need to work together. Experiential learning is, for example, very often assessed through written work that is, in essence, reflective. The use of learning journals is an example. As there is more interest in the theoretical perspectives of reflective and experiential learning, we see the literatures beginning to overlap. Now it is timely to do the theoretical exploration work in order to sort out the nature of the overlap – how reflective and experiential learning are the same and how they differ. In order to do this, we have started with the basic questions about the process of learning itself. We have related both reflective and experiential learning to a basic model of learning, and then considered how they relate to each other.

Handbooks are both theoretical and practical. With the increase in the use of reflective and experiential learning in higher education and professional development, teachers might be asked to be involved with these kinds of learning and there is a need for supportive literature, which is both theoretical and practical. People who would not consider themselves to be reflective are being asked to encourage their students to reflect, when they know that some of their students may be more reflective than they themselves are. On the practical side, this handbook covers topics such as how to introduce reflective activities and then to improve the quality of the reflection. It covers assessment issues, considers work experience as a form of experiential learning

and provides many further activities that may be used in different contexts to facilitate different forms of learning.

The book is divided into a number of parts that move from a broad view of learning in general, to reflective and experiential learning, and how they relate to this general view of learning and to each other. It then goes on to more practical issues, ending with practical activities. There are several points in the book where material is summarized, so 'beginning to end' reading of this book is not essential. Some readers may be more interested in the general material on learning in the first four chapters; some might want to start with the summary of the generic view of learning in Chapter 5 and move through the theoretical material on reflective and experiential learning. Some may be interested in the chapters that concern the implementation of reflective learning, and some may want to pick from the practical activities only in Chapters 10, 12 and the Resources section.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

A book often directs its writer. I should have known that when I started writing – even with a set of planned chapters in front of me. Now, as I come to this introductory chapter, late on in the process of writing, I notice how the book differs from the original plan. However, as an alternative introduction, I could also say that this book is a research project in itself and research is generally about discovery and not of knowing the answers before one starts. So this is what the book is – it is both a book that wrote its own way around and about material on reflective and experiential learning, and a research project that has been written according to the findings as they emerged.

Boundaries

I start by looking at some of the boundaries of this book. It is largely focused on sophisticated learning, though there are many ideas introduced that could be directed towards the earlier developmental stages of the process of learning. The text is mainly concerned with learning in relatively formal situations but there are also implications for non-formal and everyday learning. I have not been able to develop all these areas of reading as much as I would like in this book. In particular, I wanted to think further about everyday learning situations but space limitations create their own boundaries. When terms are applied in formal situations and caught up in theory that primarily relates to the formal situations, we tend to forget their relevance to the activities of everyday life and so it is with these words – 'reflection' and 'experiential learning'. I take the position in the book that we all reflect and that all learning is based on experience. All learning is therefore 'experiential learning' in one

sense. Learning from a lecture is still a matter of experiencing the lecturer's words, and many other things about being in the lecture theatre. Learning is learning from experience – but for the sake of clarity, we move towards more specific uses of the terms from the middle part of the book. The book is essentially about conscious learning. One form of learning that is largely excluded from consideration here is the learning of physical skills, though it is acknowledged that there is a link between reflective processes and actual skill.

The aim of the book is to develop greater understanding and more practical use of reflective and experiential learning as forms of more sophisticated learning. Both forms are well reviewed in relation to their own literature – they are reviewed in the context of reflective and experiential learning respectively but there is relatively little in the literature that links them with the new literature on what we term here 'generic' learning. They are somehow seen as being apart from other forms of learning and are treated in a different manner – there are whole programmes based on 'experiential learning', for example – as if it is learning that is different. From reading and previous writing, however, it is evident that these forms of learning are intimately related – and sometimes, but not always, they coincide.

There is also a practical aim to this book which becomes particularly important towards the end where there are chapters on practical ways of introducing and exploiting reflective and experiential learning in educational and other situations.

Routes into and roots of . . .

There have been many roots to this book and many routes into it. There are some obvious roots in other topics of my previous books which had their own roots described in their early pages. They also had their 'short-comings' – areas to which I wished to return in more detail. For example, in the first book, on reflection and learning (Moon, 1999a), the idea of learning journals intrigued me and led directly and quickly into the second book on learning journals (Moon, 1999b). Issues that arose briefly in both these books were assessment and the notion that there might be a 'depth dimension' to reflection. There were also issues relatively unexplored about how learners could be helped to develop reflection. This latter issue became evident as reflection was introduced more and more into curricula. The learning journal book left me with a sense of excitement and curiosity about learning in the everyday sense from experience – what role does reflection play? Although I did address how we learn from learning journals, I felt that there was more to do on this topic.

The next book about effectiveness in running short courses and workshops might seem to be a different track but it led to more thought about the relationship between learning and teaching or facilitation and again to the

role of reflection and learning from experience (Moon, 2001a). It also led me, in a large way, back to David Kolb's work (Kolb, 1984) and the manner in which it is exploited as a quick explanation of 'how we learn from experience' in so many texts. *The Module and Programme Development Handbook* (Moon, 2002a) did, perhaps, have less in common with the other three texts – but it is about precision in understanding what is going on in learning. It contrasts with much that has been written about reflection and experiential learning where assumptions are made so often without question and where imprecision may be a stimulus to curiosity.

A further academic route into the writing of this book has been my (latter) involvement with the very successful work experience modules developed in a partnership between Exeter and Plymouth Universities (Watton and Collings, 2002). Seeing the students going into work situations in order to learn about work and to learn about learning raised intriguing questions. What did the students learn; how did they learn from the experiences in work and what did they mean to them? Were they assessed on what they were learning? How were we able to guide them in their learning in this 'teacher-less' and 'curriculum-less' environment? There were interesting marketing issues with the module too – trying to 'sell' it to the schools in the universities so that they would support their students in pursuing the module. I thought about how the learning in the module could support the learning of students within their disciplines (Moon, 2002b) and that brought me back to reflective and experiential learning.

A major learning point for me, which arose from the learning journal book, was the value of maintaining a learning journal alongside any major life event, in particular those that involve ongoing thought. Three years ago when I began to consider the writing of this, I started such a journal. It is a source of comments, observations, inspirations, questions, 'excitements' about sources of ideas (notes from literature are separate), and so on. It has allowed a range of questions to be kept alive over time. There are now over a hundred written (A5) sheets of it and it has been helpful in shaping this book at a deep level as well as in more superficial ways. In particular, the pages of the journal remind me of some of the high points of my own learning in the context of this book. Among them are the following:

- Early on in the writing project, I went on holiday with a new friend, camping together and kayaking on Cornish rivers. I had camped before and kayak locally – but the circumstances were new and there was much to learn! I recognized that there might be something in common here with the kind of learning in work experience where generally known skills are used in new circumstances. I decided to write about what I had learnt. This process is described in more detail in Chapter 12. It was a source of much learning both about the activities and also about learning from reflection and experience.

- Not much later I decided to treat an emotionally disturbing incident as a source of learning from experience in a similar way. Again I learnt a great deal – and, in particular, I became acutely aware of the labile nature of emotion and how my accounts written in subsequent days varied – I could say 'slid around'. This is an important issue in reflective writing and led to considerations about depth in reflective writing: the concept of the 'slipperiness' of reflection and knowing features in the text.

- Another important high point in the progress of my learning was when I was asked to run a session for potential members of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE). The day before the workshop I was still wondering how I could help the participants to understand the nature of reflective writing. I began to write a story about an incident in a park. I then wrote it again in a more reflective mode, and again in a mode of deeper reflection (as I understand reflection to be). I used the exercise the next day, and it seemed to be helpful and generated much discussion. I have since used it with many staff and students who have to use or understand reflective writing. 'The Park' is reproduced in Resource 5. I have since developed several such exercises (Resources 6 and 10) and a framework that accompanies them (Resource 9).

- 'The Park' was the first use of fiction in the exercises designed for staff and educational development purposes. Since then I have seen great potential for the use of fiction in the development of reflective and experiential learning. After all, on a constructivist view of learning (Chapter 1), experience is all fiction – of our own or others' making. I have become very interested in the role of story telling in education as a means of enhancing learning in a wide variety of fields. Meeting and working with Maxine Alterio (McDrury and Alterio, 2002) was a great inspiration and there is more work to be done in this field. It seems to connect with the current considerations of how to bring more creativity and imagination into higher education learning.

- The 'high points' so far might suggest that this book is based entirely on personal experience and while, of course, it is in a sense, there has been a great deal of academic reading. Much of the reading is simply a matter of sitting down and reading, and writing notes. But then, every so often, there is real inspiration – the learning journal is out, the pen flies, not on notes for future reference, but on new ideas, questions, pro-activity that is engendered by the material. Margaret Donaldson's (1992) book, *Human Minds* was one such high point of inspiration. It is an extremely interesting book and encouraged me to think a great deal about the link between emotion and learning and my own prior experiences in counselling and personal development.

    Another such book was Marton and Booth (1997). I read this several times and took detailed notes. It is a book that seems to bring together much of what has been written about the student learning experience and

provided a substantial foundation for Chapter 1 on generic views of learn-
ing. Writing a learning journal seems often to bed particular experiences
in their location. I read this book on a sun-drenched window seat in late
afternoons in an old holiday cottage, thinking about what it was saying
about reflective and experiential learning.

There is a third set of authors who have remained an inspiration for
some years. They researched and wrote about the development of learners'
conceptions of knowledge. I consider that this is important material and
note how it is not often cited more than in passing. I have mentioned
Perry (1970) and King and Kitchener (1994) in earlier writing. In
some ways, their ideas are quite difficult to get across but more recently
I came across Baxter Magolda (1992) whose findings are similar to those
mentioned above, but whose work is much more accessible. She uses
quotations extensively to illustrate the ways in which learners in college
conceive of knowledge.

I have mentioned the work on academic literature that has gone into this
book. It is a feature of the book that the literature comes from a range of
disciplinary sources. The topic of learning, after all, belongs to everybody
and it cannot avoid appearing in every sub-discipline in the fields of education
and professional development. I have drawn on the following areas of litera-
ture: adult education; professional development; student learning; staff and
educational development; developmental psychology; cognitive psychology;
journal writings; personal development; work-related learning; experiential
learning in training and development; everyday learning and the develop-
ment of scientific thought.

Some notes on the style and use of words

As usual, I have considerations about gender. I am not masculine and nor is
half the population, so I do not want to use 'he' all the time and I dislike the
grammatically incorrect 'they'. I am female and to use 'she' is 100 per cent
right 50 per cent of the time. I therefore use the female gender wherever I
am referring to a person. I have also tended to avoid the word 'student'
since not all learners are students and I refer mostly to 'learners'.

There are a number of technical words that emerge particularly in Chapter 1
and then appear again somewhat later in the book. I have had to look up the
definitions sometimes for these words and I imagine that this might be an
issue for the reader. I have therefore compiled a Glossary of the more difficult
terms that appears before the Bibliography. One term that needs to be intro-
duced immediately is 'generic views of learning'. I found the need to coin this
term in order to distinguish between the generic views of learning largely
described in Chapter 1 and the specific material on reflective and experiential

learning that appears later in order to consider the links and not to perpetuate division.

This book is about probably most of the learning that anyone does (with the exception of physical skills). It is called reflective and experiential learning because these are the terms that people are using widely and which, I consider, require further elucidation. In fact, reflection probably plays a part in most good quality learning and all learning is experiential in one sense. The book is written to fulfil the following aims and as an exploration of:

- how experiential and reflective learning relate to what I call generic views of learning;
- how they relate to each other;
- their role and value in formal education;
- practical issues in their implementation in formal education.

The book also provides practical methods of using experiential and reflective learning.

Overview of the book

A handbook is a general text that combines theory and practical information. The theory in this book is in the first half and the general aim of this is to consider reflective and experiential learning as forms of generic learning. This approach is, as far as I know, new. In the literature of reflective and experiential learning, both forms of learning are discussed in relation to their own literature rather than in relation to more generalized views of learning. Reflective learning is reviewed against other literature on reflection, reflective practice and so on – and the same is true of experiential learning. It is timely to relate them to the processes of learning in general and to question their somewhat 'specialized' status.

Having laid a basis for a generic view of learning in Chapter 1, the next three chapters elaborate on aspects of the generic view that have particular relevance to reflective and experiential learning. These three aspects are described as manners of framing learning. They cover the development of conceptions of knowledge (Chapter 2), the role of emotion in learning (Chapter 3) and the approach adopted to learning by a learner (Chapter 4).

Chapter 5 follows the development of the view of generic learning but taking stock, looking back over the generic view of learning and forward to deal with one defining issue for both reflective and experiential learning – that they do not rely on a formal taught curriculum. In this context, we explore the idea of mediation in learning, providing some critical views of the often simplistic manner in which the notion of mediation is interpreted. The following chapters are concerned with the elucidation of reflective and

experiential learning as forms of learning in themselves and then in relation to the generic view of learning (Chapter 6), then to each other. Reflective learning is often involved in experiential learning, but they do not coincide completely. The view of reflective learning in this book is a development of that in my earlier books and materials. Chapter 7 is a further stage of development of this material in relation to the 'depth' dimension of reflection. The view of experiential learning is developed in a brief literature review in Chapter 8 while Chapter 9 draws together the material on reflective and experiential learning.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 present the more practical part of the book. The subject matter of these chapters has been developed in response to issues that have arisen in formal educational circumstances as tutors have instituted reflective and experiential learning within curricula. Chapter 10 deals with the difficulties that are often faced when reflective learning is introduced either on its own or as an element in experiential learning. It refers to a range of resources and exercises that can be used to facilitate reflective learning, some of which are in the Resources section at the end of the book. Chapter 11 also discusses an issue in reflective and experiential learning, it concerns assesssment. The final chapter provides additional ideas, resources, techniques and exercises that are designed to exploit reflective and experiential learning, usually in formal educational situations (Chapter 12). Chapters 10 and 12 include some substantial exercises. Some of the materials are included in the Resources section that follows. Since the Resources section includes material that may need to be directly copied for use with students, copyright is waived in this section and the materials may be photocopied freely.

Finally, a Glossary of the terms that have emerged in the early chapters in this book is provided, followed by an extensive Bibliography.

Part I

A generic view of learning

Chapter 1

The process of learning
The development of a generic view of learning

Introduction

In the Introduction, we indicated that Chapter 1 is the first of a set of four chapters that build a generic view of learning prior to considering how reflective and experiential learning relate to this. The first section looks at the issue of terminology that is used concerning the idea of learning and suggests that misuse and lack of vocabulary may skew our view of learning. New words and concepts are added to facilitate a clearer view of what learning might be. The second section of the chapter presents two ways of looking at learning – the 'building bricks' view and the 'network' view. The latter is pursued and developed throughout the remainder of the chapter particularly in relation to 'meaning' in learning, on which basis the two views particularly differ. The discussion also considers the social or individual connotations of 'meaning'. The next section illustrates some of the points made about 'meaning' and we introduce and explore the idea that all learning is based on experience. In the course of this discussion the terms 'external' and 'internal' experience are introduced.

There is constant emphasis in the chapter on the manner in which learning is a process with many events influencing and modifying each other simultaneously. A process in constant flux is difficult to describe in a linear manner. That learning is a process of constant mutually occurring modifications is one general principle that underpins this book and another is the centrality of the process of identifying figure from ground. This is elucidated by Marton and Booth (1997) and it is the important description of learning in Marton