

Using Experiential Education to Tackle Controversial Issues

About Experiential Education

What is Experiential Education?

The learner's own experiences are at the heart of experiential education. The experiential educator's role is to facilitate direct experience of phenomena leading to meaningful and long lasting learning. With controversial global issues, it is not often possible, or desirable, to 'directly experience' something, but it is usually possible to simulate an experience in a way that is active and which pupils respond to emotionally as well as intellectually.

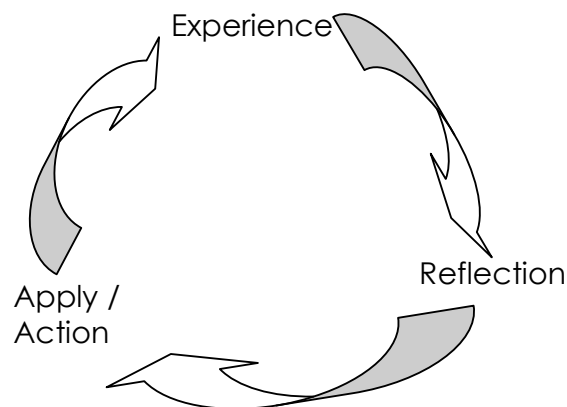
Why is experiential education a useful way of tackling controversial issues?

Experiential education is often seen as the opposite of didactic approaches. "Controversial issues touch on deeply held views and embedded attitudes. Telling young people what think or preaching to them about how to behave is likely at best to have no effect and at work to close their minds to considering alternatives views" (*Teaching Controversial Issues, Oxfam 2006*). 'Experiences' often tap into more of the 'multiple intelligences' mapped by Gardner and make more accessible to all pupils. Using the experiential learning cycle helps the educator and learner link experience, reflection and action logically.

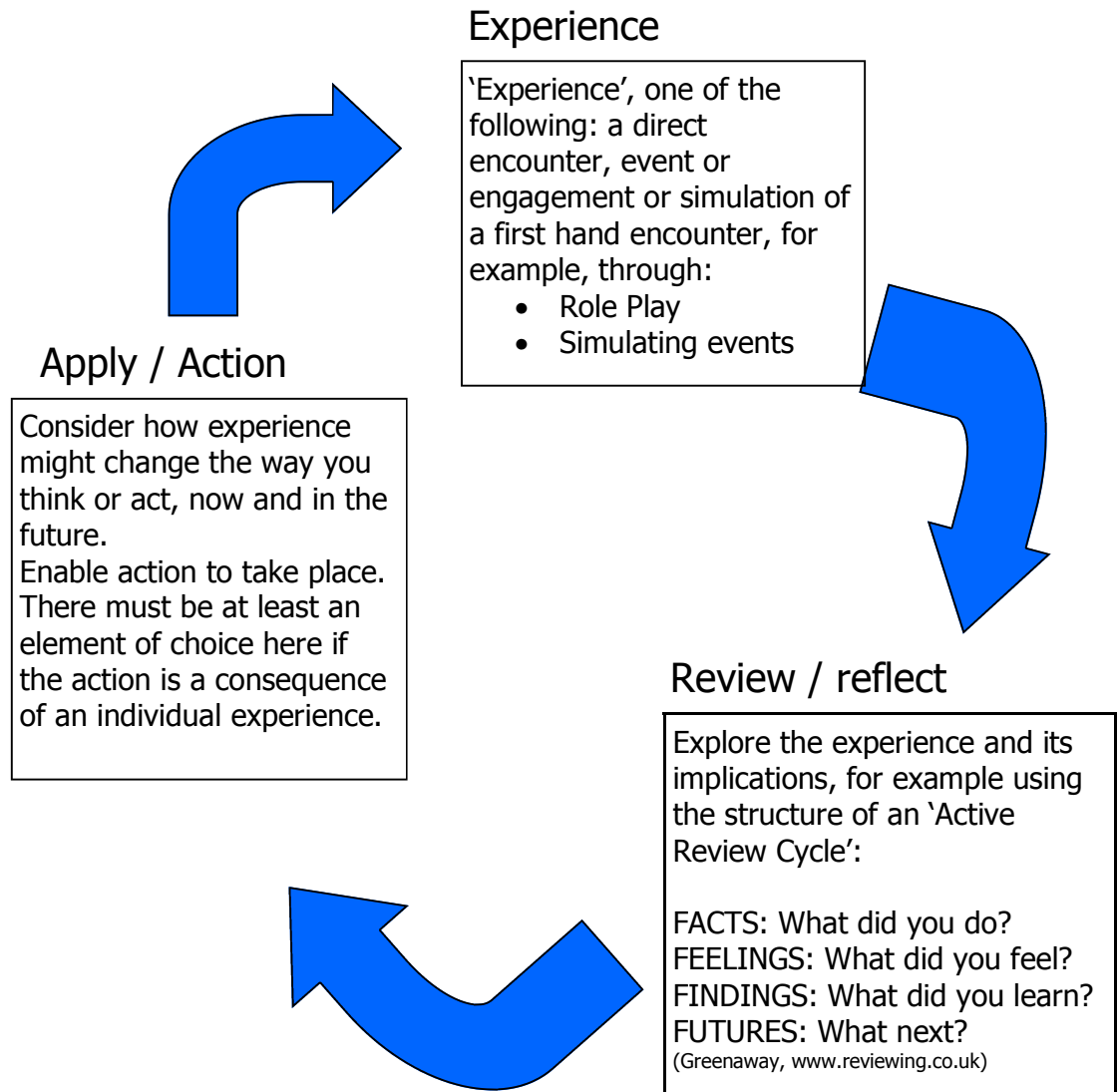
The Experiential Learning Cycle

Experience on its own is rarely enough – just as it is possible to repeat mistakes again and again, it is possible to have a wide range of experiences and still have the same narrow world view as previously. Moreover, giving pupils exposure to some difficult topics without proper reflection or consideration can lead to apathy or, perhaps worse, despair. There are many variations on this cycle, most famously Kolb's cycle. This cycle draws on Brathay's 3 stage cycle and incorporates a 'reflection' and 'action' phase (www.reviewing.co.uk).

A Simple Experiential Learning Cycle



An Experiential Learning Cycle



The importance of experience

What is an experience? When talk about 'learning from experience', experience is a process as well as an event. You could experience copying notes from a whiteboard, but it is unlikely to be *an experience* in the way most people use the term. An experience invokes the senses and emotions. Experiences are the acts that produce, create, and invent learning and have an affect on the future. In the classroom, we might try and invoke experiences 'in the real world' though role-play or simulations.

With controversial issues, most people begin a topic with an opinion, inevitably based on partial knowledge. The sources of that knowledge may all reinforce a particular view, for example a friends views might reflect their parents' views which might reflect the newspapers views etc. A class, by virtue of the fact that they are of a similar age and live in the same locality, may share similar views and so reflecting or debating within one's own group might not enable pupils to consider or understand different perspectives. By evoking an experience, you are adding something new to the mix, widening their experience and possibly challenging their assumptions.

The importance of reflection

If learning is to be meaningful, taking time to reflect on an experience and consider how it made us feel, how it sits with existing values or attitudes and how it might change our future actions. A good reflection often asks quite open ended questions and considers the importance of skills, values and attitudes alongside knowledge ("Tell me three things about...."). Reflecting does not have to be an oral question and answer plenary, and could encompass a peer and self assessment and tasks such as mind mapping. A reflection should help a pupil explore their own experiences, and the different experiences of those in their class in a non-judgemental way. They must not feel there is a correct answer: the point of teaching about controversial issues is not to get everyone to agree with you and agree with each other, but to start to form a point of view and associated values and attitudes, based in experiences and realities rather than inexperience and misconception.

The importance of application and action

Any action must follow logically from the understanding gained from experience and reflection. As everyone's subjective experience will be different, it follows that their understanding and therefore the action they decide to take will be different. Any decisions and choices learners make for themselves are likely to be more sustainable than those that are enforced. For example if, after experiencing a simulation of a refugee crisis and reflecting on it, pupils decide that it's a person's fault if they become a refugee, then clearly a class based activity raising money for the cause isn't appropriate. However, perhaps more commonly, pupils can both feel sympathy for a refugee's plight but feel there is nothing they can do about it.

It doesn't necessarily follow that just because people think differently, they will behave differently. A report by DEFRA on climate change showed if people's

attitudes don't match their actions they are more likely to change their attitudes to justify their behaviour, than change their behaviour to justify their actions. However, if constructive examples of possible action were given, this did help bring about positive changes.

However, we have to be realistic about the capacity children have for independent action. It is better to hit a small, achievable action than miss a large one, not least because these patterns of behaviour and optimism about making a difference can endure into adulthood when the choices are greater.

Experiential Education in Practice

Planning using the Experiential Learning Cycle

The experiential learning cycle can be used as a flexible tool to plan lessons and schemes of work. One lesson may incorporate the entire cycle, or it could be spread over a term's work, including a series of experiences, reflection and some more didactic activities, followed by a final 'action'. The example below shows how the elements might be used over a series of lessons:

Example topic: Trade and Inequality

<p>Lesson 1 Experience – Play Trading Game (simulates world trade)</p> <p>Reflection- paired peer review using active review cycle</p>	<p>Lesson 2 Prepare – write a questionnaire to find out if local shops sell fairtrade and why</p> <p>Homework Experience- carry out survey in at least one shop</p>	<p>Lesson 3 Reflection – consider the implications of survey results for consumers and producers</p> <p>Application / Action Provide options for courses of action. Plan a campaign.</p>
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Activities for the Classroom

Experience

Role Play – Simple Ideas **Put yourself in the picture**

Ask pupils to add a stick drawing of themselves (e.g on a postit note) onto a photograph. They are to consider things such as what they are doing, where they are looking, what they are thinking and feeling. Write a narrative for 5 minutes before and after the picture was taken.

Create your own story

Give pupils a name and age and situation and ask them to create a role or back story for themselves. Putting pupils into groups e.g. as families, will make this more interesting as their stories will have to link together. Announce a series of events to which the pupils have to react to in role e.g. A hurricane wipes out your crops. Do you: a) borrow money to replant them, b) steal food from your neighbours, c) go to the city for work.

They may need additional source material e.g. photographs and general written information, to ensure it is realistic (although you may want to do it without these in order to uncover stereotypes). You could also do this towards the end of a topic to assess understanding.

Task in Character

Give pupils a simple role and ask them to complete a task in character e.g. you could ask the pupils to imagine they were a refugee living in Britain, then watch a film about racism. How did it change the way they did the viewed the film or did the task?

Reflection

Using a Review Cycle

Using a review cycle will help take pupils logically through their experience and begin to consider it's implications. It provides a useful structure to any reflection.

The Active Review Cycle (Greenaway, www.reviewing.co.uk)

FACTS: What did you do?

FEELINGS: What did you feel?

FINDINGS: What did you learn?

FUTURES: What next? Will it change the way you think or act?

The site Greenaway's site <http://reviewing.co.uk/learning-cycle/feedback-methods.htm> gives many examples of reviewing tools using the review cycle.

Written survey

Asking pupils to complete a questionnaire style survey, alongside some more open ended questions, is a good idea e.g.

I found it difficult to image what the character would feel –
Agree 1 2 3 4 Disagree

Working in Pairs

Pupils ask each other questions from the review cycle in pairs, before feeding back some answers to a class debate.

Field of words

Give sheet of words or short phrases to each pupil and ask them to select the ones that represent how they felt after the exercise e.g. hopeful, ashamed, sad, thoughtful, frustrated. Ask pupils to use the words they have chosen to explain their response to the experience.

Application / Action

It is important that any proposed action is based on their own understanding, and an application of their experience, and that the options discussed are realistic and meaningful. It might be difficult to follow through and complete the action in the classroom for these reasons.

Design a campaign

Give pupils the framework for planning a campaign, and let them choose what they want to do. Pupils often feel like they can't make a difference themselves, but may not appreciate that they may be able to persuade others to make changes.

A framework will probably include:

- What change they want to bring about
- Decide on a scale – do you want to change governments, your school, your family, yourself? This might be a mixture of pragmatism (who can I most influence) as well as impact (what difference will it make?).
- Decide on an activity – e.g. raising money, campaigning e.g. to change behaviour or change opinion
- Plan the activity – including who is doing what and when.

Campaigning organisations like Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org.uk) often create effective campaigns with quite limited resources and people. Look at their website (particularly the 'take action') section, for ideas. People and Planet (www.peopleandplanet.org) is a Sixth Form and student campaigning organisation which might also provide inspiration.

See p. XX for a sample campaign sheet.

Carrying out a campaign

£1 to make a difference

Pupils could carry out a chosen campaign as an assessment or coursework activity. For example, the challenge could be to make the biggest difference starting with £1, working in groups and writing up the activity.

Vote on it

If there is not the flexibility or time for each pupil / group to carry out their own campaign, you could ask each group to present their campaign and ask pupils to vote for the one they think will make the biggest positive difference.

Involve the School Council

School councils are often concerned with internal matters, but this doesn't have to be so. The class could campaign for the school council to take on their campaign and promote it throughout the school.

References and resources for teaching about controversial issues

'Teaching Controversial issues – A Global Citizenship Guide' (Oxfam 2006)

Intelligence Reframed. Multiple intelligences for the 21st century, (Gardner, Howard 1999)

The Active Reviewing Guide to Dynamic Experiential Learning –
www.reviewing.co.uk

DEFRA guidance for climate change communications-
www.climatechallenge.gov.uk

The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Issues (Edited by Claire and Holden-Trentham Books).

www.trentham-books.co.uk .

Learning from Experience – World Studies in the Primary Curriculum (Steiner, Trentham Books)

www.trentham-books.co.uk.

The 'Global Dimension' website provides a useful search engine for resources about controversial issues www.globaldimension.org.uk.

The Trading Game (Christian Aid) A simulation of world trade. Christian Aid also publishes a number of other simulation games around trade

www.learn.christianaid.org.uk.

The Banana Game – a simulation of growing bananas, including how fairtrade certification makes a difference.

www.risc.org.uk/education/teaching_resources