

# The Many Modes of Experience and Learning: The Grandmasters of ECE

by David Elkind

As defined by psychologists, learning is *the modification of behavior as the result of experience*. The problem with this definition is that it leaves the term 'experience' undefined. The major contributors to early childhood education theory and practice each had his or her own conception of the process of acquiring knowledge. The philosophers were most concerned with the "What" of experience, while the practitioners were primarily concerned with the "How" of experience — with the process of learning itself. Finally, the theorists and researchers were preoccupied with the "Why" of experience and learning.

Brought together, these ideas afford a comprehensive picture of the many different modes of learning young children employ in learning about themselves and their world.

## ■ The Philosophers and the "What" of Experience

### John Amos Comenius:

- The unacknowledged father of modern education.
- Clearly articulated in the 17th century many of the modes of learning introduced by later workers.



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- Insisted that subjects should be taught from what is easy to what is more difficult and that children master their own language before learning a foreign one.

### John Locke:

- Indirectly laid the philosophical foundation for early childhood education.
- Believed the senses were the only answer to the question of "what" and experiences should be the basis of all learning saying, "Nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses." Knowledge could later be incorporated into books, but only after the sense experiences had been put together and conceptualized.
- In arguing that all knowledge comes first from the senses, Locke emphasized the importance of early childhood when sensory learning predominates: young children are learners from the start.
- Asserted that young children can be educated if the experiences to which they are exposed are suited to their developing sensory and motor AND INTELLECTUAL abilities.

### Jean Jacques Rousseau:

- Added a new dimension to Locke's conception of sense experience — two types of experience: *natural experience* (the child's encounters with plants, animals, sun, moon, earth, water, etc.)

and *group* (socially created experiences like manners and morals). Both were acquired through the senses, but had different outcomes.

- Believed that natural experience came from self-initiated experience with the real world and perpetuated the goodness of the child with which he or she was born.
- Maintained that social experience was essentially man-made and, from Rousseau's perspective, corrupting.
- Recognized that language was a social construct and instrumental in natural, as well as social, learning: all natural experience passes through a social filter.
- Emphasized that sequence is important: children should experience the natural world before being exposed to the potentially corrupting experience of the social world.

## ■ The Practitioners and the "How" of Experience

### Heinrich Pestalozzi:

- Less interested in *what* children learned than with *how* they learned.
- Introduced into elementary education what today we call 'discovery learning' or learning through the child's own activity.

- Followed Rousseau in arguing that children should discover the natural world before they discover the social one: children could learn the basics of the social world through direct experience with the natural one. In his school, children learned geography by walking about in their immediate world and then trying to draw or map it. They learned math by arranging and re-arranging pebbles.
- Described learning, which came through the child's own activity, as the 'object lesson': First was the encounter with the experience through the child's own activity (the discovery experience); second was the labeling of the experience (the learning part).
- Believed that it was only after the child had *re-presented* his experience in some way, through words, drawing, or action, that the subject was really learned.
- Believed that children learned through their own experiential discoveries and by re-presenting the experiences they had discovered.<sup>1</sup>

### Frederick Froebel:

- Gave the name Kindergarten to the type of early childhood education he created.
- A deeply religious man, Froebel believed that God was the creator and to emulate him man had to be creative as well.
- Maintained that children could also learn through their self-created experiences: namely, by engaging in play. When children build a block tower or castle out of sand, they have created their own experience inasmuch as these structures did not exist before.
- Aimed at helping children construct their own experiences and thus realize their own creative talents and powers.
- Argued that children could learn from their individual play-created experiences.

### Rudolf Steiner:

- Recognized the importance of the two modes of learning introduced by Pestalozzi and Froebel.
- Regarded Pestalozzi's elementary school mode of learning as primarily concerned with socialization and Froebel's emphasized individualization.
- Recognized still another mode of learning: participation in the arts, music, and dance — integrating socialization with individualization. In drawing, for example, the child learns important skills of how to handle a pencil or pen, but also has the opportunity to draw what he or she likes. Learning an instrument teaches the child social skills when playing with or for others, but also offers him or her the option of playing for personal pleasure. Dance provides another opportunity for both social interaction and individual expression.
- Advocated what today we call *integrated learning*, combining different learning modes in a single project. In the Waldorf schools, for example, children research, write, illustrate, and put together their individual textbooks. In this way they uniquely combine the individual and the social.<sup>2</sup>

### Maria Montessori:

- Turned to Locke and to Seguin for her inspiration. From Locke she took the idea that all knowledge comes first from sensory experience; from Seguin she took the idea that it is important to train the senses before using them for learning.
- Asserted that in the training of the senses the child learns important general skills like concentration, attention, and persistence that can then be applied to all other modes of learning.
- Designed activities to exercise the senses. Her colored skeins are used to help children discriminate different colors and hues; her sandpaper letters aid tactile

discrimination; the pink block tower facilitates, among other things, size discrimination. A series of bells with different tones helps children recognize the different sounds of the musical scale.

- Contributed to the "how" of learning the idea that *children had to learn how to learn*, because skills learned in sensory training could then be transferred to all other modes of learning.

## ■ Theorists and Researchers and the "Why" of Experience and Learning

Prior to Freud, all of the Grandmasters believed that learning was motivated and that young children had a natural need to know and to understand their world. They assumed this motivation was supported and encouraged by all of the principles of sound education, articulated by Comenius. The early workers tended to believe, with Rousseau, that children were basically good, and that any 'bad' behavior was the result of negative environmental experiences.

### Sigmund Freud:

- Added the concept of *unconscious motivation*.
- Argued that at least some of a child's troubling behavior came from the child's own unconscious experiences.
- Freud demonstrated how unconscious experiences, feelings, and emotions, could give rise to symbolic expression in play and other behaviors. In the case of "Little Hans," (Freud, 2002) for example, Freud demonstrated that Hans's fear of horses was actually a displaced fear of his father's retribution for his son's Oedipal wishes. Little Hans, Freud argued, was not bad for having these wishes; he was simply going through a developmental stage.
- Pointed out that young children often dealt with their developmentally appropriate unconscious fears and anxieties through play.

A good example is the infant's enjoyment of the game of Peek-a-boo. This universal engagement in hiding and re-appearing is the way in which many infants are helped to deal with their separation anxiety: the anxiety produced by the disappearance of caregivers whom they believe will never return. Children can thus conquer their unconscious fears and anxieties through their self-created play.

- Provided, for parents and teachers, a new and important way of looking at and understanding young children's behavior.

What before appeared to be irrational, or even self-punishing activities, can now be related to unconscious experiences that the child is trying to cope with in a symbolic way. Much so-called destructive and anti-social behavior of young children is of this type. Understanding the emotional underpinnings of such behavior provides both parents and teachers new tools for helping children deal with stresses, which are not immediately obvious. So, to the child's natural need to learn, Freud added unconscious motivations and experiences, which can dramatically affect the child's behavior.

### Jean Piaget:

- Added that there is not only an affective unconscious but a *cognitive, intellectual* one as well. Children's self-created words provide an excellent example of the intellectual unconscious. Young children often use words they themselves have made up: "stocks" for stockings and socks, "choo-choo bird" for an airplane, and "daddy's work purse" for a father's briefcase. Children are, however, totally unaware that the term or phrase they are using is of their own making and assume that everyone understands them. Young children thus externalize (take as real) their own mental creations. This is the heart of constructivism.
- Helped us to appreciate that the child's reality is different than our own. If we understand that children believe that things which happen together cause one

another, we can understand why a child might think that raising a shade makes the sun rise. Likewise, we can appreciate why a child might think that a longer car travels faster than a shorter one. These ideas are not wrong; they are just different ways of thinking based on different levels of ability and different constructions of reality.

### Erik Erikson:

- To the concepts of unconscious emotional and intellectual motivation and experiences, Erikson added those which have their origin in culture and society. The importance of such unconscious experiences is particularly important today. Thanks to modern communication and transportation, we all live in multicultural societies. In the United States and Canada, for example, some early childhood classrooms may have children who come from many different countries and who speak many different languages.
- Emphasized the importance of understanding, and respecting, the behavior of children who come from cultures other than our own. The customs and habits children unconsciously pick up from their society and culture determines how they perceive and understand their world. And they assume that everyone else sees it as they do. To people from other societies, however, their behaviors may seem strange or even rude. In a school I once ran, a Greek father came in and complained that his son had been made to wipe clean the table he had been working on. In the father's culture men did not do such things. We arranged a trade-off with another child who would do the cleaning while the Greek boy put some heavy things away — a more manly activity. We could not argue with the father's reality, so we adapted to it.

In an early childhood classroom I visited, a Hmong boy (a minority ethnic group based mainly in China) never finished the food on his plate, and tried to surrepti-

tiously push what he did not eat into the trash. In his society it is impolite not to finish what is on your plate so he was trying to avoid insulting his teachers. Understanding the unconscious origins of cultural practices and customs has become an important part of the training of early childhood educators.

- Contributed to our current understanding of learning *based upon unconscious societal/cultural experience.*

### Conclusion

Taken together these major contributors to early childhood education have expanded and enriched both our concepts of experience and of learning. Contemporary early childhood programs, regardless of what they are called, recognize and incorporate some or all of these types of learning. This is far from being the case at all of the higher levels of education. Indeed, early childhood education should be the model for all later levels of education and not the reverse.

### References

- Dewey, J. (1899/1900). *The school and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier.
- Freud, S. (2002). *The Wolf Man and other cases*. New York: Penguin.

### Endnotes

- 1 When John Dewey wrote of learning as the representation of experience, he was building upon the work of Pestalozzi. Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier.
- 2 Steiner thus anticipated Dewey's project method. Dewey, J. (1899/1900). *The school and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.