Experience, Learning and Knowledge

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Experience, Learning and Knowledge
By John L. Rury, former SNL Resident Faculty

The relationship between experience and learning is a puzzle of sorts, one that you will be asked to think about in the School for New Learning. It is also a good question to consider it the rest of your life, since it is relevant to practically everything we do. In this essay, we examine some of the pieces of this puzzle. I use the ideas of the philosopher John Dewey as a point of departure, and try to explore many of the questions his writings raise for students today. I don’t pretend to have answers to all the various sides of this issue. But maybe this discussion will help you to begin thinking about experience, and some of the ways you can use it to learn.

Let’s begin with the question “what do we learn from experience?” The answer is “virtually everything,” of course, since we are born with relatively little instinctual knowledge (such as how to breathe) and everything else can be classified as one form or another of experience. Even reading books and sitting in classes are forms of experience, even if not always exciting ones. But this is not usually what we mean when we say we learn from experience. Perhaps the question is better put this way: what do we learn from experiences we encounter in “real life,” away from school and books? Many of us feel that the lessons we have learned from life are very valuable, and as adults we have gained a great deal of knowledge and insight from our many and varied experiences. In the School for New Learning (SNL), we recognize the value of experience in adult learning, and we want to acknowledge the skills and knowledge you have gained from prior learning, in school and out. But first we should take a look at the question of experience and knowledge, and consider how experience is related to learning. After that, we can consider some ways for you to begin thinking about your own experiences, and how they may be helpful in a program such as SNL.

Educative and Miseducative Experiences
As you know from reading John Dewey, not all experiences are equal. Some teach us more than others. But what is it about an experience that makes it “educative?” Addressing this question is an important step in figuring out the relationship between experience and learning.

If we take as our premise the idea that all learning is derived from the “external world” (that which is outside of our own mind), then we can begin with the proposition that all learning is based on experience. We know from reading Dewey that not all experiences result in learning, or at least not in the same types or degrees of learning. Dewey is quite clear on this point that some experiences are “miseducative,” which is to say that they do not contribute to further growth. Examples of such experiences are not difficult to imagine. My two sons, for instance, spend too much time watching television. They are entertained, and they may learn incidental details about life from particular episodes of their favorite shows, or from movies they enjoy. But these experiences generally do not lead them to do new things, or to look at their lives differently. For the most part, in that case, these episodes of TV watching cannot be considered educative experiences. In fact, they may well be miseducative, if the boys draw the wrong inferences from them, or come to hold misinformed beliefs as a consequence of watching them. They may assume, for instance, that social problems really do not exist, or do not matter very much, because the TV characters rarely confront them. They may come to assume that life is really about saying cute or funny remarks, or beating the bad guys (or the good guys), and not about work, difficult challenges, and occasional compromise. In this instance, there is learning from these experiences, but it is a potentially miseducative type of learning. This is an important point: the fact that an experience results in learning does not mean that it is educative.
This example helps us to see one of the primary dilemmas about experience: it is difficult to see the educative value of a particular experience when it is undertaken, without looking at things from a much broader perspective. It is possible to acquire a great deal from an experience, after all, and to have the experience ultimately be miseducative. As Dewey suggests, all experiences must be evaluated in terms of what they contribute toward future growth, further learning. And to do this, you must consider all that life has to offer – including its challenges.

Let’s consider another case. A woman works at the same company for fifteen years, performing a variety of jobs and moving her way up the career ladder into management. She has learned the “corporate culture” of her organization quite well, and has acquired the requisite skills as she has taken on new tasks. In many respects, this has clearly been a series of educative experiences, as it has prepared her for new experiences inside this organization. But what about the larger world? If this person were to lose her position one day, (say her company was bought by another), how could she be sure that her skills and knowledge would be recognized – or even applicable – in another organization? It is possible, after all, that the company she worked for was quite idiosyncratic, or simply did things differently from other companies. This person may find that she has to “relearn” a number of tasks, simply because she led a somewhat sheltered life in her old company, and did not know how things were done elsewhere.

Here too, although there was a great deal of learning in her previous place of employment, not all of it was educative in terms of the woman’s future. Much of it may have been miseducative, in fact, simply because it did not help this person prepare for different circumstances. She may not have planned to leave her initial organization, but life does not always allow us to stay in the same situation indefinitely (in fact it rarely does). For this reason, it is wise to plan with the whole world in view, or as much of it as possible.

So we can see that while learning often results from experience, the educative value of an experience can vary quite widely. As Dewey suggests, truly educative experiences are those that prepare us to perform the broadest range of new tasks in the world. But even this deceptively simple statement is a very tricky guideline. To understand it we need to explore some other sides of the experience and learning puzzle.

Making Comparisons and Generalizing

Another way of expressing Dewey’s principle is to say that educative experiences prepare us for an extensive range of future experiences. But what is it about these educative experiences that is so beneficial? And how can we judge the educative potential of an experience while it is happening, or help enhance the educative quality of a particular experience?

The second example above introduced yet another dimension of learning which helps us to determine the educative quality of an experience: comparison and generalizability. This is a rather simple concept, but a very crucial one, particularly in evaluating your own skills and knowledge. Here is one way to think about it: an experience can be considered educative when a person learns something new about the larger group or class of problems this experience represented. This is what it means to be able to generalize, and to do it one must necessarily compare one’s experience with others. I realize that this is a tall order, for most problems we encounter are large and complex, and many have a long history. This makes comparison and generalizing about them a challenge. But even if the learning leads to insight about the limitations of the immediate experience (how it doesn’t apply to other situations), that is telling us something about the larger problem it represents.

To be able to compare, of course, implies that there has to be a connection between different experiences. This is what Dewey described as the principle of “continuity.” There has to be a significant common component for comparison to be fruitful, to yield generalizations. There is an old saying that you can’t compare apples and oranges, and it applies to experiences too. There should be a connection between
experiences—a similar problem, method or subject matter. Experiences that are too dissimilar offer little insight.

If the woman in the example above had worked in several different companies instead of just one, for instance, she may have been much better prepared for her new situation (as long as she dealt with similar problems or performed like tasks). She would have realized that there are often many different ways of doing things, and that being a good manager means more than simply following a certain formula or enforcing company guidelines. She certainly would have had a wider range of experiences to draw upon in assessing her new situation. She could compare her various experiences to see what the common elements were, and to begin to derive general principles about being a good manager. These general principles are building blocks of generalizations. The wider the range of experiences she has to draw upon, the better her principles (and generalizations) ought to be. In short, generalizations are constructed from comparison of different experiences, and analysis of their common and differing elements.

If you are a manager, for instance, your ability to manage in a variety of different settings will depend on what you have learned. If you have managed people in different settings, and you have compared these experiences to derive certain principles from them, then these generalizations ought to help you cope with new situations you encounter. One such generalization may be the principle that people respond positively to acknowledgement of good work. This could be a principle that you have derived from direct experience, or one learned from the experience of others. Like all generalizations, however, it is continually subject to new tests in direct experience. In each new situation, you refine this principle, test the limits of its application (does it work with all kinds of people, for instance), and derive new generalizations. After a variety of different experiences, these generalizations or principles begin to become codified into a body of knowledge. Mastery of this can make you more effective at accomplishing your goals, and can help to make your subsequent experiences educative. The act of forming generalizations from comparison of experience, in that case, is a critical step in the process of learning from experience.

This process of reflecting on experience to draw conclusions and build generalizations is an important part of what Dewey described as analytical thought. It is a critical step in thinking, which is the entire act of forming generalizations and testing them. This too, of course, is a form of experience. It is different from the direct experience of physical events, or what Dewey referred to as “primary experience.” The process of thinking about such events Dewey described as “secondary experience,” or the forming and communication of concepts or ideas to describe and assess primary experiences. These ideas are very important, for they determine which experiences are meaningful and what we learn from them. In considering the educative quality of an experience, in that case, we have to weigh both the primary and secondary dimensions of the experiences in question.

There are other things to consider also. How much a person learns from a particular experience depends, of course, on what the person knew before the experience. If an experience helps us to see something about other similar problems that we did not understand before, it is certainly educative. This is because it adds to our understanding of a problem, and enhances our ability to solve it (or related problems).

In this way, we employ the comparative method, the way in which virtually all knowledge is constructed. This is how we derive generalizations. It is through the knowledge (ideas, concepts) we have learned in a particular experience that we can learn about the larger problem; that knowledge it must not remain context specific only. This is to say, it must apply to a variety of different situations. Or, put differently still, it is knowledge that should be transferable from one setting to another (a term used by psychologists who study learning). If we learn something from an experience, and we can then understand things in other situations, we have achieved a degree of generalizability. And that contributes to the educational quality of an experience.
I realize that the discussion has gotten a little abstract, so let’s consider another example. I have spent a large portion of my life driving cars. I am a former New York City cab driver and as I have mentioned before – I now have children (need I say more?). I should add that I view a car simply as a mode of transportation, and that I do not particularly enjoy driving. Even though I have a lot of experience with cars, I know relatively little about them. My knowledge is very situation specific, largely because I have had a rather narrow range of experience with cars. Indeed, I would venture to say that most of my driving experiences in the past two decades have taught me little about cars that I did not know already. As a consequence, it is very difficult for me to say anything about the larger subject of automobiles. When I am in the company of people who enjoy the subject, and who have a wider range of experiences or who have studied cars, I often find myself at a loss for something to say. Such people compare the various qualities of cars, and talk about handling, power, braking, and the like. I am generally lost in such conversations, because it is very difficult for me to generalize – to make comments about the larger subject of cars in general – without a wider field of experience and knowledge to draw from – even though I may have spent more time behind the wheel than many test drivers. (I probably learned more about child psychology while driving than I ever did about cars!)

This example points up yet another principle about learning and experience. The amount of time one spends dealing with a particular problem or issue is not necessarily a good indicator of the educative quality of the experience. To generalize about some topic (or problem), it is often necessary to have a wide range of different experiences with it. After all, this is what makes comparison fruitful. Having varied experiences is difficult, of course, because life rarely affords us the opportunity to deal directly with many problems or issues in different settings or contexts. This one reason why travel is often such a profound learning experience: it offers an opportunity to see things in an altogether different set of circumstances. Of course, if one always stays at the same types of hotels, eats at the same restaurants, and spends time with the same sort of people, travel can be as miseducative as my children’s TV watching. But traveling is one way to change settings, get out of the usual routines, and therefore see a particular issue or problem quite differently. Traveling can be educative simply because it puts us in different settings and thus allows us to compare, and ultimately to generalize more effectively about certain subjects (provided, of course, there are points of comparison or continuity at play.) Having varied experiences is a key to learning from experience.

Educative experiences, in that case, permit us to make comparisons and to generalize. They offer a wider field of vision, and in this way, prepare us to take advantage of new situations. This is how we learn and grow. And there are a number of ways to accomplish this.

Varieties of Learning Experiences
What kinds of experiences are likely to lead to learning? As we have seen, having a wide variety of different experiences dealing with a particular issue is one way to learn a great deal about them. But this can be time consuming and expensive – like travel. What are some other ways of broadening our knowledge about something, widening our experience and augmenting our learning?

Fortunately, directly experiencing a wide diversity of situations is not the only way to learn about something. There are other ways too. One is to compare your experiences with those of other people who have had different experiences dealing with similar problems. This takes us into the realm of “secondary experience,” which is essential to education and learning. Many people, for instance, participate in professional organizations, which allow one to share experiences with others in the same field of work. Yet another way is to take a class – outside of your immediate context – in which you can see how others have dealt with the problem in different situations and in the past. Still another way is to read a book on the topic of interest, to see how the author describes her or his experiences and those of other people.
But wait a minute, you say. The last two examples are not learning from experience, they’re taking a class, and reading a book (and that is “book-learning”). This sounds quite different from the other examples of experience discussed above.

True, taking a class or reading a book are rather unlike other types of experience, but they too are experiences – even if they often don’t feel like it. It’s just that the emphasis in these settings is on “secondary experience.” But the information offered in classes and books is the result of primary experience also; it has just been refined and organized into ideas, concepts and relevant data or information. If we go back to the opening premise – that all knowledge is derived from experience – it follows that the content of formal classes and books is based on previous experience that has been synthesized and summarized, subjected to generalization, and prepared for communication to an audience. Of course, when it is delivered in this fashion, it doesn’t feel like primary experience any more. We are used to receiving such experiences through all five senses (or at least several of them), and to being an active participant—with all of the attendant stimulation and emotional responses. In classes, we receive experience through just two senses usually and sometimes just one (hearing), and with books it is usually just through sight alone. And the experience we are told about has been organized into broad principles, rules, or lessons to be remembered or for use in solving abstract problems. It does not seem the same as lived experience, and it is often more difficult to understand or make sense of. Typically, it has been rationalized, measured, divided and otherwise rearranged. But we must strive to remember that it is based on experience nonetheless. And sitting through a class or reading a book, and trying to use the knowledge gained from everyone else’s experience, is yet another way of expanding upon your own.

This is not to say that these forms of learning are always as easy or fun as other types of experiences. They often require more concentration and cognitive effort that other experiences, and lack the stimulation that comes with more physically active forms of learning. But they hold great potential for finding out about many more experiences than you could possibly encounter personally. And this is an important key to learning: expanding your own realm of experience through as many avenues as possible. There is also a connection between these different ways of learning and what you may have heard of as “learning styles,” a concept often discussed in SNL. Simply put, people grow accustomed to learning in different ways – due to a variety of factors, but primarily prior experience – and these have been classified as various preferred “styles” of learning. There are many schemes for classifying learning styles, but let’s consider just two broad categories. People who have a great deal of experience with learning by doing things can be said to have a “hands-on” learning style. They enjoy the stimulation of direct or primary experience, and the challenge of moving from one situation to another. However, persons who enjoy reading about things as a way to learn are said to prefer “abstract conceptualization.” They may be less interested in direct experience, somewhat risk-aversive, and perhaps a little shy and prefer books and ideas to interacting with people. These people particularly enjoy secondary experience. Of course, I am making very broad characterizations here, and these descriptions probably do not apply to any particular person perfectly. But they do represent tendencies we all have felt at one time or another. Both of these “styles” offer routes to educative experiences and to learning, but different ones. The trick in learning to be a more effective learner is to draw upon the strengths of all the various ways to learn, and not to be limited by a single approach.

Different types of experiences, in that case, offer distinctive varieties of learning. Direct experience is often stimulating and inherently meaningful because it is connected to problems you encounter day-to-day. The dilemma is that it is difficult to control these experiences, and to see a problem or issue from many different sides or in new settings.

Classroom or book learning, on the other hand, is often more demanding because it is abstract and detached from the excitement of daily living. But it also can be an efficient way of assessing many other experiences, and gaining insight into particular problems and issues. To become a more effective learner, it
is necessary to combine the advantages of all these approaches to the problems we face, and thus to
heighten the educative quality of our experiences.

Enhancing Your Experience through Reflection

Experiences can be a powerful means to advanced learning once we comprehend ways to enhance their
educative quality. Doing this, however, requires us to use all of the various sources of learning at our
disposal. And this often means overcoming old habits and stereotypes, and to begin learning in new ways.

Direct experience and “book learning” are often opposed to one another in many people’s minds. Persons
who prefer one method sometimes denigrate the other, suggesting that those who rely on the other
approach are missing something vital. Advocates of direct experience, for instance, say they have
graduated from “the school of hard knocks,” or something similar, and suggest that the “bookworms” don’t
understand how to get things done. However, devotees of reading and formal analysis (research and
specialized training) claim that the direct experience crowd is parochial and too close to daily problems to
see the big picture (“can’t see the forest for the trees” or other similar phrases are used). Clearly there is
much room for misunderstanding in such characterizations. And they show the danger of privileging one
form of learning over another.

My own academic field of work is history, and I occasionally encounter this type of reaction in students:
“Don’t tell me about the Second World War.” An older student once said to me, “I was there and you
weren’t.” This student was a veteran, and he did not care for my characterization of a particular issue that
was a point of controversy during the war. The implication of the student’s statement was that his direct
experience during the war was more valuable than anything I may have learned about it afterwards through
books or from others who experienced it (which are actually the same). Of course, this is a problematic
position to take without any qualification, for the student’s experience may have been isolated or unusual,
and he may know little about what happened elsewhere. This is not to say that there wasn’t great value in
his experience, and he may have acquired tremendous insight into certain facets of the war as a result,
things I may know little about. But as a general proposition, the fact that his knowledge was based on direct
or primary experience does not ipso facto mean that it is greater or more valuable than that represented in
books or other sources of information and insight about the same topic. And of course my book-based
knowledge is limited also, as books are written from certain points of view or may have favored certain types
of experiences over others. There is nothing inherently superior in one form of learning over another, even
though we all may have preferences in the ways we learn. In the end, all knowledge has to be assessed
against new sources of information, regardless of its source.

The idea that direct experience is a superior source of insight, however, is a familiar one. This is an
argument most of us have encountered many times in life, and it underscores the slippery relationship
between experience and knowledge. People tell us that we cannot possibly know as much about a topic as
they do because our experiences are different, or perhaps because our experience is not as great as theirs.
We hear it applied to a wide variety of topics and issues: management, sales, parenting, and relationships,
even how to plan a party or a vacation. But remember the examples we have seen above: they suggest that
there is not a fixed relationship between experience and knowledge. A given amount of experience with
some problem or topic does not automatically translate into knowledge. Some experiences teach us more
than others, and the most educative experiences are those that allow us to compare different perspectives
to build general principles and generalizations.

As a rule, the only way to tell the educative value of a particular experience is to assess how well it conveys
such principles. In the case of the student I described above, his experiences during the war need to be
compared to those of others, and weighed in the light of the sum total of experience gained in that time. This
is a process that Dewey described as Reflection, and it is essential to making experiences educative. This,
of course, is the realm of secondary experience. In short, the educative merit of a primary experience
depends to a great degree on the quality of reflection associated with it. That is to say, both primary and secondary experience must be used.

Reflection, in that case, is a critical component in learning from experience. In many respects, reflection is the process of comparison and analysis of experiences alluded to earlier. To reflect on an experience is to compare it to other experiences in order to extract certain ideas or principles about the problem or subject at issue. But like experience, reflection itself varies in quality, and can be better or worse depending on certain conditions.

As suggested earlier, for instance, a diversity of experiences with the same subject usually affords greater knowledge through comparison and analysis (reflection) than a large amount of very similar experiences (such as my cab-driving). On the other hand, the quality of reflection also depends on the effort and ability devoted to the mental operations of comparison and analysis. Having varied experiences does one little good if care isn’t taken to extract proper principles from them. It is possible, after all, to draw misleading conclusions from some experiences, regardless of how much potential for learning they offer. So the process of reflection is itself an important step in determining the educative quality of a particular experience.

How can we improve the process of reflecting on a particular competence? This is a crucial question, and one that lies at the very heart of your work in the School for New Learning. Obviously, learning from other experiences you draw upon, the better the potential quality of your reflection, all other things being equal. But there is more to it as well. It is also crucial to interpret these experiences properly, and this is the task of analysis, with all of its component operations: division, measurement, comparison, and generalization, to just name a few. We should question our experiences. Was the experience unusual or typical? What factors accounted for the outcome? Can future experiences like this be expected to be the same? Why? Here the observations of others is also useful, for you probably are not the first person to confront the issue or problem at hand, and other people have provided an analysis which may prove useful to you. This is not to say that you should borrow their ideas wholesale, or copy them. All the ideas you encounter should be carefully weighed against the evidence you have compiled – experiences of various sorts – and then assessed. But the analysis performed by others can prove helpful; indeed, it often provides a powerful tool in reflection.

For this reason, it is crucial to share your experiences with other people, and to draw upon their experience and learning in comprehending your own. This is one reason why Dewey always maintained that learning (and education) was at heart a social process, not a solitary act. More than that, employing the reflections of others is probably the best way to guarantee that your own experiences will be educative rather than miseducative. Naturally, this requires you to consult sources that do not necessarily agree with your own point of view, and this is not always a pleasant or easy task. Your friends, for instance, are not always the best people to turn to for expansive reflection, although there are times when they are. And it is always possible to get bad advice (we all know the world is filled with it). The very best sources, as suggested earlier, are those that draw upon more and wider experience than you can. But how do we find these people? They are not always waiting at our beck and call. One way is to consult experts of various sorts, those who analyze certain questions for a living. Universities are filled with such people, as are many other organizations. Of course, yet another way to gain expert perspective is to read. This is probably the easiest way to determine the value of a particular experience. And like the other sources of insight mentioned above, it is a key to reflection.

To learn the very most from experience, in that case, we must be willing to engage in serious reflection. This means that the sometimes silly distinctions among different types of learning must be set aside. We always must be willing to assess our experience against the knowledge and reflections (or analyses) of others. We sometimes have to consult people with different views, and we have to read to gain the widest possible
perspective. In this way, we enhance our experiences, expand upon them, and begin to make them truly educational.

Experience and Knowledge at the School for New Learning

You no doubt have heard the claim that SNL awards credit "for experience." Of course, I’m also sure that your Foundations instructor has informed you that the proper expression of the School’s policy is to offer credit for learning from experience. This is a crucial distinction, and one worth exploring at some length. As we have seen above, there is not an automatic or direct connection between experience and knowledge. Several steps are required to transform experience into meaningful experience.

At SNL, you have probably encountered the term “college-level learning.” This is yet another critical term, one essential for you to consider in thinking about your own experience and the SNL program. What is meant by that phrase, and why is this important? Basically, college-level learning is a standard of achievement that represents the learning normally accomplished in college courses. For SNL to certify that the learning you or anyone else has gained from experience is worthy of college credit (or competence in the case of SNL), we have to be certain that it meets this standard – otherwise the DePaul degree earned through SNL would not be worth very much! This means that the learning should encompass the significant ideas and theories in a given field, and some familiarity with the differing points of view regarding the problem or issue at hand.

In other words, the experience should have led to the formulation of principles and generalizations, and an awareness of how relevant questions have been addressed by people in different settings and contexts. This, of course, usually requires rather broad experience with a given issue or topic, or a willingness to augment experience with additional investigation (i.e. reading) and reflection.

How does this work in practice? Let’s consider another example. A few years ago, my wife and I visited Oaxaca, a lovely provincial city in south central Mexico. I had never been in this part of Mexico, and found myself quite captivated by Oaxaca’s old colonial architecture, its quaint zócalo (or central square) and its friendly people. We toured the surrounding countryside, visiting a number of the neighboring villages and observing farmers at work in plush fields with oxen and donkeys. Nearby we found fascinating archeological sites, and partook of breathtaking views from mountains towering over the region. Even though our accommodations were Spartan by North American standards, and we both managed to catch mild cases of “Montezuma’s Revenge,” it was an unusually memorable trip because we both learned so much, both about this part of the world and ourselves.

But what, in fact, had we actually learned on this trip? Clearly we learned a great deal, but most of our learning was unavoidably conditioned by our prior experiences and knowledge. As a historian and social scientist, I was especially sensitive to evidence of the rich history of the Oaxaca region, and signs of its present state of economic and social development (problems I had studied in graduate school). My wife has traveled extensively in Europe and other parts of the world, including Spain and Caribbean, so she was able to make many comparisons with other cities she had visited. For both of us, earlier experiences guided our learning and helped us to see things we otherwise might have missed. Had we taken time to read about Oaxaca before the trip we probably would have learned even more. The quality of our learning experience, in that case, was dictated in part by our prior knowledge.

There were yet other factors that made our Oaxaca trip a rich learning experience. My wife’s mother, who is a frequent visitor to the city and has lived there for months on end at times, met us and served as an unofficial guide. We also met another friend traveling through the region, and she offered still more perspective. Both of these women served as translators for us (neither my wife nor I speak Spanish), but we also encountered a number of friendly residents who spoke English and helped to guide us as well. These people also expanded and shaped our learning experiences.
Altogether this was a very rich learning experience, one that I have vividly recalled almost daily in the ensuing years. As I suggested earlier, travel is an unusually potent source of learning, as I learned about this new place (for me) through all of my senses: seeing the people, architecture and countryside; smelling the fresh earth and rich fields, and the aromatic markets; tasting new foods, dishes prepared with fresh, locally grown ingredients; hearing the language, the music, and the other sounds of a bustling regional city; touching the products in the market, the ancient stones of monuments, and the fixtures in our unadorned hotel. The totality of these impressions left me with a feeling for this place, a knowledge that is difficult to describe, but which probably could never be fully communicated through a book or an oral description. It was a heady form of experiential learning, which has remained fixed in my mind and body. But it was not college-level learning.

It is not hard to see why this learning experience would not qualify as “college level” by itself, even if we leave aside the sticky question of how one might focus it on a particular competence. First, it was a singular experience, at least for me. To make generalizations about any facet of the experience requires comparison, and this calls for a stock of other similar experiences. But even if I had traveled longer, or made several trips, there still would be a question of perspective. How can I know that my experience in Oaxaca was representative of this place, or similar places? This requires comparing my own experiences with those of others, particularly through reading. This is the realm of secondary experience. Then there is the matter of forming generalizations. Upon reflection, I would want to compare my own generalizations with those of others who have traveled in this region and studied it. Are there significant perspectives that I missed? Is it possible, for instance, that the apparently cheerful compesinos (or peasants) we saw were actually quite unhappy, and that some of them were organizing against the government (we did see a small demonstration one day, and there was an anti-government rebellion in a neighboring province several years ago). How do we check whether our impressions are well founded? Here too, consulting with others who have examined this area is necessary, people with a great deal more expertise on these particular issues than we have. Only when we have started to address these questions do we begin to demonstrate college level learning about this particular topic. Primary experience alone, as rich and powerful as it may be, is not enough to achieve this goal. It must be augmented with reflection, and the tools of writing and analysis provided by others are very helpful in this regard.

It is possible, of course, for reflection and analysis to occur before an experience to produce a college level of learning. I could have applied the various theories of development I had learned years ago in graduate school to reflect on my Oaxaca experiences. But this would not have been new learning, and it would have confined my rich array of experiences there to a set of categories that may or may not have been wholly appropriate. There is no doubt that my prior knowledge helped to enrich my learning experiences in Oaxaca, helping me to see things that my wife and others missed completely. But the best method for learning from experience calls for additional reflection and analysis after the experience itself. As Dewey suggests, this is a critical step in the learning process, one in which many of us ordinarily invest too little time and energy.

As a practical matter, in that case, all experience requires reflection to get the best possible quality of learning from it. For “college level” learning, a particular kind of reflection is called for. This ordinarily includes reading the “authorities” in relevant areas of knowledge, to determine that the principles and generalizations derived from experience are representative of the broadest range of experience, and that a variety of perspectives are examined. This is what college level learning is supposed to provide, after all, and in SNL, we have to demand it of all our learning experiences. To do less would undermine the very point of having a college built on the premise that learning from experience is just as valuable as other forms of higher education.
Exercise: Turning Experience and Learning into Knowledge
Here is an idea for helping you to begin thinking about experience and its relationship to learning and knowledge.

1. Identify a significant learning experience from the past several years. This could be something you did at work (a project, a new assignment, an accomplishment), a trip to a new place, something new you did with friends or family (playing or coaching a sport, for instance), or an experience with an institution (a role you played in church, a volunteer association, or a political campaign, e.g.).

2. Think of a competence statement that expresses what you learned from this experience, and what you now can do as a result of it.

3. Identify factors that prepared your learning in this experience. What earlier knowledge was most important? What people influenced you the most during the experience? Were there other factors – readings, other forms of assistance, that you found useful in learning? What senses did you employ in the learning process? How does the experience “feel” to you today?

4. How did this experience compare to other experiences you had? Do you have similar experiences to compare this experience with? Do you have experiences like this in different settings or contexts? What general principles or generalization about the problem or issue at hand would you form based on this experience?

5. Tell us how you would go about reflecting on this experience today. What steps would you take to expand the learning you started with this experience? How would you bring the learning from this experience up to “college level standards”?

6. Identify some resources you would use to reflect on your experience, and describe how they would assist in the process of reflection.