

Experiencing interaction: what makes up the bonds of relations with the world?

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Abstract

The author of the article identifies a constant interactive relationship between people and the world to which they belong, and describes the personal experience of using the interactive link with various outdoor environments. The testing of unknown landscapes opens new routes and new knowledge. Experience is not separable from perception, emerges through interconnected systems, are interconnected as well as body-mind-world. The knowledge is through experiencing the flow of actions. The interaction, and shared living, it determines the constitution of the community.

Keywords : group, nature, interaction, experience, experiment

Interaction with/in the world is a shared experience not always fully expressed or “captured” through words. If human bodies are always in interaction, then how might interpretation of this “inter-action” contribute to our growing inter-standing, (1) of experiencing? What opportunities or possibilities might open spaces for how we perceive and interpret our relations with the world? Perhaps the unfolding of my personal experiencing will aid us to consider the complexity of embodied interaction. I have come to know the world through interacting with various outdoor environments. As I have always been fascinated by the granite stone bridges in Acadia National Park, Maine, I often find myself biking along the park’s original carriage paths. One day, five of us were cycling there, searching for some old caves hidden in the forest. Guided by one companion, we hike up to a cave in the rocks that was formed years ago when the ocean was at this height, 700 feet higher than it is now. None of us have a flashlight, so we are aided by the daylight shining in the cave as we all kneel down to peer in. As far in as we can see it looks safe, but how deep does the cave go? I decide to go in first and, taking off my sunglasses, bend down on crouched knees to walk in slowly. Upon bending down my heart races as I realize I may not be able to move out fast enough should some animal living within the cave decide to come out. Trying to calm my breathing I start in. As I do so, others come right behind me, thus blocking the light and causing my heart to pound harder in my chest.

We eventually emerge into the first room, the cavern cool and dripping from the cave’s breathing. John, trying to leave the entrance so that light would shine farther into the cave, throws some rocks to see how deep the next room is. The echoes sound like the cave goes on past the next chamber which we can barely see in to. I am curious, but am still scared.

John starts to go in; I decide to follow. As my body closes off his light, his body tenses, and stops. We stare into the darkness.

I imagine a soft, furry body lying against one wall--a wolf or coyote. We shriek and escape the cave with heightened alertness!

We feel comfortable outside in the rather warm air. We decide there was really no signs of life inside. No bones, not even any spiders. We comfort ourselves with these assurances as our heart rates slowly return to normal.

Whether if be the unfamiliar wilderness hidden with/in a cave, or forests or fields enclosing a schoolyard, embodied awareness emerges while experiencing interactions within unknown landscapes. Attentive to my perceptual interplay with the cave, the heightened alertness we experienced brings forth fresh clarity and vivid sensualness. Thus, a view of perception as participatory and embodied is not grounded in the human body but arises through one's unfolding actions with the world.

Such experiencing of unknown landscapes is that journey where we walk forward, not following a path, but <<*laying down the path in walking*>>. (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991) . When we interact with/in unfamiliar spaces, we do not walk in a path that we see before us. Rather, as in my journey into the cave, we open paths with each step forward or back, bringing a freshness and wonder through our embodied experiencing.

In this sense, how might the unfolding of knowing, being and doing as part of an intertwining complex system be explored through our interactions within communities and the natural world?

Researching the Phenomena of Experiencing

The phenomena of experiencing that emerges through inter-relating systems or bodies of the world has been the topic of my inquiry for the past three and half years. In this paper I will explore one aspect of my research---the relations of embodied actions within communities and the natural world. This “space” of inter-action opens possibility for how we perceive our experiencing (2) with the world.

In our body/world, perceptions intermingle with body systems, emerging as embodied capacities for action or compassion (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1999) . My notion of embodied actions includes an enactive approach that emerges out of an inter-relating world of possibility (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) . My inquiry into the phenomena of experiencing alerted me to a theoretical framework that embodies an enactive approach to learning and reflects my belief in the co-evolving nature of knowing and experiencing. While many communities of inquiry forget about explicitly engaging the whole (bodymind) learner, my educational philosophy (connected to enactive theory) attempts to listen to the whole person and their interactions with the world. I extend enactive theory beyond cognitive science into pedagogy and how human experience is ecologically connected with the world (Haskell, 2000) . As experience is always inter-acting, I refer to such embodied inter-relating as bodymind and bodymindworld.

I contend that embodied actions are the coupling of inter-relating phenomena found through experiencing. In other words, an embodied way of knowing guides actions or choices to bring forth a capacity for interacting with the unknown. If we remain open

mindful, open to views, interactions and intuitive choices, then doing and knowing emerge through the “flow” of actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) .

One does not need a goal or intention to act. One’s body is simply solicited by the situation to get into equilibrium with it. (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1999, p. 111)

A goal, as such, might be a choice of actions, but in experiencing the world one flows to new and unfamiliar bodily ways of attunement. For example, when climbing on a glacier of moving rock, the bodily actions become attuned with the moving scree, (3) as rock and body dance through each step. In this way, we not only listen to the world of other humans, but we incorporate an open attitude of listening (to all bodily views).

Sites of Possibility

While we are intertwining with environmental phenomena, pleasure or intensity are embodied experientially. This is common to many adventures in the outdoors. These experiences are relayed in stories as a way to <<*testify to the potential for experiencing the world in profound and dramatic ways*>> which may be absent in daily living (Neumann, 1992, p. 189) (4).

The telling of experiences, which are without clear beginnings or endings, are often vividly remembered as engaging with perceptually clear and unclear phenomena. We try to tell the story in units of action and interaction using descriptive words.

Something within you longs to experience the wonder of life, the gift of nature, the magic of the moment, whether it makes sense to the mind or not. And when you plunge into the water shrieking with joy as every cell in your body wakes up, you feel completely present, completely alive. (De Angelis, 1998, p. 24)

De Angelis depicts experiencing as a living interaction. Even picture interpretations portray a rich re-(image)ning, a re-experiencing (5). What is experiencing if not the relational space---the ecotone (6), between the person and place? By ecotones I am referring to a rich environment much like the intertidal zone of the ocean where ecosystems meet---a place that constantly changes to the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tide. While in the outdoors I experience the ecotones or inter-actional zones connecting with the foreign and later express such zones as sites of possibility in my journal writing....

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How we choose to be, interact, act and perform is the journey, the labyrinth’s path, the way of becoming which seeks not to be a fixed icon on a screen, but a moving transforming hypertext that enacts and embodies one’s living (experiencing).

It is those spaces between what one can put into language to relate or connect to the experience, and yet it is all those ‘things’ left unsaid, but performed, moment by moment, with and within the units of space, the units of action and interaction.

So what is [this paper] really about if not to explore the possibilities, challenge the reader to look for the invisible, provide a site or safe space where the unheard, untouched, unseen is expressed in ways that open the mind and body to the chaotic

babble of our own interactions and relational, becoming---where sites of possibility arise?-----Sites of possibility are where the foreign and uncomfortable open our eyes; where the risk and the unfathomable transform our being; and where the interactions with the environment and each other bring about the living tensions, the inquiry and questioning of our holistic existence. An existence that is not about unconnecting but disrupting a flow of energy, a flow of tradition throughout that opens us to the chiasms, the deep crevasses and breathtaking views to “see” differently while reconnecting to the living earth.

Ungrounding Perceptual Knowing

I focus on the phenomena of experiencing which is not a fixed event, but actions flowing in a continuously unfolding process. Philosopher John Dewey supports my notion of experiencing as a continuity embodied in the uncertainties of knowing which emerge in the act and nature of experiencing. It is through direct interactions that Dewey (1938) indicates we can interpret the significance, value, and quality of experience which connects to the further desire to continue ‘experiencing.’

Dewey refers to the interplay between a person’s “body-mind” (where body and mind are inseparable) and environment or surroundings as situations. He is not indicating that experience is separate from contact with surrounding interactions. Experience is relational and *<<lives on in further experiences” and affects the “quality of further experience>>*. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 27, 37) . Likewise, I concentrate on the interactions or relationships that unfold between students and their learning environment as an ecological interplay. I plumb to the depths of emptiness, much like the Buddhist notion, where the chiasm (7) is the intertwining of possibilities for living fully. Experiencing unfolds as actions of learning, where participants emerge with new perceptions and ways of knowing.

Seen in this way, if perception is inseparable from experiencing, then how does perceptual knowing arise through bodymind interaction? I refer to ways of knowing and ways of being as inseparable from the process of experiencing, where participation, perception and knowing co-evolve together. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) refer to this antecedent as structural coupling.

On this matter, Maturana offers the coordination of behaviors as a structural coupling with our environment. Similarly, he refers to the coordination of behaviors such as languaging and emotioning as bringing forth a reality or perception, structurally determined by the organism. In this sense, a system such as the human body has a structure, with a history of experience, an epistemo(onto)logical (8) participation, where experiencing is a coordination of perceptual knowing. My embodied perspectives are best articulated in an interplay of knowing/doing/being with the natural world. Perceptual knowing or embodied awareness continuously evolves, whether exploring a cave, jumping into the ocean, or walking on scree to bring forth the living world.

Changes in perception are changes in the relations with phenomena which involve sensual participation. This sensual experiencing arises out of the act of knowing or an

embodied awareness that is not grounded, but more of an evolving interaction. We may also gain some insight from cognitive theorists about the groundlessness of our perceptions and actions with/in the world. The Santiago theory (9) of cognition, in fact states: <<*cognition is not a representation of an independent, pregiven world, but rather a bringing forth of a world*>>. (Capra, 1996, p. 270) . Varela, a student of Maturana, suggests that:

<<*Groundlessness, then, is to be found in everyday experience. Indeed, groundlessness is revealed in cognition as "common sense," that is, in knowing how to negotiate our way through a world that is not fixed and pregiven but that is continually shaped by the types of actions in which we engage*>>. (Varela et al., 1991, p. 144)

We might then be able to consider groundless (10) ways of perceiving and interacting where we embrace the invisible bonds of relations with the world.

Acclimatizing our bodies to this different way of perceiving embraces a groundless space of possibility and a place to question how we have come to know the world. How could experiencing ever be the same in that it is changing as we speak, read and engage with others? It is this embracing of new opportunities to rethink and experience other ways of knowing, doing, and being that we embody in an inquiry with the ever evolving world.

Living Interaction—The Social Historical Coupling of Community

Community is not something you create, but it emerges in the living interaction of interweaving networks of phenomena (a group's wellbeing). In my inquiry into the phenomena of experiencing, I focus upon experiencing in the outdoors, within unexpected and unpredictable moments. My inquiry followed an outdoor environmental adventure education program with Grade 10 secondary students who spent, as part of their school year, 5 months learning the standard curriculum through outdoor activities. Students participate in such activities as sea kayaking, canoeing, rock climbing, biking, and winter camping. Through experiencing shared goals, pain, humour, persistence, and group effort, students "coupled" together, in what they refer to as bonding. As Ann narrates from a back country ski trip,

You have to work together and you have to encourage everyone. [Two peers] were encouraging me the whole way up [a mountain ridge]. It made everyone bond so much.

Despite the frustrations of learning to help each other, the trip soon became "fun." Alli, a student, describes fun as "when you get to meet new people and you know that the friendships will work." The willingness to share set the stage for bonding, and for bringing these living interactions toward a networking community. Communities are built around participation and positive, contagious interactions. From this, one can move beyond a lack of relational space through bonding or sharing experiences.

How does bonding emerge in the shared interaction? According to the work of Maturana and Varela (1980) on cognitive systems, the structural coupling of organisms consensually brings forth the world of friendships. Through the

coordination of behaviors, a collaboration invites communicating, participating, and engaged being and doing. Maturana & Nisis de Rezepka (1998) maintain that education is a creation of living space, where students become socially responsible human beings. They indicate that practice or teaching should not correct the being, but open a space for students to reflect and act in awareness on what students do respectfully. In other words, comments or interchange should not focus on the structure of being, but the student actions and reflective doings. As Mitten (1995), an outdoor experiential educator further describes, the forming of communities are reinforced through being and doing statements that help affirm a nurturing and supportive environment for healthy bonding. For example, a statement such as “I am glad you are here” affirms being, whereas “I appreciate your support in helping us load the canoes in a timely manner,” is a doing message (Mitten, 1995, p. 87). Therefore, relationship skills originate in connective experiences which include students’ social history such as family and continue to emerge in the unexpected actions of doing.

Living in a relational space or domain of mutual respect opens students’ experience to meaningfulness and a sense of ‘fun.’ Bisson and Luckner (1996) affirm that “fun” is a time when participants can risk being themselves without modulating their actions. However, some students in the program struggle to feel part of the group among the social cliques. For example, Alli describes her struggle to voice her thoughts and risk being rejected or ridiculed.

I couldn’t really express what I wanted to express, like even if I said something it wouldn’t you still had to be on guard and it wouldn’t be accepted. [Nonetheless, she risks talking to someone she feels uncomfortable around.] This person that I don’t get along with or don’t have too much respect for---I have actually tried to say hello, which is the first step. To see if that person. I haven’t been getting any feedback until yesterday. But, I actually took the risk of saying something you risk being rejected or ridiculed. I feel comfortable with people who I know won’t reject me. Everyone takes their own safety. When I said hi, it was more than a grunt or a dismissal. Some people still think one-dimensional [referring to them thinking of only themselves].

The phenomena of experiencing ‘fun’ arises in activities or communities of opportunity for students to be themselves in an accepting, non-judgmental, tolerant environment, open to all encounters. Later near the end of the five months in the program, Alli relates her most memorable time as learning to telemark ski in over eighteen inches of powder.

My best days in the program were today. I couldn’t believe how well people worked. People weren’t putting each other down at all they were being really supportive, like come on you can do it as they were falling down. Everyone was positive! It was fun. I really enjoyed today, people connections were good, weather was great and the scenery was beautiful.

Experiencing continues through re-experiencing and the embodied actions of “consensual” retelling or stories of historical coupling (11).

Many students spoke of the sun coming out on the beach while sea kayaking as the most memorable experience. Arty narrates her most memorable experience:

We were on the beach and the sun was out running on the beach having so much fun with each other, everyone was happy. It was so much fun. I loved that afternoon it brought the group together and it was like a total bonding experience. Cause the sun all of a sudden just came out from behind a cloud. No one except our group experienced that.

Students embody the beach experience as fun, a living interaction with networks of phenomena in the outdoors. The outdoor experience is a coordination of connections with peers, the ocean and the sand; an interconnecting ecosystem including the “web of life” (Capra, 1996) . The bonds of community arise in the passion of fun, where students find a flow in interaction, a time of meaningful engagement amongst individuals.

Communities in the making form deep connections or bonding friendships through shared experiences and living interaction. On outdoor trips, where students focus on the necessities of food, shelter, water, and kayaking skills, the making of community and bonding is central to the sharing of the highs (fun) and lows (pain, persistence, endurance) of experiencing. The sharing of stories from day to day, while encouraging each other to coordinate interactions toward paddling and packing up camp (common goals), embodies a living, breathing, intertwining “community in the making” (Ayers & Miller, 1998, p. 41) .

We live in a very large community. The world, as such is an interconnecting web of shared experiences arising out of living interaction. Such relations are tested in the small intimate quarters of sharing food and tent space. Living interaction with phenomena (animate and inanimate) opens a network or community in the making, where the familiar patterns of behavior slowly change, allowing voices of collaboration, respect and trust, while blurring social and ecological sensibility.

Our acclimatizing to evolving ways of being and new worldviews foster fresh perspectives of relations with the world. Abram (1996) best sums up our experiencing interactions with the world:

<<Only as we begin to notice and to experience, once again, our immersion in the invisible air do we start to recall what it is to be fully a part of this world>>.(p. 260)

Through outdoor experiencing, whether exploring a cave, jumping from a cliff, skiing or sea kayaking, a world of inter-action brings forth a network of embodied awareness.

Embodying Interaction

Experiencing as embodied awareness is not grounded in a world (a body) but more an unfolding world of experiential being. Being is not as body only but an embodiment of actions that are open minded/ended. Such actions are intuitive, an embodiment not yet expressed in language. As Pettimengin-Peugeot (1999) asserts:

<<Intuition does correspond to an experience, that is, a set of interior gestures which involve the entire being it is possible to encourage its appearing . . . It consists

of emptying out, in giving up our habits of representation, of categorization, and of abstraction. This casting off enables us to find spontaneity, the real immediacy of our relation to the world. For, astonishingly, our most immediate, most intimate experience is also the most inaccessible for us. A long detour is necessary before we receive awareness of it>>. (pp. 76-77)

The languaging of intuitive experiencing or the interpretation through words requires a form of reflection or re-experiencing. Intuitive experiencing is where acting, perceiving, and becoming intertwine to bring forth integrated happenings (that we didn't know of before or pre-determine). Integrative happenings and embodied acting are all part of the phenomena of experiencing that emerges from inter-relating systems or bodies of the world.

I am not seeking a reference point to ground experiencing, but to bring about an inter-standing of the arising world as an emergent network of inter-actions. Experience happens not in a body or in a world, but unfolds or emerges through the relational coupling of animate and inanimate bodies or systems. We are saturated with the experiential flow of connections amongst systems or sentient networks that integrate the phenomena of experiencing (streaming with inter-twined becoming, acting, and perceiving).

The phenomena of experiencing is as invisible as the caverns of the cave I explored, yet rich with possibility for how we embody such dynamic relations with the world. We not only embody relationships through experience but, through our inter-actions with the outdoor world, we open spaces for how we perceive and interpret such experiencing with the world. Fresh embodied actions arise both through experiencing interactions with/in the unknown landscapes of community and the caverns of the natural world.

The world watches me and I watch the world, and I am no longer small. (Holly)

Notes

1) Inter-standing is relational where understanding is not grasping what lies beneath but gives emphasis to what lies between and amongst (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994, p. 1, 8) . For example, when braiding strands of hair, the focus is not only on the strands and how they are woven but the tension and spaces amongst the strands. It goes beyond just a conceptual view and stresses the significance of a relational “view.”

2) I use the active word “experiencing” as introduced by John Dewey (1929) in Experience and Nature. He indicates that the shift in emphasis from what is experienced to the embodied relational ways of experiencing opens capacities for perceiving “unattained possibilities” (p. 151) and promoting respect for the potentialities of human experience (p. 36). He argues that the process of experiencing such as breathing which includes an interaction of both air and function of the lungs cannot be separated (p. 13). It is this notion of object-subject separation that we come to believe and accept in education through the traditions and habituations, which

Dewey's theory of experiencing attempts to bring into question so that we may welcome the unknown, invisible and ineffable of experiencing.

3) Scree is the accumulation of loose stones and rocks at the bottom of a cliff or mountain.

4) Mark Neumann examines how tourists made meaning of their experiences in the Grand Canyon region of northern Arizona.

5) I prefer to use the term re-experiencing instead of reflection to stress the point that reflection is not just in the mind but an embodiment of experience through the bodymind.

6) Ecotone ---[Greek tonos tension] a transition area between two adjacent ecological communities (Merriam-Webster's new collegiate dictionary, 1976, p. 360) . In a conversation I had with Philip Booth, a doctoral student in Australia, he says: <<*One interesting reference is in the Permaculture Designers Manual (Mollison, 1988: 77) which explains how the edge or interface of ecosystems is usually more productive. I am only claiming to be the 1st Ph.D. to have applied ecotones to paradigms*>>. (Booth, personal communication via email, January 23, 1998). I see the space of ecotone as a chiasm of abounding interactions or the site of tension for the phenomena of experiencing.

7) I borrow the word chiasm from Merleau-Ponty's (1968) work, where he refers to a chiasm between various senses, as a cohesive perceptual intertwining of human flesh and the flesh of the world.

8) I use the combined word of epistemology and ontology to reiterate the inseparableness of these two concepts. Perception and knowing co-evolve in the actions of experiencing, where perceptual knowing or being are indiscernible.

9) The Santiago theory, developed by Maturana and Varela in Chile, is now referred to as the theory of enaction or the enactive approach by Varela, Thompson, & Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*.

10) My use of the term groundless and other references to Buddhist thinking are related to my interpretation of Varela, Thompson, & Rosch (1991) as well as Winnie Tomm's (1995) explanations.

11) Maturana & Nisis de Rezepka (1998) refer to intelligence as situations of consensual interacting which take place in the animate and the inanimate. Intelligence is the capacity to participate which is influenced by the emotional flow of humans that expand or restrict consensuality of behavioral interactions. See Varela et al. (1991) for a more inclusive understanding of social historical where past experiences are part of human experience.

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