

Experiential Learning of Curriculum Reform in China

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Abstract

With the promotion of comprehensive curriculum reform in China, a focus on pupils' "learning experience" in primary and secondary schools has become popular. In practice, however, there exist some problems of implementation: Conceptual confusion, too much focus on "experience" and not enough on "learning"; unclear objectives, resulting in a lack of proper understanding of what learning can be achieved through experience; and a change of form but not substance. We believe that experience learning is not intended simply to maintain students' current life experience, but to go beyond this; not simply to prepare students for future experiences, but to lead them to go beyond reality experience and forward to a better life.

key words: Experience learning; Popularity; Deviation; Value orientation

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INTRODUCTION

The way of learning is of great significance to students. Changing learning methods is one of the key points in

basic education curriculum reform. The current stage of curriculum reform gives a prominent role to learn based on the students' experience. The Basic Education Curriculum Reform Program (Trial) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001, July 27) states: "Students' interests and experiences should be considered",

Changing the over emphasis on receptive learning, rote, mechanical training and encouraging students' active participation, the will to explore and practice, and cultivating student' ability of collecting and processing information, obtaining new knowledge, analyzing and solving problem, communicating and cooperating

With promotion of comprehensive curriculum reform, a focus on experience learning has become popular in primary and secondary schools. However, although the policy advocates experience learning, it gives no detailed explanation of the concept. So, this leads to different interpretations of what experience learning means in practice. As theory guides practice, different theoretical interpretations thus lead to different practices, not necessarily within the spirit of the original intention.

1. THE POPULARITY OF EXPERIENCE LEARNING AND ITS FORMS

One of the key points of curriculum reform is to change the ways students learn. To address the issue of teaching content being divorced from students' real life experience, the reform advocates learning based on students' own real experiences. Influenced by this notion, teachers attach great importance to making use of and developing students' direct experience, extending teaching to outside the physical classroom itself, expanding learning content beyond books to wider community resources, transmitting the way of learning from simply understanding and accepting the known to exploring the unknown. Thus, as a key part of the development of new curriculum reform,

experience learning has become popular in elementary and secondary schools.

In terms of its form, experience learning is through different courses and teaching methods, including research learning, community service and social practice, information technology education, labor and technical education, and a curriculum with the flexibility to be tailored to specific schools and local contexts. The implementation of these courses is not limited to the classroom; but is intended to lead students to take part in various activities to obtain direct experience. In addition to this, there is also “inquiry learning”, “autonomous learning”, “dialogue teaching”. All these concepts attach great attention to students’ personal experiences and provide opportunity for students to demonstrate their own original knowledge and experience, helping them to link this with new knowledge. In this reform process, students are no longer on the sidelines; teaching content and process are no longer designed by experts or teachers beforehand, with students passively accepting what is prescribed to them. Instead, students themselves become the co-owners of the curriculum and teaching, and actively participate in the development and implementation of the curriculum. A course of teaching is no longer a static written document, but an experience constantly regenerated and evolved by teachers and students together in the educational situation.

In terms of its content, experience learning is closely related to students’ life. Some experience learning, such as inquiry learning and dialogue teaching, is mainly conducted through books, with the purpose of better understanding abstract theoretical knowledge. Other modes of experience learning, such as the research learning and community service etc., are intended to help students to understand the community within which the school belongs, and to solve some practical problems. In all cases, experience learning involves the use of students’ own social experiences.

In terms of its effect, experience learning represents a fundamental change from the traditional curriculum and teaching model, which emphasized narrower cognitive goals, to a three-dimensional curriculum and teaching model, which focus on cognition, capability, and emotion. This new model encourages a much more dynamic classroom atmosphere. Traditional learning focuses on the acquisition of others’ indirect experience, mainly on imparting knowledge systematically and on students’ accepting knowledge. The primary objective of the traditional approach is mainly on the systematic acquisition of knowledge. Although students’ feelings, attitudes, and skills may also have been cultivated, this was only ever a secondary objective. Experience learning seeks to put the cultivation of students’ cognition, capability and emotion on an equal footing. In the teaching practice and the teaching process, dialogue

and understanding creates a new relationship between teachers and students, namely the “I-You relationship”. In the “I-You relationship”, the teacher will not teach his/her own thoughts, opinions, ideas to students, but will guide students to start from their own experiences, to reflect their lives, and construct their own experiences and knowledge. This curriculum and teaching can better motivate students’ interest in learning, arouse students’ emotional response, deepen students’ understanding and improve their practice, so as to make the classroom much more dynamic.

We can see from this description that experience learning make strong use of students’ own experience, and therefore relates closely to their own lives. The reality is that experience learning has become a mainstream trend that has already penetrated into Chinese students’ expectations, and knowledge of life, influencing their way of thinking in many different ways.

2. ANALYSIS ON DEVIATIONS FROM EXPERIENCE LEARNING

From the above discussion, we can see that experience learning is an important trend in the current curriculum reform process. However, although schools and teachers have paid great attention to this type of learning, there are some deviations in the practice which lead to “alienation” of experience learning. This is demonstrated by the following three aspects:

The first is conceptual confusion, which causes experience learning to begin with experience but stop at experience. Many teachers regard experience learning as students’ acquisition of direct experience; some teachers think that experience learning emphasizes participation and practice, so students have experiential learning so long as they are left with enough time and space in the classroom; some other teachers believe that experience learning is to learn with practice, as long as study content links with actual life, whatever students have experienced counts as experience learning. In such teaching activities, teachers connect with the students’ “direct experience”, make use of methods of “inquiry”, “performance” and experience to organize teaching. Such teaching design stresses the experience part of experience learning, but it has neglected the learning part. It is problematic when experience learning becomes simple “teaching through entertaining” and begins with experience but stops at experience. Experience learning, as the name implies, should of course obtain direct experience from the actual activities, but it also has a learning requirement, and therefore should give emphasis to how to construct knowledge from experience. Hence, the experience from experience learning is not the same as the experience of daily life.

The second is unclear objectives. This means there is experience in experience learning but no reflection. Though experience learning emphasizes the subjectivity of students and students' experience and perception, it also needs the teacher's organization and guidance. However, some teachers regard experience learning as "accumulation of life experience" simply for its own sake, and therefore let students do whatever they want. The teachers ask the students to read aloud or discuss by themselves, but play no guiding part themselves. The teaching content is the so-called "reform" such as "singing and dancing", which leads to a teaching deficiency. Although many teachers design participative teaching activities for students, they do not urge students to do further thinking to understand the relevance of their experience, so that students' cognitive process is not complete. A lot of experience and knowledge then become superficial, and not self-cognitive. From the point of view of learning and cognitive development, it is not enough to get experience only, learners' reflection on their learning experience is also of critical importance. In experience learning, if there is no reflection, experience will be transient; if experience is not upgraded, the experience will stay at the previous place and experience learning will lose its proper development effect.

The third is form over substance, falling into the trap of experientialism and activism. Due to a lack of proper understanding of the essence of experience learning, there exists a phenomenon of valuing form over substance, which makes it hard to achieve genuine experience learning. Many teachers only pay lip service to the requirements of student-driven, cooperation, inquiry, dialogue and experience promoted in experience learning, for example turning the traditional "chalk and talk" into a "question and answer" instead of a proper "dialogue". The cooperation has its form but without substance, and the class has participation from students but without real experience. Such "excessive" form and "lively" atmosphere make experience learning appear lively on the surface, but with little substance in practice. The other trap is to "wear new shoes on an old road". "Some education workers call loudly for reform, but only to follow the fashion and to set an example to people, the inherent disadvantages in traditional teaching still exist." (Zhang, 1999) Many teachers were criticized for "teaching the new curriculum in adherence to the logic, rules, purport and method used in the traditional examination-oriented education, essentially 'wearing new shoes on an old road' and reforming only in a superficial way." (Hao, 2006)

Why do such deviations emerge in the actual process of experience learning? The main reason is the disorder of value orientation. Confusion over the theory of experience learning has led to disorderly implementation. Due to the vagueness of the theory itself, many practitioners of

experience learning have only a one-sided understanding, and there appear therefore a variety of education behaviors in the name of "experience learning". There is no fixed definition for experience learning in the education discourse system, and it is often used to replace different notions unconsciously. The notion of experience learning is rooted in different human natures and values. Due to different value orientations, different people use the concept of experience learning in different levels, so that different people deal with it in their own way. As a whole, there are two kinds of value orientations among the present educational circles on understanding experience learning.

One learning orientation is based on the "life experience", which is called a "worldly" experience learning orientation. This learning orientation based on "life experience" regards the students' daily life experience as experience, and thinks "experience learning" is based on learning of daily life experience. The Outline of the Curriculum Reform in Basic Education points out the need to

change the difficult, complex, partial, old part of the course contents and change the phenomenon of too much emphasis on the book knowledge, strengthen the link between curriculum contents and students' life with the development of modern social science and technology, pay attention to the students' interest in learning and experience, and teach them basic knowledge and skills in lifelong learning. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001, July 27)

It is obviously important to consider fully the "students' experience". Accordingly, some teachers think that the "experience" part of experience learning relates specifically to students' life experience, and is intended to solve the separation of teaching from real life. This view sees experience learning as intended to correct problems with traditional teaching approaches which attach too much attention to an instructive mode and ignore the role of students' life experience.

Another learning orientation is based on "notion experience", which is called a "metaphysical" experience learning orientation. In this understanding, experience learning is not learning based on life experience but learning based on meaning, namely the experience is "to experience". In this definition, "experience learning is a personalized approach to learning in which the learner puts his/her mind into communication with the outside world or the inner world." (Yang, 2007) The learning based on "meaning" attaches great importance to people's living state and life values during teaching, emphasizes the generativity of teaching, and highlights the attributes and value of teaching. In this sense, it can be said that to use the concept "experience learning" mainly expresses the basic objective of some educationalists who try to make people liberated from the enslaved state of alienation, and advocate the need to pay attention to and individual person's living practice and subjectivity and creativity,

as well as individual realities. In this sense, experience learning is just a way of putting forward old problems in a new discourse.

Reflecting on the two kinds of value orientations on experience learning, if we regard experience in experience learning as the experience in daily life, the result is to restore learning to daily life. This reduces the pursuit of learning from the angle of history, and is certainly a setback and risks gaining no result. If we regard experience in experience learning as the “notion experience” guiding teaching, it just regards learning as a concept rather than a reality. This reduces the real value of learning from the practical viewpoint, and also risks achieving no result.

3. THE OUGHTNESS OF THE VALUE ORIENTATION OF EXPERIENCE LEARNING

Experience learning should not simply position experience in learning from the students’ daily life. Both teachers and students of course have their own lives, so there must be a close relationship between teaching and life, and teaching should take account of real life, and students’ life experience as well. But experience learning is not intended just to return education to the teaching of daily life, but to go beyond students’ daily life in the teaching process to help them create a better life.

Of course, experience learning is not only about experience in a purely philosophical sense. Experience learning is certainly concerned with the meaning of survival and value, but the meaning of experience is our objective, and this is certainly not just in terms of students’ day-to-day experiences. Learning, as a kind of realistic, specific activity, cannot be done in pure meaning and value of the world, whose pursuit of meaning experience can only be displayed in the process and results in experience learning. The abstract meaning and value experience cannot be the fertile soil which develops teaching, but as the background and results of teaching activities. We can’t imagine how to reflect and develop teaching activities and the value of human life and the meaning of survival without the inheritance of knowledge and the guidance of value. It has no operability and will make learning nothingness if we define experience learning as the learning based on notion experience.

As education is a kind of practical activity intended to support human development, it must have its transcendent characteristics. The objective of education is not to make people “accept” or “adapt” those they have, but to make good use of those they have for the aim of “transformation” and “beyond”. (Lu, 1996)

We think that experience learning should have transcendent characteristics. Experience learning must pay attention to and closely relate to the student’s life

experience, but its purpose is to improve the students’ life experience, to go beyond the students’ previous experiences. Due to the autonomous nature, intuitiveness and conservativeness of human life experience, people need rational knowledge with transcendence to guide life and then make progress. This transcendence is not “castles in the air”, but to lead the students to review, criticize and reflect reality with a view towards truth, goodness and beauty, so as to create a better life.

The idea of experience learning entails the following facts: Experience learning expresses a means of teaching--paying attention to people’s living state, making close contact with students’ experience, advocating generative characteristics of experience. However, experience learning is not learning based on daily life, nor on conception experience, but a process of participating in studying with reasonable factors, and the improvement and transcendence of previous experience to realize a transformation. So, we need to adhere to the transcendent character of the learning experience in practice.

However, in practice, there appears to be a prevalence of non-rationalism in understanding experience learning from daily life and experience learning as a notion. Many teachers value the reality but not transcendence in conducting experience learning. Teaching is interpreted as an individual, empirical, nonsystematic learning activity based on everyday experience activities, and is surrounded by repeated habits, taking the maximum freedom and happiness of the individual behavior as the major principle. Many teachers use the name of experience learning to let students do “independent thinking”, “self-selection”, and “experience by oneself” and then turn the class teaching to a situational show just to make education entertaining. The reason for this is the lack of clear understanding amongst teachers of experience learning, resulting in activities being practiced which cannot be regarded as genuine experience learning, leading to much variation in the quality of experience learning.

Experience learning should pay attention to students’ direct experience but improve and surpass this direct experience. Because in many cases, teaching is overly concerned more with students’ primary experience, and students’ primary experience is limited, actual learning has become limited. The focus of experience learning on students’ direct experience should aim to improve and transcend students’ original experience. At the time to understand and interpret students’ experience, education needs to reflect the transcendent dimension. And if it lacks a transcendent dimension, many empirical studies show that it loses its driving force for good.

CONCLUSION

Experience learning should not simply position experience in learning from the students’ daily life. Of

course, experience learning is not only about experience in a purely philosophical sense. We think that experience learning should have transcendent characteristics. Experience learning must pay attention to and closely relate to the student's life experience, but its purpose is to improve the students' life experience, to go beyond the students' previous experiences. Experience learning expresses a means of teaching—paying attention to people's living state, making close contact with students' experience, advocating generative characteristics of experience.

So what should be the value orientation of experience learning? We believe that experience learning is not to maintain the students' existing life experience, but to go beyond the students' life experience; not to prepare for students' future experience, but to lead them to go beyond

their own real-world practical experiences and go towards a better life.

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