EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

Experiential Learning for the History Classroom: Engaging Learners on Different Levels and in Different Ways to Encourage a Lifelong Love of Learning

By

Katherine McDougall

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements

For the degree of Master of Teaching

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Copyright by Katherine McDougall, April 2014
Abstract

This research study investigated the use of experiential learning by secondary level history educators to determine in what ways experiential learning activities are being used to teach and to engage students with history. The qualitative data collected through two in depth interviews demonstrates that while experiential learning is often effectively used to engage students with history, it is not being used to its full potential as an effective tool to foster critical thinking and inquiry. Numerous difficulties in accessing experiential learning programs and tools, particularly in terms of financing and planning logistics, and in terms of geography in rural locations, have resulted in experiential learning activities being seen as an approach to be used selectively and often as a reward at the end of a unit.

Key Words:

Experiential Learning, History, Engagement, Critical Thinking
Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge and thank the students I have been privileged to work with over the last two years and from whom I have learned so much.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic/Questions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Relationships</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Researcher</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Existing Scholarship</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of Experiential Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses of Experiential Learning</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Benefits of Experiential Learning</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Drawbacks of Experiential Learning</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Frameworks</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments of Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

Ethical Review Procedures 25
Limitations 26

FINDINGS 28
Introduction 28
Differing Understandings of Experiential Learning 28
Possibilities of Engagement for All Learners 29
Experiential Learning and Critical Thinking 31
  Dangers of Stereotyping and Oversimplifying 32
Difficulties in Accessing Experiential Learning Opportunities 33
  Inclusiveness 35
Best Practices 35
  When in the Learning 36
  Assessment 36

DISCUSSION 38
Introduction 38
Data Analysis 38
  How is it used? 38
    When is it Used? 39
  Assessment 39
    Challenges 40
  Evaluation 40
Experiential Learning for the History Classroom: Engaging Learners on Different Levels and in Different Ways to Encourage a Lifelong Love of Learning

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

My philosophy for life, teaching and learning (in this context, the conducting of research) is that everything should inspire, awe and captivate the mind and imagination. And if it cannot do that then it ought to at least be fun and memorable. I believe that the best way to learn something is to be immersed in it, to have all of one’s senses engaged and focused on whatever it is that you are studying. Learning about something from a direct experience of doing it or being as directly engaged with it as possible is the keystone of experiential learning (Itin, 1999). With experiential learning students are engaged on multiple levels with the subject matter. Simply by being different from the normal banalities of most history classrooms where most learning occurs seated behind a desk, experiential learning has almost by default the potential for increased student engagement. By engaging students in the experience of doing or being immersed in what they are learning students are more likely to focus and engage on at least one aspect of the experience and are more likely to retain and understand the knowledge they have gained in a meaningful way.

I believe that experiential learning has the ability to engage and resonate with a larger percentage of students than do the majority of classroom based lessons, by enabling students to engage with the subject matter in ways that cater to students
multiple intelligences and learning styles. When used to its full potential, experiential learning fosters the need for students to think critically about what they are learning, thoughtfully applying, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating what they learn. In history education specifically, this experiential learning has the potential to provide rich opportunities for students to develop historical thinking skills, namely the ability to identify historical significance, indentify continuity and change through historical periods, analyze the causes and consequences of historical events, understand the ethical dimensions of historical interpretations, use primary source evidence and take historical perspectives (Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, 2014). Furthermore, experiential learning, buy its vary nature of learning through doing, lends itself inquiry based learning.

I believe that when learning is an experience that is situated and contextual, that the learning is more authentic, meaningful, applicable, memorable and enjoyable for the students and therefore not only benefits their learning in the short term, for a unit or a course, but also encourages them to develop an inquiring mind and a lifelong love of learning that is no so enticing when what you learn about history is limited to words on a page or flickering images on a screen.

**Research Topic/Question**

The specific research question that my study is formulated around is “In what ways do secondary school history teachers use experiential learning at museums and historical sites in their classes?”. The sub-questions are “is experiential learning used effectively to increase student engagement?”, “when do
teachers use experiential learning within their units/ courses”, and “how is experiential learning assessed or used to support assessment?”.

The goal of this project is to answer this question and to identify what history educators consider to be experiential learning, how secondary school teachers incorporate experiential learning into their courses and to identify the key benefits and drawbacks that history educators believe exist surrounding the use of experiential learning as a teaching method at the secondary school level.

**Research Relationships**

Over the course of conducting my research, I hope to be able to establish and maintain friendly and collegial professional relationships with my research participants. All of my participants will be professional adults and history educators themselves. I am planning to collect the vast majority of the data for my research from formal interviews with my participants. I will be conducting interviews of thirty minutes with each of my participants, audio recording them and then typing them up using smooth transcription. I feel that as professionals they should be allowed to go over the final transcription of the data to ensure its accuracy and be allowed to discuss the conclusions I draw from interpreting that data in order to maintain the transparency of their role in my research. I believe that this kind of research is highly co-operative; I may be the researcher who actually pulls all the information together into a coherent argument, but my participants are the key source of knowledge, what they bring to the process is crucial to the expansion of developing further knowledge and understanding of experiential learning practices.

**Background on the Researcher**
This research study is my first attempt at qualitative research. My background in research is limited to undergraduate papers, mostly on 20th Century history, written primarily based on considering existent secondary research and, when available, primary source documents. I conducted this research solely through database and journal searches and manual scouring of library shelves. I often sought research on my topics from scholars in other disciplines in order to get as much understanding as possible from multiple perspectives on a subject. I believe research conducted on a topic in another discipline is helpful in understanding the strengths and errors of approaches from my discipline, and can if used only briefly to supplement discipline-based research, be helpful in adding context to research grounded in a single discipline.

I see teaching as, arguably, the single most significant way in which the present can shape and influence the future. The lessons we teach to the young people who are our students have the potential to inspire students and to influence their understanding of themselves, those around them (and on the other side of the world), their role in society and of the world around them, whether the lessons are in social studies or science, but only if those lessons are focused on developing competencies and deep understanding. It is therefore vital that the lessons we teach them be grounded in social justice, empathy and equity for fairness to all students, in building understanding not only of curriculum material, but also of the importance of continuing to learn after the class ends. We need to provide students with the tools they need to apply the things they learn in class to real world situations, to help them develop the skills to think critically, to analyze information
and decide for themselves its validity, veracity and significance. As important as it is to teach students what they need to know in the curriculum, it is perhaps more important to teach them how to keep learning for themselves, not just to satisfy the teacher in class, not just to please their parents or to pass a test, but *for themselves.* When students leave our classes at the end of grade twelve the culmination of our efforts should leave them with the skills they need to navigate society as aware and productive citizens and life long learners, whether they continue with formal education or not. If we want to encourage our students to become life long learners, we first need to engage them with the material we are teaching and with the learning process.

I remember most classrooms learning as a very serious and sedate undertaking, as I am sure many in my generations and certainly older generations do (Fullan, 2014). At times, it was hard to stay awake, let alone engaged. This is where the individual strengths of teachers show and where teaching methodology becomes key. I remember exactly what brought me to my enduring love of history. When I was very little my family lived in Calgary, Alberta. There was a place their called Heritage Park that was set up like an early frontier town. The buildings were heritage buildings that had been relocated and the methods used to grow food in the fields, bake food in the bakery and so on were all period accurate. To a five year old child it was stepping through a time machine into the past. Everything about the experience of being there was engaging and memorable. To this day I remember how the dirt and gravel roads felt under my feet, how the smells of grease for the train tracks, baking bread from the bakery, the myriad scents from the animals and
the smell from the buildings and artifacts, like that of old library books, that I still associate with old knowledge and things to learn about carried in the air. My family left when I was ten and I have learned that Heritage Park was commercialized beyond recognition in recent years but in the years I spent going there the experience of being immersed in the past, being there, seeing and hearing about and doing things like churning butter and seeing how sod houses where made stayed with me. It captured my imagination and seeded a fascination for history in my mind like nothing else could.

I have since had many other changes to participate in experiential learning opportunities. During my undergrad I spent a month studying Baroque culture and theatre in a castle in the Czech Republic. Being around the things I learning about and seeing everything as close to its original context as possible on an almost daily basis. It was the richest learning experience of my undergrad. In the MT program itself we participate in experiential learning, most notably in the form of our practicums’. We are fully immersed in the experience of teaching and I believe most teacher candidates agree that it is the most useful and applicable part of the program. To this day I believe that museums and historical sites are the richest way to teach about history and to engage students with it and that is why I am interested in researching the ways in which history educators employ experiential learning at the secondary level.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview of Existing Scholarship

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is a relatively new theory but a very old idea. The theory itself was developed by David Kolb in 1971 along with his Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) but in practice the use of experiential learning has always existed. It is important to note that my research is inspired by the Kolb’s theory at its most basic level: that knowledge is created by the transformation (doing, reflecting, adapting) of experiences. Experiential learning, that is learning from direct experience and doing, has existed from the first time one of our hominid ancestors decided to teach their children how to hunt or build a fire by having them come along and do it. It has been in use in modern schooling for decades, most prominently in the form of field trips. This study is important to the education community because it will focus specifically on the methodology and reasons for using experiential learning in secondary school courses and will clarify the benefits and limitations of experiential learning as a teaching method distinct from the basic class field trip.

The existing scholarship on experiential learning has been conducted on a wide array of fields, including education, psychology, business and medicine among many others. While research into the application of experiential learning in education makes up the largest portion of existing scholarship, most of that is focused on higher education rather than on secondary or elementary education. What does exist on secondary education is often focused specifically on curriculum development and on the ways in which experiential learning can be used/modified
for students with disabilities. Within the scholarship on the use of experiential learning at the secondary level, the majority of that literature is focused on science education rather than on history education, specifically experiential learning at museums and historical sites, as this study is. Furthermore, almost all of the existing research into experiential learning is in the form of doctoral dissertations that focus on various aspects of the American public school system.

**Origins of Experiential Learning**

The experiential learning theory is a holistic theoretical model for understanding and determining individuals learning processes and development (Kolb et al., 1999). In his theory Kolb defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 38). The emphasis placed on the role that experience plays on learning and development by the experiential learning theory is what makes it distinct from cognitive and behavioral learning theories (Kolb et al, 1999). Kolb’s theory is related to and rooted in the preceding learning and development theories of John Dewey (philosophical pragmatism), Kurt Lewin (social psychology), Jean Piaget (cognitive development theory) and from Carl Jung’s recognition that different individuals develop different learning styles in accordance with their preferred ways of adapting to the world around them (Kolb et al., 1999). In developing his theory Kolb defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.” (Kolb et al., 1999, p. 2 quoting Kolb, 1984, p. 41).
Kolb created a four stage cycle model for the experiential learning theory. He defined four modes of learning that work together in the model to create a complete experiential learning experience. These modes are: Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualization, Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation. According to Kolb’s four stage cycle immediate (or concrete) experiences are the basis for making observations and reflections that are then assimilated and synthesized by learners into abstract concepts with implications that can be tested therefore becoming the basis for new experiences and repeating the experiential learning cycle (Kolb et al., 1999). Kolb also created four learning styles in his learning styles inventory in 1971. The experiential learning theory was intended to work with the inventory to identify the learning techniques that would work best with each learning style. More recent research has shown that experiential learning can be used to effectively cover multiple learning styles and teach to multiple different intelligences (Kolb et al., 1999). These studies address experiential learning in its underlying basis, the links that exist between the experience of something, the learning of it and the development of corresponding skills. Most of the scholars that are covered in the literature review for this proposal define experiential learning as learning based around a particular experience. My research works with the theory of experiential learning on that same basic level and for the purposes of my research I define experiential learning as learning that takes place outside of the typical classroom setting in a place designed to out the content of the lesson into a physical context, which is immersive and involves active student participation. In other words, learning that is an experience unto itself.
Uses of Experiential Learning

Most educators who intentionally use experiential learning as a way to enrich their classes do so to enrich their students with knowledge and learning experience that is distinct and more authentic than the learning that typically occurs in classrooms (Hattie, 2009). Some educators, such as Darren Johnson are very inclusive about what they categorize as experiential learning. Johnson cites “after-school programs, athletic, music, dance or other types of camps, field trips, and educational travel” as forms of experiential learning, though his research focuses on educational travel to important American cultural and historical sites (2008). A. E. Jonas is even more inclusive with what she classifies as experiential learning. In her research any learning that is an experience, regardless of whether or not it takes place outside of the classroom, is experiential learning. Bettye Alexander Cooke is comparatively very narrow and specific in her definition of what constitutes experiential learning. She defines it as “doing with hands touching physical materials” (Cooke, 2007, p. 3). Her research is focused exclusively on experiential learning at the American history museum.

Students are able to better engage with, understand and analyze the information and concepts they are learning when new knowledge is taught from the concrete to the abstract (Kamina & Iyer, 2009). Experiential learning used at the beginning of a unit has the potential to excite students and get them engaged with the subject material in an inquiring and critical way. Seeing and doing activities related to the material has the potential to ground a unit in authentic learning. Traditionally experimental learning activities, especially field trips, have been used
at the end of a unit, more as a reward for learning than as a grounding and assessed piece of authentic learning to build upon.

**Perceived Benefits of Experiential Learning**

Some of the perceived benefits of experiential learning at museums and historical sites that have been observed by researchers include enriched student development “intellectually, emotionally, socially, and culturally.” (Johnson, 2008). Research into experiential learning on the whole has found that experiential learning positively impacts students’ personal growth and development as well as students’ academic achievement (Jonas, 2011). Many scholars and educators who favor experiential education argue that when teaching students about a specific subject, such as pond ecosystems or the exploration and colonization of the local region, or the Second World War it is better to engage students with the material in as immersive and hands on way as possible (Johnson, 2008). So if your are studying a pond, take the students to a pond have them look around, make observations and collect samples for further study. If you are studying the Second World War go to a museum to look at artifacts, talk to veterans’, explore monuments and if at all possible explore the historical sites that exist (battlefields, internment camps, training camps, whatever you can manage from where you are with the resources you have available).

Johnson’s interviews with students demonstrate that students benefit from experiential learning by expanding their knowledge on a subject, by gaining insight into their community and themselves. Each student was able to explore different aspects of their interests in a specific topic because of the scope of the experiential
learning method. He reports that they felt their personal interests in the subject were expanded as were their views of what was personally possible in terms of future study, careers, and even personal exploration (2008). Scholars also report that experiential learning at museums and historical sites gives the students a deeper sense of personal connection to history, the site and the people involved. This sense of connection positively influences students’ social and civic engagement and responsibility (Jonas 2011). In her research Jonas argues that experiential learning actually enhances students’ higher order and critical thinking skills in ways not found to result from traditional teaching methods (2011). She argues that experiential learning gives students’ authentic learning experiences and tasks that are translatable into practical applicable skills that serve students well in their futures both personally and professionally (2011).

Neither Johnson nor Jonas focused on when in the learning experiential learning situations that are most effective. Their studies focused primarily on experiential learning that was ongoing throughout the course of a unit. The findings from my research (discussed in chapter 4) suggest that experiential learning can be helpful at different stages in a unit depending on the unit and the student, but is most universally effective towards the end of a unit’s learning.

**Perceived Drawbacks of Experiential Learning**

Unfortunately many school boards, parents and students are concerned primarily with student grades, consistency and accountability. In the United States for example, where most of the research on experiential learning originates, educators are being hindered by the No Child Left Behind Act, which prioritizes high
academic achievement in tested subjects and rejects the use of newer teaching methods (including experiential learning) that have not proven to raise test scores (Johnson, 2008, Jonas 2011). The perception is that experiential learning is fun for the students but does not cover curriculum or encourage literacy/numeracy as efficiently as chalk and talk or textbook based lessons. Experiential learning as seen as less accountable that traditional teaching methods because it is harder to ensure that it supports and meets curriculum standards and can often be much more complicated to assess for, as and of students learning when using experiential learning methodology. There is not a substantial body of research that provides clear evidence about what works and why where experiential education is concerned and as such it does not have the support that traditional methods of teaching has and despite its long history, continues to be seen as an alternative teaching method (Johnson 2008, Jonas 2011).

As recently as 2011 Jonas noted in her research that there is a lack of consensus in the educational community about should be classified as experiential learning. Even among researchers there is not a clear and agreed upon understanding. An obvious and little discussed drawback to experiential education is that in almost every case it is more time consuming to plan than a more traditional method, more work to organize (in terms of getting administrative and parental approval for trips, etc), presents increased risk of liability should anything unforeseen occur off school property, and of course usually more expensive to implement than a traditional textbook or chalkboard lesson (Johnson, 2008, Jonas 2011). A major whole in the literature for my research is the near total absence of
non-American research into the use of experiential learning as a teaching method at the secondary school level. Research based on drawbacks stemming exclusively from American legislation and policies has not been included in this literature review as it is irrelevant to the specifics of this research study.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

I hope that my research will be in keeping with my personal values and beliefs. I believe that education should work to encourage young people to embrace a love of learning, a sense of social justice, equitability in the way they treat others, and responsibility for their role as social agents for positive change in society. I consider my values to be those of equity to all individuals, accounting for differences with sensitivity and respect with the goal of treating everyone as equals in society. I believe everyone should be given a chance and a say and that treating everyone as a unique individual with unique strengths and challenges is the only way to treat everyone justly and fairly. I believe that these considerations only become more important in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world. On a daily basis, we increasingly encounter differences in the individuals we interact with. These differences are on socio-economic factors, on religious beliefs, on ethnic backgrounds and traditions, on abilities and challenges or on any combination of these factors. I believe that individuals should be agents for positive change, on behalf of themselves and their communities and that teachers are in a unique position to encourage this kind of thinking and acting for change in young people.

My own experiences and views on education and learning will strongly influence the tone of my research. I believe my research style is in keeping with the
Social Constructivism and (less so) Pragmatism research paradigms. While I do not really feel that my research falls into a specific interpretive community, I would say that what I hope to accomplish with it is most in keeping with postmodern perspectives. I come from this background understanding that all research is biased based on the ideology and values of the researcher, but also believing that facts must speak for themselves as much as possible. Evidence that works against a hypothesis is just as useful in expanding our understanding as evidence that supports it.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative research study into the how teachers and educators make use of experiential learning in their teaching of intermediate and senior level students was conducted by collecting data in the form of a review of current literature in the area and the conduction of interviews with educators who specialize in experiential learning and history. The qualitative data for this research study was collected through two semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants, Beth a museum educator at a major Ontario museum, and David a teacher and Department head from rural Nova Scotia with 34 years experience. The interviews were transcribed, analyzed and coded to find themes. The participants, the procedure followed in the conducting of interviews, the ethical review procedures and the limitations of this qualitative research study are also discussed in this chapter.

Procedure

In order to gather data for my to answer my research question I began by formulating interview questions. I then contacted participants and conducted two interviews. I gave my participants the choice of location for the interview. Beth wanted to conduct the interview in her office and David wanted to conduct it in his home so that is where I interviewed them. After I went over the letter of Consent and they signed it we got comfortably seated and began the interviews. I allowed the participants’ attitudes to determine how much I interjected. Beth was conversational and seemed to very much prefer the interview that way, whereas
David’s interview was more formal and one-sided. I think that the comfort of the participants played a crucial role in determining how rich the data was and this is more valuable to me than consistency in my level of input in each interview.

Both interviews were conducted with teachers and educators who work with students at the intermediate and senior levels and who actively use experiential learning as a key part of their teaching. The intent of these interviews was to gather data on how the participants use and experiential learning to engage their students with concepts and ideas in history; as well as to uncover the perceived benefits and limitations to using experiential learning in teaching, trends in what types of educators most consistently incorporate experiential learning into their teaching practices and suggestions on how other educators might successfully incorporate experiential learning into their teaching. Data was collected by audio recording and transcription and analyzed by coding and searching for relevant emergent themes.

Participants

For the purpose of this research study participants were recruited from both the traditional classroom setting and educational settings in museums. Participants were chosen based on their roles in developing and delivering experiential learning opportunities for middle and high school students. I interviewed two participants for this study. Beth is a young museum educator working in a major Ontario museum and pursuing doctoral research into education in museums. David is a high school teacher and department head from rural Nova Scotia with 34 years of experience and significant professional development training in history education. He was instrumental in piloting the Canadian History program in Nova Scotia in
2001. Prior to this research study I had briefly meet Beth during the course of my studies at OISE and I was aware of her interest and involvement in experiential learning programming. I was introduced to David by a mutual acquaintance that was aware of my research and of his vast experience with history education in Nova Scotia.

**Instruments of Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The instruments of data collection that I used in this research study were a literature review of current scholarship (Chapter 2) and two semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted using the same set of twenty-two questions (Appendix B). The questions were carefully designed so as to flow logically and smoothly from one train of though to the next without the need to shift gears, and to be open ended so as to encourage participants to answer fully and thoughtfully. The questions were designed around the research question and sub-questions so as to elicit relevant and useful information for the study. The interviews were recorded using the AudioMemo app for iPhone and transcribed into Microsoft Word.

I transcribed the raw data for this research study. The interviews were transcribed in strict verbatim. Participant’s names and identifying information were replaced and one statement was completely omitted to protect participants’ anonymity. When I began coding my data after completing my transcription I began by re-reading the interviews several times and making note of what I thought were the most important ideas. I came up with eleven key ideas from the interviews. I then re-read the interviews and decided that my eleven key ideas could be refined
into seven themes. After I identified these themes I assigned each one a colour from a package of Crayola markers and highlighted the sections of the transcribed interviews that corresponded with each theme’s colour. There were several sections that belonged in two themes. These sections were highlighted in the colour I feel they are most important to and underlined in the other theme’s colour. While this research study is not based in grounded theory, I chose to use emergent methodology to uncover themes in my research. Looking for emergent themes allowed me to set aside as many fixed pre-conceptions of what my data would tell me as I could (I acknowledge that a limitation of this study, and any qualitative study is my own bias and opinions). By comparing the data from both interviews to each other and then to the existing literature in what Suter (2012) calls “constant comparison” I was able to find themes within my data, rather than forcing them onto my data.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

The initial contact with participants in this research study was made by email with Beth and by telephone with David. The email very specifically informed the participant that should she chose to assist me in my research she would remain completely anonymous and retain the ability to withdraw her participation at anytime before the conclusion of the research study in the spring of 2014. The letter of Consent for Interview (Appendix A) was also attached to this email. Initial contact with David was made through a mutual acquaintance that was aware of my research. This individual reached out to David and then gave me his phone number. During the phone call I informed him of his rights within my study should he chose
to participate (the same as outlined above) and read the letter of Consent for
Interview to him over the phone.

All participants had the opportunity to discuss and resolve any questions
they may had with the researcher prior to the interview by email or phone and
again on the day of the interview before it began. The letter of consent that each
participant signed was carefully gone over with the participant before the interview,
to ensure that participants were aware that they may chose to stop the interview,
decline to answer a question without question and/or withdraw their participation
from the research study at any time before its completion. No changes were made to
the procedures outlined in the letter of consent once the data collection process
commenced.

All personal information from participants that might reveal their identity
(names, places of employment) is kept strictly anonymous. Pseudonyms for names
and institutions are used in this paper to ensure participants anonymity. Both
participants were made aware of these procedures before the interview. As is
outlined in the letter of consent, all participants were given the opportunity to
request a final copy of their transcribed interviews in order to ensure accuracy.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research study. The researcher’s limited
experience with qualitative research analysis must not be discounted. My personal
bias and inclination towards experiential learning as a method of teaching and
engaging intermediate and senior level students (indeed learners at all levels) has
undoubtedly played a role in biasing the interpretation of research data, though I
have tried to as unbiased as possible. The generalized and brief nature of the interviews also limits the possible outcomes of the data collected. The time constraints on conducting this research study also represent a limitation, in terms of the amount of data that was able to be collected, sub-questions that could be analyzed and to a lesser degree, the amount of literature that could be reviewed. While having only two participants represents a limited sample size and therefore limits the ability to make generalized statements about the use of experiential learning by history educators overall, it allowed for more in-depth analysis of each individual case.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The findings from my research data are rich. The findings I collected from my interviews have been organized into several themes, which I have summarized below. These themes are: Differing Understandings of Experiential Learning; Possibilities of Engagement for All Learners; Experiential Learning and Critical Thinking, with the sub theme Dangers of Oversimplifying; Difficulties in Accessing Experiential Learning Opportunities, with the sub theme of Inclusiveness and Universal Design; and Best Practices.

Differing Understandings of Experiential Learning

My interview data quickly revealed that, as with academic literature on the subject, there is no one definition of experiential learning that fits all educators. Beth defined it as “multi-sensory learning...It's about learning by doing.” She said “it could really be anything that has engagement with an environment or an object or a process that invites students to use their faculties of observation and sensory abilities to engage with [any] of those things”. She included hands on activities with historical artifacts (authentic or reproductions) and objects from nature in her description of what counted as hands on experiential learning and said it could take place anywhere from a classroom, to a museum to a pond. During the interview Beth stressed the importance of inquiry in experiential learning as a key component of successful experiential learning.

David’s understanding of what counted as experiential learning was broader than Beth’s. He included field experiences at museums and historical sites, guest
speakers, trips to conferences such as Encounters Canada and Forum for Young Canadians, hands-on in class activities, and even the analysis of historical films (fictionalized and documentaries) in his definition of what experiential learning could include. When I asked, “can you give me some examples of what sort of activities you consider to be part of experiential learning?” David responded by saying “definitely going to visit, to see museums, going to interview people who have been through something, some experience that you want to share with your students, having them hear first hand from a person who has been through it is something that they always seem to perk up on and that they get a lot out of.” I was quite surprised by his inclusion of guest speakers as part of experiential learning. It was not something that I had personally thought to include, nor is it something that come up in the literature. He continued to stress the use of guest speakers or attending speaking engagements as a form of experiential learning throughout the interview.

Possibilities of Engagement for All Learners

When discussing the relationship between experiential learning and student engagement, both Beth and David indicated that believed experiential had a lot of potential to increase student engagement. Both interviews suggested that experiential learning has a lot of potential to reach hesitant or reluctant learners. David stated “I’ve seen students who were totally unmotivated, absolutely unmotivated and going nowhere, with no focus or direction go to a speaking engagement and something clicks. All of a sudden they become focused and once they’re focused...they have a goal and they shoot for that goal.” He expanded, saying
that finding a focusing point and a goal is hard for teenagers "and sometimes that hands-on experience gives them that focusing point". Throughout the interview he repeatedly came back to the idea that experiential learning had the potential to inspire students and focus them on learning, keeping good students interested and on track and often engaging students who were more reluctant learners.

Beth’s role educating in a museum means that she often does not have any previous experience with the individual learners that she is teaching on a given day and that it is unlikely she will have any follow up with them to assess their ongoing engagement. She indicated that in her practice, learners’ engagement is often by verbal cues such as asking her questions or volunteering answers when she asks. She said that she has had many learners express a deeper sense of connection to what they are learning during experiential activities, saying that they feel like they are part of the learning (as opposed to passively recording or absorbing it through listening and/or note taking). She also indicated that she has had good experiences with parents and teachers who have brought students to her museum, saying that often they are as engaged as the students because the experiential activities often represent new learning and new understanding for them too.

Throughout the interview Beth talked about the power to engage and inspire that she believes experiential learning has. She said “the second you introduce and actual object you change the game.” Asking students to draw conclusions based on what they can see or hear or feel “puts the power in the hands of the learner. And if there is anything that’s going to get kids interested in history, that’s it.” Her interview revealed that experiential learning can be very memorable and impacting
for learners. She said that she has had many learners come up to her in the museum months or even years after the experiential activities she did with their classes asking if she remembered them and wanting to talk about what they learned from those activities. However, she also said that over the past few years she has noticed a marked shortening in learners attention spans for engaging with a single object or activity.

**Experiential Learning and Critical Thinking**

Beth’s interview provided a lot of data on the potential use of experiential learning activities to foster critical thinking. She talked about how making deductions about objects in experiential learning activities requires critical thinking that applies to critical analysis of the real world. She said as educators “we want to create a populace that can think critically and analyze...if we connect it to democracy, now you need to be able to have these forms of education so that you can create a critically thinking populace who is able to make their own deductions and have insights about the world around them.” In museums specifically she said experiential learning activities can be used to foster critical understanding of the presentation and collection of objects, such as the colonial legacy of object collections and museums.

She said that experiential learning does not have to be complicated. It can be done in a simple form in a classroom with something as mundane as a coin and still be used to develop critical thinking in students. She gave this example about history educator Dorothy Duncan: “She would hold people spellbound with a penny. She would do object based learning with a penny. What do you see on the side? What's
In David’s interview critical thinking in relation to experiential learning was also closely tied to making connections and analyzing real world situations. He gave the example of a graduation field trip he had taken his students on to Halifax. During this trip they went on a boat into the harbor while the USS Virginia aircraft carrier was in port. He stated, “we weren’t allowed within 150 yards of it and they had patrol zodiacs going around. That really drove home this idea about security to the kids on a level they probably hadn’t truly thought would ever affect them.”

**Dangers of Stereotyping and Oversimplifying**

During our interview Beth expressed concern about the fact that experiential learning situations can be problematic if not used correctly and can lead to potentially stereotyping cultures, regions and historical periods. She was especially concerned about the danger of placing contemporary cultures in past tense, by presenting their histories as fixed points within museum exhibits (the major concern she focused on was aboriginal cultures). She said, “I question the benefits of experiential learning around issues of cultural dress-up and cultural performance...I’m uncomfortable with the idea of experiential learning in terms of trying on somebody else’s identity. I find that very problematic and I see that a lot.” She continued, “One of the dangers about experiential learning, specifically when it comes to dealing with...particular cultural representations is [that they are] representations. It’s not necessarily historically accurate.” She gave the example of a
plains tipi used in her museum “It’s not a local representation” she said. Indeed, "the plains tipi is sort of the most stereotypical representation.”

**Difficulties in Accessing Experiential Learning Opportunities**

As a museum educator, Beth’s insights into the difficulties of making experiential learning situations available are illuminating. She pointed out that historical (and scientific) objects are valuable and as a result some individuals and institutions with access to these objects may not want them shared with students because of their value, and, in some cases, the inability to replace them. She said that reproductions can be difficult to make and do not have the same properties as the originals, so observation based conclusions that students’ make may not be accurate.

Beth also talked about how museum policies make it difficult for educators to create rich experiential learning activities. She talked about how in the past educators at her museum were able to do activities like painting and paper mache based on object observation in the galleries. She said, “I can show you pictures of kid’s using paint and clay on the gallery floor. We would never hear, never think of doing that now.” These days she said, experiential learning happens in very circumscribed and specialized situations. She also said that some museums, hers included, have a policy not to allow older students to do hands-on object based learning, that there is an assumption that older students do not benefit from it. Another difficulty that she has encountered is the issue of the information from students’ textbooks not corresponding with the information from the experiential learning situation.
David talked a great deal about the difficulties in accessing experiential learning opportunities. The main concerns he expressed were issues of funding, physical access (geographical, weather, limited supply) and policy restrictions.

When I asked, “in your opinion what are some of the fundamental challenges of using experiential learning as a teaching tool?” he immediately replied “Funding.” He expanded saying “if you live in a rural area like we do it’s 45 minutes to an hours drive for anyone to come out and do anything...when it takes hours on a bus and you have to rent a driver and a bus and all that kind of thing just to go for an hours experience, and then make the trip back, that’s pretty much your whole day shot.” He also talked about the difficulty that bad weather can present in the wintertime for bringing people to schools or for taking students to other locations. In terms of accessing funding for activities he said “usually there is a lot of support for the sciences and the maths from the powers that be and the humanities are considered not quite so important. ‘If you’ve got a history text you can teach history, anybody can teach history’ but it’s not necessarily so.”

David talked stated that over the course of his career the policies that govern field trips and other out of school activities have made access more difficult. “There’s a lot of logistical hoops that you have to jump through and the hoops have become more numerous than they were in the beginning. There are more layers of bureaucracy that you have to go through to get something like that to happen” he said.
Inclusiveness

During my interview with Beth, the subject of inclusiveness in experiential learning came up when I asked her about what kinds of reactions she typically got to experiential learning. She stated that she has had good experiences doing experiential learning activities with students with disabilities. She said that discovery based and object based learning work well because they allow learners to discover things in their own way. It puts’ learning and developing an understanding in the learners’ hands. She stated that experiential learning is “barrier free learning in a lot of ways”. What did not come out in the data was the barriers that can exist, such as physical access to historical sites or the ability to interact with objects in particular ways (seeing or touching) for individuals with physical disabilities.

Best Practices

Several points about best practices when using experiential activities emerged from my interviews. An important point that Beth discussed when she was talking about the dangers of stereotyping in experiential learning was that some situations require that you demonstrate that you are critical of the activity or representation (stereotypical representations, etc.) involved in the activity. She also suggested that educators who are interested in experiential learning and object-based learning begin to build a collection of primary sources, such as newspaper articles or postcards that are fairly inexpensive on sites like eBay.

During his discussion of the difficulties in accessing experiential learning situations David raised the idea of using technology to supplement learning when experiential learning activities outside of the classroom are logistically impossible. I
had not expected technology to come up in my research data, so I was surprised. He stated, “technology has improved so much that you can do virtual tours of things without actually taking the kids there. Through sites like YouTube or virtual tour websites or things like that you can allow the kids to almost do a visitation from the classroom. But there’s no substitute for actual experience...it just doesn’t have the same impact. First hand experience is always better.”

**When in the Learning?**

My two participants expressed similar sentiments about when experiential learning is best employed. Beth stated that in her practice and research she has found that experiential learning activities can be a great class or unit hook and can be used at the beginning of a unit to set up the frame or at the end as a formative assessment of learning. When I asked David when he thought it was best to use experiential learning in a unit, the beginning, the middle or the end, he told me that he had tried all three. He stated, “a lot of times it’s good to use things like that at the end of a unit to kind of summarize and bring it all together. I find in the middle of a unit they don’t really know how to digest it...so it’s good to do it as an intro or closure.” He stated that he has mostly used it as a closure.

**Assessment**

Using experiential learning to support assessment was not something that participants discussed. In Beth’s role as a museum educator it is unsurprising that she would not be involved in assessment. When I asked David “do you do anything to assess [experiential learning activities]?” he stated, “Quite often you have a follow-up sheet which the kids can respond to” with questions like “did your
questions get answered, was the speaker knowledgeable so on and so forth”. He stated that he sometimes marks these for completion and sometimes to evaluate the quality of the response “did they respond to the complete answer or did they just answer yes or no. If some of them give you more detail, give them higher. It demonstrates higher critical thinking, so you can assess that accordingly.”
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the question “in what ways do secondary school history teachers use experiential learning at museums and historical sites in their classes?”. The sub-questions are “is experiential learning used effectively to increase student engagement?”, “when do teachers use experiential learning within their units/ courses”, and “how is experiential learning assessed or used to support assessment?”. A goal of this project was to answer these questions and to identify what history educators consider to be experiential learning, and to identify the key benefits and drawbacks that history educators believe exist surrounding the use of experiential learning as a teaching method at the secondary school level. The data I collected from my research interviews was not able to fully answer any of these questions, however it does provide new insight.

Data Analysis

In discussing the way that they use experiential learning in their practice, Beth and David provided a lot of valuable information towards answering my research questions. The data is organized below based on the original research questions.

How is it used?

My findings suggest that history educators are using experiential learning in a variety of ways. Sometimes they are using it as a hook or basis to start a unit. Sometimes they are using it as a summation and closure for a unit. Unsurprisingly,
my research also indicates that experiential learning is also being used as a reward (for example David discussed a grade 12 graduation trip) without connection or foundation in authentic learning. Both Beth and David indicated throughout their interviews that experiential learning is excellent at increasing student engagement. David talked a lot about how experiential learning could prompt reluctant learners into engaging and even help them to find a passion for learning about something that they had not had before. This is an exciting finding. It suggests that experiential learning, if used correctly has the potential to increase student engagement, motivation and success. While the findings indicate that using experiential learning to encourage critical thinking and the development of historical thinking skills can be difficult for teachers and educators, the fact that experiential learning is so successful at increasing student engagement makes it well worth the effort to try.

**When in the learning?**

My findings suggest that history educators find experiential learning most useful at the beginning of units of study beginning as grounding or hook for future learning and/or the end to summarize and solidify previous learning. The research I uncovered during my literature review (Kamina and Iyer (2009) in particular) suggests that experiential learning is most beneficial to students at the start of a unit of learning, because learning is best when topics are taught from the concrete to the abstract.

**Assessment**

My findings regarding the assessment of experiential learning activities and their use to support authentic assessments of students unit and course learning are
concerning. David indicated that he used write-ups and experience evaluations to assess students learning from experiential activities. Both participants indicated that most of their assessment was formative and related to engagement. This is concerning because of the importance that authentic assessment of authentic learning has current schooling. There is a lot of potential for critical thinking and development of historical thinking skills in experiential learning activities, but assessing those activities seems to present a conundrum for teachers.

Challenges

Though it was not a part of my initial research question, my findings revealed a lot about the challenges that educators face in accessing and incorporating rich experiential learning activities. Both Beth and David expressed frustration with the policies in place within museums in Beth’s case and within school boards in David’s surrounding access to experiential learning. Funding and geography presented expected challenges for David. Indeed funding and geography are not challenges that I expected to be raised and which in some way will always be limitations and drawbacks to using experiential learning in teaching history. While it is not surprising that policy presented challenges and barriers to using experiential learning, it is concerning that both participants stated that they thought it was getting worse and not better. Policy is something that can be addressed and changed more easily than the availability of money or barriers of geographical distance.

Evaluation

I uncovered a lot of unexpected data in my research, especially from David’s interview. His definition of experiential learning was substantially different than
Beth’s, that of the available literature and mine. The data from his interview was helpful in answering the questions about timing and assessment of experiential learning, but not as related to the use of experiential learning in museums and historical sites as I would have liked it to be. It is possible that I was not clear enough in explaining what I was defining experiential learning as before our interview, but having read it over I suspect that it’s more likely that his understanding is somewhat dated and re-imagined based on the limitations and difficulties he has encountered in implementing experiential learning. I did not have the opportunity to interview a teacher practicing in a major city, such as Toronto, with significant access to museums and historical sites for experiential learning activities. As a result I did not find much direct information about the value of things like Edukits, or half-day trips to enrich learning. Some information can be extrapolated from Beth and David’s interviews as to how teachers based in urban settings use experiential learning, but further research is called for.

**Implications**

This research study has several direct implications for me as a research and an educator. I am thoroughly convinced of the value of experiential learning in engaging students with history, but my research has also convinced me that very deliberate and careful uses is needed to foster critical and historical thinking skills. As a result of my practice I am now convinced that experiential is an excellent way to motivate reluctant learners. In my practice, based on my literature review more than the findings from my interviews, I will try to use experiential learning at the beginning of units to provide a concrete foundation for future learning, rather than
as a summery (or in some circumstances a reward) at the end of learning. My understanding of what experiential learning includes has been challenged and expanded by my findings. I now have a greater appreciation for how simple a good, critically challenging, experiential learning activity can be.

**Broader Implications**

My findings suggest that there is a lot of room for improvement in the way that experiential learning is taught to pre-service teachers and used in history teaching. The difficulty in finding a definition or understanding of experiential learning that was recognizably, coherently, similar between academics in the literature and especially between my participants suggests that experiential learning has been under addressed in pre-service education. David and Beth’s concerns about policies limiting students’ access to experiential learning opportunities are particularly concerning. At a time when inquiry based learning and authentic learning and assessment are key components of policy and curriculum it is concerning that access to inquiry rich experiential learning activities is limited by layers of bureaucracy.

**Recommendations**

My research has yielded a few practical recommendations for teachers in their use of experiential learning. Beth and David both discussed the value of experiential learning at as an introduction to unit of study, but stated that it was most commonly used at the end of a unit as closure. Kamina and Iyer (2009) stressed the importance of teaching concepts from the concrete to the abstract. This
suggests that experiential learning activities may most valuable at the start of a unit to ground the subsequent learning in authentic and concrete knowledge.

Beth’s suggestion to build a personal collection of objects and artifacts to work with is a compelling one for those passionate about experiential learning and the use of primary sources use in the developing of historical thinking skills. It is important to remember from her example of Dorothy Duncan and the penny, that experiential learning does not need to be complicated to organize or even outside of the classroom to be a valuable way to teach and foster critical thinking. David’s suggestions to use technology to supplement experiential learning when it is logistically impossible to do the real thing is interesting, particularly at this point in time when more and more technology is available to students in classrooms, but it is also important to remember, as he and Beth both said, that there is no substitute for the real thing and real experiences.

**Further Study**

Questions emerged from my research data that are deserving of further study. The variation in what educators and even academics understand to be part of experiential learning raises the question “what if any training do intermediate and secondary teachers have related to experiential learning?” Beth’s discussion of the potential inclusiveness of experiential learning, which she described as “barrier free learning in a lot of ways” raises questions about universal design for inclusiveness and accessibility in experiential learning activities. Is experiential learning an effective way to teach students with disabilities? All disabilities or just certain types? The number of participants I was able to interview limited my research; it
would be interesting and valuable to expand this study to look at more cases of museum educators’ role in experiential learning, more teachers from major cities and rural areas to contrast the way they use experiential learning. It would also be interesting to compare the uses of experiential learning in Canada to how it is used in other countries. Further study on the use of technology in and supplement experiential learning would also be beneficial.

**Conclusion**

While there is still a lot of room for future study into the varying uses and benefits of experiential learning my research findings are useful in highlighting the multiple understandings and uses of experiential learning, and in highlighting the challenges that educators have in implementing experiential learning activities, particularly in rural areas. It also raises concerns about the use of experiential learning to authentically support and assess students’ learning.
References


*I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.*

- Confucius
Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ________________

Dear ________________ (Participant’s Name),

My name is Katherine McDougall. I am a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am researching the ways in which history educators employ experiential learning as part of a major research assignment required for my program. I believe that your knowledge and experience will provide helpful insights into the topic and be invaluable to my research.

To collect my data I will be conducting approximately 45-minute interviews with several participants that will be digitally audio tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed for common themes. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else of your choosing.

The contents of this interview will only be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. Your interview will remain strictly anonymous and confidential. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. If you wish I will share a copy of the transcribed interview with you to ensure accuracy. The only person who will have access to the information apart from my self will be my research supervisor, Professor Garfield Gini-Newman. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question during the interview, stop the interview at any point and/or withdraw your participation in the research study at any time, for any reason even after you have consented, without penalty. I will destroy the recording after the research paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. The risks to you in participating in the project are minimal, as are the benefits, but your participation is greatly appreciated.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed and retain a copy for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours most sincerely,

Katherine McDougall
Consent Form

I ______________________________(Participant's Name), do hereby acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in the interview is completely voluntary, that I may decline to answer any question during the interview, stop the interview at any point and/or withdraw my participation in the research study at any time, for any reason without penalty.

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read the letter provided to me by Katherine McDougall and agree to participate in an interview with her for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________

Name (printed): ______________________________

Date: ________________
APPENDIX B: Interview Questions

Main research question: “In what ways do secondary school history teachers use experiential learning at museums and historical sites in their classes?”

a) Participant Background Information

What grade(s) and subject(s) are you currently teaching?

How long have you been teaching/educating?

What brought you to study history?

What were your majors/minors/specialties for your degree(s)?

Did you have any personal experience with experiential learning (formally or informally) before working in education? (if so, what?)

b) Introduction to Experiential Learning

Can you give me some examples of what sort of activities you categorize as being a form of experiential learning?

What inspired you to incorporate experiential learning as a method for teaching into your practice?

Looking back, can you describe how the way you use experiential learning in your practice has changed/progressed over the years?

c) Value/Benefits of Experiential Learning

In your opinion, what is the value of experiential learning? How do you think students/learners benefit from experiential learning at museums and historical sites?

How do your students/learners generally respond to experiential learning activities? What different attitudes have you observed?

How do you think experiential learning at museums and historical sites can be used to motivate and engage students with history?
d) Practices and Strategies for Incorporating Experiential Learning

Can you give an example of an experiential learning activity that you have used with your students/learners that you believe worked especially well?

When in a unit do you employ experiential learning activities?

What if anything do you do to introduce the material covered by an experiential learning activity beforehand? How do you follow up afterwards?

How do you assess students’ learning from an experiential learning activity?

What key skills, ideas, and understanding do you want your students/learners to learn take away from experiential learning activities?

e) Barriers/Challenges of Experiential Learning

In your opinion, what are some challenges/downfalls of experiential learning as a method for teaching/educating?

Can you think of a time you used experiential learning in a lesson and it was particularly unsuccessful in accomplishing what you hoped it would do for the students/learners? Why do you suppose it was unsuccessful?

How do parents generally feel about the use of experiential learning activities in your experience?

f) Advice

What advice would you give to history educators who would like start using/make better use of experiential learning in their practice?

g) Professional Development

Are there professional development opportunities you are aware of or have participated in that help history educators learn how to better incorporate experiential learning into their practice?

Do you have any additional comments you would like to add about experiential learning or other questions from this interview that you would like to go back to?