

FROM “EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION” TO “EXPERIENCE-SAVVY EDUCATION”: CHANGING JEWISH EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

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The term *experiential education* is an obstacle to the pursuit of excellence in Jewish education. Here are three reasons why: First, it often leads to thoughtlessly devised practices organized around the idea that being plunked down in an interesting setting or being asked to engage in a hands-on activity will have a desirable and powerful educational impact; this is magical thinking. Second, the movement to encourage experiential education is too often intertwined with undervaluing the desirability of serious content learning, the acquisition of skills and dispositions, and the fostering of attitudes that encourage further learning. Third, and most fundamentally, “experiential education” is a misnomer because it tacitly suggests that some education is not experiential,

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whereas in fact, like every moment of our waking lives, every educational transaction – be it good or bad – is experiential. As John Dewey, the person most often credited with the ideal of experiential education (a term he never used), never tired of declaring: We live and die in a world of experiences and the problem with education is not that it is absent powerful experiences, but that the experiences are typically of the wrong kind, serving to shut down or distort the growth of learners.

Pursuing this further, we can ask ourselves what else John Dewey might say if he could be brought back to life to weigh in on the recent interest in experiential Jewish education. Because Dewey was a wise, judicious educator, a thinker who was wary of fads and of either-or pendulum swings, we would do well to consider his ideas. Here is my own attempt to identify a few of the key points he might make.

While dismissive of the phrase “experiential education”, Dewey would embrace the concerns that animate those who are associated with the experiential education movement. Were he able to observe Jewish education as we know it, he would argue, as do they, that it suffers from at least the following problems:

a) There is insufficient and often no opportunity for learners to have first-hand experience of the phenomena to which the subject-matter of instruction refers. Too often, they learn about Shabbat without having had sustained experiences of Shabbat; they learn about Israel without having been immersed in the realities of Israeli life, and so forth. Not only can a good deal of what we hope to teach in traditional classrooms be learned more powerfully through such immersion experiences, but the kind of learning that can be facilitated in classrooms is unlikely to be achieved if the learners have not had prior first-hand experiences of this kind; for such experiences provide reference-points and awaken interests, passions, and questions that are to education what a favorable wind is to sailing. True, it is impossible to have first-hand experience of everything that we wish learners to learn about in Jewish education; But it is usually possible to design educational transactions that bring them much closer to these first-hand realities than they have been in the past. Consider here the potentialities of movies, stories, educational games and simulations, role-plays, or encounters with people who have had first-hand encounters with the relevant phenomena and have the capacity to communicate their character.

b) Education in school settings is often completely disconnected from the things that matter to the learners. It doesn't take a rocket-scientist to know that we are most likely to learn voluntarily, energetically, and effectively when the educational experience we are undergoing speaks to our real and living concerns, interests, and questions – the things we care about not just as learners, but also as whole human beings. And yet, the opposite is typically true in many educational environments. The moral: Wherever educational experiences take place, they need to be in sync with “where the learners are”, such that the learners themselves feel that these experiences speak to them in powerful ways.

Although John Dewey would laud the efforts of self-styled experiential Jewish educators to address these two concerns, he would nonetheless be troubled by certain all-too-common features of this movement. The most important of these is the tendency to put too much weight on powerful first-hand experiences and too little on the need for follow-up experiences that take the energy, the questions, and the learning that emerge out of such first-hand experiences into new territories that facilitate new and deeper learning. In a related and also troubling vein, experiential educators are often less interested in, if not contemptuous of, educational

transactions organized around the systematic acquisition of Jewish content and skills. True, Dewey would caution them, first-hand experiences are integral elements of high quality education; but they are not its totality. The gifted educator uses such experiences as springboards for motivated inquiries, skill learning, and engagements with the Jewish community that will facilitate continuing educational growth.

Moreover, Dewey might add, the best environments for some of this learning may well be the very same traditional classroom that some experiential educators disparage. As an example: If, through first hand experiences in Israel or in an exciting Yeshiva, I have made up my mind to make Aliyah or to engage in serious, text-based Jewish learning, I may well place myself in a skill-and-drill educational setting that will allow me to acquire the skills that I need to pursue my dream.

For those of us who want to actualize the potential of Jewish education to advance the growth of individual Jews and the Jewish people, here's the general Deweyan point. Whether it goes on at the top of Masada, at a summer camp, or in a classroom in Topeka, Kansas, all educational transactions are experiential in the sense that they proceed through experiences had by the learners. The challenge is not to ensure

that learners have powerful experiences but to ensure that they have experiences that are conducive to their growth, rather than leading them to turn elsewhere to satisfy their spiritual, ethical, and communal aspirations.

At a minimum, and very practically, the foregoing suggests that educators, no matter what the context in which they work, would do well to keep the following questions in mind in their planning:

1. Does the educational transaction I am planning include, or is it grounded in, powerful first-hand experiences of the phenomena that are to be studied – or at least something immediate enough to give the learners a vivid connection to, a concrete “feel” for, the subject-matter?
2. Does the learning experience I am planning engage the learners not just as pupils but as human beings? Will it speak to speak to their real and living concerns and interests and therefore genuinely matter to them?
3. Is there good reason to think that this learning experience will leave them hungry to learn more – to acquire new skills, understandings, and insights that will energize their continuing growth?
4. Is there reason to think that over time the kinds of learning experiences I am planning will render the

learners increasingly connected – intellectually, affectively, and existentially - to the traditions, ideals, communities, and challenges of the Jewish people?

Education that is thoughtfully aligned with these criteria will require a lot of **savvy** about the way to design and sequence the experiences of learners, wherever they takes place. Such education is therefore best described not as “experiential” (which, I have suggested, *all* education is), but as ***experience-savvy***. This is the kind of education we need!