



Manifestation of Experiential Learning in Paulo Coelho's Novels

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Abstract

Experience has long been considered as imperative for learning and development. Experience cannot be learnt by reading or by being told, it is best learnt through life experiences. Having an experience is the best way or possibly the only way, of coming to know what that experience is like. Confucius rightly said in 450 BC. "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand. Benjamin Franklin in 1750 stated, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I will learn, Julius Caesar held that "experience is the teacher of all things", and Albert Einstein believed that "the only source of knowledge is experience". Experience is the most prevalent term in Coelho's Novels. He says, "To live is to experience things, not sit around pondering the meaning of life." According to him the purpose of life is to taste experience to the highest and to transform better. He gets inspiration from his daily life, from the people he met and from the experience he has acquired through travel. He firmly believes that experience is the best way to acquire knowledge and the knowledge acquired through experience transforms human beings. Hence this



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paper explores the manifestation of experiential learning in the selected novels of Paulo Coelho.

Key words: *Education; Experience; Experiential Learning; and Openness to Experiences.*



Experience has long been considered as imperative for learning and development. The concept of experience has occupied the minds of philosophers and has remained a main concept throughout much of the history of the discipline. It has become a key construct for a number of divergent perspectives in anthropology which includes feminist theory, phenomenological anthropology, psychological anthropology, medical anthropology and critical ethnography. In all these approaches the significance of experience is palpable whereas the definition and the application of the concept remain mostly obscure. There is no consensus on what experience is. Over the millennia, the dominant philosophies of each age have added their own definition of experience to the list.

Aristotle said, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them”(Nicomachean Ethics, “On Virtue”, Book II.1, 1103 a-b). It is clearly understood from the above words of Aristotle that experience is the best teacher. Inspired by Aristotle, Dewey argued that learning is doing and one learns by doing. Experiential learning is a process during which one learns skills and develops knowledge through real-world, hands-on experiences. Dewey believed experience is the base for all teaching methods. Dewey talks about two different concepts of experience, in his seminal work, *Democracy and Education*. In chapter 20, he pointed out the philosophical dualism on the



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concept of experience of ancient Greece and the British Empiricists. He also indicated the British Empiricist perspective as sensationalistic empiricism and saw the acquisition of experience as a passive affair. He critiqued sensationalistic empiricism “a thoroughly false psychology of mental development” (316). His theory of experience is read and discussed not only within the educational field but also in philosophy and psychology. Experimental psychology plays a significant role in Dewey’s philosophical development. He says that ‘experience’ is interconnected to human beings’ lives and living. He employs the term ‘experience’ to put forward the relation of individual and the environment. He utters, “I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience (24).

William James who is a contemporary of Freud, had a different understanding of epistemology from the rationalist and empiricist philosophers and this made his understanding in relation to rationalism and empiricism more understandable than Locke and Descartes. He also connected empiricism and rationalism through understanding truths in different lights, which he titled as pragmatism. His concept of pragmatism is the basis of experiential learning today. The term “pragmatism” was first used in print by him, who credited Charles Sanders Peirce with coining the term during the early 1870s. “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind” (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1).

The theory of experiential learning relies on the writings of eminent scholars of 20th century who provided experience a key role in their theories of human learning and development. They are John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean



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Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others to develop a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience. Carl Rogers suggested that personality is built of conscious decisions and choices based on an individual's perception of his experiences, contrary to the beliefs of Sigmund Freud. He also claimed that individuals are not victims of their childhood. Besides, childhood experiences are important and can affect the way a person sees or interprets the world around him, but also current feelings and emotions also play a powerful role. He opines that all human beings have a natural propensity to learn and proposes self-initiated learning. He agrees with the presumptions of Abraham Maslow, but adds that for a person to grow he needs an environment that provides him with genuineness, acceptance, and empathy. He believes that without these, a healthy personality will not grow and he will be, much like a tree will not grow without sunlight and water.

According to Rogers, a person can achieve his goals, wishes and desires in his life and when he did so, self-actualization took place. This was one of his most important contributions to psychology. He talks about his personal experience in his book *On Becoming a Person* Where he states, "Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me" (23).

Rogers identified five characteristics of the fully functioning person. They are: (1) Open to experience, (2) Existential living, (3) Trust feelings, (4) Creativity and (5) Fulfilled life. He believed that a fully-functioning person is an individual who is continually working toward becoming self-actualized. The



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individuals understand their own emotions and place a deep trust in their own instincts and urges. They are open to new experiences and are capable of changing in response to what they learn from those experiences. He also suggested that the fully functioning person is one who has embraced 'existential living', he is able to live fully in the moment. He experiences a sense of inner freedom and embraces creativity, excitement and challenges.

Paulo Coelho, one of the most widely read authors of recent times, was born on August 24, 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From his childhood, he dreamt of becoming a writer, but his parents discouraged him. Reading Henry Miller's books, he decided that writers were non-conformists. So he adopted a way of life that frightened his orderly parents. His Parents thought that Coelho needed psychiatric help and so admitted him to a mental asylum. There he was subjected to the brutality of electric shock treatment. He managed to flee thrice and finally he was released when he was 20. Later, he documented this experience in *Veronica Decides to Die*. He was admitted to a law school in 1970, but he dropped out and took up traveling to South America, North Africa, Mexico, and Europe. He engaged in drugs and lived as a hippie. He went on to work in all sorts of professions before becoming a full-fledged writer. His association with Brazilian composer and singer Raúl Seixas gave some of the greatest classic rock songs in Brazil. He studied occult and magic for his music but the lyrics soon landed him in jail.

Hell Archives, which was published in 1982, was his initial book but it was not well received. In 1982, during a trip to Europe, in Dachau and later in Amsterdam, he had a mystical meeting with "J", his new mentor, who persuaded him to walk the Road to Santiago de Compostela, a medieval pilgrim's route between France and Spain. On this ancient highway, he



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experienced one of the defining moments of his life. He achieved self-awareness and spiritual awakening that he later described in *The Pilgrimage*. In the next year, he published *The Alchemist*, which became one of the best-selling Brazilian books of all time. Some of his bestsellers are: *The Fifth Mountain*, *The Valkyries*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, *The Devil and Miss Prym*, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *Eleven Minutes*, *The Witch of Portobello* and *Like the Flowing River*. In 1980, he married Christina Oiticica. They established the “Paulo Coelho Institute” which offers assistance to those who face financial issues.

Coelho is an internationally acclaimed author and an outspoken activist for peace and social justice. He is a Messenger of Peace for the United Nations, an Ambassador to the European Union for Intercultural Dialogue, a Member of the Board of the Shimon Peres Institute for Peace and a UNESCO Special Counsellor for Intercultural Dialogues and Spiritual Convergences. He is a Board Member of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship and also an active member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Experience and learning plays a key role in Coelho’s novels. As Albert Einstein said, “The only source of knowledge is experience” Coelho considers learning and experience are intertwined with each other and gaining experience is a regular part of his routine. He also believes in experiential learning as the end result of an action always leave a strong impact on one’s mind. He opines that when we are open to experience, we can inherit wisdom and knowledge. The following quote reveals his openness to experiences and his perception of having different experiences:

I was an idealist at heart and deep down I thought that for someone who wanted to be a writer, it is only right to have to



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undergo all experiences, even the mental hospital... I saw it as a part of my personal legend, or my yearning for adventure (Arias 35-36).

Coelho says there is no greater way to learn than through action. As people learn best through experience, he says experiential learning makes one stronger and resilient. He utters, "There is only one way to learn. It's through action. You can study, read, and listen until you turn blue in the face, but the full experience is when you take action, and let the rubber meet the road. Once you're done aiming, pull the trigger." He advises his readers to take risks by trying to go beyond the limits that they are used to. He reiterates in his blog, "For ten minutes a day, be that person you have always wanted to be. If the problem is shyness, stimulate conversation. If the problem is guilt, feel approved, if you think that the world ignores you, try consciously to attract everyone's looks. You will experience the occasional difficult situation, but it's worth it." Teacher - learner relationship can be found in many of his novels. In *Pilgrimage*, Coelho learns lessons from his mentor Petrus. His personal experiences and his mentor's teachings impart the spiritual wisdom that reveals the true purpose of his journey. The journey gave him great insights and experience which transformed him eventually.

For him, a writer is a catalyst for the experiences of others. He believes, "The function of a catalyst is precisely that, not to mix with the transformational elements but to allow them to become manifest." He adds further about his books:

In my books I just tell what's happened to me in my life. I say that this happened to me, but I don't add, 'You do the same.' No, I talk about my tragedy, my mistakes, of how I came through them, but I



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don't say that that's the solution for everyone, because every life is different and personal. In fact, if we lined up all the human beings on the planet we wouldn't find two identical. I don't believe in collective messages, I believe in a catalyzing, incendiary element. For example, I try to make it clear, through my own experience, the failing is not the same as being defeated. They fail who don't even try to fight their battle and they are defeated those who are able to struggle. And this defeat is no shame. It can be a trampoline to new victories. (Arias 25)

Coelho has the gift to turn any experience into a learning opportunity. It is revealed in *The Alchemist*, he speaks through Santiago, "learned some important things, like how to deal in crystal, and about the language without words... and about omens" (54). Throughout the story the boy learns things from many sources – sheep, crystals, the desert, and other people. This is the idea Coelho gives in almost all his novels that one can learn things from anything and anyone, which is the ideal mindset for learning. The Alchemist in the desert advises the boy that the only way to learn is through action. Then he explained what he meant by action. He said, "The existence of this world is simply a guarantee that there exists a world that is perfect. God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom. That's what I mean by action" (121). For him, education only makes sense when it is meaningful for the individual, helping him to fulfil the individual's dreams and ideas. He values experiential learning such as travelling and meeting people than formal education.

Coelho opines that a normal path yields normal results. So he advises his readers to take a different path which will lead them to achieve their goals.



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He also says that by taking a different path one can gain a very different perspective than other people, and can understand the reality better. Armed with this new perspective, one can access the world in a different way, and can create valuable things that have not been created before. He lives his life according to the lines of Robert Frost, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by and that has made all the difference." His perspective of being different is revealed in his bestselling novel *The Zahir*,

As I write, I realize that the way I see the world is going through a series of major changes. For many years, I studied and practiced magic, alchemy, and the occult; I was fascinated by the idea of a small group of people being in possession of an immense power that could in no way be shared with the rest of humanity, because it would be far too dangerous to allow such vast potential to fall into inexperienced hands. I was a member of secret societies, I became involved in exotic sects, I bought obscure, extremely expensive books, spent an enormous amount of time performing rituals and invocations. I was always joining and leaving different groups and fraternities, always thinking that I had finally met the person who could reveal to me the mysteries of the invisible world, but in the end I was always disappointed to discover that most of these people, however well-intentioned, were merely following this or that dogma and tended to be fanatics, because fanaticism is the only way to put an end to the doubts that constantly trouble the human soul. (28)

He had both positive and negative experiences in his life. He considers his pilgrimage to Santiago as a positive experience. He experimented with all



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other religions and sects, especially the Eastern ones. He tried Hare Krishna, Buddhism, Yogic Philosophy, everything. He started to go to mass regularly again, only after making the pilgrimage to Santiago. Being attracted to the world of spiritualism and for looking spiritual experiences, he went towards the furthest. He said, "I really got into Indian Cosmogony. I began reciting all the mantras to hand, practicing yoga, meditating and everything related to oriental spirituality" (Arias 108). He learned the most important lesson of his life that "the extraordinary is not the birthright of a chosen and privileged few, but of all people, even the humblest" (Arias 178), "the beauty is in simplicity. That's why I told you that my house, as you can observe, is as simple as possible" (Arias 180).

He had his negative experience with drugs. At his young age, he got into drugs out of rebellion, because it was forbidden and presented a way of protesting against the confining society of the time. He says, "We answered back in many ways and one of them was with drugs. I was always a person of extremes who never took half measures; I still am, thank God. That's why I like what it says in the Bible, I would thou wert cold or hot... because thou art lukewarm... I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Arias 127). After having his negative experience with drugs, he wanted to give them up out of fear. Later he recollected his past experience with drugs and said, "I don't know how I would have ended up if I'd kept on that road. Probably like some of my poor friends ended up..." (Arias 133).

Coelho accepts that he has presided over a few black masses in his time. He says, "I wouldn't recommend it necessarily, but every young person should allow the flame of rebellion to manifest in some way, because if you don't see the other side of the coin, you are just a sheep. You'll have some risky



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experiences, but everyone knows his or her limits, I believe.” In an interview with Juan Arias, an eminent writer and journalist of Spain in July, 1998, he was asked what he was looking for when he wrote. He answered:

Myself, because I am many Paulo Coelho’s and at each moment of my life I’ve made interior changes and I still don’t understand myself completely. I also write to know who I am at the precise moment. Then I change and I have to write another book, and so I can share my many changes, my many facets, my many hues.
(Arias 226)

In many of Coelho’s novels, the expression of his personal experience is evident through the portrayal of his characters. In his books, he writes about what happened to him in his life, what mistakes he committed and what he did in order to overcome them. He does not recommend them as the solution for each person. He elucidates through his personal experiences that failing is not the same as being defeated. For him, life is more beautiful in the moments one struggles. When one stops struggling, life becomes meaningless. He is a contented person with his ups and downs, his battles won and lost, his defeats but always joyfully with the joy of a bullfighter. He says, “For me, life is like a bullfight, I have to confront the bull of my responsibility each and every moment and I never know if I’m going to succeed or not” (Arias 28).

Before becoming a personally transformed person, he had mentally suffered a lot. He recollects one of his experiences while he was on a pilgrimage to Rome. He says, “I started to see my worst side, the most horrible; I saw myself as materialistic, vengeful, all the worst sentiments.” (Arias 202) Later through his experiences, he came to a realization that the sufferings were transitory and the journey had transformed him a better person. “We go



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through that process of painful growth, because the first thing we see is not the best, but the darkest part of ourselves, then comes the light.” he said. (Arias 202) The below lines from *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* are the revelation of his personal experiences “We will have difficult times, and we will experience many disappointments- but all of this is transitory; it leaves no permanent mark. And one day we will look back with pride and faith at the journey we have taken” (8).

John Dewey stated, “Experiential learning takes place when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity” (Dewey). Carl Rogers held that every person can achieve his goals, wishes and desires in life and when he did so, self-actualization took place. According to him, Personal involvement, learner’s initiative, evaluation by learner and pervasive effects on learner are the qualities of experiential learning. Like Dewey and Rogers, Coelho firmly believes that learning as a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and later leads to action which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection.

As Rogers identified, Coelho has the five characteristics of the fully functioning person: Open to experience, Existential living, Trust feelings, Creativity and Fulfilled life. He is open to new experiences and is capable of changing in response to what he learns from those experiences. He places a deep trust in his own instincts and urges. He experiences a sense of inner freedom and embraces creativity, excitement and challenges. Hence, He can be rightly called a fully-functioning person as he is continually working toward becoming self-actualized.



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Coelho went through many trails throughout his life time to attain the position where he is now. He experienced a lot of phases in his life that were not easy to deal with. Although not all of his experiences were good, they all helped him to enhance his writing style. His experiences made him stronger not only in his life, but also in his writing. As he considers that true life lessons are in one's own experiences and the experiences keep one alive, he insists his readers to live the life to the fullest, listening to one's hearts and acquiring knowledge gained through experience rather than focusing on the destination one has to reach. He also stresses that the experiences and knowledge one gains through the journey is the real treasure. Like Emerson said, "Life is a journey, not a destination." Coelho says that the treasure is not in the culmination of events; rather it is in the path itself. He advises his readers to experience all the dualities and not be afraid of experience, because the more experience one has, the more mature one becomes.

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