Why Experience Matters

By J. Matthew Price

What Pragmatists Teach Wesleyans about Educational Experience

Not long ago, I attended a midweek educational offering at a church situated in the Wesleyan holiness tradition. When I entered the classroom I found four other people. The teacher—or group facilitator soon joined us. The facilitator was ten to twenty years younger than all but two of the participants. I chose a chair at the end of a row near the door. There were eventually eight of us. After some informal chit-chit, the session began.

The discussion started with a question about moments in our lives when we experienced God at work. Several people responded after gentle prodding from the facilitator. The introduction then led into a brief soliloquy by the facilitator on Romans 1:19-20. During the ensuing discussion, an older participant interrupted the facilitator. My impression of the man asking the question/comment was of a long-retired blue-collar worker with a balding head, calloused hands, and steady gaze. He said, "We have sort of gotten off track [though we hadn't as far as I could tell]. But, I just wanted to say that I'm thankful that God knows our destiny—each and every one of us. In fact, God knew all about our lives in advance, before we were born, He knew the path we would follow. He even knew what I would be doing tonight since the beginning of the world." The facilitator smiled, hesitated, and then continued the overview of the evening's scripture meditation—without responding to this statement. After while, the man with the question/comment stood up, and walked out of the room. I discovered later that he was taking attendance for the various groups meeting at church that night. He was obviously one of the lay leaders in the church. We concluded the session with prayer requests, mostly for personal physical ailments or those of loved ones.

I was a little startled by the participant's straightforward question/comment and the unwillingness, or inability, of the facilitator to respond to such a theologically slanted remark. The facilitator tried to create an environment that encouraged discussion. But, when an encounter for educational transformation occurred, when life interacted with truth in light of scripture, the facilitator backed down. A meaningful educational experience was missed, though the environment had been set, the participants present, the facilitator theologically trained for such an educationally and spiritually vibrant experience. Why? What was the opportunity missed for teaching and learning? Why did the participants and facilitator sidestep the purpose of the gathering? Could the group activity have moved into uncharted educational territory to uncover theological misunderstandings and to discover new ideas about God and humanity? Why does active experience matter in theological education? Theological educators, regardless of their situation in local church or college or seminary, know when they have missed the teachable moment. They also realize in hindsight that those active experiences of interaction are the reason we teach as well as the result of what we do.

To support my contention that theological educators need not miss these opportunities for meaningful educational experiences, we will look to William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952) who introduced the theory of pragmatism into the vocabulary of 20th century philosophical conversation and promoted its influence in educational practice. The following is a survey of Dewey's and James' ideas particularly on the notion of "active experience."[1] This paper will connect their ideas about "conjunctive experience," or interactivity, and the importance of the educational environment with current theological education in the holiness tradition, particularly in light of the educational influence of H. Orton Wiley (1877-1961). Hopefully, this discussion will help future educators in the Wesleyan holiness tradition to continue the conversation rather than dismiss the difficult questions faced in the warp and woof of educational practice.

An Overview of Active Experience in the Pragmatism of James and Dewey

Pragmatism, according to James, is a methodological outlook. The pragmatic method intends "to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences."[2] James derived his philosophical method from the Greek word *pragma*, which referred to actions, events, especially in the realm of public affairs.[3] The trajectory of James' pragmatic ideas can be traced back to Aristotle where intellectual and moral excellence (Greek, *arete*) was viewed as a development within an individual as a result of experience, time, and habit.[4] The idea of pragmatism, according to James and Dewey, involves action, interaction, and change within the participants and during the given activity.[5] At the outer edges of philosophical pragmatism one finds the notion of "active experience."

Active Experience as a Way to "Learn Something"

Experience as activity needs further definition. James made reference to experiences as *"turning places."* These experiences are "the parts of the world to which we are closest, the parts of which our knowledge is most intimate and complete."[6] Supporting this idea, Dewey noted, "the engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical."[7] Dewey insisted on some kind of inner reflection that corresponds to outward activity. Experience is thus more than encounters with empirical or superficial phenomenon.

Another aspect of experience is that of activity. An activity occurs as a process of continuous, but not purposeless, experiences. Genuine experience, according to Dewey, has an "active side"[8] , though "mere activity does not constitute experience"[9]. Furthermore, James agrees that activity is an extension of another fact or experience, like an "impression" or "shadow."[10] So, what purpose lies behind active experience?

Dewey explains purposeful experience as a "trying [that] involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it consciously connect[s] with the return wave of consequences which flow from it."[11]

Purpose and change within one's experience are at their inception meaningless without a result, a destination, or some kind of response or feedback. Mikhail Bakhtin stated it this way: "understanding comes to fruition only in the response."[12] Dewey continues, "when the change made by action [or active trying] is reflected back into the change made in us [by passive undergoing], the mere flux is loaded with significance." Outward activity *always* results in something new with each experience. It is in this experience of flux between trying and undergoing , says Dewey, that "we learn something."

Experience intersects with theology at this point. H. Orton Wiley, as best we can understand him today, viewed personality as the underlying motivation upon the world of active experience. Individuality and personality reflect the constitution of every person. Like his mentor, John Wright Buckham, Wiley explained individuality as the outward expressions of the inner workings of an unchanging character. The skin may grow old, may reflect flaws over time, but the personality maintains a degree of constancy over time and through a multiplicity of experiences. The personality, in Wiley's opinion, makes religious life possible. In a book co–authored with E. P. Ellyson, Wiley wrote, "the religious capacity...and experience will develop with the personality."[13] Cultivating that religious life is only possible, however, when it becomes personal as "the result of the action of the will."[14] The tendency of religious education to sway toward the vague notions of intuition—to feel the emotions of religiosity—are drawn back to the world of active experience by the human ability to act, change, and learn.

How one learns or teaches should be flexible or fluid in its purpose. Elliot Eisner asserts that excellency in teaching "requires artistry" and that means "the teacher is able to exploit opportunities as they occur."[15] In other words, an educator should be apt at "knowing when to alter the goal, when to explore new interactions and when to shift strategies."[16] Acknowledging the "end–view"[17] , as Dewey terms purposeful experience, teachers and students can adjust to the progression of active experience in the teaching–learning encounter. Eisner cautioned that "what diminishes human

rationality is the thwarting of flexible human intelligence by prescriptions that shackle the educational imagination."[18] The existence of syllabi, courses of study, and teaching guides do not exonerate teachers from the responsibility to guide the experiences of education toward a preconceived goal. Educators need to possess the capability of altering the direction of a syllabus, session, or class discussion based upon knowledge of their own and their students' present and collective experiences. This educational interaction makes the responsibility for learning something that is mutually shared by the educator and the student.

Conjunctive Experience as Educational Activity

A teaching–learning encounter is a "train of experience"[19] , according to William James, that is bound together by "conjunctive relations"[20] between the teacher and student. The teaching–learning encounter begins with knowledge of the students and teacher's own self–understanding. James uses the analogy of a rope to help explain the notion of conjunctive relations."For instance," James wrote, "your hand lays hold of one end of a rope and my hand lay hold of the other end. We pull against each other. Can our two hands be mutual objects in this experience, and the rope not be mutual also?"[21] It is this relation that establishes the reality and context for meaningful educational experiences.

Experiences are not barren, isolated actions in James' understanding. Rather, experiences are infused with the "process, obstruction, striving, strain, or release" of actively engaging some real thing or person.[22] Yet the engagement is more real than the things or persons are by themselves. The experience is the reality. Conjunctive relations between simultaneous experiences leave an impression upon a knower (the student) and make a connection between the student and the learning event that makes a difference in the knower (the student).

Dewey and James define self, or personal consciousness, as a series of successive experiences that are "integrated" (Dewey) or "knit together by different transitions" (James). It is this change, or transition within conjunctive relations with others, that is "immediately experienced" by the student. According to H. Orton Wiley, "love is the spring of every activity."[23] The experience of holy love within the life of a disciple, or learner, becomes the unifier of one's existence and ties together the experiences of one's personal biography. The act of this infusion of holy love came to be termed within the Wesleyan tradition as entire sanctification. Wiley wrote: "To understand the spiritual significance of this work of grace it must be experienced, for spiritual things can only be known by experience."[24] It is in this statement that one hears the influence of William James, and by association John Dewey, upon the conceptualization of holiness theology for the last century. The transitions of life's experiences can provide learning opportunities that are transformational and integrative within the lives of teachers and students.

Educators within the Wesleyan tradition can capitalize on these transitory moments by providing experiences that allow the student to reflect upon their "life–experience"[25] , as it relates to others. F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin cite this activity as an effort to gain "personal practical knowledge." This is "a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation."[26] In other words, student should have the opportunity to share experiences meaningful in their lives. Asking about times of change and transition will enable most students to tell something significant that has occurred in their lives. The lecturer needs to allow for student input or the material loses its transformative impact upon student learning. Students should be able to reconstruct and integrate their life experiences and make connections with the lives of others. It is the educator that moderates the experiences of students within this educational process by building relationships with the students.

The Importance of Environment for Educational Activity

The educator creates the activities and environment that best communicate the possible meanings of the learning experience to the student. "Conjoint activity" is the educative goal of the learning experience.[27] The educator's role is to be the "leader of group activities."[28] By guiding this process, the educator may seem more like a ringleader of a circus, than a semi–conductor of vast intellectual energy. James likens these instances of conjunctive relations as "quasi–chaos.[29]" Group experiences and activities, though they border on chaotic, occur in a specified environments. A microcosm of this kind of creative environment can be seen on the library tables prior to term work due date. Students have piles of books and paper stacked across tables strewn with pencils, highlighters, and humming laptop computers. The tabletops containing this jumble of activity is the environment as guided by the requirements and encouragement of the educator.

Broadly speaking, "the environment consists of the sum total of conditions which are concerned in the execution of the activity of a living being."[30] Several unique contributions of environment to the teaching–learning encounter are implicit in this definition. The environment is a collection of "objective conditions," which includes the content, method(s), attitude, materials, and "the social set–up of the situation in which a person [as student or teacher] is engaged."[31] Ideally, all of these conditions could be influenced by the educator, but, in some cases, content, method, and materials are established before the educator is introduced. However, the social set–up of the teaching environment can be guided. Relationships between the students, to the teacher, and to the subject are intertwined in the social set–up of the educational setting. A teacher should not make an *a priori* decision about this social set–up, but engages in an "active process of organizing" the environment for learning.[32] This is the meaning of the Dewey's idea of education being the "reconstruction of experience."[33]

Teaching begins with an understanding of the student—who they are and what they have experienced. Part of constructing the learning environment is identifying the "life–space" and "life–duration" of the students.[34] Awareness of students' previous experiences means that selection of course content can

"fall within the scope of ordinary life–experience."[35] The learning environment, and therefore, the teacher, according to Dewey, "must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child [or any student]."[36] The curricular decisions made by the teacher should reflect what best communicates within the teaching–learning encounter. For Dewey, communication is "the process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession."[37] One type of shared experience for the teacher to draw upon is found in the annual cycle of the Christian year.

Theological educators should take a closer look at the educative value of the rhythms found in the Christian calendar. From the First Sunday of Advent to Christ the King Sunday, the church year advances through a regular and cyclical repetition of seasons and holy days, and festivals. To this cycle is added the scholastic layer of educational conferences, courses, due dates, and exams. Course work and scholarly pursuits can be enhanced with associations to Kingdomtide, Advent, Lent, and Easter.[38] Educators, regardless of their setting, can tap into these narrative rhythms of the church year to enrich their teaching experience.

Dewey asserts that it is the "business of educators to supply the environment" to inspire curiosity, to provide moving experiences, to change things, and to make experience "continually active."[39] The educator is not merely a ringleader in the learning encounter, but an active participant with the students. Selecting influences for the teaching–learning encounter requires the ability to inspire, move, change, make, and engage students with a continuous range of experiences that connects the subject with life, student with other students, and students with teacher. The educator carries a heavy responsibility in an education motivated by James and Dewey's notion of active experience. With each new teaching event, "there is the reconstruction of experience, and it is through this cyclic repetition of school [and church] life that teachers come to 'know' their classrooms [and students] rhythmically."[40] The same process can be said about the role of the church year in theological

education. To teach rhythmically assumes that teachers know how to activate their group of students, create an environment that inspires curiosity, and bridge students' lives with the learning experience.

Interactivity in the Educational Experience

Education, technically defined by Dewey, is the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."[41] An educational experience is the continuation of what preceded it and an impetus for what follows. For Dewey, teaching with a purpose or having good aims were not the target itself, but a process of "hitting the target." The experience is just "bare activity," unless actors are interacting. Interactivity is the mingling of actors, actions, and mutual experiences in the context of "conjoint activity" to use Dewey's terminology or "conjunctive relations" to use James'. Their point–of–view asserts that the goals of the teaching–learning encounter are realized in the present and not in the future. This perspective is reinforced by Dewey's belief that education is "a process of living and not a preparation for future living."[42] Educators and students may influence future experiences through their interaction, but the intent of student–teacher interaction is to appreciate the fruits of the teaching–learning encounter as a present reality and not only a future possibility, whether the goal is spiritual growth, transformative experiences, or practical application.

Evaluation of Active Experience in Educational Interaction

William Ayers gives a series of helpful questions to evaluate an educational experience derived from an educational practice of active experience. Ayers asks educators the following questions:

> "Are there opportunities for discovery and surprise?"
> "Are students actively engaged with primary sources and hands–on materials?"

"Is productive work going on?"
"Is the work linked to student questions or interests?"
"Are problems within the classroom [or teaching–learning encounter] and the larger community, part of student consciousness?"
"Is my work in the classroom [teaching–learning encounter] pursued to its far limits?" [43]

An educator should grow with the students by actively experiencing subject matter with them. The teaching–learning encounter is connected to “real life” through the shared experiences of all the participants. When this happens, the “teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social [and theological] life."[44] The effort of the entire group contributes to the educative value the learning experience. Active experience thus engages the students, challenges the teacher, and enhances the subject matter. Experience really does matter.

Conclusion

Scenes like the one described at the beginning of the paper do not have to be representative of Christian education in the local church or at any level. Educators can be reflective in their work to make the best of their teaching and learning experiences. In the realm of church extension, George Hunter has found a place for what he calls Wesley’s "sanctified pragmatism."[45] In Christian education, the philosophers have much to say to the practitioners and vice versa. Pragmatic theories can be applied to the teaching and learning experience. However, every philosophical base should be questioned and then tested in professional practice.

Further research needs to be accomplished. Questions need to be asked: What can philosophers of education offer practitioners? What can philosophers of education offer to theological dicussion? This paper has approached these questions as least in part. Further questions might include: What are the

limits of American pragmatism for Christian educational practice on a global scale? Can a secular theory such as pragmatism really contribute to the theological basis for Christian education and ministry? Is there an articulate theology of experience to enhance the dialogue within our own theological tradition as it matures and becomes increasingly global? These questions, however, are only the beginning of the discussion.

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NOTES

[1] B. C. Ewer, "The Philosophy of American Life," *The Personalist 3* (1922): 58.

[2] William James, *Pragmatism*. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1940 [c1907]), 45.

[3] W. J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers,1990), 341-342.

[4] S. M. Cahn, *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*. (Toronto: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1997), 197, 114.

[5] Dewey insists that "every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects…the quality of subsequent experiences... [because] it is a somewhat different person who enters into them" (*Experience and Education*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963 [c1938]), 35.)

[6] William James, "The Experience of Activity," *William James: Writings 1902-1910*. (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 802.

[7] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. (New York: Free Press, 1997 [c1916]), 236.

[8] Dewey, 1963, 39.

[9] Dewey, 1997, 139.

[10] James, 1987, 808.

[11] Dewey, 1997, 139.

[12] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Dialogic Imagination," Reflections on Language, Stuart Hirschberg and Terry Hirschberg, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) as quoted in Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Heteroglossia and Philosophers of Education," *Educational Theory 52* (Summer 2002): 293.

[13] Edgar P. Ellyson and H. Orton Wiley, The Study of the Pupil. (Kansas City, MO: Dept of Church Schools, 1930), 54.

[14] Ellyson and Wiley, 1930, 59.

[15] Eisner, *The Educational Imagination*, (New York: MacMillan, 1994), 163.

[16]Ibid

[18] Dewey, 1963, 67.

[19] Eisner, 1994, 165.

[20] James, 1987, 1160ff.

[21] William James, "A World of Pure Experience." William James: Writings 1902-1910. (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 1177.

[22] James, 1987, 801.

[23] Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publihsing House, 1941), 2:502.

[24] Wiley, 1941, 2:440.

[25] Dewey, 1963, 51.

[26] Connelly and Clandinin, *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 25.

[27] Dewey, 1997, 22.

[28] Dewey, 1963, 59.

[29] James, 1987, 1171.

[30] Dewey, 1997, 22.

[31] Dewey, 1963, 45.

[32] Dewey, 1963, 82. Should professors be present in the library during the evenings prior to term work due date? Their presence and involvement would stimulate the learning process of writing term papers.

[33] Dewey, 1963, 87;; Dewey, 1997, 76-80; Dewey in J. W. Hillesheim and G. D. Merrill, G.D., *Theory and Practice in the History of American Education: A Book of Readings*. (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1980.Hillesheim, 1980), 237.

[34] Dewey, 1963, 74.

[35] Dewey, 1963, 73.

[36] Dewey, in Hillesheim, 1980, 235.

[37] Dewey, 1997, 9.

[38] Much more remains to be written about the liturgical dynamic of theological education.

[39] Dewey, 1997, 209.

[40] Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, 162, 168

[41] Dewey, 1997, 76.

[42] Dewey in Hillesheim, 1980, 235.

[43] William Ayer, *To Teach: The Journey of the Teacher* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 94-96.

[44] Dewey (1897) in Hillesheim, 1980, 239.

[45] *To Spread the Power*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

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by J. Matthew Price, Ph. D.
Doyen, Faculté de Theologie de l'Eglise du Nazaréen, Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa