

The Benefits of Experiential Education Within the Context of the Local Church

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THE PROBLEM WITH THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TODAY

Generally, the foundational problem that exists in education today is the relationship between the teacher and student. The overriding characteristic of this relationship is that it is fundamentally narrative. Communication is unidirectional with the contents of the narration being lifeless and alien to the existential experience of the student. This method of education lacks depth and more importantly, is void of transforming power.

Students are seen as empty "containers" that the teacher needs to fill with facts, ideologies and formulas. The more completely the containers are filled, the better a teacher. The more the containers permit themselves to be filled, the better the students.

Two educational stages exist: Firstly, the teacher gains "head" knowledge from written material or as a result of himself being an "empty vessel" concerning topics. Secondly, the teacher then expounds this "flat" knowledge to the students. The students are not necessarily called upon to integrate this knowledge, but to merely memorize the contents as narrated by the teacher and to later "spurt" it out. This system of education views knowledge as a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those they consider to be ignorant.

In today's world of great technological advances, the half-life of many facts may be ten years or less. Therefore half of the knowledge acquired by any particular student may be nullified by the time he/she reaches the age of twenty and may be obsolete by the time that student is thirty. The emphasis therefore needs to change from didactic teaching, to the development of educational skills of inquiry and integration. The creative powers of students are also maximized through this method of education.

The above-mentioned educational concept implies that the traditional education system may not necessarily be the best method of preparing the learner to fulfil his /her lives tasks and achieves his/her potential. An alternative educational method that is more practical and "life-orientated" needs to be identified and implemented.

SECULAR EDUCATION AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

If one were to replace the teacher with a minister, youth leader, Sunday school teacher, etc., the "formal instruction" method of teaching would, in all probability, not differ that much from that used in secular education. This is the problem in Christian education today. Assumptions from the secular "Instructional Paradigm" have been exclusively and unquestioningly accepted and implemented. The Instructional Paradigm, at best, is only able to teach about Christianity as a religion - this not being the most important aspect of Christianity. There is a great difference between learning about the Bible and living

out its teaching as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is therefore obvious that the Instructional Paradigm alone cannot be used in the church for Christian education. What is needed, in addition, is an "Alternative Paradigm" and not merely an alternative Educational Programme.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Experiential Education is the process of actively engaging students in an experience that will have real consequences. Students make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves, instead of merely hearing or reading about

the experiences of others. Students also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, attitudes and theories or ways of thinking (Kraft & Sakofs, 1988)

John Dewey (1938) was an early promoter of the idea of learning through direct experience, by means of action and reflection. This type of learning differs much from traditional education, in that teachers first immerse students in action and then request that they reflect on their experiences.

Experiential Education, then, in its broad understanding, draws learning from experiences that the learner is exposed to. These experiences could be incidental or deliberate. The experiences may be pleasurable or unpleasant, short or of long duration. The learning from these experiences may be definite or accidental. This is how we first learned as infants and still continues to learn today. A “facilitator”, someone who directs the learning, enhances the learning. Experiential Education is found in so many places and is utilized in many different programmes and methods. For this paper I will limit its usage to Adventure-based experiential education.

The Chinese have captured the true essence of adventure in the term "wei-jan" Roughly translated, the expression means “ Opportunity through danger”.

Adventure implies elements of uncertainty of outcome, risk and stimulation due to adrenaline. Further, adventure is a highly personal experience that is uniquely understandable to that individual. Therefore, an adventure experience by a number of individuals may be interpreted differently.

Now, adventure, by definition, can happen in situations and environments ranging from white-water rafting to being a victim in an armed robbery. Both have elements of uncertainty of outcome. In fact, facing a maths exam may also be considered an adventure.

Again, for the sake of this paper I will limit the field of Experiential Education to Outdoors -related adventure-based experiences. (Referred henceforth as EE)

The outdoors, on its own, offers value because it allows us to withdraw from the impacted routine of our daily lives and gives us chance to reflect on the substance of our lives, our priorities and our directions. The outdoors not only allows for isolation but also is a highly simulating environment with new sights, new sounds, etc. In addition, the outdoors has a threatening quality about it. It is unpredictable, impartial and not controllable. Just living in this environment offers real-life challenges.

To discover how EE benefits the church we first need to look at society and the changes that have taken place over the years. In the old days family was the core to society and for a family to survive each member was required to contribute. People learnt within this family context issues of trust, sharing, commitment, values etc. Today principles are diminished because family life and its strong bonds of belong are less evident. Children growing up experience comfort and ease due to the pervasive affluence of society. Paul Tournier says that spoiled children live dull lives, lose all ambition and become weary everything.

In churches this mindset prevails. Church buildings are air-conditioned and the pews cushioned. This too has infiltrated our theology. God is seen as a giver of pleasant things exclusively. Difficulties and hardships are the result of “ backsliding” Scripture teaches otherwise. For example James 1:3-4 says difficulties can result in character development.

In order to develop and grow the young person, particularly, need challenges, to be exposed to situations that are outside of their comfort zone, take responsibility, endure the stressful consequences of failure. The lesson of commitment, perseverance, tolerance, dedication, etc. cannot be taught passively. These skills are derived from interaction, challenge and activity. Young people need challenges to develop and grow. A Scripture Union article states, “ If the youth will not stand for anything they will fall for everything”. If the church fails to provide these challenges, youth people will seek and find in places of less significance.

The church has always seen the value of outdoor camping. Christian organisations (viz. SU, YFC etc.) use camping intensively in their ministry. Unfortunately all too often church camping means a home from home.

Entertainment takes the place of challenges and often the camp is without purpose and/or objectives. At times an artificial environment is created on camp that is not conducive to life change.

Experiential Education and the Bible

1. Rom 1:20 reminds us that it is the outdoors that testifies to existence of God - " For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities- his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" Therefore, the outdoors with facilitation a good place to start "Spiritual Discovery"
2. Bible is an Adventure Book. Throughout its pages great Biblical characters were called out of their routine life and into the wilderness for special purposes, mainly being preparation and training for ministry. Even Jesus followed this route.
There is lessons learnt in the outdoors that cannot be learnt anywhere else.
3. Remember words of Paul " I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" EE is nothing more than an alternative teaching technique. Jesus, Master teacher, used varied techniques to teach, techniques that are used in EE today. (Viz. metaphors, object lessons, story telling, etc.)
4. Jesus always met people at point of their need- group and individual. This is the cornerstone of EE – programme designed around real and perceived needs of individuals and group. Parables without explanation were meaningless stories in the same way; adventure without facilitation is nothing more than entertainment.
5. Galatians - " there is neither Jew or gentile, slave nor free, male or female for all are one in Jesus Christ" Another bedrock of EE is that all are equal in ontological value. Each contributes to the well being of the group and not to compete against each other.
6. Romans 12:3 - "Think of yourself with sober judgement" Bible promotes a realistic evaluation of self. The call is to be real. EE brings out real person, encourages tolerance, acceptance, respect, etc.
7. Bible calls all Christians to strive towards excellence. God said "be perfect as I an perfect". Someone once said, " The joy of adventure is an anticipation of the joy of success" but " we cannot take part in any adventure without running the risk of failing in it" EE allows these to seemingly opposite concepts of success and failure to be viewed in their true sense.
8. Discovering Jesus of Bible conflicts with paintings and images we see. Jesus of the Bible outspoken, bold, of strong character, yet not afraid to show emotion, be vulnerable. All these qualities are characteristics of a positive self-image. We are called to imitate Christ. EE strives for self-discovery, character development and a realistic self-image.
9. Believers are members of God's family i.e. an alternative community. EE gives opportunity to explore and learn how to practically live in this community.
10. Throughout Bible lessons of responsibility, consequences, perseverance, commitment etc.
Are these not the goals of EE?

BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION FOR THE CHURCH

1) Personal Growth

a) Self Esteem

Christians are not exempt from the problem of low self-esteem. Teaching on this issue within the context of a church could prove to be difficult. According to Schoel, Prouty and Radcliffe, a negative self -esteem is the result of accumulated patterns of failure and "well designed adventure activities that focus on success experiences will help to break the cycle of failure" (1988). Romans

12:3 "... think of yourself with sober judgement." is the goal. Through EE, Scripture such as Psalm 139:17 "How precious are your thoughts about me O God." takes on a deeper meaning as one reflects on the things of God in the outdoors.

b) Discovery

Any person taking perceived risks would stretch their self-imposed boundaries. Rugged outdoor activities are also a means of developing courage, friendship, perseverance, trust and initiative. The adventure experience contributes to the participants' awareness of their dependence upon God. One participant on such a programme expressed it well: "Growth doesn't occur when everything is going perfectly and there is no pain. I know a lot of times I got too comfortable, being comfortable. I should be more uncomfortable more often." We frequently become addicted to comfort and convenience - the good life - convinced it is somehow related to the truth of Scripture.

2) Relationship Development

Christianity is based not on rules and regulations, but upon relationship. Relationship firstly between a God that reconciled mankind to Himself and secondly, between mankind itself. Scripture calls the believer to "grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). As love cannot be taught and can only be experienced, so this growth in relationship is far more than mere intellectual assent. It is lived out through experience. The church is a community of believers. Community skills can only be developed within a community. EE offers this opportunity as groups live, eat and sleep together in a "temporary community". Concepts of sharing, caring, respect, responsibility and consequences (amongst others) are better understood and this learning can be directly carried back into the real world. Adventure education is a form of role modelling teaching. Participants are able to see theory and practice merge, as they observe their "teachers" positively deal with similar stressful situations (cold, fatigue, the unexpected, etc.) to themselves.

3) Spiritual Development

EE removes the participant from "everyday" distractions. One is able to come face to face with God, as "masks" are removed. One's standing before a Holy God can be explored through reflection. Difficult abstract concepts (viz. Faith, Salvation, Commitment, etc.) may be expounded through the use of concrete adventure-related experiences. The Christian walk is exciting, challenging and demanding. EE is a valuable tool in the equipping of the believer with learnt practical skills in order that they may live out their convictions in the real world.

CONCLUSION

The responsibility of the church is to "... equip God's people to do His work .." (Ephesians 4:12) Jesus made use of many different teaching techniques including preaching (Mark 1: 38). The church today needs to seek and use EVERY "... means to save some." (1Cor. 9:22). EE has its limitations, but its strength in enhancing existing teaching methods, needs to be implemented in the church. "Youth people need large doses of adventure in order to change, discover and grow. If they aren't sufficiently challenged by real-life adventures, they will seek and find fictitious adventures of significantly less value". (Tim Hansel.1987, Pg 23). "The ultimate failure in our ministry is not for a person to reject Jesus, rather ultimate failure is when we don't give him/her anything to reject, so that they walk away disinterested" (Unknown). May the church not fail in meeting this charge!.