

WHAT IS EE?

PHILOSOPHY

A central tenet of Experiential Education (EE) has been its **rejection of dualisms** (progressive vs. traditional education, empirical vs. rational ways of knowing, transmitted vs. discovered knowledge, learning for self vs. community) and this has made EE **difficult to define**. At times it seems like a **technique** (learning by doing), a **method** (do, reflect, theorize, test, do), or a **philosophy** (as described by John Dewey).

In examining EE's two constituent words, the etymological roots of "**experience**" range from trial and proof to reflection on raw, unmediated events. "**Education**" has customarily implied an intentional process, well beyond instruction or learning, that addresses: what exists, what is real, how do we know, and how should we live? What implications form when this notion of "experience" modifies an "education" process?

IMPLICATIONS & ORIGINS

Perhaps foremost, each learning experience must **feel real**. Something must be at stake! Relevance and meaning to a students' past and future learning will typically be obvious, since genuine, authentic, complex or indeterminate **problems with significant consequences** are often the means to this curiosity-driven inquiry.

Pedagogically, EE students spend more time **actively constructing knowledge** and solving problems rather than passively accepting facts and solutions. In this way, learning experiences are **immediately applicable to a learner's life**, not parcels of information to be stored in case of future relevance. Therefore, EE practitioners are drawn to non-contrived, highly impactful practices that integrate learning with living.

With a rudimentary explanation of EE in place, a look into its contextual origins will bring further

understanding. Rather than EE having its own philosophy, it may be accurately described as an **amalgam of philosophies**. In particular, the influences of two philosophical traditions, not only gave rise to EE, but have influenced the way in which it has been applied.

On the one hand, **Romanticism's European and American expressions together** emphasized value for the individual, the innocence of the child, the role of emotion in learning, a preference for the sublime, and the morally purifying effect of time spent in nature. These values are clearly seen in EE's commitment to personal development, unstructured play, and the expeditionary travel tradition to remote and exotic landscapes.

On the other hand, **pragmatism** has influenced EE with its bias towards the social nature of learning and practical problem-solving through experimentation. These pragmatic techniques were applied to the early **American progressive educational movement**, which strove to make society more just and equitable. Created to address this progressive agenda, EE aims to inspire democratic ideals and rectify social and environmental injustices.

This short account of EE reveals it is more a **field of practice** and an educator's orientation to processes of **learning in service of the good**.

AEE's DEFINITION

EE is a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies, in which educators purposefully engage with clients in direct experiences and focused reflection so as to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop their capacity to contribute to communities. In other words, challenge and experience followed by reflection lead to learning and growth.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

READING

Beames, S., & Brown, M. (2016). *Adventurous learning: A pedagogy for a changing world*. Routledge.

Blenkinsop, S., Nolan, C., Hunt, J., Stonehouse, P., & Telford, J. (2016). The lecture as Experiential Education: The cucumber in 17th-century Flemish art. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 39(2), 101-114.

Roberts, J. W. (2015). *Experiential Education in the College Context: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters*. Routledge.

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Thomas, G. (2013). *Education: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

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