

## **The Experienced Idea:** **Using experiential approaches to teach philosophical concepts.**

### **Abstract:**

The central focus of this paper is to share several experiential activities we have designed over the course of our teaching careers that are used to help education students access and enter into philosophical ideas and discussions. These are students who tend to have little or no experience with philosophical texts and ideas and who are often intimidated by the very idea of philosophy. The activities and resultant processes shared in the paper are drawn from important educational discussions. For example, we shall offer experiential activities we have developed that have assisted our students into discussions and understandings of Plato's Republic and the Allegory of the Cave, John Dewey's scientific method, and Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. These activities came from our desire to find a way to scaffold our students into discussions which, for the most part, were quite foreign to them. We have found that by offering a thoughtfully created, tangible, and shared experiential encounter teacher candidates appear to have a better sense of the philosophical explorations and implications that underlie these key theoretical works. We also plan to use this paper as a chance to discuss the concept of experiential education as a means to better understand more theoretical pedagogical ideas. Rather than holding to the more simplistic ideas of learning-by-doing or hands-on-learning we have, through experience, implementation, and discussion found that experiential education has much more to offer the larger pedagogical world. Drawing out this discussion in the paper will help the reader to understand how we conceptualize experiential education and how that has led and supported us into creating these activities. We believe this pedagogy has much to offer teaching philosophers of education for the myriad of reasons discussed within the paper.

### **Introduction:**

Author 1 writes: *I remember the feeling of frustration, I just couldn't get a complete conceptual grasp of Plato's Republic, book VII. Yes, I could read all the words and I thought I had understood but when it came time to describing, re-encapsulating, and making understanding my own, the ideas seemed to slip, like so much sand, right through my cognitive fingers. I was fifteen years old and admittedly a bit precocious (with a suspicion of self-aggrandizement) when it came to philosophy, but Plato and this challenge were really pissing me off. Then it came to me, Plato is talking about a cave, being in one and coming out of one, and it is an experience he has probably had. Why not find a way to have a similar, even shared, experience and see if that helps my understanding? So, lacking the funds for a Grecian grotto junket I turned my bedroom into a cave (extending beyond the normal darkness of the adolescent living quarters). It became not just any cave, but Plato's cave, being as true as possible to every description in Jowett's translation. The result was that I came to understand the allegory better. I still remember it more robustly than other texts I have worked with since, and, intriguingly, the experience led to my own theory-building which to my surprise paralleled Plato's in further passages of the Republic that I had not yet read.*

What are the implications of this experience to the process of teaching philosophy? How might we as teaching philosophers understand a pedagogical practice that includes direct experiences as part of our teaching? And, might, as in the aforementioned case, philosophical ideas sometimes be better learned as experiences?

As philosophers of education, teaching philosophy predominantly in faculties of education, we have found that well designed somatic experiences can help further the understanding of new, complex ideas. In some cases, these experiences work to jump start discussion laid low by abstract or intimidating text, in others the shared experience provides fodder, and/or a focal point, for further theory-building, and in still other cases the difference in understanding may even be of kind, as well as degree.

While the practice of experiential education may seem to be far removed from the act of philosophizing, many philosophers already teach in ways that relate to this approach. Thought experiments, allegories and examples used by philosophers are often ways of bringing readers to intuitive perceptions of “rightness” that can then be explored more theoretically and abstractly. Making an idea “real” often involves imagining a philosophical example in more detail. In other words, if our hunch is correct, then the kind of teaching we explore here is to some extent already being done. Changes we advocate would entail some slight variation in the quality of the experience. They would certainly include an articulation of the practices more clearly. They would also include some distinct increase in valuing the significance of learning by this and similar approaches. Nonetheless, we think that what we are offering will be accepted by many as instinctively good teaching. In this paper, we provide three examples of teaching philosophy of education experientially. But before introducing these, some little background in experiential education is needed to situate them.

### **Part I: Experiential Education**

Experiential education, colloquially known as “learning by doing”, is a pedagogical process designed with one or more experiences serving as the centre of the learning. In structuring experiences, the goal is to engage learners in solving problems that have meaning and significance for them. The experiential activity, rising from the student’s own learning trajectory, is designed to challenge, to build directly on previous experience, and to engage more holistically, somatically, and even metaphorically with the content, concept to be learned.

The origins of current experiential education can be found in the work of the John Dewey. Dewey’s work was done in response to what he perceived as a removed and unresponsive “traditional” model of education in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Learning was characterized by mastering, rather dogmatically, a specified body of conveyed knowledge rather than by a “progressive” process of interacting with ideas, actively questioning, and growing understanding over time. With deep roots in American pragmatism and a strong affinity towards the larger scientific project of his day, Dewey naturally gravitated towards this growing progressivism.

The lynchpin in Dewey’s project was reason – the ability to think. For Dewey, there was an obvious and teachable way of thinking and this became the method behind the educated life. Experience, in particular the encountering and subsequent overcoming of a problem, became the curricular content of the educational process. But maybe, given the aim of this paper it behooves us to invite you to engage in an experience, one

designed to help our students understand Dewey's idea of problem-solving, his method of thinking, what later became known as the scientific method.

## **Part II: John Dewey and the sticky rope: Problem solving and the scientific method.**

Even some of the most abstract concepts may be illustrated through aptly designed experiences. Often students who have no interest in theoretical ideas will entertain them if there is an engaging experience that serves as an entry point for understanding. The pedagogical power of an experience is oftentimes belied by its seeming concreteness. The same may be said for metaphors which can also be routes into tricky concepts. By coupling metaphor and experience the learner is given two additional, and alternate, ways to make sense of the abstract.

John Dewey is one of the most influential philosophers of education in history. As part of the Pragmatic philosophical movement his philosophical explorations generally sought, not Truth, but likelihood and utility, specifically that which could help in the solving of practical, testable questions. One important element of his work was the extensive consideration of the process of thinking, which he wrote about quite specifically in *How We Think*, and which forms part of the background structure of his educational work in *Democracy and Education*, first published in 1916. For Dewey, "The sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking." (Dewey, 1966, p. 153)

For educators, Dewey's discussion of thinking comes to its most fevered pitch in Chapter twelve of *Democracy and Education*. It is here that he conjoins the "method of thought" with the "method of intelligent learning" (Dewey, 1966, p. 153) and "the method of an educative experience." (Dewey, 1966, p. 163) Thus, in his exploration of this critical act of thinking, Dewey comes to the conclusion that the method of teaching should both mirror and simultaneously teach students this method of thinking.

Processes of instruction are unified in the degree in which they center in the production of good habits of thinking. While we may speak, without error, of the method of thought, the important thing is that thinking is the method of an educative experience. The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essentials of reflection. (Dewey, 1966, p. 163)

For some, the method of thinking described in Chapter twelve, or a similar one, has become known as problem-solving education; for others, the scientific method; and for still others experimental or experiential education. In whichever guise it appears understanding Dewey's method is critical to understanding how he constructs the educational process. What follows is a description of a problem solving activity that gives education students an experience of Dewey's stance. We have also found that it may lead students to encounter their own, spontaneously arising problem solving methods—methods which, when more closely examined, often resemble Dewey's descriptions and, as such, provide us with an entry point into his somewhat stilted prose. We call the experience "Dewey's problem solving and the sticky rope initiative," or just "sticky rope," for short.

Ultimately, any "initiative" – a problem based learning activity – would serve since problem solving is the point of an initiative. However, we tend to use "sticky rope"

because it is simple, it develops gradually, and it allows a lot of opportunities to stop action and discuss the process should you choose to do so. In the experience itself, groups of five to eight students attempt to untie a rope from a vertical object – a freestanding post, a traffic light (the kind one finds in a parking lot as opposed to one with traffic buzzing by), or tree of some kind, anything with some space around it. A gracious, spreading oak on a grassy, sun-flecked sward wins top billing. The rope is tied around the tree and secured with a snug bowline, making sure that the two ends of rope leaving the knot are roughly equal in length and stretch out away from the tree. The immediate goal is for the group to untie the rope and leave it lying in a straight line on the ground. The overarching goal is for students to become aware of their own processes of problem solving. Later, they will base their evaluation of Dewey’s discussion and insights on this experience. Governing this activity are the following rules: Students must use only themselves to undo the knot. No tools are used. Anything that touches the rope is imagined to become stuck to the rope at that precise point of contact until the end of the activity (this tends to make the activity more difficult and adds another level of awareness into the problem as a result). For example, if someone stands on the rope then their foot (shoe) is considered stuck to the rope where it touched.

Some variations on the experience include allowing planning time before tackling the problem; asking for detailed plans before anything is attempted, and varying time limits for any particular components. Pedagogically, other variations include not briefing students about the scientific method beforehand, not reading Dewey’s description of problem solving beforehand—and thus changing the experience from illustrative to knowledge-constructivist—or “front-loading” the problem-solving sequence and “freeze-framing” during the activity to allow key points that appear in the group process and their relation to the scientific method to be explored.

In the experience, often several groups work at once to solve the problem. Sometimes groups are motivated by elegance, wondering, through their own process, whether a more elegant—less panicked perhaps, or more sleek—solution is possible. Sometimes they are motivated by a sense of trying to go faster. Sometimes it appears enough just to solve the problem once. At other times, a striving for something like perfection emerges. We encourage all approaches. As with so many effective acts of learning, it appears that the more thoroughly students immerse themselves and really play, the better the ultimate learning. In other words, we don’t force the application of what comes below. We allow what appears below to emerge. Thus, what has been absorbed physically, emotionally, and intellectually becomes the subject of conversation about a broader issue—what it is to solve a problem, or, with Dewey, what are the purported components of his method of thinking.

In discussing the experience we tend to focus on having students make explicit their group’s own way of coming to a solution. Usually this begins with a description of what they did to untie the knot. By pushing these answers there is the possibility that patterns begin to emerge that might be used to describe most activities. If they do not, it is possible that moments of intuitive clarity can allow for spontaneous conclusions that do not appear to have been reasoned. But usually, this is not the case. Usually, the discussions begin to gravitate around fairly standard problem solving descriptions.

At this point, we might introduce, or review, a simple sequence for solving problems that parallels Dewey’s key concepts of thinking, or the scientific method. The

sequence goes as follows; Step one is to identify the problem. Dewey (1966) says that thinking begins in experience. To be fair, he actually writes, “The initial stage of that developing experience which is thinking is *experience*.” (Dewey, 1966, p. 153) Not, perhaps, the most inspired of sentences, but, to continue in fairness, he says that while this ought to be a truism, it unfortunately is not. That is, thinking ought to relate to events in the world. Later, in *Experience and Education* (1938), he describes the ideal learning *experience* as having certain characteristics relating to the students’ own development and to the curriculum that helped to determine what this experience would be.

Thus, our discrete activity is not quite what Dewey intends. For Dewey, a “genuine problem develop[s] within this situation as a stimulus for thought” (Dewey, 1966, p. 163); the problem occurs in an ongoing *situation* where “there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for his own sake...” (Dewey, 1966, p. 163) If viewed as isolated from broader learning, the activity we propose is not part of an ongoing continuum, though it may very neatly fit into, for example, a science curriculum. So, there is no necessary motivating force that links this event to other events in the participants’ lives that have inherent meaning. Nonetheless, there is, for many students in education, a shared interest in understanding the processes of learning; this activity provides them with one way of viewing the solving of certain kinds of problems. If this is an ongoing philosophical theme—and this depends partly on the construction of the wider class design—then this activity can be related to much larger epistemological questions. For us, then, the first step, *identifying the problem*, begins with being clear about the guidelines and understanding the specific goals of the initiative. But it also means to become familiar with the materials at hand, the knowledge within the group – ranging from rope experience to group dynamics and everything in between, the shared sense of the problem, and so on. Depending on the members of the class, this may necessitate engagement in earlier familiarizing activities, or reading and discussing Dewey first, or thoughtfully choosing particular framings for the activity

Step two is to analyze the problem. This corresponds to the third step in Dewey’s end-of-chapter synopsis—the gathering of knowledge—an important aspect of thinking. Dewey observes that thinking, knowing and knowing how (“skill”) are often taught as separate activities for separate subjects, as though each did not depend to some extent upon the other (Dewey, 1966, p. 153). In this experience, students see the gathering of information as naturally flowing out of the wanting to find a solution to a problem.

How this plays out in the experience depends on some of the variables we mention. One group might play with arrangement of its members’ appendages, Twister-like, beforehand. Others might get to know the “weak point” of a bowline. Others might try making giant loops. Others might discover the experience already present in members of the solving group. All of these are examples of data collection.

Step three is brainstorming, searching for and proposing all possible solutions that the group can generate. Here anything goes; the goal is to just gather all the possible ideas, wacky and zany right next to the obvious. In Dewey’s schematic, this corresponds to the proposing of ideas. Ideas are part of the overall pattern of thinking; they are not thought itself. Thought is the overall method of learning; ideas are what come about when immersion in an experience and the gathering of information lead to proposed solutions.

Step four is to select and implement a possible solution. The point of this is to winnow the brainstormed solutions in light of all the available data. The heavier kernels of insight containing possible seeds of solutions settle in the diffuse light of whirling, gathered information. The “best guess” (hypothesis) is selected and the group has the opportunity to act on the basis of that.

Step five is to evaluate and assess the hypothesis. It can happen either during or after step four’s implementation. Several results are possible. These include: First, if the potential solution has failed, the group likely needs to repeat the earlier sequence and select a new hypothesis to test, based on any new insights generated in the course of their attempt. Second, if step four has been partly successful, changes can be forthcoming as we move forward to the next problem (remember that, for Dewey, *thinking* is equivalent to learning and living). Finally, if step four is a success on all possible levels then the group can focus on the next problem which, at its best, has been generated in the crucible of the previous experience/problem, and the cycle continues.

The goal then of Dewey’s sticky rope is provide a shared experience for students that becomes something to consider, speak to, think upon as they engage the somewhat heavy prose of chapter twelve. The experience also serves to identify and compare each other’s ways of approaching problems. At a theoretical level, the activity is a way into some of the key ideas; the scientific method, testability, fallibility, etc., that undergird Dewey’s, and by extension the Pragmatist’s, theorizing.

### **Part I continued: A Return to the Theory of Experiential Education**

The result of the combination of Dewey’s understanding of how we think and his translation of this into a method for education might be referred to as the experiential learning cycle. As is to be expected there are various models proposed (Joplin, 1995; Itin, 1999; Kolb, 1984) however all contain the key elements of:

- A) Framing, a means of preparing participants for an experience.
- B) The Experience itself, an holistically engaging and challenging activity.
- C) Debriefing, whereby the experience is reflected upon, returned to, learned from, shared amongst participants.
- D) Preparation, for the activity/experience that appears as a result of the previous.
- E) An environment of ongoing support and feedback, in which the experience and the process are seen as part of a larger project of education and where any individual might learn at any moment.

The experiential learning cycle is described metaphorically as dynamic, non-linear, and mutable. Although more recently it would appear that Dewey’s work has been superficially interpreted as being really only directly related to education when it comes to working with objects, manipulatives, if one considers terms such as “encouragement” and “assessment” replacing “support and “feedback,” and if activities can be considered to include intellectual ones as well as physical, this model becomes immediately and more obviously appropriate for learning in an academic context.

In experiential education, the teacher plays a key role. While much of experiential education is self-directed, the teacher is the one who monitors the process, knows where it is going, keeps an eye on the student, can predict moments in which greater learning can occur, and makes these happen. Most significantly for this paper, it is the teacher who sees potentially allegorical connections between what a philosopher might be claiming or

showing in a certain passage and an activity that might permit greater understanding of the idea. And it is to that we turn our attention in the next part.

### **Part III: Back to Plato's Allegory of the Cave: Building for Understanding**

Foundational as an educational text, *The Republic's* influence is far greater than that and as such makes a lovely case-study for this discussion. In this activity the experience is simply a re-creation of the allegory used by the philosopher himself. Clues such as the squinting upon return into direct light suggest that the author did indeed have a lived history with cave experiences and as such that experience might assist the students to make better sense of the allegory itself. At the very least this activity requires them to read closely and in a more engaged way than most reading is done.

Quite simple to arrange, each student is provided with a copy of the Allegory from the beginning of Book VII. If this is the first dip into *The Republic* then it is helpful to provide a little background on style, on what has been happening up until now, on who the person with really meaningful responses to Socrates is, and maybe even on Socrates as a person and character in history. Once the stage is set the instructions are fairly simple. You are going to want to create groups of no more than about 10 or 12 (could do more but then the hangers-on disappear into the woodwork) and provide each group with their own space (separate classrooms work best, but it has been done with two groups in one room or even in separate places outside). Once these are set, groups must read the section assigned (we usually take people to just beyond the frustrated return into the cave) and turn their space into the cave. They can do whatever they want to achieve this but must be true to the text, they need to back their decisions up using the text ... always back to the text. Groups are then given time to discuss the text, come to some kind of consensus on what they think they are understanding of it and then create the space that will then be Plato's cave. Lastly they will have to present the cave to the other groups (this could involve having others be the prisoners, be an audience, or even be the shadows themselves). The entire project can take an hour or two depending upon the kinds of discussions they have around the text, the time you have in class, and the kind of debrief you are going to want to have with the larger group. The debrief itself tends to lead into fascinating discussions often beginning to explore the ground that Plato moves to next. Key questions such as: what were the differences you noticed between the caves? What were the stumbling blocks in understanding within your group? How are you now making sense of the allegory having worked so hard to create your caves? All help to open up the conversation. A quick note: often the most challenging part of cave design is the projection of firelight in order to create interesting shadows. This is easily overcome with overhead or power-point projects however we have also seen really innovative solution using flashlights, lighters, and even mobile phones (iphones with a fire application!) so fear not.

### **Part IV: A Third and Final Example: Martin Buber's Encounter on a Knife-Edged Ridge: *I/Thou* and the Educational Relationship**

Martin Buber is best known in education for his philosophy of dialogue, a philosophical position which begins by suggesting, loosely translated, that humans are relation beings "all the way down." There is nothing but relationship. Nuance appears when we start to explore what kinds of relationship are available to us and what these

notions of relationship look like in an educational setting. Buber's work has been actively explored and discussed in education by, amongst others, current educational philosopher Nel Noddings in her work on care (Noddings, 1984 & 1992).

Picture this: you are high in the distant ranges and have been mountaineering through some magnificent terrain for the last few weeks. You have decided to take the fast way out and to do so you are currently gingerly making your way along a knife-edged ridge. The ridge runs for as far as you can see and you are trying to forget the fact that on one side of the ridge there is a 3,000 foot slide down a steep slope into a bank of fog, while on the other the slope is even more precipitous, but thankfully only drops 2,000 feet before a hard stop on the valley floor. You are gently edging your way along this narrow ridge, being thoughtful about your foot/crampon placement, and wondering why you ever found mountaineering a good idea in the first place. Then, *mirabile dictu*, you discover another mountaineer approaching you on the same ridge from the other direction. And now you have to pass each other safely because neither of you wants to go back.

The image of the narrow ridge is Buber's own metaphor for conceptualizing his *I/Thou* relationship. In Buber's thinking, each person on the ridge of being has to encounter—to embrace—both themselves and the other in order to be successful. This image captures, if briefly, the relationship that Buber is aiming at. In order to successfully pass one another the two climbers need to respond exactly to what the other person is doing, weight is adjusted, arms are tendered, each becomes “present” to the other in their particularities in this moment. If the pass works well neither *I* nor *Thou* is lost but there is also a third relation that occurs between us, *I/Thou*.

In the activity we do, the knife-edged ridge becomes a narrow wall of bricks, or a low concrete parapet, or a tree lying near ground level. That it is not a few thousand feet above the ground decreases risk but does not significantly alter the positioning of people engaged in the action. In the activity, participants get to experience what it is to move responsively, sensitively, thoughtfully, communicatively; always with awareness of the other. Without engagement and being present, the encounter fails.

Buber believes that all life is relationship and his book *I and Thou* (1970) begins with a primary distinction between two kinds of relationship, the “twofold attitude,” *I/It* vs. *I/Thou*.

Man can treat the world...as an “It”—an orderly, comprehensible collection of things of objects to be experienced and used. He then becomes aware of himself as a subject differentiated from these objects, as an ‘I’ dealing with ‘Its’...Our conceptual knowledge is of this sort. When we behold what confronts us in the world, we deal with it by treating it as an object which can be compared and assigned a place in an order of objects, described and analyzed objectively, filed away in our memory to be recalled when needed (Buber, 1970, p. 90).

The *I/It* relationship as “an attitude toward the world” lacks mutuality, because “the ‘I’ remains separate” and “we lose in being unable to relate to anything” (Hendley, 1978, p. 141). The *I/It* is passive and takes place within the individual, thereby separating subject from object, and not “between” the individual and the other. The *I/It* relationship objectifies, made so from within the individual, and alienates the world that Buber

believes must be revered and related to because only in saying “*Thou*” does the *I* truly come into being.

For Buber the *I/Thou* offers insight into the eternal through the encounter with the other, entering relationship, and engaging in dialogue. The self is illuminated through history, personal work, and the process of dialogue. A reality in which relationship and dialogue exist between the individual and other people and between the individual and the world beyond is neither completely within nor completely outside the individual; that is what Buber means by *I/Thou*.

This is a difficult concept to understand from the individualized world we inhabit. But the experience of actually encountering another person and attempting to negotiate a successful pass allows for the possibility of a moment where we leave the individualized. This sometimes difficult experience involving constant consciousness, tact and communication helps expand the place in which the person can be considered to exist, from merely within the body, to interactive and relational beings such as those discernable within the *I/Thou*.

Buber claims that through such things as technology, science, and institutionalization today’s world is in a situation of ever-increasing “*I/Itness*” moving farther from the *I/Thou* relation. Though we live constantly within potential reach of the *Thou*, and it is, as Buber says, always “coming towards us and touching us,” yet we “have become inept and uneager for such living intercourse” (Buber, 1970, p. 92). However, there is hope, through encountering the other with an ever-present openness and learning again to revere the world and its objects.

Relationship plays a major role in education. It is made a priority in the human sphere and regularly in and between the human and more-than-human. There are discussions happening continuously around the nature of relationships between parents, teachers, students, administrators, the natural world, and the community at large. However, if Buber is right we need to ask: what is it we *mean* by relationship? And if we are in fact seeking the less-alienated version of the twofold he calls the *I/Thou* then it becomes critical to understand what that form of relationship *feels* like. This activity provides that sense

## **Conclusion**

We have provided a brief introduction to teaching highly theoretical concepts experientially. We are aware that for many who read this, a question that may arise is, how are these activities substantially superior to thought experiments? Why not employ these, instead? Thought experiments require less time, they can be done almost anywhere, it is easy to change variables, and besides, they already have common currency in academic circles. Besides, isn’t thought what the academy is meant to be about?

We can agree with most of these arguments. Certainly, starting to teach experientially in a course in which such activities are not expected might seem risky for some people who are more comfortable in traditional academic roles. But we would like to argue the following: First, from theory. Dewey isn’t just being coy when he says that thought begins in experience. If we want to give this view credence, and if we wish to extend this to circumstances beyond merely the study of Pragmatism, then even the kind of thinking that may occur in the academy ought to be linked to something in the world. The advantage of the kinds of experiences we advocate is that they are portable. Even

better still might be locating something in the world that is not simply an event designed for a class that may be invoked.

This said, the example in the world, if it is only mentioned, loses much of its force. We think that the reason Dewey linked thought to experience was because an experience necessarily calls in the whole person. The body, senses, emotions, imagination, creativity, may all be involved. It is both difficult to forget an experience and it is difficult to replace its complexity with simply conceptualization. At the least, like a real world mnemonic, often forgotten concepts can be recalled when a potent experience is recalled and relived, see how far Proust got with a bit of pastry.

Our second argument is empirical; it relates to our own experiences teaching. We think it is not merely the relief from the monotony of conceptualization that has caused students to enjoy this kind of teaching so much. We think that concepts can gain greater, fuller, more ripened meaning from being presented as experiences. The whole being of the student may be involved in the kind of understanding required when it is an experience that is presented. So much of the complex way in which the world is experienced through senses can be avoided, if the world is reduced to conceptualizations. With this reduction is sometimes a concomitant reduction in accuracy of understanding.

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