An Investigation into the Implications of Dewey’s “Learning Situation”
For Online Education

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Abstract

Course designers and program administrators face daily challenges of finding balance between new technology and educational principles conducive to online learning environments. This study investigates the implications of Dewey’s understanding of the “learning situation” through a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of students’ participating in an online course at a faith-based liberal arts university. The salient themes of flexibility, travel, and communication emerged from the study. Ecology of learning and community of inquiry are treated in order to explore theoretical bridges between Dewey and distance education. A conceptual diagram of Dewey’s learning situation is provided to assist online course designers in creating assignments that account for various levels of self-directed student reflection and online social interaction. The article concludes by recommending practical ways to infuse student experiences as part of student learning outcomes.

Keywords: John Dewey, constructivism, online education, distance education, experiential learning, experiential e-learning, study abroad, phenomenological research, ecology of learning

Introduction

While the tools of technology upgrade almost daily, educators are left with the daunting task of integrating digital progress with educative principles. As technology continues to provide new tools, course designers and subject matter experts have the responsibility to look beyond “the latest thing” and to evaluate the new instruments’ usefulness for learning. Given the more established place of online learning in higher education (Legon & Garrett 2017, p. 10), the burden for supporting digital innovation with educational principles has also become more crucial.

At the heart of online learning program development, educators face the epistemological dilemma of whether they are to use the Internet for the redistribution of knowledge (perennialism) or to use the Internet to provide access to knowledge (constructivism/progressivism). Although programs may select combinations of these two, at the end of the day, administrators must decide if they are willing to invest in learning models that lead students to construct, engage, and experience knowledge. Otherwise, their sophisticated technology may do nothing more than transmit information from one device or computer to another with expectations that somewhere along the way students also upload the information to their brains. In order to avoid a simple information transfer, course designers ought to build into online courses ways for learners’ experiences to become part of the curriculum.
John Dewey recognized the significant role real-life experiences play on learning. Dewey drew from Romantic philosophers, such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel, and applied their principles of sensory experience to his twentieth-century American context (Dewey, 1916). His aim was to explore ways of learning for the benefit of education as a discipline (Dewey, 1938). As institutions of higher learning bring online academics toward the mainstream of education, they should consider how Dewey’s principles of experience apply to today’s context. The purpose of this article is to invite distance educators to consider how Dewey’s understanding of learning by experience affects online course design. In order to explore the role of experience in online learning, this study conducted a phenomenological analysis of student experiences from an online course. The analysis was guided by the following research question: “In what ways does the interaction of past experiences and present community impact learning online?” The student feedback revealed flexibility, travel, and communication as important themes that support Dewey’s “learning situation” as a theoretical framework for experiential learning online.

Related Literature

A growing body of recent literature on distance learning emphasizes the importance of social learning and interaction in online education (see Thor et al., 2017; Howell et al., 2017; Westbrook, 2015). Carver, King, Hannum, and Fowler (2007), by focusing on experiential e-learning (or elearning), introduce important concepts for joining experience and learning at a distance, such as “learner-centric,” “agency,” and “belongingness.” They suggest a six level taxonomy for experiential e-learning: type 1 “content sharing,” type 2 “online conversation,” type 3 “meaningful online conversation,” type 4 “drawing on student experiences,” type 5 “problem-based/service learning,” and type 6 “direct experience/action learning.” The authors conclude that “the addition of concepts from experiential education can bolster e-learning environments,” especially given that experiential e-learning helps students overcome some of the challenges of learning in isolation (Carver et al., 2007, p. 255). Following their lead, Baasanjav (2013) overlays Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory onto these “elearning core concepts” and applies this integration of theory to an online course design. Bartley (2006, p. 23) calls for assessment strategies that are “interactive and engaging.” Collins and Halverson (2009) promote the “lifelong-learning era” that echoes the progressive movement of the twentieth century in light of innovative developments in computer technology. They write, “The pedagogy of the lifelong-learning era is evolving toward reliance on interaction…” (p. 97). Conrad and Donaldson (2004), drawing from the work of Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky, and Piaget, insist that online pedagogy incorporate social constructivism in order to avoid courses’ becoming merely “digital correspondence” courses (p. 6). Koontz, Li, and Compora (2006) write, “The implementation of a constructive environment online can be done through the process of discovery learning,… This constructive approach is necessary in Web-based instruction because students are forced to access, retrieve, reconstruct, adapt, and organize information in a way that is meaningful to their learning” (p. 27). Mason and Rennie (2008) point toward interactive interfaces and “connectivism” as the way forward “for learners to flourish in a digital era” (p. 19). It should come as no surprise that progressive modes of delivery utilize progressive theories of education. The challenge for the road ahead will be for online enthusiasts to ground innovative design with objective assessment and theoretical exploration.

Cassady and Mullen (2006) explore electronic field trips (EFT) as a means to enhance the learning experience for online students. They report how Ball State University, in conjunction with institutions such as The Smithsonian Institute and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), has created EFTs that incorporate live broadcasts, simulations, online games, discussion boards, and teaching materials. The design of the EFTs creates a learner-centered environment, following a constructivist model. Cassady and Mullen (2006, p. 151) evaluate the EFTs by implementing Bruce and Levin’s (1997, pp. 82-91) adaptation of Dewey’s (1900, pp. 59-61) natural impulses of learning (“inquiry,” “communication,” “construction,” and “expression”). They conclude that these impulses provide a taxonomy that helps administrators in distance education create a “coherent framework” for resource selection and EFT design (Cassady & Mullen, 2006, p. 159).

Addressing the problem that not all students everywhere have access to elite museums and research centers, the EFT experiment successfully demonstrates how an interactive museum experience open to all students via the Internet generates natural inquiry, allows for educative communication, and lends itself to constructive learning. However, the study also recognizes how the gap in time and space for asynchronous learners limits the efficacy of EFTs in the construction and expression domains (Cassady & Mullen, 2006, pp. 157-160).

While images alone may conjure emotive inquiry from students, visual representation does not replace the full sensory experience of physically being at a site. In one example, the authors describe how students’ watching high-
definition imagery of the Grand Canyon conjures similar responses to the monument as a personal visit would. Although the Grand Canyon’s beauty may be enjoyed on video or in pictures, an experience of the Grand Canyon limited to audio and video is not the full Grand Canyon experience. A picture or even motion picture does not come close to the sensation of one’s standing on the rim trail with amazement and realizing that her or his senses cannot absorb the canyon’s width and depth. While computer programmers continue to improve “sensory-filled experiences” (Wagner, 2006, p. 49), a simulated experience merely imitates the in-person experience.

In contrast to digital field trips, study abroad programs actually place students in 3-dimensional laboratories in which the students are experiencing new cultures, languages, and historical sites. Savicki’s (2008) multi-authored book provides studies in which students in these study abroad programs document their learning of intercultural competency from real-time and real-life experiences. Selby writes, “...study abroad students experience something that is truly transformational” (2008, p. 1). While students personally process intercultural experiences, the faculty on the trip offer “purposeful intervention” that helps students make the most of their overseas learning encounters (Lou & Bosley, 2008, p. 282). The interest of this current study is to explore the role of experience and online education, and, as is described below, several of the participants were taking an online class about culture while attending study abroad programs. The connection, then, is to consider how both face-to-face encounters and digital learning environments may be bridged as experiential resources for learning.

Lowe and Lowe’s (2010) application of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of human development to distance education offers the framework for considering this bridge between digital connections and one’s personal face-to-face interactions. Intending to address the American Theological Society’s (ATS) standards for spiritual formation in distance programs, Lowe and Lowe suggest that distance education courses draw from students’ greater social network for transformation and learning. They write, “Ecological diversity, whether biological, social, or spiritual, creates an enriched environment that stimulates beneficial interaction among living organisms similar to the sapiential observation that ‘iron sharpens iron, as one person sharpens another’ (Prov 27:17, Today’s New International Version)” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010, p. 90).

Comparing the ecological environment to a set of nested Russian dolls, Bronfenbrenner suggests four systems that envelop an individual’s development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. He describes the most immediate connections or interactions with others as the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The mesosystem he describes as “interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (p. 25). The exosystem includes events, activities, and settings that have an effect on an individual though he or she is not an active participant (p. 25). The macrosystem comprises a collection of the three lower systems that form continuities, or “consistencies,” at the subcultural or cultural level (p. 26).

Lowe and Lowe (2010, p. 93) regard the interaction, or interconnectedness, in Bronfenbrenner’s theory as helpful to envisioning successful online learning. The term “connection” has obvious links to online education; indeed, the Internet has taken interconnectedness to a new dimension. Lowe and Lowe (2010, p. 98) correctly point toward the students’ ecological environment as a resource for learning, noting how one’s family, church, and community provide social interaction that has educative value. As distance educators and administrators design and implement online curricula, they ought to give careful thought to how each student can perceive his or her immediate surroundings as possible sources of social learning and enhanced sensory perception, thus moving away from the real-world versus school-world separation (Roberts, 2007, p. 225).

A form of education that integrates online and face-to-face learning is blended learning, an integration that approaches a paradigm for applying Dewey’s educative experience with distance education (Graham, 2006, p. 3). Garrison and Vaughan (2008, pp. 17-29) speak of the community of inquiry that grows out of three types of presence: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. Social presence online exists when course participants project themselves authentically into online space through forums, blogs, or in other forms of communication. Teaching presence joins content and design with the scaffolding of the facilitator. Students also participate in the teaching presence when they make valuable contributions to discussions. One may describe the cognitive presence as the “aha” moments, meaningful exchanges, measurable integration of course materials, and other events where learning occurs. These three overlapping domains comprise the educational experience, resulting in a community of students and teachers engaged in inquiry and learning.
While all three of these domains may exist in pure face-to-face and online courses, both modes of delivery have different strengths. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) write, “It is our experience that the communication media do have different advantages. Therefore, educators need to consider which phases of an educational task are best conducted in an online or face-to-face environment” (p. 37). To use social presence as an example, while online discussions lend themselves to a safe, trusting environment for students to explore deep thinking, face-to-face collaboration tends to result in higher levels of interaction (Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001, p. 287). A well-designed blended course, then, consists of elements for face-to-face collaboration as well as online forums for individual and student-to-student reflection.

**John Dewey’s View of Experience**

A tendency for education historically has been to create a dichotomy between traditional and student-centered models of learning. John Dewey, however, advised against “either-or” approaches to education (Dewey 1938, p. 21). At a time when traditional curriculum was challenged by utilitarian impulses (Cremin, 1961, p. viii), Dewey’s appeal provided balance between information exchange and real world application. In his classic history of the Progressive Movement, Cremin acknowledges the lasting effects left by these efforts:

... granted the collapse of progressive education as an organized movement, there remained a timelessness about many of the problems the progressives raised and the solutions they proposed.... The Progressive Education Association has died, and the progressive education itself needed drastic reappraisal. Yet the transformation they had wrought in the schools was in many ways as irreversible as the larger industrial transformation of which it has been part (1961, pp. 352-353).

One cannot deny the ways the Progressive Movement transformed American schools. With the incorporating of a holistic approach to curriculum, the influence of social science theories, and initiatives to reduce social class bias in the school system, today’s students and teachers stand on the shoulders of theorists and practitioners who sought a better way to teach children in a democratic society.

The Post-Enlightenment era and Romanticism created a climate in which innovators such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel would develop learner-centered models of education. However, other forces of the times, such as the Industrial Revolution, immigration, urbanization, and poverty, stifled child-centered education, leading toward a product-centered, or factory model. Thus, the old guard of tradition devalued learning by experience.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the growing pains of a developing nation rekindled interest in education that was practical and accessible to the working class and immigrants. For example, Francis W. Parker undertook a reform of the Quincy, Massachusetts, schools. According to Cremin, Dewey regarded Parker as the “father of progressive education” (1961, p. 21). In 1893, Joseph Mayer Rice challenged traditional schools with his book *The Public-School System of the United States* (Rice, 1893; see Reese, 2001). Educators in this movement took seriously social concerns, and its leaders revisited school systems as a means to “Americanize” the children of the working class and immigrants in proper manners, in ethics, and in pursuit of American democracy (see Cremin 1961, pp. 66-89). Shapiro writes, “No symbol of humanitarianism was more meaningful to progressives than childhood” (Shapiro, 1983, p. 171).

Effects of Progressivism could be seen ubiquitously. Gamson records Frank Cooper’s initiatives in Seattle, Washington, from 1901 to 1922. Cooper encouraged the implementation of “active learning” and “creative play” (Gamson, 2003, p. 422). Wallace (2006) documents Angelo Patri’s child-centered reforms in New York City during the Great Depression and leading up to World War II. In 1907 in Gary, Indiana, William Wirt developed a work-study plan that brought “hands-on” learning to traditional curriculum (Volk, 2005). It was during this era that philosopher John Dewey sifted through the period’s cries and offered a balanced voice, assimilating learning by experience into a traditional system.

As a “pragmatic naturalist,” Dewey addresses the paradigm shift that eighteenth century writers, such as Rousseau, brought forth (Eames, 1977; Noddings, 2012, p. 26). He writes, “The seeming antisocial philosophy was a somewhat transparent mask for an impetus toward a wider and freer society.... The emancipated individual was to become the organ and agent of a comprehensive and progressive society” (Dewey 1916, p. 59). He also credits Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel for originating the emphasis of natural education in early learning (Dewey 1916,
p. 74). According to Dewey, natural education was a reaction against the Protestant doctrine of total depravity, where nature was regarded as God’s work and social interference of God’s divine plans was “the primary source of corruption in individuals” (1916, p. 73). Although Dewey regards this view as an oversimplification, he acknowledges the value of natural education’s quest to overturn the powers of injustice when he writes, “It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (1916, p. 76).

Dewey gleans from the experiential impulse of natural education: “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance” (1916, p. 90). Dewey also writes, “In critical moments we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes intuition, is that got through life itself” (Dewey, 1900, p. 31). Learning from experience, then, begins with the senses of the student: “The senses—especially the eye and the ear—have to be employed to take in what the book, the map, the blackboard, and the teacher say” (1916, p. 88). The senses serve as “external inlets and outlets of the mind,” conducting information exchanges between material objects and the mind (1916, p. 89). In Dewey’s words, “To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence” (1916, pp. 87-88).

If sensory perception leads to learning, then one would reason that learning experiences ought to focus on making sensory impressions. In Experience and Education Dewey certainly takes this view. He offers childhood recess as an example of children’s learning rules for schoolyard games as they negotiate social guidelines (Dewey, 1938, pp. 52-53). Reminiscent of Friedrich Froebel’s kindergarten, Dewey writes, “The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power” (Dewey, 1938, p. 58; 2005, pp. 135, 174). He even echoes Romanticism’s sentiment on loose clothing as an aid to learning in this critique: “Strait-jacket and chain-gang procedures had to be done away with if there was to be a chance for growth of individuals in the intellectual springs of freedom …” (Dewey, 1938, p. 61; Froebel, 1906, pp. 60, 63; Rousseau, 1979, p. 43). In other words, children learn through sensory perception, and prohibiting their movement, such as when bundling infants, limits their experiments and experiences with the world.

According to Dewey, education has an organic connection with students’ experiences; yet not all experiences benefit the student, or in Dewey’s terms, are “genuinely educative” (1938, p. 25). Experience alone does not educate; rather the depth of the learning depends on the quality of the experience. Dewey refers to this range of experiences as the “experiential continuum” (1938, p. 28). Even traditional education, he says, gives “a plethora” of experiences, but unless students achieve learning outcomes from those experiences, the unintentional, traditional exercise falls short of a quality educative experience (1938, p. 26). Dewey presents two criteria for an experience to be educative: continuity and interaction. An experience satisfies continuity when students adapt something from the past in a way that benefits the future (1938, p. 35). Interaction involves the individual or individuals who guide, facilitate, and scaffold learning (1938, p. 42). When continuity and interaction intersect, according to Dewey, a learning “situation” occurs (1938, p. 43).

Figure 1 illustrates how the learning situation results when one’s interaction with the object to be learned intersects with the learner’s experience. The vertical axis indicates the continuum between one’s self-reflection and interaction with another person, place, or event. The greater the contact from facilitators, classmates, and individuals from one’s context, the less students reflect in order to assimilate new information. The inverse is also true. The more students spend reflecting on their own, the less their learning includes feedback from others. The continuity of experience line indicates educative experiences from the past and anticipates experiences in the future. The arrows show how the learning situation does not occur only once, but rather repeats throughout one’s intellectual growth (Roberts, 2007; see also Kolb 1984, 22-23). Depending on the subject matter and the needs of the students, the horizontal line moves up or down. The spiral illustrates the non-sequential and unpredictable nature of deep thinking.
While learning begins with the senses, an educative experience also requires reflection: “Thought or reflection ... is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence. No experience having a meaning is possible without some element of thought” (Dewey, 1916, p. 90). In order to direct reflection toward growth in understanding, Dewey suggests a five-step method for an intentional reflective experience rather than a trial-by-error approach to thinking, echoing the scientific method and anticipating the accommodation and assimilation components of cognitive stage-theory. The five steps are listed below:

1. “Perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined.”
2. “A conjectural anticipation—a tentative interpretation of the given elements, attributing them to a tendency to effect certain consequences.”
3. “A careful survey (examination, inspection, exploration, analysis) of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand.”
4. “A consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent....”
5. “Taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action which is applied to the existing state of affairs: doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis.” (Dewey, 1916, p. 93)

Thus, students reflect when they attempt to make sense of inconsistencies in their experiences (Dewey, 2005). Haphazard, trial-by-error reflection does not benefit student learning as much as intentional exploration of thought. Reflection with a purpose enhances thinking and creates ways for students to understand, apply, and own new content.

Dewey’s concept applied to distance education helps course designers to evaluate their decisions when organizing content, creating online interactions, and exploring other ways for students to achieve learning outcomes. A forum post that encourages collaboration between students and facilitators would target a learning situation toward the middle of the interaction axis. Online journaling, intended to encourage self-reflection, would fall lower on the interaction line. For both forums and journals, carefully crafted prompts and questions are to summon student experience as a tool for understanding new concepts.
A century after Dewey challenged traditional education, causing educators to rethink how they write curriculum, teach, and value the child’s role in the learning process, his theory continues to guide course developers in the digital age toward learning strategies that take into account how people think in addition to what content must be transmitted. Dewey’s caution for balance remains timeless: “…it is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name education” (1938, p. 90).

Research Design

This current study applied Dewey’s theoretical framework of continuity of experience and interaction to a phenomenological analysis of student learning online. A single online class from a private liberal arts university was selected. Although a single course as the primary source of data could be viewed as a limitation, the interest of the study was more focused on the intersection of experience and online learning than the actual case itself. Merriam (2009, p. 48) refers to this type of qualitative research as an “instrumental case study,” in that the examination of a particular case provides information about a process that has transferable qualities beyond the case. By applying Dewey’s “learning situation” to contextual matters of online learning, the following research question guided the data collection and analysis:

**RQ:** “In what ways does the interaction of past experiences and present community impact learning online?”

After obtaining permission from the Institutional Research Board of the participating university (kept on file), the researchers proceeded to identify the case for the investigation. They chose a single course from a private, liberal arts, faith-based school for the following reasons. First, the course contained learning outcomes that included intercultural competencies, which by definition suggested extra-course experiences. Second, this course had built into the design assignments that required reflection on lived experiences of the students. Third, the participating students were a blend of international students, adult learners in the United States, and U.S. American study-abroad students. The study examined the individual experiences of participants who were sharing in common educational activities that spanned across international locations. Confidentiality of participants was strictly protected throughout the process.

The selected course is taught online three times a year, and class size ranges from 10 to 40 students each term. The term selected for this study was in May-August of 2016 (considered to be the summer term of the university). Students in this course were both traditional-aged students as well as adult learners in non-traditional programs. Their ages ranged from 20-37, and there were a total of 33 students enrolled. As an online class, students participated from the main campus, from their home states, from their home countries (particularly from China), and from other countries in a study abroad program, which included campuses in Greece and Italy.

The researchers determined that this broad spectrum of participation would allow for a variety of experiences by the students who shared a common learning space. Common themes shared by these students would then indicate phenomena that may be typical to learning situations in an online learning environment. In terms of transferability for a case study such as this one (Gall, Gall, & Borg 2007, p. 476; Patton 2002, p. 584; Lichtman 2013, p. 299-301), the common themes shared by these participants have applicability to the larger population of students who participate in online learning spaces with classmates located globally.

The researchers triangulated the data by analyzing through the lens of the research question the course participation and responses to a survey instrument developed by the researchers. Two specific online discussion questions were of interest. In one discussion question, students were told to “find one person from a culture other than yours and discuss with him or her what you are learning about worldviews...” In a second discussion question students were asked to discuss with a person outside of class about a particular topic relevant to their learning module. In both instances, the course assignments required outside interaction. Students’ reflections in their discussion posts were considered as indirect data of how their experiences with others contributed to their learning online. The researchers reviewed a third course assignment that served the purpose of a summative assessment for the course. This assignment, based on problem-based learning models, required students to work in groups in order to create a five-year strategy for working in an intercultural setting. Not only did this assignment encourage interpersonal interaction, it also was assessed with the VALUE rubric for intercultural knowledge and competence (Rhodes 2009).
The researchers were able to peruse the completed projects as indirect data for how social interaction might have led to student learning. As interpreters of the phenomena (Lichtman 2013 p. 85), the researchers met weekly to discuss common themes and specific comments made by students that related to the research question. The researchers kept notes of these meetings and individual journals while they reflected on the data.

The survey, guided by the research question, contained open ended items about participants’ interactions with other people, their location, and their learning environment while participating in their online course (see Appendix). The instrument was sent to all 33 class participants approximately 5 months after their course was completed, and 10 people responded. Of the respondents, 80% were female and 20% were male. A majority of the respondents were 23 years or younger, revealing that most of the respondents were likely in the study abroad program rather than in the adult learning program. Once all the surveys were collected, the open ended responses were coded with the HyperRESEARCH 3.0 and HyperTRANSCRIBE 1.5.3 softwares. The coding process began with open coding, and as common themes began to emerge from the participant’s input, the researchers also looked for the relationships these themes had with each other.

Research Findings

After coding data from the survey results and comparing them with student comments in the course assignments, three major themes were identified as salient to the research question: flexibility, travel, and communication. Each theme relates to the research question regarding the relationship of past and current experiences with student learning.

Flexibility

Students appreciated the flexibility the online course gave them as they attempted to balance studies with traveling abroad or with their adult learning contexts (see Merriam et al., 2007, p. 66; Sandmann, 2010, p. 223; Westbrook, 2017, p. 87). As subthemes of flexibility, “time” and “location” shed light on the contexts of the participants and how they understood flexibility. In close connection to “flexible,” the descriptor “convenient” surfaced multiple times in the survey responses; however, convenient was used within the context of time. The respondents were able to fit in their studies around travels if they were study abroad students and around employment and taking care of their family’s needs if they were adult learners. Convenient did not imply “easy” in the way the participants used the term.

Regarding “time,” the students reported that they were able to participate in this online course on their “own time,” and the time of day they worked online varied. In addition, the days they worked in the course was driven by their contexts. One study abroad participant wrote, “I would typically do a lot of work on the class in one sitting since we had such an irregular schedule the entire summer…. Sometimes I did everything in the middle of the day, sometimes I did it all in the morning, and sometimes I stayed up past midnight working on it.” Those who were not studying abroad and could fit their work into a regular schedule reported set times when they would interact with the online course, for example: “I mainly went to Starbucks a couple nights a week to work on it, usually for a few hours.” Another student wrote, “I usually worked on class work in the evenings—usually several hours at a time.” Others reported morning as their preferred time to work on the class. One of the adult learners who had to balance work, school, and family reported, “I did a majority of the work at home at night or on the weekends. I worked full time while taking the course.” The key feature to this sub-theme of time is that the participants selected the right days and times of day that would give them the opportunity to engage in learning. The flexibility of the online course granted empowerment of their learning experiences. Flexibility in this sense of empowerment supports Carver et al.’s (2007) use of agency and Westbrook’s (2015) report of “time as commodity” as important values for successful online learning.

Second, the flexibility of the online course gave students the choice of where they could study. Locations varied from working at home, the library, on campus, and in coffee shops. Their choice of location was sometimes pragmatic in that they logged into the course where they could get the most reliable Wifi connection. One person wrote, “So on days that we were not traveling … I would get a cup of tea, sit in a relatively quieter [sic.] room at the villa, and do up to 3 modules in a day.” Another student mentioned the “kitchen table” as her or his preferred place to work online. As noted above, “Starbucks” was specifically mentioned as a location of choice. Although this survey did not approach learning styles and preferences, it is difficult to overlook the educational implications of
how students may gravitate toward their learning styles when they get to choose where they learn and how they learn.

The theme flexibility indirectly relates to the research question of this study. Given that the research question focuses primarily on past and current experiences of the students, their reports of when and where they participated suggest a context in which their current experiences would take place. Indeed, the hours of reading and writing at the kitchen table, in a coffee shop, or in a study room are experiences that contributed to the learning situation.

**Travel**

*Travel* was the second major theme that surfaced from the data analysis. This theme applies directly to the research question of how past and current experiences relate to one’s learning situation. Two student learning outcomes for the selected course speak to the international scope of this course: “develop solutions for sharing the message of Christ domestically, interculturally, and internationally” and “evaluate the place of intercultural studies, missions strategies, world religious dialog, and the history of missions in world-wide evangelism.” Given the global Christian evangelistic nature of the course, one should not be surprised that participants’ travel experiences, both past and present, would contribute to the their learning. Bennett (2008) describes the benefit of intercultural experiences for learning in this way: “By combining the interdisciplinary perspectives offered in intercultural communication, international studies, language, and education, an effective approach to intercultural learning readily emerges” (p. 22).

As the participants reflected on their past experiences, several mentioned mission trips or other traveling that related to how they processed the course content. Even high school aged mission trips or overseas experiences left impressions that would help students in this online course. In answer to the survey question “In what ways have your previous life experiences influenced your thinking about world Christianity?,” one student responded, “My church back in Arizona did mission trips around the States, and whenever I got the opportunity to go I would…. Going to places of poverty really made me think [emphasis added] and realize … that I could help them.” Another person shared, “I have been on three mission trips to Mexico with the church I have grown up in, and that definitely gave me a passion for spreading the gospel.” In addition, a student noted, “I’ve been on mission trips before so that helped shape my understanding [emphasis added] of cross-cultural experiences.” Although church trips were the most often cited experience, any intercultural experience provided backgrounds as possible resources for learning, for example: “I also travel[ed] to Greece and Israel for two weeks with Scholars Abroad where my eyes were opened [emphasis added] to new and … different cultures from anything I previously experienced.” Not only do these statements demonstrate the lingering impact short international trips can make, but the statements also show evidence of past experiences as a means for processing new learning.

In contrast to previous life experiences as resources, two people indicated that they did not know much about “world Christianity” prior to taking the online course. One person mentioned how he or she had studied other religions and denominations before but “enjoyed delving deeper into those” through the online class. This bit of feedback finds its place on the Dewey learning situation in that the course became the experience that led to learning new content.

While not everyone thought that their geographical location had any bearing on their learning, some did: “I was in Florence, Italy, and this class factored into my learning experience by helping me to keep what is truly important in perspective…. It helped me to remember and more fully understand that everyone in the world … is an unconditionally and immensely loved child of God who needs Him alone.” This student’s statement corresponds to another syllabus listed student learning outcome: “develop a compassionate, Christological response to individuals or groups who do not know Christ.” One of the adult learners located in the same state as the main campus wrote, “There is a lot of diversity in this city, thus it really opened my eyes to the needs of the people in my community in regard to hearing about Jesus.”

Those who participated online from the main campus reported minimal impact of their location on their learning. The data do not indicate why students who were on the main campus did not think that their location had any impact on their learning, but one could infer that the mundane routine of being in a familiar area sparked less attention toward cultural differences than those who were in new and different places.
Communication

Communication was the third major theme of this study. In both the course assignments and survey, participants addressed the importance of communication in their learning experience. Particularly, the participants mentioned the communication with the course facilitator, interaction in the online discussion threads, and face-to-face conversations with others not in the course.

The survey asked students to describe things they did not like about previous online courses. An overwhelming majority complained about the lack of interaction with their professors. It seems that the degree of participation from their professors made an impact on the overall learning within their courses. One student wrote, “I also did not like that I felt such a disconnection from the teacher…. I had basically no contact with the professor…. I just generally like to have a knowledge of what the teacher looks like and know a little bit about their personality.” Other comments in the survey had similar criticisms: “[online] hinders the communication between the student and the professor in some cases”; “every class is set up differently so it can be hard to navigate if the teacher doesn’t give adequate instructions”; and “no face to face conversation.” Given that the survey did not ask the participants specifically about the course facilitation, there were no direct comments about the level of the professor’s participation in this study. The negative comments they made were about previous online experiences, but they reveal how lack of communication might be associated with poor learning environments. These comments echo Carver et al. (2007) and their concept of belongingness as an important attribute to experiential online learning.

When asked about conversations with people in the online course of this study, several positive evaluations were made by the participants. One person reported that the discussions provided “new insights” than what would have been attained “just by the book alone.” Other comments expressed appreciation for the student to student interactions: “I really liked seeing other people’s opinion in the discussion groups”; “it helped me to see different points of view”; and “I enjoyed reading the different perspectives from all different kinds of people.” Furthermore, participants drew a connection between their learning and their online discussions: “the conversations on the discussion boards in the class definitely helped my learning in the class” and “[I] learned lots from others.” In contrast to previous experiences in which lack of communication resulted in frustration, the good communication with fellow classmates led to self-reported learning.

Participants were also asked to share how conversations with people outside of the class influenced their learning. Such conversations would have included interviews with people of other cultures and other people with whom participants would have been encouraged to visit about course content. According to one student, “[Conversations outside of class] gave many new insights to the questions that were being asked that allowed me to gain even more insight than I would have by just the book alone.” Another student wrote, “My conversations with the Italians who worked at the villa influenced my learning in the class mostly because I got to hear about some of their experiences with faith, which were so different than my experiences.” One participant reported how the course affected how the student interacted with others outside of class: “I would say that my learning in [this course] influenced my conversations with others more than the other way around.” Consider in the following statement how discussions with parents helped clarify the student’s thinking: “Frequently if I got stuck or if something really stuck with me, I would talk to my parents about it. They really helped me talk through some things.”

In addition to the survey responses, the researchers also reviewed comments in the discussion boards that pointed toward the communication theme as valuable for learning. In two assignments, students were asked to interview people outside of the class and report their experiences in the threaded discussion. One student wrote, “I learned a good little snippet from this exercise.” Another indicated that reading a classmate’s post reminded her of the interview she conducted. A third student commended a classmate for interviewing his own father, writing, “Our parents are our first teachers, and we learn a lot from them.” While reflecting on the benefit of learning Greek culture from a Greek person, a student reported: “It was so beneficial for me to get to talk to [a Greek individual] today and to get to learn about Greece as I study here.” Overall, there was appreciation and educational value associated to the students’ time with other people outside of class.

The theme communication connects directly to the research question in that the reports of discussions with classmates and those outside of class helped the students understand course materials better. In terms of the Dewey learning situation, their current experiences with others helped the learners process new ideas and lead to educative moments.
Summary of Findings
The survey surfaced three salient themes: flexibility, travel, and communication. Each theme was reported to contribute to student learning. Flexibility was understood in terms of time and location. Participants appreciated the convenience of being able to contribute to online work on their “own time” and in locations that suited their learning preferences and contextual demands, whether they were students in travel abroad programs with limited Internet connection or adult learners who had to schedule their online interaction around jobs, parenting, and other personal responsibilities. Travel reflected directly the research question’s concern of the impact of past and current experiences on learning. Both past travels and current study abroad programs provided useful experiences that generated mental frameworks for assimilating new knowledge from their online course experiences. Communication also connected to the research question’s interest in the impact of experience in that students benefited from online dialog with classmates as well as conversations pertaining to course principles with individuals outside of class, in particular, with people of other cultures that led to understanding anthropological principles.

In the Name of Education
Over twenty years ago Dede (1996) acknowledged pedagogical challenges distance educators face when he distinguished between “knowledge webs,” “virtual communities,” “synthetic environments,” and “sensory immersion” models of distance education. The knowledge web model simply provides content for students to learn or access. Virtual communities imitate face-to-face conversations through online interaction. Synthetic environments simulate real-life situations, such as a flight simulator for student pilots. Sensory immersion uses technology to create the “illusion” of sensory experiences. While Dede anticipated the day when “sensory immersion might ... be combined with knowledge webs, virtual collaboration, and synthetic environments to enable powerful forms of distributed learning” (1996, p. 28), he also noted how new forms of distance education would not replace valuable face-to-face human interaction. He correctly concluded: “The most significant influence on the evolution of distance education will not be the technical development of more powerful devices but the professional development of wise designers, educators, and learners” (Dede, 1996, p. 30).

As Cassady and Mullen (2006) have shown, EFTs can provide students vivid and powerful imagery useful for learning. Their experiment also included social interaction between students and facilitators. However, online interaction alone ignores valuable resources students encounter each day. Savicki’s (2008) book records the value of face-to-face experiences in study abroad programs. Lowe and Lowe’s (2010) application of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of development to distance education bridges the virtual with the actual by emphasizing one’s context as a resource for learning. Finally, Garrison and Vaughan’s (2008) community of inquiry applied to blended learning demonstrates how distance education can be seen more broadly than merely web-based social connectedness. Not all distance learning programs may be offered in a blended model, but unless students are in confined isolation, students who learn at a distance may invite people in their contexts into dialog, thus creating a localized version of a community of inquiry. The participants of this study support the literature by demonstrating that past and current experiences as well as interaction with others creates a personalized learning space conducive to achieving student learning outcomes in an online course.

This brief revisit to Dewey’s emphasis of educative experiences reinforces to online course designers how significantly their designs contribute to the growth of the students. In addition to an emphasis on content, course designers are to create learning environments that motivate students, challenge them, and maximize their natural tendencies for learning. While digitally produced sensory stimuli may imitate face-to-face encounters with people, places, or events, an online presence need not replace the in-person interactions with friends, family, and colleagues who might be willing to enter into their thought world. The key to quality distance education is not more technology, although technology will continue to improve, but rather the blending of the best technology with the best of in-person interaction in order to achieve student learning outcomes. Listed here are a few possible ways to generate more in-person sensory experiences within online learning environments:

- Informal conversations. Facilitators require students to interact with colleagues, peers, or family, allowing the social interaction to be personally relevant.
- Service learning. Students engage in service learning projects, such as tutoring children or working in a non-profit organization. Many disciplines would have applications in such settings.
- Interviews. Have students interview people in their community and report their conversations to the class online.
● **Field trips.** Facilitators assign real, personalized field trips. Many communities have a nearby museum, park, or relevant institution or organization that provide invaluable opportunities to interact and learn from people and places close to home.

● **Guided conversations.** Students converse with members of their family or social circles following a list of exploratory prompts that connect course content to real world issues.

● **Summative assessments.** Teachers assign summative assessments that require students to contextualize their learning into a useful tool in their own setting.

These are only a few suggestions, but they illustrate how online courses can have meaningful assignments that create genuine learning experiences in the students’ contexts. Dewey’s principles of experience invite course designers and distance education administrators to move beyond the digital box and to create designs that tap into resources for creating educative experiences for the students, no matter what the media for information transmission might be.

References


IMPLICATIONS OF DEWEY AND ONLINE EDUCATION


IMPLICATIONS OF DEWEY AND ONLINE EDUCATION


Appendix

Survey for [name of the online class]
This survey asks you about your experiences in your online [name of the online class] at [name of the university]. Thank you for taking time to answer these survey questions.

Your participation in this research survey is voluntary, and if you choose to fill out the form, you may withdraw at any time or leave any items blank without any repercussions. Furthermore, your participation is strictly confidential. As the research is shared professional and public audiences, no one will be able to identify your comments as your own. You will be protected in this way. Finally, this research is being conducted in compliance with and approval of the Institutional Research Board at [name of the university].

Demographic and Introductory Information
What is your gender?
What is your age?
What is your marital status?
What is your race?
What is your classification?
What is your major or degree program?
Do you have a job? If so, what is it?
Where did you attend high school? Was it public, private, or homeschool? Or a combination?
If you attended a college besides [name of the university], where did you go?

Experiences in [name of the online class]
Describe the things you liked about online classes you have taken prior to [name of the class] online.
Describe the things you didn’t like about online classes you have taken prior to [name of the class] online.
Describe your typical setting for participating in this online class? Where did you work? What time of day? How much time did it take?
In what ways have your previous life experiences influenced your thinking about world Christianity?
What other activities or classes, if any, were you involved in while taking [name of the online class]?
In what ways did your conversations with other people outside of class influence your learning in [name of the class]?
In what ways did your conversations with people in the class influence your learning in [name of the online class]?
In which city were you when you took [name of the class] online; and in what ways, if any, did this location factor into your learning experience?