

## CHAPTER A8

# Locating Immersive Experience in Experiential Learning

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### *Editor Note:*

This is one of three Chapters in the e-book that deals with the idea of immersive experience – the theme of a conference held at the University of Surrey, Centre for Excellence in Professional Training and Education, in January 2008. *Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical and emotional experience of being submerged in water. The expression, '*being immersed in*', is often used to describe a state of being which can have both negative consequences – being overwhelmed, engulfed, submerged or stretched, and positive consequences – being deeply absorbed or engaged in a situation or problem that results in mastery of a complex and demanding situation. *Being immersed in* a challenging experience might be very uncomfortable but it is favourable for the development of insights, confidence and capabilities for learning to live and work with complexity: a world that professionals are expected to cope with. This piece was originally written for the Immersive Experience conference.

### **Introduction**

Immersion is an important type of experience that many professionals encounter and have to cope with and master. The aim of this Chapter is to provide a conceptual foundation for the theme of 'immersive experience' which is also examined by (Jackson and Campbell Chapter A9, and Eraut Chapter A10). It outlines some ideas about immersive experience and how it is used in formal educational settings, and examines these from the perspective of experiential or experience-based learning. It starts by considering what immersive experiences might be. It continues by summarising some of my own earlier work about learning from experience and applies a model of learning from experience to immersive situations. It warns about the trap of naïve experientialism and cautions about the uncritical application of experiential learning practices in formal educational contexts in which assumptions of volition and aware participation may not be valid. It continues with discussion of more recent work about learning in workplaces, which is nothing if not experiential, and ends with a proposal for an agenda for considering the use of immersive experiences in higher education contexts.

### **What are immersive experiences?**

Immersive experience is a somewhat paradoxical idea. It refers to situations in which learning occurs effectively and somewhat naturally, but it also describes a condition needed for any learning to occur. At one level we know that, for example, full immersion in a language culture is highly effective in learning the language and being able to communicate with speakers of that language. It aids language learning by placing it in a context and culture; it forces us to use the language to describe our needs because there is often no alternative. It enables us to adjust pronunciation and formulation of ideas to make ourselves understood and it enables us to use language in naturalistic ways similar to how we learned our first language, rather than from following formalised rules of

grammar. But what constitutes immersion? Surely every act of learning requires immersion to some extent? All learning is necessarily from experience. When we learn trigonometry we immerse ourselves in the world of two dimensional objects, angles and distances. We suspend attention to other matters and enter the world of trigonometry as if there were no other. This then must also be immersive. Of course, it is. The label immersion then describes a condition of all learning.

It can be useful if we focus on what might not be an immersive experience as this can point to features we need to identify to characterise the condition. Experiences are not immersive if the learner is not fully engaged. That is, only a limited part of the attention of the learner is consumed. Examples of such situations are when students are doing exercises for the sake of completing a required learning task. They are partially involved, their emotions are not engaged—they are not energised or captured by the task—and they do not need to complete it to be satisfied or fulfilled.

Why then should we now be considering immersive experience as if it were an innovation in higher education that is worthy of focus? I suggest that we need to do so as a way of emphasising features of teaching and learning that have been overlooked in our current drive for efficiencies and systematisation of higher education. As we move to the highly accountable modularised course with tightly specified learning outcomes, a minimal set of learning activities and unambiguous assessment tasks, there is a danger that we lose sight of the processes needed for the learning of complex, high level capabilities that can be deployed in contexts beyond the end of the course.

Why should we be concerned about them for learning purposes? It should be clear from this that immersive experiences might be many and varied. They do not necessarily involve being placed in a 'real' situation or work practice. Immersion can occur in a classroom, though we do not often think that this is possible or may not create the circumstances to bring it about.

One way of conceptualising immersive experiences is through the lens of experiential learning as in many respects immersive experiences are simply a way of labelling the situations to which ideas about experiential learning have been taken to apply. That is, they could be experiences that substantially engage learners inside or outside the classroom, using pre-existing stimuli from what has gone before (e.g. reflective workshops), or involve establishing a new stimulus (e.g. simulations). Most commonly they involve students in some kind of work or community placement in which it is hoped new experiences will be generated from which students will learn in ways not contrived by educators, and thus be in some sense, more authentic.

We need to be wary of a naïve or reductive experientialism though. That is, a view that the more participative or the more immersive the activity, the better. We have all experienced situations in which we have been caught up in the action of a process to such an extent we have not been able to draw much from it. It might have provided a stimulus for learning, but we did not have the opportunity or occasion to benefit from it. We were so occupied with what we had to do that the potential of the situation for learning passed us by. This is the trap of immersive activities. The activities may be so interesting or so fully occupying that they no longer have the potential for further learning—we are simply employing what we already know and do. We may report that they are generally worthwhile, but we have difficulty saying in what ways they were beneficial. Learning within the context of a formal educational program necessarily requires some distance from an experience and some opportunity for processing and reframing to occur. If this cannot be provided, we may have the impression that we have benefited the student, but we may not be able to demonstrate it to our satisfaction or theirs.

### **Some ideas from experience-based learning**

My preference is to use the term experience-based learning as experiential learning implies to me the possibility that there may be some kinds of learning that are not experiential. My view is that all learning needs to be seen as coming from experience. Sometimes an activity is highly contrived and may appear to be abstract and artificial, but learning can only occur through engagement with it. Experience-based learning though refers to situations in which learning activities are explicitly set up on chosen on the basis that they will directly engage

substantially with the experience of the learner. That is, experience is constructed as the focus of the activity. As we have described before (Andresen, Boud and Cohen 1995 p 2007):

“... the distinguishing feature of experience-based learning is that the experience of the learner occupies central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or experiences arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators.”

Experiential or experience-based learning typically refers to approaches that holistically include cognitive, affective and conative features. That is, they do not focus on intellectual and skill learning alone, but also emotional and volitional learning. A key feature of that class of educational activities that can be described as experience-based learning is that learners work with their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing that experience (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, sometimes both) in order to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience and other ideas and concepts that may be available to them. This review of their experience may then lead to further action that in turn generates further learning and so on.

Experience-based learning is based on a set of assumptions about learning from experience. Boud, Cohen & Walker (1993) have identified them as

- Experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for, learning
- Learners actively construct their own experience
- Learning is a holistic process
- Learning is socially and culturally constructed, and,
- Learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

Whether or not teaching and learning activities are arranged in the forms that are commonly associated with experience-based learning, these considerations still apply.

### **Defining characteristics of experience-based learning**

It has been suggested (Andresen, Boud and Cohen 1995) that experience-based learning does not lend itself to being reduced to a set of strategies, methods, formulas or recipes. However, it is possible to identify features that characterise it and distinguish it from other approaches. The first three of these are probably applicable to *all* experience-based learning. The remaining three may or may not be present in any particular case.

The six features can be explained further thus:

1. Involvement of the whole person—intellect, feelings and senses. In learning through role-plays and simulations, for example, the process of playing or acting in these typically involves the intellect, some or other of the senses and a variety of feelings. Learning takes place through all of these forms of engagement.
2. Recognition and active use of all the learner's relevant life and learning experiences. Where new learning is related to personal experiences, the meaning thus derived is more likely to be integrated into the learner's values and understanding. Meaning making is an important part of the experience.
3. Continued reflection upon earlier experiences in order to add to and transform them into deeper understanding. It is the quality of reflective thought that the learner brings to any experience that is of greater significance to eventual learning outcomes than the nature of the experience itself. 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.' (Kolb, 1984, 38)
4. Whether or not the activity that leads to learning has been intentionally contrived or is a naturalistic experience. Deliberately designed learning events are often referred to as 'structured' activities and include simulations, games, role-play, visualisations, focused group discussions, sociodrama and hypotheticals. However, most experience-based learning arises from unplanned and unstructured activities that take

place all the time. Much learning also emerges through improvisation in response to unexpected situations that could not possibly be planned for.

5. Whether or not learners' engagement in an activity is facilitated or co-created by some other person or persons (teachers, work colleagues, etc.) and, if it is, the degree of skill with which that facilitation is carried out. Experience-based learning often assumes relatively equal relationships between facilitator/co-creators and learner, involves the possibility of negotiation, and gives the learner considerable control and autonomy.
6. Whether or not the outcomes of learning through experience are to be assessed and, if so, by what means, by whom, and for what purpose this assessment is to be carried out. Experience-based learning is often as much concerned with the process as the outcomes of learning, and assessment procedures should accord with this. Assessment tasks associated with experience-based learning include individual or group projects, critical essays located in the learner's own experience, reading logs, learning journals, negotiated learning contracts, peer assessment and self assessment. They might include a range of presentation modes other than writing, so as to enable the holism, context and complexity of the learning to be evidenced. However, the paradox of assessment should be recognized here. Assessment per se might inhibit the very learning that experiential activities seek to promote (Boud (2001). Assessment is an act of justifying learning achievements to others; it is not in itself an act of personal sense making.

### **Essential criteria for experience-based learning**

We should recognize that experience-based learning, of which immersive experience is an example, is not a mere 'method' or 'technique' or even a particular 'approach'; it is as wide and deep as education itself. Although there is no single way to identify the process of experience-based learning, there are some criteria to be fulfilled if teaching and learning activities are to be usefully labelled 'experience-based'.

The most important criterion we start with refers to the "ends" of education—its goals, its purposes, what it is trying to achieve.

- The ultimate goal of experience-based learning involves the learner's own appropriation of something that is to them personally significant or meaningful (sometimes spoken of in terms of the learning being "true to the lived experience of learners").

There are then a number of criteria that refer to the "means" of education—how we go about doing things to try to achieve those goals or ends.

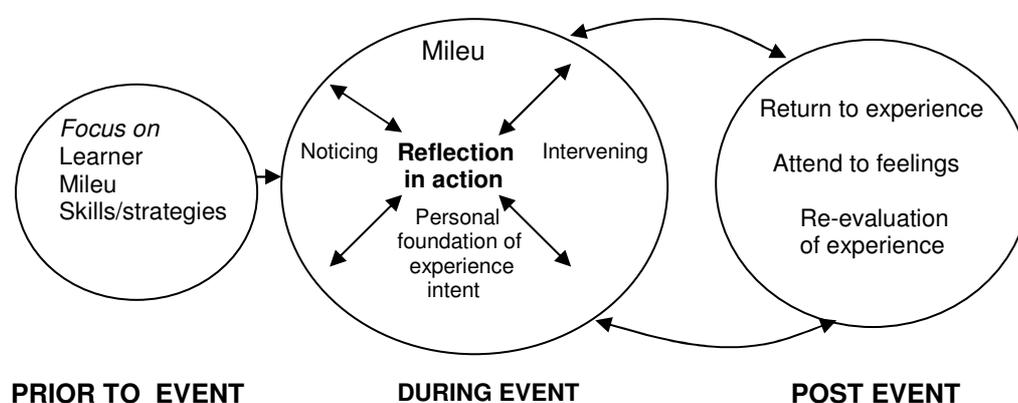
- Experience-based learning has a primary focus on the nature of learner's personal experience and interpretation of phenomena (sometimes described as the learner being more-or-less directly in touch with the realities being studied).
- There is an assumption that the learner will be able to notice and respond to their experience while it is happening, retaining key information for later re-processing.
- Debriefing and reflective thought and the explicit articulation of what has been learned are employed as essential elements. (This incorporates a value stance, that experience alone is not necessarily educative).
- There is acknowledgment of the premise that learning invariably involves the whole person (senses and feelings as well as intellect; affect and conation as well as cognition); and that this is associated with a particular set of perceptions, awareness, sensibilities and values associated with this full range of attributes of the total, functioning, human being.
- Recognition of the importance of what learners bring to the learning process (informal or formal acknowledgement or recognition of prior learning).
- A particular ethical stance (involving features such as respect, validation, trust, openness and concern for the well-being of the learner) is adopted towards learners by those who are their teachers, trainers, leaders, facilitators or peers.

These criteria are probably *conjointly necessary* before an educational event becomes properly called an experiential learning activity.

### A model of learning from experience

While I am not aware of any direct models of immersive experience, it may be useful to examine it from the perspective of a model of learning from experience I developed some time ago with David Walker (Boud and Walker 1990) and which built upon a model of reflection on learning (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985). This conceptualizes the process of learning from complex activities in terms of three stages (Figure 1): what occurs prior to an event, what occurs during an immersive event and what takes place after the event. It distinguishes between an event—a public label for a set of activities—and experience of the event—the unique intersubjective representation of it. This model is of course but one pragmatic representation of important features and needs to be read in conjunction with subsequent developments about how we learn to be and develop identities in new situations.

**Figure 1** Model of learning from experience (after Boud and Walker 1990)



The basic assumption of the model is that all learning builds on prior experience of a variety of kinds, and that any attempt to promote new learning must in some way take account of that experience. Learners bring with them to any event their *personal foundation of experience*. This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. It is represented in the embodied life history that exists on every occasion that profoundly affect perceptions of what does and does not count as important, and what they are prepared to do. It acts to sensitise us to some features of our world and blind us to others. It shapes the *intent* that guides our priorities. Normally our personal foundation of experience is not readily accessible and can only be inferred from our actions and our declared intent.

The second assumption of the model is that the process of learning from experience is necessarily an active one that involves learners in engaging with and intervening in the events of which they are part. This engagement and intervention is with what is termed the *learning milieu*—i.e. the social, psychological and material environment in which the learner is situated. While vicarious learning in which the learner appears to learn from the experience of others or appears to be passive, occurs, there still needs to be active engagement of the learners with the experience of others so that they can identify with and make the experience of others part of their own. There is also no clear demarcation between vicarious and experience-based learning: one merges imperceptibly into the other.

*Prior to the event* emphasis is on what preparation may be required to enhance the possibility of the event being one from which a given learner can learn fruitfully. There are at least three considerations to be taken into account:

*Focus on the learner.* What intent and specific goals does the learner bring to the event? What part of their personal foundation of experience of which they are aware may be engaged or provoked? What are his or her expectations of the event and its outcomes? What plans might the learner create for engaging with the event and their experience of it?

*Focus on the milieu.* Usually, much of the learning milieu in any event is given and cannot be altered. Emphasis here is on what is fixed and what can be changed? What does the learner need to know in advance about the culture and the practices of the event? What possibilities for interactions with people and materials are there available?

*Focus on learning skills and strategies.* The learner is often not equipped to make use of the opportunities that exist, so what physical, emotional or intellectual preparation will help the learner in the anticipated situation? What concepts and language of learning is needed to equip the person? What rehearsal may be needed to create and maximise opportunities for learning during the event? What observational or other sensing skills are necessary to be aware and to respond? What guides, heuristic devices or learning-to-learn strategies might be usefully learned and deployed? For example, what means of recording activities and reflection would work within the particular setting? Also, in what does a learner need practice before taking the plunge? For example, would it be training in negotiation with people they might meet, practice through role play of problematic encounters, or development of understanding of a particular sets of ideas or concepts that might illuminate what will be experienced?

*During the event* it is the learner's engagement with the milieu that constitutes a particular learning experience. Learners create a learning milieu through their presence and interaction with the situation. Through *noticing*, *intervening* and *reflection-in-action* they steer themselves through the milieu in accordance with their intents and what is available for them in this process.

*Noticing* is an act of becoming aware of what is happening in and around one. It is directed towards both the interior and exterior worlds and involves attending to thoughts and feelings as well as the actions of others and material features. Noticing affects the extent to which the learner is involved in the process whether or not the learner might appear 'active' to others. Noticing is also important when it comes to making sense of the situation and ultimately provides a resource for deeper learning through reflection.

*Intervening* refers to any action taken by the learner within the learning situation affecting the learning milieu or the learner. Again, intervening may not be overt and noticeable to others, but is an act that brings about some change. The conscious decisions not to speak or to focus ones attention on interior rather than exterior dialogue can be forms of intervention just as much as a question or a physical act.

*Reflection-in-action* describes the process of working with noticing and intervening to interpret events and the effects of ones interventions. For much of the time these factors are invisible and unconscious and, in Schön's terms, they are part of the artistry of effective practice. However, in developing expertise of any kind it can often be helpful to become more deliberate and conscious of the process and be aware of decisions being made by one and others. It is through exposing these decisions to scrutiny that the assumptions behind them can be identified and a conscious decision taken to act from a new perspective.

*Following the event* important learning can occur as the distractions of the milieu and the lack of opportunity to stand aside from the dynamics of the action limit what it is possible to do at the time. Some aspects inevitably take time and the ability to view particular events in a wider context. Reflection after the event has been discussed over many years, but the formulation of it in the model emphasises that it is not simply a process of thinking, as Dewey has been taken to suggest, but one which necessarily involves feelings and emotions. It has we have suggested three elements: *return to experience*, *attending to feelings* and *re-evaluation of experience*.

*Return to experience*

The base of all learning is the lived experience of the learner and to return to this and attempt to fully recapture it in context allows further reflection. Emphasis needs to be placed on what happened and how it was experienced at the time. Judgements about this are often made prematurely and possibilities for further

learning can be obscured. Mentally revisiting and vividly portraying the focus experience can be an important first step. This element can be aided by also sharing descriptions of the different perceptions of others who were present, particularly those of peers as these are often more readily available and can be expressed with less concern about hierarchy.

#### *Attending to feelings*

As part of returning to the experience, learners focus on the feelings and emotions that were (and are still) present. These can inhibit or enhance the possibilities for further reflection and learning. Feelings experienced as negative may need to be discharged or sublimated otherwise they may continually colour all other perceptions and block understanding, while those experienced as positive can be celebrated as it is these which will enhance motivation and desire to pursue learning further.

#### *Re-evaluation of experience*

Re-acquaintance with the event and attending to the thoughts and feelings associated with it, prepares learners for further consideration of their experience. There are four aspects of the process of *re-evaluation* that may need to be considered by the learner. They are: *association*—relating new information to that which is already known; *integration*—seeking relationships between new and old information; *validation*—determining the authenticity for the learner of the ideas and feelings that have resulted; and *appropriation*—making knowledge one's own, a part of one's normal ways of operating. These aspects should not be thought of as stages, but parts of a whole.

While these reflective processes can be undertaken individually, this can easily lead to reinforcement rather than reappraisal of existing views and perceptions. Re-evaluation necessarily involves criticality as it involves re-appraising judgements that may have been made in the press of the moment. Working one-to-one or with a group for which learning is the *raison d'être* can begin to transform perspectives and challenge old patterns. Much learning is invisible or inaccessible to a person working in isolation. It is also through give and take with others that critical reflection can be promoted and awareness of alternative views and interpretations develop.

In summary, the model points to the importance of being open to experience and to prepare, where possible, so that the affordances of any activity are utilized. It stresses the significance of the intent and what the learner wishes to gain from the situation: the more they are in touch with this, the greater the likelihood that possibilities get realized. It draws attention to the need to be active in the midst of experience and to construct oneself as an active subject rather than just letting the passive object of events themselves. Finally, it points to the crucial role of reflection of various kinds as a key process in drawing meaning from experience. It deliberately takes its perspective of that of the learner and the agency of the learner in the process. In this perspective others are used to support and foster the reflection and meaning making of the learner. In its present formulation it accepts that learning is always socially constructed, but it chooses to highlight the action of one of the players as a heuristic device to enable learners to focus on important elements of learning from messy experience.

### **Application to immersive experience**

How might these ideas be applied to immersive experience? The first question to consider is what constitutes an event that might be the focus of an immersive experience and reflection. In an extended activity such as a placement, is it the entire experience or some aspect of it? The model can be applied either to parts of a large immersive activity or to the whole of it. For example, this might be a focus on a particular interaction on a particular day, or the totality of a four-week work assignment. In order to maximize learning both perspectives are necessary as they may emphasise different kinds of issues for different purposes. For example, this may involve focusing on the development of conflict management skills in a particular situation, on the one hand, or the nature of particular kinds of work, on the other. There are some features that can only be examined when the whole is considered just as there are others that must be taken within a particular setting in order for sense to be made. The model then can form part of different magnitude cycles of reflection. Of course, for the purposes of making meaning from experience a single episode can be significant, so long as it is highly involving. However, immersive experience normally involves multiple episodes over time that need to be considered singularly and collectively and typically involves participation in an environment unfamiliar to the learner.

The second issue for immersive experience is what constitutes immersion? Immersive experience assumes that for some significant part of the event, learners allow themselves to be fully part of it, in direct encounter, as John Heron would put it. Intensive and holistic engagement is a characteristic of immersive experience. For the time of that engagement, other considerations may be suspended, for example, recording what is happening might get in the way of the experience itself. However, this does not mean that immersion itself is sufficient, or that recording and reflective processes do not form a central part of the totality of the event. It suggests that to fully benefit from the opportunities available, there are times when being present is worthwhile in and of itself. Paradoxically, in order to be an active subject, there are times at which being active requires a pause of activity. However, to learn from the experience and to be aware that one has learned from it, it is still necessary for reflection after the event to occur, for meaning to be made and for this to be appropriated into one's wider repertoire of knowledge and skill.

The value of a model is to provide a representation of a learning process to be shared between those assisting a learner—a teacher, mentor, supervisor, or peer—and the learner him or herself. It provides a vocabulary for talking about experience and suggests things that may need to be done to make the most of what is available.

Of course, if the assumptions of any model are not valid, then it may be inapplicable. This is most commonly the case in models of experience-based learning when assumptions about the fully voluntary nature of participation of learners are not fulfilled. When intrinsic reasons for participation are overshadowed by extrinsic ones such as obligation, the requirements of assessment by others and lack of choice, then it cannot be assumed that the learner is as an active subject as the model imputes. Most conceptualizations of learning break down when the desire to learn is not present or has been occluded by inadvertent features of the design of the event or inappropriate behaviour of those facilitating it.

### **Beyond models of learning from experience — Learning in workplaces**

Since the development of this model we have learned a great deal more about learning in complex environments that is more than can be summarized here. There have been valid criticism of the experiential learning tradition from both the traditionalists of the critical social science school who argue that there is insufficient attention given to the questioning of basic taken-for-granted assumptions to post-structural and post-modern critics that argue that there is no essential self with a given set of experiences on which to focus (Fenwick 2003). Multiple takes on any given experience are available and we need not be limited to single identities with continuity over time.

In recent years, there has been a new focus on how people learn in work (Eraut 2010 summarises much of this work). This interest has been driven by an awareness of the importance of work and the learning that occurs there both for the people concerned and for the organizations in which they operate. While in the early days of research on vocational education and training, frameworks from the education sector dominated with ill-conceived attempts to conceptualise workplaces as educational institutions, there has now arisen a body of work that treats learning in these contexts as worthy of study in its own terms (e.g. Wenger 1998, Billett 2001, Evans et al 2006). Any summary of this work will be partial, but there are some features that are of interest for the present discussion.

#### *Working trumps learning*

The main purpose of workplaces is, not unsurprisingly, to engage in work. Learning is necessarily subordinate to this. More significantly, though, learning in terms that educators would appreciate is not a part of normal workplace discourse and that which does occur is fully enmeshed in work itself. It is seen as part of doing work, not as a distinct activity in its own right. This can be a challenge for students who have mainly experienced educational institutions and the everyday learning discourse in schools and colleges. In workplaces, work tasks may be made explicit, but learning tasks associated with them are often implied. In other words, learning directions are absent.

This poses challenges for immersive experience, as students will be necessarily distracted by, as well as learning from, work itself. They can easily lose their identity as learners and fail to notice important features of what they are doing needed for subsequent reflection. Strategies for disengagement and time-out may be needed in some immersive sites.

#### *Being a learner may be problematic*

In recent studies of learning in everyday workgroups (i.e. those not including students or structured training activities for workers), one of the findings (Boud and Solomon 2003) was that workers resisted being identified as learners. To be a learner was to be identified as less than competent, and being seen as less than competent was to raise questions about being accepted as a normal worker. When interviewed, members of the workgroups did not deny that learning was taking place as a normal part of their work, but they did not want to be seen as learners—it is like having a 'L' plate around my neck—and they did not use the language of learning to describe what they were doing. They saw what we as educators identified clearly as learning activities as 'just a part of doing the job'.

Students are legitimate learners when they are temporarily in a workplace. Other workers may be aware that they are not permanent residents. However, this creates a new tension: some things cannot be experienced unless one acts as if one is doing something for real and it is accepted by others that this is the case.

#### *Workplace supervisors are not facilitators of learning*

Much of the normative literature on human resource development gives workplace supervisors a key role in the learning and development of the people they supervise. Empirical investigation raises serious questions about this. Hughes (2004), for example, identified the problematic nature of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee as far as learning is concerned. There is an intrinsic tension between the employees need to be accepted as a person who knows what they are doing (i.e. accepted as a competent worker), and the need to reveal what they don't know and can't do which is necessary for their supervisor to facilitate their learning. It is not uncommon therefore for employees to go to great lengths to avoid revealing to their supervisors what they don't know and can't do. They seek out fellow workers who do not have a supervisory relationship over them to learn what they need to do their job. This does not mean that the supervisor has no role in learning—they can be very effective in structuring work tasks to scaffold development—but the limits to this role need to be recognised.

Most placements are such that it is not assumed that the workplace supervisor does more than supervise the work, and it is important to be realistic about the limits of this role. What it does mean is that significantly greater responsibility lies with the student in managing and monitoring their own learning, and staff from the educational institution have a vital role in supporting this function. There is a significant pedagogical role in this beyond that of placement coordinator.

#### *Learning in organizations is not conceptualised as individualistic*

Learning in educational institutions is conventionally seen in terms of individuals learning. Assessment is overwhelmingly of individual students and certification of outcomes is recorded only under the names of individuals. This is in contrast to the world of work. The output from workplaces is not individuals and their learning, but products and services and their quality. Sfard (1998) has captured this well in her distinction between two metaphors of learning. Learning in workplaces and communities is situated and specific and is acquired through *participation*. In education, learning occurs through structured activities explicitly designed for these purposes and is acquired through *acquisition*. Work, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms occurs through communities of practice in which new members of the community start by engaging in peripheral participation, then moving to a more central place through their involvement with the community through undertaking tasks that increasingly place them as a fully functioning member of the group.

This feature of work means that there will always be a necessary translation from the workplace to formal education. What is learned from participation must be re-inscribed to turn it into learning that can be assessed and judged by the academy.

### *Much learning at work occurs in between*

Finally, our detailed study of learning in workgroups showed that much development of capacity, as distinct from learning to do the immediate work, occurred neither in work, nor out of it. It took place in what we termed the in-between spaces (Solomon, Boud and Rooney 2006) where there was a transition between direct engagement in work tasks and full disengagement in out-of-work time. 'Learning' conversations occurred in the interstices between work and non-work—such as tea and lunch breaks, or around the pigeonholes—though, when pressed, participants denied they were engaged in learning! These spaces also created opportunities for productive reflection at work (Boud 2006). They could be taken up as reflective spaces where issues and challenges could be explored with others.

This can be very confusing for students until they realise that much of their informal learning in educational institutions takes place in this way as well. The exchanges among students between classes, the chats over coffee, the unexpected encounter with a lecturer are undervalued but important features of the academy as well as the workplace and we need to find ways of acknowledging their value.

### **The limits of organising immersive opportunities**

An important consideration in immersive experience is that experiences as such can't be directly planned and controlled. An event can be organised, but what a person experiences when involved with it cannot be. Experience is essentially relational. An event or activity can afford certain possibilities for learning, but these affordances have to be perceived as such and be taken up by the learner. Any given learner may not have the inclination, the capacity or the prior experience to be able to utilise the opportunities. Throwing learners in at the deep end only works when the learner has the resources and support to be able to cope. If they don't, they just flounder and sink. This then is a sobering test of the appropriateness of immersive experience: can the learner cope with it. Even if the learner can cope, would it be ethically defensible to do so, and if ethically defensible, could the risk be managed within the confines of an educational institution? The risk referred to here is not one of physical danger as it is taken for granted that this must be managed, but one of learning risk: is there a significant chance that learning will not occur or indeed, learning occur that it adverse to that desired?

A key feature of much immersive experience is that there is often no one present who acts in a primary role as a facilitator with the learning interests of the participant as their central concern. There are normally multiple other people, but they are mostly concerned with doing whatever is normally done in that setting—if they are nurses they are nursing, if managers they are managing, etc. Nevertheless depending on their dispositions to the learner these co-participants may be integral to a learners learning.

This means that it is common for the only continuity with regard to learning to be learners themselves. This places significant responsibilities on students to manage their own learning. Indeed, without some significant capacity to do this, learning from the experience can be diminished. This feature of immersive experience also points to the significance of one of the elements of the learning from experience model: the need for preparation with regard to learning skills and strategies including the language and constructs of learning. If the learner is the only person present looking after their learning interests, then they need a repertoire of dispositions and devices to assist them. These may range from macro-level organising devices such as learning agreements for a placement to micro-level devices like that of keeping appropriately an effective learning journal.

Responsible use by educators of immersive experience places an obligation on them to appropriately prepare students to be active managers of their own learning by introducing this feature from the very start of their program.

### **An agenda for considering immersive experience**

This review of experience-based learning and the positioning of immersive experiences within raises some interesting questions that provide a useful focus for further enquiry.

1. What kinds of immersion are good for which purposes? This begs the further question: are some immersive experiences not good environments for learning, or some kinds of learning?
2. What particular kind of immersion is appropriate for the given learner and the given learning outcomes?
3. Why is an immersive experience thought preferable to one that is less immersive for the particular educational outcomes sought?
4. What are the key considerations in the design or selection of an immersive opportunity?
5. Can an event or activity that involves significant immersion be ethically justified and particularly justified in terms of the risks involved? Can an ethical challenge be mitigated by the preparation and ongoing support that the learner receives in a highly immersive situation, or the need for the learner to be prepared for difficult or risky situations?
6. Are learners sufficiently well prepared and suitably equipped to utilise the opportunities the event provides? What constitutes appropriate preparation for immersive environments that are highly unpredictable?
7. To what extent are learners able to notice and retain what is happening in an immersive situation?
8. What occasions and opportunities are there within the context of the activity, and following it, for reflection and processing to occur?
9. Are the reflective processes available for learners sufficiently well understood, and practiced, for them to be able to be applied to the experiences involved?
10. Is enough time available, and conditions suitable, for reflection during and following the event?
11. Are assessment activities sufficiently well designed to ensure that they do not inadvertently inhibit and distort reflection on the immersive experience?
12. In what ways can assessment tools and criteria be made able to take account of the unpredictable nature of the outcomes that emerge through immersive experiences?

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