

(Mis)Understanding the Student Experience

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INTRODUCTION: “THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE”

It seems that you cannot read the educational press, or browse social media, without coming across yet another league table of the best universities or colleges. Universities themselves eagerly await such rankings, and their websites vaunt that they are among the very best in terms of factors such as academic achievement, sports facilities, campus location, student diversity, student safety, or environmental awareness. More recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on rankings based on “the student experience”, and colleges and universities pursue relentlessly both measuring and improving it. As Paul Standish and Elizabeth Staddon note: “The phrase ‘student experience’ is now reiterated, as if *de rigueur*, in university policy statements.”¹ Moreover, Peter Scott, Professor of Higher Education at a leading UK university, wrote recently:

While students once went to university to get a higher education, now they go to be given an “experience” by that university... The student experience is made for the student. Universities, jittery about how they will score in the National Student Survey, have invested in iconic new student centres, all airy atria containing banks of Macs (ideally). They offer more and more “customer services”. They do “feedback” to death.²

The focus on the student experience is a relatively new phenomenon, though it first received attention in the 1990s.³ Arguably, it has gained prominence as a result of national policy initiatives, increased student tuition fees, and an accompanying more assertive sense of entitlement.⁴ The use of the definite article (*the* student experience) suggests that those who seek to measure and improve it have in mind a *particular* experience. This is not the case; its use seems to incorporate factors such as the quality of teaching, the level of academic support, extra-curricular activities, work-based learning opportunities, and campus and recreational facilities. And all of these factors have their own quality benchmarks, and league tables. The use of the term appears to refer to a wide range of experiences to which students might be exposed as part of their university life. Michelle Morgan writes: “Student experience encompasses all aspects of student life (i.e. academic and non-academic) with the academic imperative being at the heart of it.”⁵ A 2014 report on managing the student experience in the shifting landscape of higher education provision in the United Kingdom, makes a similar point, defining the student experience as “the totality of a student’s interaction with the institution.”⁶ The notion of the student experience becomes more complex still when it is discussed in connection with two related concepts: “student satisfaction” and “student engagement.” Morgan sees student satisfaction as a corollary of the student experience, arguing that: “An excellent first-year student experience is one where everyone involved in the activity is left satisfied.”⁷ But students’ perception of their experience of campus life and teaching quality is also directly linked with notions of student engagement, as seen in the National Survey of Student Engagement in the United States.⁸

MEASURING AND IMPROVING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

An obvious result of the increased emphasis on the student experience is the burgeoning industry in developing measures to assess it, and then in rolling out initiatives to improve it. Two examples serve to illustrate this. First, in England, there is the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, both facilitated by the Higher Education Academy,⁹ and developed with the explicit aim of benchmarking provision against other providers in the sector. This is in addition to the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey conducted by a national higher education magazine. In the United States, there are measures of college experience (such as the NICHE assessment) that use community qualitative reviews and hard quantitative data to produce a list of the best colleges.¹⁰ In addition, organizations such as the Business Innovation Factory have developed a project with Utah State University students that aims specifically to improve their college experience.¹¹ All this is evidence of unprecedented thinking about student experience as “a relatively distinct higher-education management function.”¹² Both research and policy documents attempt to support such a function, laying out the different experiences on which institutions should focus,¹³ and the different points that are crucial to “get right” in order to boost student experience scores.¹⁴

It would be unreasonable to argue that improving students’ experience of higher education is not an appropriate aim. But the seemingly unending efforts to understand, and to secure, the student experience risk *mis*-understanding it in a number of ways. First, in the way that the student experience is currently understood - focussing as it does on the here and now, and students’ immediate reactions to their experience - restricts it to what is easily categorised and measurable. This might have benefits in terms of addressing of the related demand for accountability, and of achieving some sort of common measure. However, the “seductive, eschatological appeal”¹⁵ of the measurable, tends to define, and limit, what is knowable. For example, the website of the National Survey of Student Engagement claims boldly that in assessing collegiate experience and quality, it measures only “activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning.”¹⁶ Second, the student experience also tends to be misunderstood in the very attempts to define it. Where these are too narrow, an unhelpful and reductive position is reinforced. In surveys of the student experience, the categories of experience that are included (and those that are excluded) come to stand for what the student experience *is*; they create a reality rather than just measuring it. In this way, the student experience is reified. And furthermore, the very possibilities of experience are delimited: “The space of higher education, homogenised by quality control and the elevation of student choice, is in danger of restricting the students’ experience in ways that limit the possibilities of their education.”¹⁷ By denying these possibilities, the nature of the student experience is misunderstood. If, as Staddon and Standish claim, this limiting is also a form of settlement that excludes other forms of divergent thinking about the student experience, then, in their words, there is a “completing the circle, without remainder.”¹⁸

The aim of this article is to reconsider the student experience in terms other than those that close the circle. This does not imply, however, an aim to broaden the

term so as to make it all-encompassing. This broadening will undoubtedly occur over time with the changing nature of higher education, and as student and institutional priorities change in response to emerging agendas (of which employability is a recent example). Neither is the aim to suggest a more suitable measure than exists in the current crop of surveys for assessing the student experience (though this would be a worthwhile project). Instead, this article will look to two key philosophical works that address the notion of “experience” in different ways. It will then show how the ideas that they contain offer a way of thinking about student experience that opens, rather than limits, the possibilities for, and of, education.

EXPERIENCE: EMERSON AND DEWEY

In 1844, in his second series of essays, Ralph Waldo Emerson published “Experience.”¹⁹ It is a work written out of the devastating grief at the loss of his five year old son. Just less than one hundred years later, another American philosopher, John Dewey, first published his influential analysis of education, *Experience and Education*.²⁰ Here, he emphasizes a number of points: the need for a theory of experience in education; what the criteria for experience should be; and what the educator’s role should be in creating educative experiences. The starting points for Emerson’s and Dewey’s discussions are clearly very different. Emerson writes of the nature of our human experience, asking at the outset, “Where do we find ourselves?”²¹ before going on to explore the experiences of illumination and conviction, but also of helplessness and resignation, between which we perpetually move. Dewey, on the other hand, is concerned in *Experience and Education* specifically with the nature of *educational* experience. He writes in the introductory chapter: “There is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience, and education. If this be true, then a positive and constructive development of its own basic idea depends upon having a correct idea of experience.”²² Despite the different contexts in which they were writing, there are lines of connection between the articulation of the nature of experience in these particular texts of Emerson and Dewey that merit closer attention. In what follows I consider extracts from these texts in detail in order to make these connections more explicit; this will then allow an exploration of the accounts of experience that they offer. I will then consider the implications of these accounts for the contemporary understanding of the student experience in the university.

EXPERIENCE AND THE LIMITING OF POSSIBILITIES

The poem that opens Emerson’s essay serves as something of a fractal: it mirrors the shape of the essay as a whole.²³ The “lords of life” in the opening poem, which refers to the forces of experience that are common to our human condition, are described as both “use and surprise.”²⁴ This description serves as a reflection on the different aspects of our human experience that Emerson seeks to highlight. In the subsequent sections of his essay, Emerson considers our routine - or “use” - experience: “So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect that the pith of each man’s genius contracts itself to a very few hours.”²⁵ Emerson then goes on to use a number of examples that serve to explore the (human) limiting of the possibilities of our experience. He acknowledges our human

confusion in the face of the forces that distort our perception, and that prevent our seeing beyond the material (to the divine). Taking the example of a collector who scours what Emerson calls the “picture shops” across Europe, in the hope of finding a simple crayon sketch, or a forgotten landscape by one of the great masters, he writes:

But the Transfiguration, the Last Judgment, the Communion of St. Jerome, and what are as transcendent as these, are on the walls of the Vatican, the Uffizi, or the Louvre, where every footman may see them; to say nothing of nature’s pictures in every street, of sunsets and sunrises every day, and the sculpture of the human body never absent.²⁶

As a further example, Emerson recalls a collector with whom he was acquainted, who purchased at auction a Shakespeare autograph for fifty seven guineas. But, he continues, for no cost at all, even “a schoolboy can read Hamlet, and can detect secrets of highest concernment yet unpublished therein.”²⁷ The stories Emerson recounts here seem to point to that aspect of our human experience where gaining new perception is difficult, and we see only what we are capable of seeing. In the experience of finding a work of art, or purchasing an autograph, our perception is that a form of satisfaction is secured. But if such experiences preclude our attention to the fuller possibilities of the present, then our human life is merely “a tempest of fancies.”²⁸ If such things alone constitute our experience, then, for Emerson, we are so impatiently caught up in the experience before our eyes, that we fail to see the possibilities of what is before us; we fail to give “respect to the present hour ... Let us [rather] be poised, and wise, and our own, today.”²⁹

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey addresses the central issue of the kind of experiences that should be the basis of the form of education that he espouses. He begins by naming two criteria for assessing the quality of an experience, namely, continuity and interaction: “The quality of any experience,” writes Dewey, has two aspects. “There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence on later experience. The first is obvious and easy to judge.”³⁰ It is this notion of continuity that is key for Dewey in assessing the potential for an experience to be educative. Dewey asks his readers to imagine a child who has just learned to read. That experience “has also widened the conditions of subsequent learning.”³¹ Gratification might be immediate in relation to the text the child is reading at a given point in time, but that facility for reading “opens up a new environment.”³² A similar idea of continuity, and how this is a characteristic of our human experience, is found in Emerson’s “Experience.” He writes:

When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water, or go to the fire, being cold: no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose...But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel.³³

For Emerson, this is not the experience of the “tempest of fancies”; it is experience that requires an attention to the present marked by a persistence (in reading or thinking), and a certain passivity that allows insights to dawn gradually and to open themselves to us in sequels.

For Dewey, every experience influences the further experiences that a child has. This is the principle of the continuity of experience that opens up the possibilities

of future learning. The nature of the experiences in education to which children are exposed leads, according to Dewey, to one of two results. An experience can

set up an attitude which operates as an automatic demand ... that persons and objects cater to his desires and caprices in the future. It makes him seek the kind of situation that will enable him to do what he feels like doing all the time. It renders him averse to, and comparatively incompetent in, situations which require effort and perseverance in overcoming obstacles.³⁴

An experience of this kind limits the potential of the principle of continuity to lead to further growth in the child. But, paradoxically, an experience can also arouse curiosity. If this is the case, then it can “carry a person over dead places in the future ... Every experience is a moving force.”³⁵ This notion of the continuity of experience, and of opening up and moving towards and into further experiences, is also familiar from Emerson, who emphasizes the need for succession – our moving of focus from one object to another. Following the poem, the opening paragraph of “Experience” begins with the image of our waking to find ourselves on a stair. Emerson writes: “there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.”³⁶ Just as Dewey notes that some experiences may operate so as “to leave a person arrested on a low plane of development,”³⁷ so Emerson writes poetically of not ascending the stairs that stretch out before us, because “we cannot shake off the lethargy ... Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eye ... Ghostlike we glide through nature.”³⁸

INTENSITY AND SURPRISE

If Dewey is right, and the nature and quality of experiences in education can have such very different outcomes for the child, then what are the experiences that will carry them forward? Dewey seems to suggest three criteria. First, they should “arouse curiosity”; second, they should “strengthen initiative”; and third, they “should set up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense.”³⁹ These criteria seem to resonate with ideas in Emerson, where it is in our moving from one object (or experience) to another that the intensity of an experience is encountered. Emerson writes of “the necessity of a succession of moods or objects ... We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious.”⁴⁰ As an illustration of this, Emerson recounts the books of which he once thought he would never tire: Montaigne, Shakespeare, Plutarch, and Bacon. But his experience of returning to them demonstrates that “each bears an emphasis of attention that it cannot retain ... when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it.”⁴¹

The experience of intensity might also be thought of as an encounter with the unexpected. The opening poem of “Experience” reminds us that the lords of life are “use and surprise.” Emerson goes on to write of the value of the unexpected in our experience: “Life is a series of surprises and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not.”⁴² In Dewey, this element of surprise has a different emphasis. It is not used in the sense of “caught off guard,” which we might understand from the Emersonian account. Rather, Dewey points to those experiences that are found to be of value only when one looks back at them from a distance; they are not immediately gratifying. He writes that the educator has a particular responsibility to “arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable.”⁴³

There may well be a risk in exposing students to these kinds of experiences. This is particularly the case in a culture of higher education that celebrates forms of student satisfaction and engagement that rely on the settling that comes from contentedness and equanimity. But this again misunderstands one aspect of experience that the etymology of the word reveals. It has its origins in the Latin *experientia* (meaning “trial”) and *periculum* (“danger”). The value of our experience cannot be reduced to satisfaction with its smallest events. As Emerson writes: “Years teach us much that the days never knew.”⁴⁴

UNSETTLING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Peter Scott argues that there is a danger in the contemporary university that “the ‘experience’ will trump the ‘education’.”⁴⁵ There is a poverty in the current understanding of a student’s experience that gives attention only to events in her immediate purview, and where attempts to measure it happen within a culture that might be described using Emerson’s words as the “vertigo of shows and politics.”⁴⁶ It is only in the long term that she will come to understand - and to properly evaluate - the import of her everyday educational activities. If universities are so preoccupied with the everyday details of satisfaction, with matters such as the students’ experience of feedback, then there is little time left to consider the weightier matter of the experience of education as a whole. While it might be entirely appropriate for universities to gain feedback, through statistical measures, on students’ experience of campus facilities, resources, and the availability of technology, measuring their experience of *learning* is an altogether messier business. Partly this is an issue of timing: students are asked to rate their experience of education *before* they have completed it. But there is a bigger issue here, which Dewey highlights: our experiences in education should be more than immediately enjoyable. Indeed, a measure of the quality of an educational experience is continuity, its effect on subsequent experience. Its value can only be judged by how it moves the student forward. If this is the case, then the only measures of a student’s *educational* experience that would be of value would be ones taken long after her graduation. Emerson urges us to “give respect to the present hour,”⁴⁷ but also draws attention to the limits of the present in thinking about our experience. He writes: “We do not know today whether we are busy or idle. In times when we thought ourselves indolent, we have afterwards discovered that much was accomplished, and much was begun in us We never got it on any dated calendar day.”⁴⁸ An illustration of these ideas is found in the novel *Stoner*, by the 20th century American writer, John Edward Williams. It tells the story of William Stoner, sent to study agriculture at the state university from a life of near poverty on his parents’ farm, and of how he falls in love with English literature, and with the academic life. In a moving scene near the end of the book, Stoner is near death, and is recalling the experiences of his life, as a teacher, as the author of a book, and as a husband and father. He reflects on a life of possible failure, both as an academic and a family man. But in that moment, long after the actual events, he is able finally to make sense of these experiences: “There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been.”⁴⁹

Scott also argues that universities' new enthusiasm for managing the student experience "may restrict the potential for [the kind of] exploration and experimentation" that are at the heart of what a university experience should consist in.⁵⁰ Perhaps it is because universities are so concerned with providing, and controlling, daily experiences that the *experientia* - the trial and the risk in one's educational experiences - are lost. But the value of the unexpected is seen in the discussion of surprise in "Experience." Here, Emerson indicates the inadequacy of a life lived in the "kingdom of known cause and effect." For, Emerson writes: "Presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering - which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years."⁵¹ The intensity of an experience that disconcerts is also illustrated in *Stoner*. As a freshman student, Stoner has to take the compulsory class in English Literature. He finds little difficulty with the work in his other classes, such as soil chemistry, but he finds particular difficulty with the English Literature classes, particularly one on Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73." These classes trouble and disquiet him. The tutor, Archer Sloane, asks Stoner directly for his interpretation of the sonnet. Stoner cannot reply. Sloane repeats the request, and still Stoner is not able to answer. But this is not a sign of Stoner's indifference; far from it. It is evidence of Stoner's complete absorption in the sonnet, his seduction by the subject. The possibilities for his education that these classes offer come to Stoner unexpectedly. And it is to this same experience of literature that he turns at the end of his life when, in the final scene, he reaches for a book:

It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial. He did not have the illusion that he would find himself there, in that fading print; and yet, he knew, a small part of him that he could not deny was there, and would be there.⁵²

There are aspects of the student experience that are valuable to measure and to improve, in the same way as in other customer-focussed operations. But we might conclude from reading Emerson and Dewey on experience that to try to do the same in relation to one's *education* (as opposed to the facilities and technologies that *support* our education) is problematic. These difficulties relate not only to the type of measurement instrument used, nor to the use to which the data they generate is put. But also to the deeper problem that our educational experience cannot be reduced to measures of contentment, operationalized as a series of small, observable events that we grade the moment we have undergone them. These do not constitute our education. A richer educational, and educative, sense of experience might unsettle the security that comes with prescription of what aspects of our education have value. To experience is to undergo trial and to confront danger (as the etymology suggests). It is to undergo experiences that unsettle thinking and that destabilise knowledge. It is, like Stoner, to be "troubled and disquieted in a way that nothing had ever done before."⁵³ It is to allow students to have such experiences, and to recognise these as educative. Such an approach amounts to a reversal of the idea that Scott identifies: "The student experience is made for the student."⁵⁴ This does not abrogate the educator from her responsibilities to shape what Dewey calls the "enviroming conditions" for learning.⁵⁵ Rather, it recognizes that the student's experience is the result of her

ongoing engagement with her subject, and that this might open in ways that she never thought possible or desirable. Her education depends on nothing less than this.

1. Elizabeth Staddon and Paul Standish, "Improving the Student Experience," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 4 (2012): 631-648.
2. Peter Scott, "Once students went to university for education. Now it's an 'experience'," *The Guardian*, 6th October 2015.
3. George Kuh, "How Are We Doing? Tracking the Quality of the Undergraduate Experience, 1960s to the Present," *The Review of Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (1999): 99-120.
4. See, for example, the following White Paper from the United Kingdom: Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, *Students at the Heart of the System* (London: BIS, 2011).
5. Michelle Morgan, "Re-Framing the First Year Undergraduate Student Experience," *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 5, no. 3 (2013): 1441-1458
6. Paul Temple, Claire Callender, Lyn Grove, and Natasha Kersh, "The Changing Management of the Student Experience in England" (York: The Higher Education Academy, 2014), 3.
7. Morgan, "Re-Framing the Student Experience," 1415.
8. See: <http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm>; Accessed 29th September 2015.
9. The Higher Education Academy is a UK-based organisation responsible for enhancing teaching and supporting learning in higher education.
10. See: <https://colleges.niche.com/rankings/>; Accessed 29th September 2015.
11. See: <http://www.businessinnovationfactory.com/projects/student/portfolio/re-creating-student-experience>; Accessed 29th September 2015.
12. Temple *et al.*, "Changing Management," 10.
13. *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.2.
14. Morgan, "Re-Framing the Student Experience," 1448.
15. Staddon and Standish, "Improving the Student Experience," 640.
16. See the NSSE website at <http://nsse.indiana.edu/>
17. *Ibid.*, 644.
18. *Ibid.*, 640.
19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1944), 243-268.
20. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1939/1997).
21. Stanley Cavell also points out that this question refers not only to our existential condition, but also to our place as readers at the outset of an essay, and to our place in language as well as in the world. See Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984).
22. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 20.
23. E. Thomas Finan, "The 'Lords of Life': Fractals, Recursivity, and 'Experience'," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45, no. 1 (2012): 65-88.
24. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1944), 243.
25. Emerson, "Experience," 244-245.
26. *Ibid.*, 254.
27. *Ibid.*, 254.
28. Emerson, "Experience," 252.
29. *Ibid.*, 252.

30. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 27.
31. *Ibid.*, 37.
32. *Ibid.*, 37.
33. Emerson, "Experience," 259.
34. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 37.
35. *Ibid.*, 38.
36. *Ibid.*, 37.
37. *Ibid.*, 37.
38. Emerson, "Experience," 243.
39. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 38.
40. Emerson, "Experience," 249.
41. *Ibid.*, 250.
42. *Ibid.*, 257.
43. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 27.
44. Emerson, "Experience," 258.
45. Scott, "Once students went to university."
46. Emerson, "Experience," 253.
47. *Ibid.*, 252.
48. Emerson, "Experience," 244.
49. John Williams, *Stoner* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 288.
50. Scott, "Once students went to university."
51. Emerson, "Experience," 256.
52. Williams, *Stoner*, 288.
53. *Ibid.*, 8.
54. Scott, "Once students went to university."
55. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 40.