
Reframing the Concept of Reflection: Consciousness, Experiential Learning, and Reflective Learning Practices

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Abstract

The concept of reflection is common to a range of learning theories and therefore carries various meanings and differing significance. Within theories of adult education, reflection is predominantly conceptualized as the rational analytical process through which human beings extract knowledge from their experience. This article critiques this cognitive bias. However, the author argues that a perspective of embodied experiential learning should not give preference to the body over the mind as a source of knowledge. Nor should researchers reject reflection as an exclusively cognitive process. Reflective practices can facilitate a learning dialogue between our implicit embodied experience and conceptual aspects of our consciousness. The author illustrates this with the example of the theory and practice of Gendlin's *Focusing*. In conclusion, the author proposes a set of elements, characteristic of individual and collective human experiential learning, that can provide a framework for a more expansive and integrative conceptualization of reflection.

Keywords

reflection, experiential learning, Focusing, Gendlin, consciousness

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Introduction

“Reflection” is a key concept in adult education theory and more specifically within experiential learning discourses. It can be understood to refer to the “activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985c, p. 33). Reflective practice is a pedagogic tool used widely within formal, informal, individual, and organizational learning activities and processes. The concept and practice of reflection has undergone considerable change and development in its definition and application (Illeris, 2007; Mezirow, 1991) and takes different forms in different contexts (Hoyrup, 2004).

The value of reflection as a learning tool is disputed. From the perspective of the dominant “constructivist” approach to experiential learning, cognitive reflection is the key process through which individuals extract knowledge from their concrete experience (Fenwick, 2001; Illeris, 2007). As such, reflection is maligned by critiques of the rationalist assumptions of experiential learning discourses for its mentalist prejudice. These critiques that seek to “re-embody” experiential learning suggest that the concept of reflection has an inherent cognitive bias and is therefore irredeemable (Coulter, 2001; Fenwick, 2001, 2006; Michelson, 1996, 1998).

I propose that the concept of reflection needs to be rescued and rehabilitated rather than rejected. An outline of the genealogy of the concept within experiential learning discourses shows that its upbringing has been unhelpfully restrictive. However, in spite of reflection’s reputation for distilling rational knowledge from the mess of human experience, I will argue that reflective practices have the potential to do the opposite—to integrate a range of cognitive and nonconceptual elements that make up our experience and consciousness.

Evidence from neuroscience points us toward the physiology of mind–body integration. However, it also shows that we have a significant structural and functional tendency toward nonintegration and dissociation of thought from embodied experience. Disconnection of mind from body, like mind–body integration, is a physiological proclivity not just an ideological construct. Biology provides us with the capacities, and we make the choices, develop the inclinations, and harden the patterns psychologically, socially, and culturally.

To engage with this complexity requires that we critique the cultural, class, and gender assumptions and prejudices of rationalism that elevate mind over body. But in doing this we must not reverse the bias and give preference to the body over the mind as the site of experiential learning. Rather, we have to learn to listen to the dialogue between what is emerging to become explicit in our cognition on one hand and our nonconceptual experiencing on the other. When surfaced into our awareness through integrative reflective practice, this dialogue constitutes the learning edge of human experience.

I propose that embodied reflective practices can encourage an integration of varied and often disconnected aspects of our human experience and consciousness. I argue that we need to bring this capacity to light and develop an integrative concept and

practice of reflection. To make this proposition more concrete I follow two paths. First, to illustrate a reflective practice that sensitively approximates the intricate complexity of our human experiential learning, I outline Eugene Gendlin's methodology of Focusing. Second, I outline what I propose are the key elements of human experiential learning; elements that, taken together, provide a framework within which to develop both an expansive concept of reflection and a range of integrative individual and collective reflective practices.

The Image of Reflection: A Tainted Genealogy

In adult education theory, the concept of reflection carries very specific genetic material. Cartesian and Christian traditions that elevate the mind and soul over nature and the human body gave reflection a swelled head from birth. Childhood allowed the concept to internalize the class, gender, and cultural prejudices of its Western capitalist cultural and social environment and to integrate these into narrow hierarchical assumptions about what does and does not constitute knowledge (Michelson, 1996, 1998). Not surprisingly, the concept of reflection, having been raised in an atmosphere that was disconnected from nonconceptual dimensions of human consciousness, has been "more concerned with thinking . . . and less with experiences, feelings or interaction" (Illeris, 2007, p. 65).

In the early years of the genealogy of experiential learning, John Dewey conceptualized reflection as a form of critical inquiry into "primary experience" that was necessary for cognitive "meaning-making" and for testing the validity of assumptions (Dewey, 1916; Mezirow, 1991; Skilbeck, 1970). Drawing significantly on the work of Dewey, Piaget, and the action research model of Kurt Lewin, David Kolb in the 1970s and 1980s developed his famous "learning cycle," which saw "reflective observation" as being a stage in the human learning process at which we step back to understand and conceptualize our experience (Illeris, 2007; Mezirow, 1991). Illeris describes this early work of Kolb as involving "a vigorous rationalization of the diversity of reality" (Illeris, 2007, p. 54). Kolb's learning cycle has been adapted into various forms of an "Action Learning Cycle" or the "Action Learning Spiral" and is widely used in many organizational and community action-learning and participatory research processes (Community Development Resource Association, 1997; Luckett & Luckett, 1999; Mclean, Feather, & Butler-Jones, 2005).

Moving from understanding and interpreting experience to a more critical perspective, in the 1980s Edward Cell conceptualized "retroactive reflection" as a process through which we could "overcome distortions" in our experiential knowledge (Mezirow, 1991, p. 101). Jack Mezirow, drawing on the legacy of Paulo Friere and Habermas, took this further in his concept of "transformative learning." He conceptualized reflection as a process "grounded in cognition and content" through which we can transform the "meaning perspectives" that we have and that we are not comfortable with. Stephen Brookfield argued that a process of "critical reflection" through which we challenge our assumptions is essential for such a transformation (Illeris, 2007, pp. 62-63).

A consistent motif in reflection's formative years is its inclination to step out of experience, to allow for detachment and objectivity. However, this did not meet the needs of professionals who need to "think on their feet." To fast-track the cognitive processing of experience, Donald Schon developed "reflection-in-action" tools that allowed for problem solving within professional applied knowledge contexts (Illeris, 2007, p. 66).

This brief outline of the dominant trajectory of the development of the concept of reflection within discourses of experiential learning indicates that reflection is primarily understood and used as a cognitive activity (Sodhi, 2006). Reflection has had a narrow upbringing, premised on the dominant assumption within experiential learning that "rational cognitive thought is epistemologically superior to embodied, interested, experiential knowledge" (Cooper, 2005, p. 42).

In Reflection's Shadow: The Emergence of Dissonance

What if we were to allow the concept of reflection to "reflect" on itself, not within the confines of a small upstairs room well away from the distortions of subjective experience but rather by running downstairs, exploring the darkness of the basement, flinging open the front door, and venturing out of the house? If reflection could stretch its limbs, get in touch with its bodily held feelings, its discomforts, emotions, intuitions, and imagination, might then awareness emerge of a more expansive calling in the service of human learning and development? Might reflection see that it can embrace a wider range of elements in our learning processes?

For this to be possible two elements are needed: First, reflection needs to make friends outside the neighborhood of adult and professional education. It needs to seek out and engage traditional and contemporary spiritual and contemplative practices to explore noncognitive dimensions of human consciousness. This should not be difficult for the concept of reflection because experiential learning is intrinsically relational and interactive.

Second, an expansive rehabilitation of the concept of reflection cannot be imposed from the outside. It must approximate what is intrinsic to processes of human experience and consciousness. Like all authentic development, reflection's potential for change relies on an internal dynamic. To facilitate the emergence of this potential, we need to look beyond the narrowly rationalist application of the concept of reflection, beyond its complicity in reproducing silence and disempowerment, and get in touch with dissonances within its own experience. I propose that it is these dissonances that suggest that reflective practices are capable of a more generous engagement with human experience and learning.

In what follows, I will look at three examples of "dissonance" within reflective practices and conceptualizations of reflection that point to the need and possibility for an expansive rehabilitation of the concept.

The first dissonance relates to the emotional and developmental learning that takes place beneath the explicit purposes of cognitive reflection. I draw one example of this

from my reading of a selection of writings on reflective practices edited by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985a). Experiential learning theorists invariably acknowledge the importance of holistic learning processes and the importance of not neglecting feelings and emotions alongside rational processes (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Boud et al., 1985a). In their model of the "components of reflection," Boud et al. (1985a) indicate the importance of "attending to feelings." However, this is motivated by the need to "utilize positive feelings" and "remove negative obstructive feelings" in the service of promoting clarity of learning (Boud et al., 1985b). Clearing feelings out of the way of rational interpretation of experience is very different to embracing emotion and feeling as important sources of knowledge (Michelson, 1996).

However, what is striking in a number of the contributions to Boud et al. (1985a) that explore autobiography, writing, listening, debriefing, and cooperative enquiry as pedagogical reflective practices is an implicit message that learners and participants found significant value in these reflective processes that was separate from the explicit cognitive, content, or conative learning purpose of the activity (Pearson & Smith, 1985; Walker, 1985). This suggests that we need to give primary attention to the *processes of integration* that reflective practices make possible when people are able to listen to themselves, or be listened to, or share in a collective—processes that allow for the organic emergence of conscious meaning. Fenwick's discussion of "listening to experience, not reshaping or emancipating it," points in a similar direction (Fenwick, 2006, p. 52).

A similar instance of the developmental value of reflection that emerges in the shadow of a reflective activity's designed purpose comes to mind from an experience in my work in the Industrial Health Resource Group at the University of Cape Town. At the end of an occupational health and safety skills training program that we conducted for members of a health worker trade union during 2005, a formal interview evaluation process was carried out with a small group of the participants. They were asked to "reflect" on their training and learning experience. At the end of this process one of the health workers emphasized not the content of her learning but rather the developmental impact that the reflection process had on her. She said, "I want to say this is the first time that someone came to enquire what the course has done for me. Never before was there any follow up like this. This gives me a better outlook and more confidence" (Industrial Health Resource Group, 2006, p. 14).

My second example of dissonance, where nonconceptual dimensions in the experience of reflective activity emerge from the shadows to challenge a strictly rational purpose, comes from the social work profession. Donald Schon developed reflection-in-action as a means of enabling professionals to make rapid judgments and decisions in difficult situations (Ixer, 1999; Sodhi, 2006). Following this approach, professional education curriculum planners have attempted to straitjacket reflection conceptually as a tool for professional decision making and problem solving and have established it as a behavioral skill that can be measured as a learning outcome (Ixer, 1999). In an important contrast, Sodhi's (2006) research on how social workers incorporate experiential learning into their professional practice reveals how many of them intuitively

seek to reflect on their experiences of working with clients, not through critical cognitive reflection but by “sitting” with a feeling:

While in session, they did not use critical reflection to process this non-cognitive way of knowing. In fact, all the social work practitioners in this study believe that the body is invaluable in their practices in that it provides them much feedback on which to reflect. They shared examples of how, when they in fact ignored their bodies, they found they did not make the best decisions, and even may have caused harm to their clients. (Sodhi, 2006, p. 203)

My third example of the emergent potential of reflection comes from my reading of a dissonance evident in Illeris's (2007) definition of reflection as an “afterthought.” He suggests that an “afterthought makes itself felt” because “something remains unfinished” in the “time-lag” between an experiential interaction and learning (Illeris, 2007, p. 66). This feeling or sense of incompleteness, more or less conscious, is common in our daily lives in big and small ways as we engage with ourselves, others, and our environment. I would argue that this is not just a “cognitive dissonance” requiring an “afterthought” as Illeris suggests (Illeris, 2007, p. 66), but that it is instead a complex mix of bodily held feeling, memory, external stimulus, internal emotions, ideas, and new and old information that require integration and meaning making. This involves and requires reflective processes that pay as much attention to the body as the mind and that embrace feelings and emotions as sources of experiential knowledge.

These dissonances that lie within the shadows of strictly cognitive reflective practices need to be brought to light. I propose that their emergence points to an inclination or yearning toward integration and meaning making and resolving the feeling that something remains unfinished and that this proclivity is intrinsic to human consciousness and experience. To approximate and facilitate this capacity we need a more expansive conceptualization of reflection to better understand and engage with human experience and consciousness. Critiques of the rationalist genealogy of reflection suggest that experiential learning needs to be re-embodied. We now turn to examine to what extent these critiques offer a more generous framework for a new conceptualization of reflective practice.

Re-embodying Experiential Learning: What Place for Reflection?

Although supporting the progressive challenge that experiential learning discourse and practice have posed to traditional hierarchies of knowledge expertise, Tara Fenwick and Elana Michelson, among others, have developed quite fundamental critiques of its pedagogical assumptions (Fenwick, 2001, 2006; Michelson, 1996, 1998). The constructivist experiential learning perspective posits that an individual learner can extract learning from distinct concrete experience through a process of cognitive reflection that is best undertaken separate from the experience, ideally through

facilitation by an educator (Fenwick, 2001). The key learning process for experiential learning discourse is “cognitive reflection on concrete experience” (Fenwick, 2001, p. vii).

In seeking to move away from a purely cognitive conceptual framework, Fenwick explores psychoanalytic, situationist, critical cultural, and enactivist critiques of experiential learning in a chapter titled “Beyond Reflection” (Fenwick, 2001). Although these critiques open a wide range of issues they are consistent in their criticism of experiential learning’s rationalist detachment from the subjective, social, contextual, cultural, and co-emergent richness of human experience. To remedy this detachment, they all point toward the need for experiential learning to be “re-embodied” physically. This orientation is developed more explicitly by Michelson (1998) in her suggestion that

as a function of memory, experiential learning is more properly understood as an act of re-membering. I want to make the case that experience is itself located in the body as well as in the social and material locations that bodies invariably occupy, and ask what a theory of experiential learning might look like that re-members body and mind. (Michelson, 1998, p. 218)

Drawing on feminist theorizing of the body, Michelson argues for our recognition of an embodied knowledge that embraces “emotions, desire, pain and pleasure, needs, and physical abilities and disabilities in addition to cognitive thought” (Michelson, 1998, p. 223). Through our subjective embodied observation and interaction with others and with the outside world, and within the complex processes in which perception, sensation, memory, expectation, and meaning making seek integration, the mind and body are not separate. The body does not just hold the raw material for learning, but is itself a site of experiential learning (Michelson, 1998).

What then is to be the fate of reflection within this effort to re-embody experiential knowledge and learning? In her exploration of embodied knowledge, Coulter (2001) offers a critique of “conscious reflection as a way of legitimizing experiential learning” and argues that the development of the idea of knowledge as embodied could lead to “a re-conceptualization of experiential learning” (Coulter, 2001, p. 6). Coulter does not explicitly suggest what the fate of reflection should be in this process, but there certainly is an implicit message that it has no place in this reconceptualization.

Michelson’s challenge to experiential learning contains a powerful critique of the concept and practice of reflection, not only for its dispassionate stepping back from embodied experience, and therefore its reproduction of the split between mind and body, thought and action, but also for the deep complicity of its masculine, positivist, and humanist assumptions with the power dynamics of gender, class, and race (Michelson, 1996).

Fenwick argues for reclaiming and remembering experiential learning and proposes that we explore the possibility of turning experiential learning discourse “inside out” to encourage its further development as a progressive adult education discourse (Fenwick, 2006, p. 42). Fenwick suggests that for discourses of experiential learning,

we should “unseat the humanistic assumptions that remain dominant in its renderings,” but she does not make any specific attempt to reconceptualize reflection (Fenwick, 2006, p. 43). Although Fenwick’s suggestion of “pedagogical practices that encourage co-emergence . . . listening to experience, not reshaping or emancipating it” could suggest new flesh on the bones of a more expansive concept of reflection, she rather leaves reflection licking its wounds in the “mentalist world” (Fenwick, 2006, pp. 52-53).

Reinhard Stelter (2005), in challenging the “myth that learning processes are initiated in the brain,” argues that there is a need “to highlight the participation of our lived body in the unfolding of experience and learning” (Stelter, 2005, p. 1). However, Stelter does not see reflection as a process that is incompatible with embodied experiential learning. He argues that reflection is still an important concept insofar as it facilitates the making of meaning by integrating the “experiential and pre-reflective dimension” with the “discursive, narrative and community-based dimension” of human experience (Stelter, 2005, p. 7).

Overcoming Mind–Body Dualism in Experiential Learning

Notwithstanding their critique of the mind–body separation assumed in experiential learning discourses, both Fenwick (2006) and Michelson (1998) implicitly suggest a privileging of the body over the mind, and thereby retain a residue of the body–mind dualism—albeit inverted. In Michelson’s hypothetical example of Mary’s learning experience, Michelson argues that Mary’s “moment of learning” was located in her immediate emotional and physical response to a situation and not in a later “cognitive flash” resulting from “a moment of dispassionate self-reflection” (Michelson, 1998, pp. 225-226).

Similarly, Fenwick privileges the body over the mind in her assertion that “the difference here from mentalist or reflection-dependent understandings is accepting the moment of experiential learning as occurring *within* action, within and among bodies” (Fenwick, 2006, p. 46). Implicit in their suggestions that we “turn experiential learning inside out” (Fenwick, 2006, p. 42) and “ask what a theory of experiential learning might look like that re-members body and mind” (Michelson, 1998, p. 217) is the suggestion that the body where we feel things is the source of all knowledge and wisdom.

There are two problems within this body preference that I wish to explore, both of which emerge as a result of inverting and not removing the mind–body duality. The first problem is the idea that we have to pinpoint “the moment” of learning (within, it seems, a hierarchy of moments). Michelson distinguishes between the “moment of learning . . . located in Mary’s initial emotional and physical response” from the “moment [of “understanding”] in which her mental processes caught up with what her body already knew” (Michelson, 1998, p. 226), emphasizing that “her learning is understood as a moment of emotional and physical response” and that “the production of knowledge is a moment of self-location.” Fenwick has likewise sought out and

pinpointed “the moment of experiential learning as occurring *within* action, within and among bodies” (Fenwick, 1998, p. 46).

This seems to be challenging the rational mentalist notion of learning happening in a “cognitive flash” on its own terms, simply by inverting “the moment” of learning from the mind to the body. If we are seeking to embody experiential learning then we have to move away from the dualistic *structures* of mind and body and understand learning as a *process* that embodies all kinds of moments in its emergence. Surely there are moments of physical sensing, of perception, of recognition, of memory, of disturbance, of tension, of release, of understanding, of meaning making, of intention, and of decision making that make up the fluid process of experiential learning. Within the movement from implicit to explicit, from felt-sense to cognitive awareness and formulation, it cannot be useful to seek out “the moment of learning” or to try and determine any hierarchy of learning moments. For sure, in any particular learning experience there can be strong bodily felt or cognitive flashes, but these are moments within a learning process, and are not competing for “the moment of learning.”

The second problem that arises with identifying the body as “the site of learning” in opposition to the mind is that human learning cannot happen without the mind. Because the embodied human brain has an intrinsic capacity to mentally symbolize experience through images, metaphors, and language, our experience and consciousness is immediately mental and symbolic. Language is implicit in the human process of living (Gendlin, 2004). To embody experiential learning requires not that we give preference to the body as the site where any single “moment of learning” happens but rather that we embody the human mind as one important dimension of the distinctively human learning process. To do this we must engage with the specific capacity of the human mind in its relation to human consciousness, contingent as both these processes are on the existence of our bodily held brains (Batchelor, 2004; Damasio, 2000).

The Embodied Processes of Human Mind and Consciousness

In her use of complexity theory to “turn experiential learning inside out” Fenwick explores the contingency, complexity, and co-emergence of human experiential learning (Fenwick, 2006). In doing so, she seems to collapse human learning into a wider range of complex natural (e.g., the immune system) and social (e.g., the stock market) “learning systems” (Fenwick, 2006, p. 48). Although Fenwick’s emphasis on humans as part of nature is important in conceptualizing our co-emergent development within and with our changing environment, we cannot lose sight of the fact that humans are simultaneously apart from nature. What makes humans distinct within nature is our capacity for self-consciousness, imaginative intention, and purposeful actions (Geras, 1983).

To understand our embodiment of this capacity of human consciousness it is useful to turn to the work of contemporary neuroscience. In particular, I draw on the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (Charlton, 2000), and on Peter Afford’s interpretation

of the work of neuroscientists such as Joseph LeDoux, Susan Greenfield, Dan Siegel, Jaak Panksepp, and Gerald Edelman (Afford, 2008).

In an early chapter in his book *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio (2000) outlines the evolution of human consciousness as the movement from “being but not knowing” to the development of our human capacity to “know life” (Damasio, 2000, pp. 30-31). Consciousness and mind, argues Damasio, are not the same, they are distinguishable processes (Damasio, 2000). Consciousness is the continuous process of our human sense of self and experiencing in the world. It is bigger than our mental activity and cognitive awareness in the sense that it also encompasses our implicit feelings (Gendlin, 1993), tacit knowledge, and the embodied experiences and memories that lie beneath the surface of our awareness. Consciousness is continually receptive to outside stimuli—interactions, ideas, images, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures—and we immediately engage these with a complex mix of our internal memories, thoughts, and emotions, and with specific feelings and meanings associated with these experiences. The elements that constitute this process of human experience and consciousness are hardly distinguishable from one another (Batchelor, 2004).

Like consciousness, the human mind is a process and not a thing. While drawing on consciousness for its creativity, the process of the mind is quite specific. It is a continuous flow of related mental patterns or images (Damasio, 2000). Although clinical evidence shows that the human mind can function without consciousness, creative developmental human mental activity is only possible as an aspect of human consciousness (Damasio, 2000). The capacity of the human mind to explicitly formulate what is held implicitly in consciousness—to make meaning symbolically, through thinking, language, art, or movement—constitutes an essential dimension of human learning (Gendlin, 1995; Stelter, 2005).

Human consciousness and the mind are processes that are contingent on the existence and functioning of the human brain. And the brain is firmly embodied—it is part of the central nervous system that extends from the head, down the spine, and into the lower back. The central nervous system connects with every internal and surface organ in the body (Afford, 1998). Intrinsic to our embodied brain is the integration of thought and emotion. Thought processes are grounded in emotions and bodily states. The “somatic marker mechanism” in our nerve activation patterns enables our cognitive representations of the outside world to interact with our cognitive representations of our internal world. Perceptions and emotions are inseparable in the human consciousness (Charlton, 2000). This evidence from neuroscience helps us understand our embodied capacity for integrating the thought activities of the human mind with bodily held experience.

However, our physiological proclivity toward integration is inseparably coupled with the capacity for dissociation. The possibility of an acute or chronic disconnection between cognitive thought on one hand, and emotion and implicit feeling on the other, resides in what Peter Afford describes as a “design fault” in the human brain (Afford, 2008). What is relevant here is the relation between the two cerebral hemispheres, the “left brain” and the “right brain.” The left brain is dominant for detailed rational

thinking and language use, and the right brain is dominant for sensing the body and processing the bodily felt experience. Although you need both sides of the brain to function properly, their functional separation does make it possible for thinking to become disconnected from feeling and from the bodily felt experience. Dissociations between left and right brains can lead to difficulties in giving names to feelings, to symbolizing, to empathizing, and can inhibit our use of our imagination (Afford, 2008, p. 3). Our physiological capacity for dissociation becomes realized through individual and collective life experiences such as acute trauma, empathic failures, existential anxiety, and social alienation.

The relationship between integration and dissociation is clearly fluid. Both are clearly real embodied capacities and experiences. Our learning theories, conceptual frameworks, and pedagogical practices should not be constructed on mind or body preferences or dualities but should seek to engage with dissociation and encourage the integration of different aspects of our experience and consciousness. Eugene Gendlin's philosophy of the Implicit and his accompanying methodology of Focusing-oriented psychotherapy give us an example of such a perspective and practice. Although this model falls outside the discourses of adult education, it offers a methodology that relates intimately to embodied experiential learning as a dimension of human development.

Gendlin and Focusing

Beginning his research in the 1960s, Gendlin sought to establish why certain people benefited from psychotherapy and others did not. He found that an important element of positive change had to do with the way in which some clients intuitively accessed and processed their implicit experiences. Gendlin set out to conceptualize this intricate process and develop ways of facilitating and teaching this natural method to those who did not seem to be able to access it. Because this methodology seeks to bring an unclear, vague, inner sense of a problem or situation into clearer focus, Gendlin named it Focusing (Johnson, 2008, p. 6). Gendlin uses the concept of Focusing to refer both to the natural process of working with this implicit awareness and to the method of consciously relearning and facilitating it.

According to Greg Madison, an experiential-existential psychologist and psychotherapist;

The work of philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin addresses the level of implicit experiencing. Gendlin saw therapy as a unique place where the process of bringing unformed experience into language could be investigated. Gendlin discovered that the ability to stay with an unclear (but clearly felt) bodily experience constitutes a natural form of self-reflection that he called "Focusing." Focusing guides us to the evocative. It allows us to witness how implicit feeling generates explicit content, and how there is always a "more than" hazily surrounding anything explicit. Reflecting upon bodily-felt experiencing

in an open phenomenological way can lead to shifts in bodily comportment, often accompanied by insights into self and world. Focusing is a way of paying attention to our being-in-the-world. (Madison, 2009, p. 188)

In his development of the Focusing approach and practice, Gendlin has formulated precise concepts. The continuous moment-by-moment flow of raw, present, concrete human experience and feeling is referred to as “experiencing” (Friedman, 2004, p. 23). Human beings, Gendlin says, *are* their experiencing process, a process which is embodied and nonconceptual but whose implicit richness can be made explicit in words or concepts. Gendlin conceptualizes the bodily felt sense of a specific situation, problem, or experience as the “felt-sense” (Friedman, 2004; Stelter, 2005).

The felt-sense initially comes as an unclear bodily felt sensation that often occurs in the throat, chest, stomach, or abdomen, and hovers just on the edge of our thinking. It is not dissimilar to the body–mind relationship conceptualized by Michael Polanyi as “tacit knowledge”—a kind of knowing that is embedded in the body and does not yet have words (Perl, 2004). The felt-sense is not a sensory perception of something external nor is it an emotion. It is an implicitly intricate bodily felt interaction with a specific situation that invokes a constellation of associations, past and present, self and others (Madison, 2001). The felt-sense is the familiar moment-by-moment bodily sense of a situation that enables us to know where we are and what we are doing. Within our implicit “natural” knowing we can experience a felt-sense of something missing or something not quite right (Gendlin, 1995).

It is interesting at this point to see how Gendlin has conceptually explored a space that experiential learning theory leaps over. In his conceptualization of “reflective inquiry,” John Dewey spoke of the “incompleteness” of primary experience as a place from which we move toward cognitive meaning-making, or “secondary-experience” (Skilbeck, 1970, p. 14). Dewey outlined five steps or features of this reflective process: suggestion, intellectualization, hypothesis, reasoning, and decision. In doing so, Dewey emphasized the particular importance of the most analytical and rational features of this process (Dewey, 1916, p. 74). I would argue that this leaves behind the complex, rich, and subtle implicit dimensions of experiencing, aspects that lie between the “incompleteness” and the “suggestion” and that probably get suppressed in the process of pursuing rational analysis.

The purpose of Focusing is to “dip” into this subjective space in order to formulate and make explicit this implicit and vague felt-sense of experience. The felt-sense always urges forward, demanding words or a thought or an action. The emergence of that formulation or action is seen by Gendlin as more than just a representation of what was implicit—it is a forward movement, a “carrying forward” through a “felt-shift” (Gendlin, 1992, 1995). A felt-sense contains many elements of feeling, memory, tacit knowledge, thought, emotion, opinion—all of which cross, govern, and give relevance to one another. What emerges as the felt-sense is made explicit, is a unique “crossing” of particular elements so that the thought, word, or action has a meaning that is

specific to that situation. With its attention to a particular experience, the felt-shift is a unique co-emergence of a specific situation and a person's interpretation, thought, or action in relation to that situation (Gendlin, 1995).

Returning to our earlier emphasis on the value of reflective practice for integrating different cognitive and nonconceptual aspects of human experiencing and consciousness, Peter Afford (2008) argues that Focusing allows us to counter the tendency for thinking to be dissociated from feeling. Practitioners of Focusing indicate that when they bring their felt experience into awareness they tend to feel better inside. Something shifts. Afford explains that this easing is physiologically located in the brain:

What is interesting is how the brain works differently when body and feeling are included in the ambit of consciousness. Felt shifts presumably involve neural processes of integration overcoming those that lead to dissociation While Focusing, we allow our attention to wander freely amongst brain areas involved in sensing and mapping the body, generating and registering the emotion and feeling, consciousness and language, and all our other cognitive processes. I imagine that it is through this inner invitation for aspects of our inner life to re-associate that the positive benefits of the felt shift come about. Neural integration feels good. (Afford, 2008, pp. 1-3)

Although Focusing was developed in a therapeutic context with an emphasis on individual experience, it is also being adapted and applied in a range of modalities with individuals and collectives. The conceptual precision of Gendlin's philosophy of the Implicit, in dialogue with the growing tradition of Focusing practice, yields rich insights into the complexity and intricacy of human experience, consciousness, and learning that can well inform experiential learning discourses.

Reflective Practice Needs to Facilitate Integrated Experiential Learning

The specific attention that Gendlin's Focusing gives to facilitating a dialogue between bodily felt experiencing and cognitive formulation and expression of that experience suggests a process of mind-body integration that I would argue is the calling of reflective practice. For reflection to be a purely cognitive exercise excludes much of the richness and complexity of human experience and consciousness from knowledge creation. As an adult educator, I am familiar with a sense of unease in my reliance on cognitive recall and analysis to evoke meaning. To develop more subtle methodologies and tools of reflective practice that can better integrate the various dimensions of human consciousness, I propose that we need to surface and elucidate the characteristics of an experiential orientation to learning that reflective practices need to engage with. In what follows, I propose nine elements of human experiential learning that contribute to developing a framework for reconceptualizing reflection:

1. Embodied experience *seeks integration*: Human beings, individually and collectively, yearn to resolve dissociation caused by social alienation, existential anxiety, trauma, or more “natural” psychological and physiological conditions and experiences.
2. Human beings are forever reconstructing themselves through their experiencing and the movement of their consciousness. Within this process of experiential learning we naturally seek to *make meaning*.
3. Every experience seeks an emergence that is very specific. Although it might draw on a range of memories and associations, and have an inclination toward routine response, its most creative possibilities rely on us being present to the *uniqueness of the experience of the moment*. Our capacity for awareness of the present, for engaging with the uniqueness of our present experiencing, and for avoiding predictability, provide opportunities for intricate learning and creativity.
4. Human consciousness is always *intentional*, “on the threshold of responding or reacting to what is unfolding around you” (Batchelor, 2004, p. 100). Gendlin argues that the process of what is implicit in our consciousness and seeking expression is always a “carrying forward” (Gendlin, 1995). Experiential learning is about stretching our experiences forwards, driven intrinsically by hope as an aspect of our encounter with the world.
5. This forward movement that is implicit in human experiencing draws not so much on our analytical mode of thinking and planning, as it does on our capacity for *imagination* (Kaplan, 2002).
6. Learning from experience needs to be responsive to the specific *internal rhythms* of each individual or collective—it is “learner centered”—rather than being reliant on any external teaching or development agenda. This suggests being in touch with deep internal processes of development as the driving force of meaning making and change (Kaplan, 2002). It is only by being fully in their rhythm or in their “flow” that people can be present to their tacit knowledge and meaningfully engage with it (Stelter, 2005).
7. Making meaning from our experience is a *relational* process—internally between different elements of our consciousness, internally between our personal and social aspects, externally between ourselves and individual others, and within a shared collective. In many cases, the individual and the collective relations are not separable, just as the personal and social are always integrated (Kemmis, 1985).
8. Because learning is always relational it thrives on *dialogue and listening* as essential elements to its process (Fenwick, 2006; Stelter, 2005). Just as an individual’s embodied knowledge emerges through a sensitive internal listening and a dialogue between different aspects of experience, so the embodied experiential knowledge of a collective emerges through sharing (Stelter, 2005).
9. The relational aspect of experiential learning includes our *co-emergence* with the situations and environments in which our experiencing is embodied

(Fenwick, 2006). How the environment “invites” a person to engage in a certain way, or how a person’s intention is implicitly shaped by the environment, is conceptualized by ecological psychology as the “affordances” offered by the environment (Stelter, 2005). Similarly, the classical text of ancient Chinese wisdom, the *, advocates developing a sensitive disposition that allows for a deferential “way-making” in the world (Ames & Hall, 2003).*

Conclusion

Our individual and collective experiencing in the world is a continuous process that is integral to the development of our consciousness. The embodiment of our experiencing provides us with the tacit knowledge that allows us to know who we are, where we are, and what we are doing without a great amount of thought. Much of what is tacit, or implicit, is also emergent in that it seeks explicit awareness and cognitive formulation. Invariably this emergence is evident in language.

Human consciousness and the mind, embodied in the human brain, are the interactive processes that constitute experiential learning. Neuroscience shows us, as do our individual and collective experiences, that we have physiological, existential, and social proclivities toward both integration and dissociation. My argument in this article is that if we can conceptually engage with the complex intricacy of experiential learning with precision, then we can develop reflective practices that seek to facilitate an integration of the range of implicit and cognitive elements of our conscious experiencing. By identifying and engaging with elements that are characteristic of the integrative and meaning-making journey of experiential learning, I propose that we can develop a more expansive concept and practice of reflection.

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Bio

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