

Understanding Student Experience

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Higher education, Amanda Fulford observes, is obsessed with improving “the student experience.” In theory, this project is reasonable and right. In practice, however, it misunderstands educational experience. Fulford contends that this misunderstanding stems from the belief that improving experience requires us to measure it, and that operationalizing experience for the purposes of measurement fails to capture the qualities of experience that make it educational. This prevents institutions and policy-makers from imagining that good education entails something other than state-of-the-art sports arenas and haute cuisine food. Rather than improve higher education, Fulford concludes that measuring the “student experience” perpetuates practices and aims that are *mis*-educative.

To clarify the features of educational experience, Fulford turns to Emerson and Dewey. In so doing, she implicitly suggests normative claims about how students ought to understand and respond to their experience. I will briefly summarize Fulford’s analysis of Dewey and Emerson and will explicate her thoughts regarding how experience should be perceived. I will then develop a claim about teaching that Fulford suggests but does not fully develop. I also will challenge Fulford’s view of measurement, and argue that measurement can aid the kind of transformational experience she envisions.

Fulford’s analysis of Emerson and Dewey highlights two key points. First, both men maintain that experiences are not self-contained events, truncated from the past and boxed off from the future. As Dewey famously explains, experience occurs in time; present experiences are influenced by the past and also influence the future. The effect of an experience on subsequent experiences, therefore, is crucial for determining its educational value. Does an experience carry students forward? Does it help them contextualize their present understanding, drawing on past experiences to foresee more expansive horizons?

Fulford implies that to answer these questions requires us to view our own experience in a certain way. As we move through life, we must come to recognize that meaning unfolds over time and accept that our understanding will change as we grow older. In short, we must learn to cultivate perspective regarding our immediate circumstances. To illustrate this idea, Fulford cites John Williams’s character Stoner, who sees, at the end of his life, that decisions he once doubted actually helped him realize his true calling and place in the world. Cultivating perspective and transforming one’s understanding of one’s life means that living through experience is not simply inevitable: it is *educational*. Fulford captures this idea with a quote from Emerson: “Years teach much that the days never knew.”¹

Becoming educated thus requires us to recognize the temporality of experience and to cultivate perspective regarding our immediate situation. By contrast, mea-

suring how students view their experience at particular points in time distorts the dynamic and continuously evolving nature of experience, and ignores the possibility that students' perspectives will be transformed. Policy-makers who rank institutions based on time-bound data perpetuate a serious misunderstanding regarding educational experience.

Fulford's first point, in sum, is that experience is temporal and that becoming educated requires us to cultivate perspective regarding our experience. Her second point explores what cultivating perspective requires. To answer this question, Fulford cites Emerson: "Presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering - which discomfits the conclusions of nations and years."² The future, in other words, harbors unexpected encounters and events. Surprises can be pleasant, of course. But Emerson's point is that unexpected events can - and often do - defy our predictions and assumptions. Fulford insightfully notes that becoming unsettled is endemic to the etymology of experience, which is related to the Latin words for "trial" and "danger."

Drawing on Emerson, Fulford concludes that the educational work of cultivating perspective can be unpleasant. Insofar as the future unsettles expectations, becoming educated requires students to live with discomfort. This is hard, Dewey acknowledges. We tend to prefer immediate gratification and expect that the future will conform to our current desires. These tendencies do not promote our wellbeing, however. To the contrary: they shut down curiosity and prevent us from engaging the future in ways that further learning.

Becoming educated thus requires us to accept that future experiences may unsettle our beliefs in ways we neither desire nor expect. Fulford notes that, by contrast, surveys valorize instant gratification and measure the extent to which students feel comfortable and content. By mistaking comfortable, gratifying experiences for good education, policy-makers and institutional leaders devalue transformative struggle. Consequently, they dismiss or curtail experiences that promote good education.

I am deeply sympathetic to the ideas Fulford explores in this sensitive and important article. I applaud her for drawing attention to the troubling ways that experience is being defined, not only in the U.K. but also in North America. I agree that developing perspective is necessary for becoming educated, and that living through unsettling experiences can clarify perspective.³ In the spirit of helping Fulford to continue to develop her ideas, I want to extend one of her claims and raise one critical question.

My extension of Fulford's argument pertains to her view of teaching. Toward the end of her article, Fulford writes that allowing students to be unsettled "does not abrogate the educator from her responsibilities to shape what Dewey calls the 'environing conditions' for learning."⁴ Fulford does not explain why she believes this conclusion follows from her analysis of Dewey and Emerson. Indeed, we might conclude that because unsettling experiences cannot be predicted or regulated, they defy being taught.

But Fulford argues, correctly I think, that teachers *are* responsible for creating conditions that help students learn through becoming unsettled. Why?

One answer is that teachers cannot prescribe learning or compel students to take up *any* educational experience. Creating opportunities to learn does not *guarantee* that students will seize these opportunities or that they will take them up in the ways we expect. This is true no less for experiences that confirm understanding than it is for experiences that challenge it. But the fact that teaching does not guarantee that learning will occur does not absolve teachers from the moral responsibility to try to productively transform what students know, how they reason, and how they understand themselves in the world. The kind of education Fulford envisions thus does not relieve teachers of the responsibility to create “environing conditions” that can promote learning.

While Fulford’s educational vision does not absolve teachers from creating conditions for learning, it does require them to challenge conventional pedagogy. Fulford does not recognize or explore this point. Teachers could rethink how they approach literature, for example. Rather than help students develop skills to interpret texts, teachers could think about how to help students allow texts to “interpret” them. How might students learn to be open to the uncomfortable experience of allowing texts to challenge them in ways they cannot imagine?⁵

My critical question pertains to Fulford’s view of measurement. Is it really true that educational experience cannot be measured? Fulford’s response to this question is mixed. On the one hand, she claims that measurement “reifies” student experience in ways that stifle curiosity and foreclose learning. Her goal, consequently, is not “to suggest a more suitable measure than exists in the current crop of surveys.” She rather aims to clarify the contours of educational experience, in order to show (perhaps) that educational experiences *by definition* resist being measured. On the other hand, Fulford writes that if experience can “only be judged by how it moves the student forward ... then the only measures of a student’s *educational* experience that would be of value, would be one given to the student long after her graduation.” Presumably, then, educational experiences *can* be measured, but in ways that challenge conventional survey research.

If Fulford is correct that educational experiences “carry students forward” and promote transformation, we need some way to assess whether or not change has occurred. We must also be able to evaluate the direction and degree of change. The trajectory of change may not be linear or straightforward; estimations of value may be inexact. These possibilities do not obviate the need for assessment, however. Rather, they can stimulate us to imagine new evaluative tools, taking care not to misuse these tools for inappropriate purposes.⁶

I encourage Fulford to continue to consider what her vision of transformation suggests with respect to assessing the quality of educational experience. I also encourage her not to dismiss measurement too quickly. Measurement can provide valuable information that would otherwise escape our notice. I wonder how the measurement community would take up the challenges for assessment that Fulford’s view of educational experience suggests.

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1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1944), 258, cited in Amanda Fulford, his volume.
 2. Emerson, "Experience," 256, cited in Fulford, this volume.
 3. See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of *Bildung*. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 8-17.
 4. Fulford, this volume.
 5. For an exploration of this question, see Deborah Kerdeman, "Preparing Educational Researchers: The Role of Self-Doubt," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 6 (2015): 719-738; Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308; and Deborah Kerdeman, "Between Interlochen and Idaho: Hermeneutics and Education for Understanding," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society: 1999): 272-279.
 6. For a related effort, see Project HULA (Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education: <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/humanities-liberal-arts-assessment-hula#sthash.nXssbVOy.dpuf>