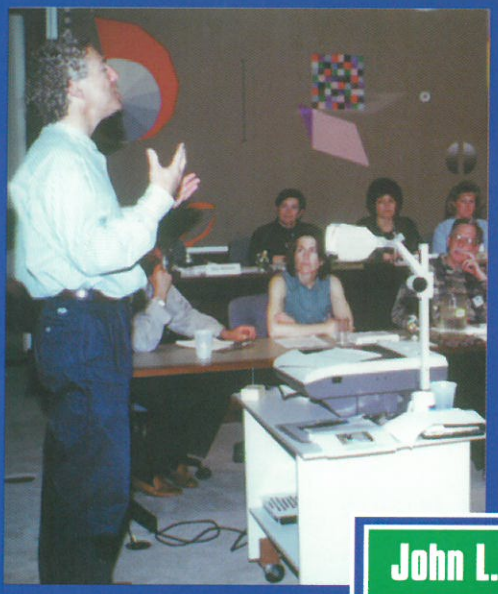
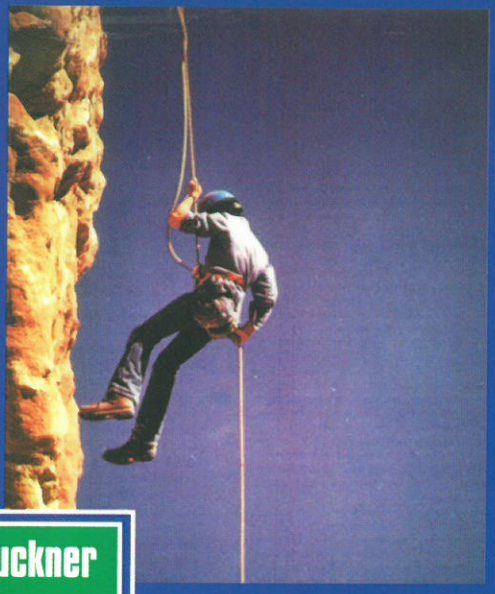
PROCESSING THE EXPERIENCE

Strategies to Enhance and Generalize Learning

— Second Edition —





John L. Luckner

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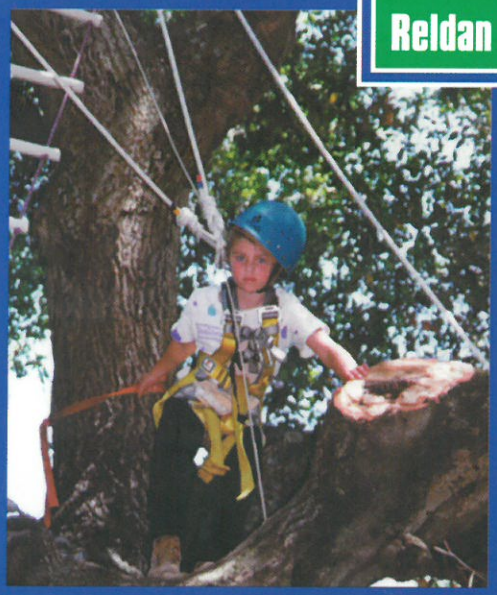
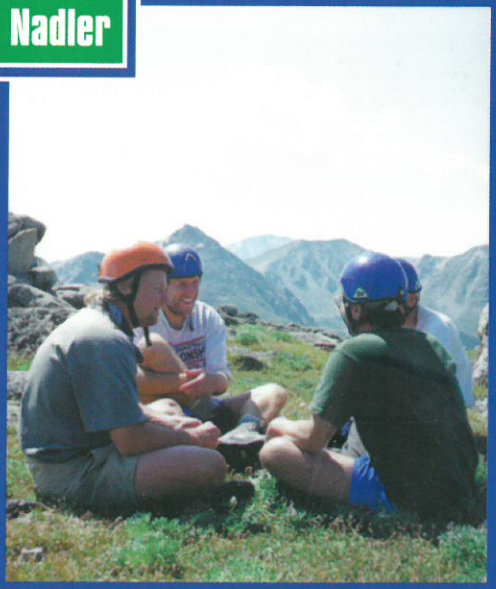




PROCESSING—WHAT IS IT?

"Everything that happens to you is your teacher. The secret is to learn to sit at the feet of your own life and be taught by it."

—Polly B. Berends

Our lives are comprised of billions of experiences. What is most important though is not just the quantity and quality of those experiences, but what we learn from each experience (Cousins, 1981). Processing is best viewed as an activity that is structured to encourage individuals to plan, reflect, describe, analyze, and communicate about experiences (Gass, 1993b; Knapp, 1990; Quinsland & Van Ginkel, 1984; Nadler & Luckner, 1992). As shown in Figure 2, processing can occur prior to, during, or after the experience. Processing activities can be used to: (a) help individuals focus or increase their awareness on issues prior to an event or to the entire experience; (b) facili-

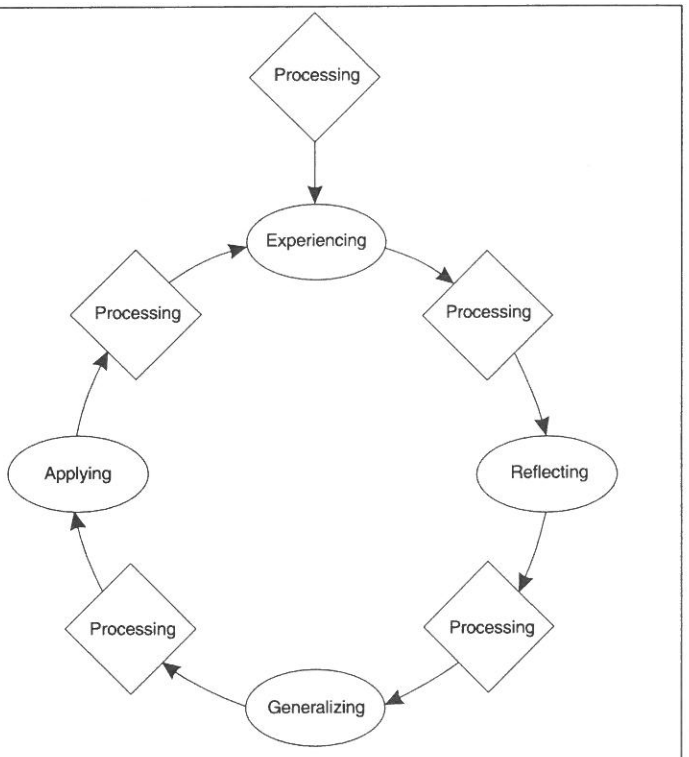


FIGURE 2
Processing

tate awareness or promote change while an experience is occurring; (c) reflect, analyze, describe, or discuss an experience after it is completed; and/or (d) reinforce perceptions of change and promote integration in participants' lives after the experience is completed (Gass, 1993a).

WHY PROCESS?

"The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative."

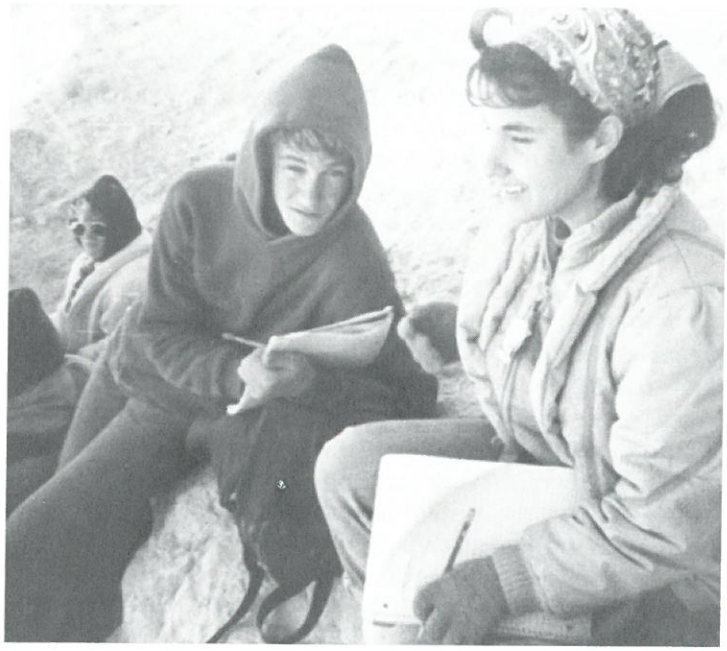
—John Dewey

In general, experiential educators and therapists agree that learning occurs through active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world, and through internal reflection about the attributes of the experiences and ideas (Kolb, 1984). Processing enhances the richness of the experience, so it stands out and apart, like the important lines of a page underlined with a yellow highlighter. These unique learnings then can be used again and generalized to other settings. When a new experience is processed, integrated, and internalized, individuals are able to grow, and as a result, they have more choices and influence in their lives.

Additional support for experiential learning and the essential role of processing for promoting learning and development can be found in four theories that have gathered considerable attention among educators and psychologists in recent years—brain research, active learning, constructivism, and narrative. A brief explanation of each theory and how it relates to processing the experience follows.

❖ BRAIN RESEARCH

Human beings are biologically driven to make sense of their world. While the primary function of the brain is health maintenance, recent brain research suggests that a critical function of the cognitive system is to search for patterns that can impose meaning on the input received in order to make sense of the chaos which surrounds us (Caine & Caine, 1994; Gruneberg & Morris, 1979). We do not input facts into a memory system as is done with a computer. Rather, learning is the process of constructing meaning—developing associated maps which continually evolve in response to experiences.



Learning represents the opening of new or enlarged neural pathways in the brain (Rose, 1989). The more powerful, significant or varied the experience or stimuli which initiated the learning, the stronger and more numerous are the synaptic connections, resulting in better understanding (Dozier, 1992). Our consciousness or reality is a model of the world that draws on the past—memory, the present—awareness and the future—extrapolation or anticipation of future events (Dozier, 1992).

Learning takes place when the brain sorts out patterns by using past experiences to help make sense out of the input that the brain receives. Recognition of patterns facilitates transfer of learning to new situations. Understanding concepts, behaviors, procedures, or skills result from perceiving relationships and linking what is being learned to the individual's past knowledge, current experience, and future needs and aspirations. Hart (1983) identified six major patterns to which the brain attempts to attach meaning:

1. Objects—dog, caterpillar, chairlift, desk, glacier, water fountain.
2. Actions—walking, running, swimming, hiking, working on a computer.
3. Procedures—getting dressed, showering, paddling a kayak, preparing a report.
4. Situations—taking a test, making a presentation, first-aid emergency.
5. Relationships—me/you, friend/enemy, supervisor/employee, sun/heat.
6. Systems—family, political, school, law, weather, organizations.

One of the most important lessons to derive from the brain research is that in a very important sense, all learning is experiential. Individuals are perceiving, patterning, and creating

meanings, all the time in one way or another. We do not, however, automatically learn enough from our experiences. What matters is how each experience is used. Since, the brain is designed as a pattern detector, our primary function as facilitators of learning and development is to provide individuals with experiences that enable them to perceive "the patterns that connect" (Bateson 1980) while simultaneously allowing individuals to plan, reflect and generalize how and what they have learned, so they begin to take charge of learning and the development of personal meanings.

Learning is a natural, developmental process, the same as is breathing, eating, and sleeping, but like all processes, it can be either inhibited or enhanced. Caine and Caine (1994) suggest that educators, trainers and therapists who want to promote learning and development based on the principles of brain research should:

1. Design and orchestrate lifelike, enriching, and appropriate experiences for individuals. and
2. Ensure that individuals process experiences in such a way as to increase the extraction of personal meaning.

❖ ACTIVE LEARNING

Over the last decade the fields of education and cognitive psychology have produced a large and growing body of research that focuses on the teaching-learning processes (e.g., Harris & Pressley, 1991; Heron, 1989; Shuell, 1986). This research suggests that learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge whereby information is delivered from teachers to their students, but rather learners create their own knowledge and understanding using the prior knowledge and experiences that they bring to the learning setting. As noted by Cross (1991) "Learning is not so much an additive process, with new learning simply piling up on top of existing knowledge, as it is an active, dynamic process in which the connections are constantly changing and the structure reformatted" (p.9).

For centuries, educators have relied upon the "transmission" model of teaching. Within the transmission model, educators deliver knowledge to students through lectures. This model of education may have been appropriate during our Agrarian age; however, as our society has transitioned to the Information age and the quantity of information appears to be doubling every 20 months (Beyer, 1987). The transmission model of teaching fails to prepare

individuals for the future. As a result, there is a growing desire among educators to involve students more actively in learning projects and to assist them in becoming more self-regulated and autonomous learners who establish personal educational goals, employ learning strategies that are appropriate to task completion and manipulate learning environments to ensure success. This shift in perspective about the teaching/learning process requires educators to change how they define their roles as teachers. It means spending less time trying to be the "sage on the stage" and more time as the "guide on the side"—designing, supporting, and managing the learning environment and teaching process. Similar insight is surfacing in the corporate world where organizations are realizing that good ideas can't only come from the top, but also need to come from the frontline people, who are constantly interacting with customers, products, and services.

Professionals who are aware of the demands of our changing society and who want to prepare individuals who can meet these challenges are incorporating active learning strategies into their work. Active learning can be defined as learning in which individuals, by acting on objects and interacting with other people, ideas, and events, construct new understanding. Active learning derives from two basic assumptions: (1) that learning is by nature an active endeavor and (2) that different people learn in different ways. Active learning strategies help individuals connect what they are learning to their work and personal lives. Professionals who employ active learning are not giving students disembodied facts, figures, theories, and methodologies, but are sharing the practical ways that professionals go about working in their disciplines. Active learning strategies allow individuals to become self-directed, collaborative, and critically reflective; knowledge and skills that are essential to meaningful lives and careers. This transition in perspective currently is evident within many corporations who encourage employees to become better learners, so the corporation can function as a learning organization that is skilled at "creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin, 1993, p. 80).

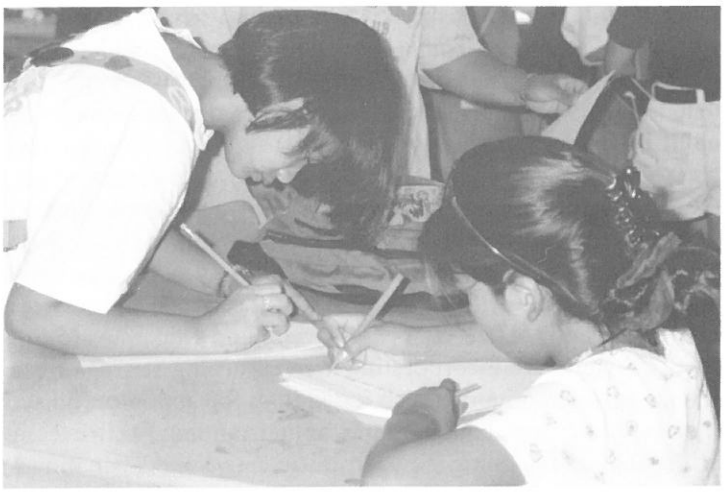
Additional information about structuring learning environments that use active learning strategies are provided in the section entitled Educational Guiding Practices.

❖ CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is a theory of learning and change that is based on the premise that learning is a process whereby new meanings are created (constructed) by learners within the context of their current knowledge. Educators, trainers and therapists who support a constructivist perspective believe that knowledge is constructed in the process of reflection, inquiry, and action, by learners themselves. Efficient learning is predicated on individuals' active involvement in the learning process and opportunities for interactive communication among other learners (Fosnot, 1989).

Educators, trainers and therapists who adhere to a constructivist perspective contend that people are always trying to make sense of their own lives and the interactions they experience around them. The process of making sense of these interactions involves a never-ending search for and construction of personal meaning. Consequently, learning is not simply the taking in of new information as it exists externally; it is the natural, continuous construction and reconstruction of new, richer, connected, and more complex meanings by the learner.

One of the major tenets of constructivism is that individuals do not acquire knowledge from outside information given to them, but rather they learn by constructing new meanings from



new and preceding experiences in a context of rich social interactions. Similarly, learning does not occur by transmission but by interpretation and interpretation is always influenced by prior knowledge. Individuals, in an attempt to make sense of new information and experiences, transform and organize the new information in relation to their own meaning-base. Consequently, learning is viewed as an organic process of invention, rather than a mechanical process of accumulation. As a result, constructivists view the learning process as analogous to impressionistic art rather than photography. Accordingly, educators, trainers and therapists who adhere to a constructivist perspective act as problem posers, coaches, and mediators. They help individuals put their own reasoning into words by raising questions and inviting them to share their opinions, solutions, reflections, and strategies with others. In addition, these constructivists encourage individuals to try to solve problems their own way and to observe and evaluate the results. They also ask probing questions or note aspects of the problem that will help individuals think about the problem in diverse ways.

Several principles of constructivism, adapted from Fosnot (1989) and Poplin (1988), which are especially applicable to the field of experiential education are found in Table 2.

❖ NARRATIVE

A story is a "telling or recounting of a string of events" (Scholes, 1982, p. 59). Social scientists such as Bruner (1985) who spoke of a narrative mode of thought and Sarbin (1986) who proposed story as a "root metaphor" for the study of human conduct, believe that the story helps individuals organize and understand new experiences and simultaneously provides a unit of meaning that stores and permits retrieval of experiences. As noted by Olson (1990), "Narrative structures provide a format into which experienced events can be cast in the attempt to make them comprehensible, memorable, and shareable" (p. 100–101). From this perspective, it is contended that we live storied lives; "human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8).

Stories consist of events, characters, and settings that are gathered together into a plot in which significance and causality are given to the events, characters, and settings as they relate to the theme of the story. The plot configures the events into a whole, and the events are transformed from a series of independent happenings into meaningful happenings that contribute to the whole theme (Polkinghorne, 1988). In essence, stories become a way of capturing the com-

TABLE 2

Principles of Constructivism

1. All people are learners, always actively searching for and constructing new meanings. Thus, they are always learning.
2. The process of learning is self-regulating and self-preserving.
3. Knowledge consists of past constructions.
4. The best predictor of what and how someone will learn is what they already know.
5. Learning often proceeds from whole to part to whole.
6. Errors promote growth and are critical to learning.
7. Meaningful learning occurs through reflection and resolution of cognitive conflict and thus serves to negate earlier, incomplete levels of understanding.
8. People learn best from experiences about which they are passionately interested and involved.
9. People learn best from people they trust.
10. The purpose of education is long-term knowledge that can be used flexibly and independently.
11. Teaching is a process of providing learners with experiences, activities, and prompts that enables them to make meaning through self-regulation.
12. Instructional goals change momentarily as learners gain knowledge and acquire new skills.

plexity, specificity, and interconnectedness of an experience and linking them into coherent, meaningful, unified themes.

Stories are not merely raw data from which to construct interpretations but products of an interpretive process that are shaped by the impulses of the author and by the requirements of narrative structure. The process of transforming experience into story is so much a part of our daily existence that we usually are not aware of its operation (Polkinghorne, 1988). Simultaneously, the stories we live by are not purely private inventions; rather, we build them from the information provided by experience, from the inventory of stories or prepackaged expectations, and ways of interpreting them supplied by our culture and from those significant individuals that we interact with in our lives (Chafe, 1990). With regard to experiential learning and therapy, the role of stories play an integral part in the following ways:

1. The story that is created from the experience determines the meaning given to the experience.
2. The stories determine the real effects, type and degree of transfer of the experience.
3. The stories select which aspects of the experience will be highlighted and then given expression.
4. The stories encompass the learning, and helps us store the information in our memory so that we can later generalize to other experiences.

As professionals seeking to promote learning and development, we can help individuals co-create their new stories that are developed as a result of their experiences as well as to help them re-create more positive perspectives of old stories. By helping them become aware of and articulate the narratives they have developed, this give richer meaning to their lives. Individuals are then able to examine and reflect on the themes they are using to organize their lives and to interpret their own actions and the actions of others. Additional information about how to process experiences using narratives is provided in the section on Effective Leaders Knowledge and Skills.

❖ SUMMARY

In summary, the challenges of living in our current world require each of us to (a) be able to effectively interact with others, (b) learn how to acquire information, (c) apply information; and (d) create new knowledge and information. These goals are best achieved in situations where individuals are supported and challenged to construct and apply meaning to experiences and activities which are relevant to their lives. In this section, experiential learning and the role of processing for facilitating learning and development has been substantiated from a variety of perspectives.

Because of the active and personal nature of experiential learning, each experience provides an avenue for thoughts, feelings, insights, metaphors, and behavior patterns to surface. These feelings, thoughts, and behaviors may continue to exist at an unconscious level if we do not take the time to reflect and articulate them. Processing is a developmental endeavor of discovering patterns and unique outcomes. It is a liberating and generating process that helps individuals construct a new reality or generate new meanings from their experiences. Our challenge as experiential educators, trainers and therapists is to help individuals become aware of their thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns and to promote the transfer and generalization of this new learning.