

## Philosophy and Education Paper

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Imagine this classroom, an outdoor space protected from the sun and rain under a semi enclosed structure. In one direction students look out to see the rows of neatly cultivated produce growing and being harvested. While facing the south, students see the community table and woodfired oven. This location is Wild Willow Organic farm in Southern California. Wild Willow Farm is nestled next to the bank of the Tijuana River Valley that lies at the California and Mexico border. People come here for an immersion of the senses, in order to learn cooking organically through holist approaches. A student will take in the sunny dry afternoon air and sit at a large table arranged with vibrant, colorful and fragrant fruits, vegetable and herbs, oils and other tool and ingredients. The physical space is outdoors and rustic yet has clearly been assembled with care to details and an appreciation for beauty. Ironed aprons, and fresh cut wildflowers await each student at their work space. The hickory smoke and aroma from the warming woodfire oven dances in the air to welcome students for their learning experience.

As we experience a current shift in learning opportunities during a pandemic to more technology based solitary experiences, it's important to reflect on the potential impacts of removing experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning theory proposed by David Kolb defined this type of learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” The approach is centered around subjectivity and holism where the emphasis on experience includes, cognition, environmental factors and emotions that together influence the learning process. (1)

In this paper I will explore the philosophy of education and learning through the lens of our experiences and assigned readings during this course. I will also explore the space of a farm such as Wild Willow as an environment that supports experiential learning, and the impact that holistic learning can have on students and the environment.

We all live and learn to navigate an ever-changing education system where our environments and classrooms are often influenced by changes in technology. I would like to consider the value of gathering physically together in a space such as a “brick and mortar” school or other physical learning environment that through the experience, it has superior power and influence to change and expand our knowledge and world views. In the article “The Crisis of Education” H. Arendt discusses social and political challenges of the education system and the continuing decline in education standards. She highlights the loss of authority in education as being a significant point of concern for learning. We live in a modern world that emphasizes personal freedom and autonomy and questioning authority has become second nature to use. Arendt emphasizes that education needs to have authority and needs to be conservative at the same time it must be revolutionary. Education is about a fragile mix of protecting old ideas, theory’s and practices and the sharing of new ideas and thoughts. (2) This emphasizes the importance of a physical environment where “teachers” become the facilitators of learning. There is plenty of opportunity for self-learning in the technological world, but autonomously we may fail to guide ourselves to higher learning.

In Masschelein and Simon’s article *In Defence of the School*, they paint a picture that the idea of ‘making of school’ both the physical space with classroom desks and a chalkboard and the emotional space for teaching are crucial for learning. Schools allow for students to disconnect from their families, socioeconomic status and other aspects of life and enter into a new world of thought. (3) The elements of suspension of beliefs, attention, authority and discipline were also aspects of education that were modeled and present in the classroom with professor Masschelein. At a first glance some students might observe Masschelein as an overly authoritative presence with strict rules that include, zero cellphone use and not leaving the room during lectures. But, upon a deeper exploration, one would experience a teacher that was very present, physically, intellectually and mentally. His deep love for the topic of learning and the importance of students and teachers being present created a deep and memorable learning event.

The impact and importance of being present both physically and mentally to actually experience the ‘making of school’ was also observed in the viewing of the film *Afterschool*. The film maker Antonio Campos follows an eighteen-year-old boy at an Elite school who spends most of his free time and time during class browsing the web. The film follows this student as he struggles with his web addiction to pornography and social media and navigates a detached education system that does not enforce or protect his education in any way. (4)

The matter of being present to learning is nearly impossible if students are scrolling between different worlds and realities. It can happen so quickly the allure of a world of distractions at one’s finger tips. Distraction and lack of presence in the *making of school* can certainly happen without the use of technology. Our minds naturally wonder and, the delicate dance of teacher and student in the present moment can be the key to allowing the freedom of learning to occur. Science does tell us that multi-tasking is not something our brains are good at. If we sit in a classroom with our phones and read emails or otherwise, it competes naturally with the attention required for learning and impairs cognitive ability. (5)

The cultivation of presence is a primary pillar of learning in much of Eastern Philosophy. The author, scholar, poet and eastern philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh is an example of a teacher dedicated to the idea that presence for both teacher and student, is the key to learning. “The best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment” (-Thich Nhat Hanh). The practice of becoming present has also been called mindfulness. Hanh’s teaches that through mindfulness, we learn to live in the present moment. He launched the *Wake Up Schools* program training teachers to bring more presence to the classroom through he teaching mindfulness practices. (6)

The pedagogy of mindfulness is outlined in many of Hanh’s books including *Happy Teachers Change the World* (7) a book that for specifically examines the important relationship of both teacher and student to being present in the classroom for learning to occur. The book focus on

practices and techniques such as meditation, breathwork, and becoming aware of our senses as a means to bring connectedness, presence and focus to the learning environment.

Mindfulness and its pedagogical applications to academia has been widely studied. One study at the University of Connecticut found that teachers and students that were taught the skills of mindfulness and meditation showed a significant increase in attention and observation skills. (8) Another study at the University of Queen's in Canada found that students that were taught skills for becoming more present experienced what they called 'deeper learning' and felt calmer and more relaxed in the classroom setting. (9)

The experience of becoming fully present in the classroom during Professor Perullo's Epistomology classes were also an experience one could be described as deep learning. We were guided through a lesson that brought awareness and attention to wine through our different senses. We were asked to release our preconceived ways of knowing wine and instead were offered to experience wine through the lens of art, music and creative writing. Although Perullo does not describe his exercises as practices in mindfulness these practices also had the outcome of bringing attention and presence to our senses and the present moment. This experience was one that left me feeling expanded, present, connected to everyone involved with this process as well as creatively inspired.

Historically philosophers such as Plato did not acknowledge the significance that our senses have on our knowledge. Smell and taste were senses thought to only satisfy a basic need and had nothing to do with knowledge. In both experiencing and understanding the benefits of awakening our senses to the present moment as a means to inspiring learning, it is fair to say that there are many different ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge. Being in tune to the present moment with touch, hearing, smell, taste and emotions are all relevant sources of knowledge. More modern philosophers whose ideas about acquiring knowledge from all of our senses can be discovered in the book *Taste as Experience* by philosopher Nicola Perullo. (10) Perullo highlights the writing of Belgian writer Amelie Nothomb who believes in the strong link between sensuality and

intelligence. She writes “There has always been a large group of imbeciles opposing sensuality to intelligence. They inhabit a vicious circle: they deny themselves any extravagance to exalt their intellect, and the result is they diminish their intellect.” (10) (11)

Allowing growth and knowing to be something that is experienced with our entire body allows us to cultivate curiosity as part of a process while not knowing what will happen.

In our world when discussing school and learning there are topics that usually fall into the categories of academic or non-academic or one might even dare to say smart and not smart. The academic side in charge of math and sciences while the non-academic involving the arts. Sir Kenneth Robinson a British author and international advisor on education shared his ideas about learning and intelligence on the Ted stage by say “...true intelligence is diverse, dynamic and involves different disciplinary ways of seeing things.” (12)

Education that is experiential and facilitates learning in diverse ways engages our senses enhancing our ability to understand at a deeper level. Creating Art and experiencing Art is another example and can also be used as teaching strategy. Art can be a tool for learning mindfulness and presence. Research conducted at the University of Southern Connecticut taught business students’ skills on becoming present through meditation and, were brought to museums and were silently encouraged to reflect on the *felt* experience of art. It was found that while business education usually overlooks the need for developing student’s self-awareness and their reflective mindset, skills that have the capability for more embodied learning. Art as a pedagogical tool had the ability to increase student’s perceptual awareness as well as the skills involved with contemplation and divergent thinking. (13)

As we connect back to the location of Wild Willow organic farm, we can imagine an optimal learning environment where students anxiously arrive and find their seat. As the last student takes a seat the instructor offers a brief breathwork practices that allows students to become more present to the current environment. The teacher then asks each student to share how they are currently feeling and why they decided to come to the class. Creating space in the classroom to get

a sense of the emotions and energy of the group will help the teacher navigate the lesson and know what students needs are as well as bring a felt sense of care to the room. The teacher discusses the itinerary for the week and shares the rule of no cellphone use in the learning space. The class is called 'Cooking as Experience' and focuses on bringing attention to the present moment through our senses.

Students begin by participating in a silent walk around the farm. They are encouraged to stay curious to the sounds, sensations and emotions they experience. The group gathers together to share their experience of their silent walk. Students speak of the sound of bees, the squishing sound their boots make in the damp soil, the noticing of the tiny aphid nibbling on a leaf of cabbage, the earthy smells coming from the compost, they are surprised by aliveness and vibrant colors of the fruits and vegetables. They also share memories and emotions that came to mind about spending time in their grandmother's garden as a child.

The next activity could involve the experience of taste. Students are encouraged to walk through the garden and harvest a vegetable that they remember eating as a child. With a partner they take turns sharing a food memory that this vegetable inspires. Students are then guided back to the cooking area where they begin their cooking instruction. Their class involves instruction with attention to sound, taste and the deep stories and memories that foods carry. Upon completing their recipes, the students gather at the community table to share the meal they have prepared. Before they begin to eat the teacher, offers a moment of contemplation with the following questions: How many people do you think were involved in bringing the ingredients of this meal to this table? If you also include the animals, plants, insects, worms, and microorganisms that had a role in the life of this food how many would there be? How far back in time does the life of this food go? Where did the carbon, and the hydrogen, of this food begin? How old then is this food?

I imagine the rest of the week on the farm would continue with various sensory whole-body learning activities. The activities would teach on topic such as nutrition, cooking, gardening and

wellbeing. All learnings would involve creative ways of becoming present to senses and emotions. Students would also be encouraged to share and connect.

There is still much debate on the advantages of physical spaces for learning and the making of schools. However, the philosophies of learning and education provided here provide clarity around the notion of the significance of an education system that facilitates learning through experience. This includes engagement of all senses, the significance of presence, gathering in a physical space and engaging emotions. I argue that an education system that offers this needs to be preserved for the needed healing and growth in ourselves, society and the planet. How we can do that in a pandemic will require innovation but most of all, if it is temporarily not possible, we must maintain the recognition of its importance if and when we can return to its benefits.

“What can educators do to foster real intelligence? We can attempt to teach the things that one might imagine the earth would teach us: silence, humility, holiness, connectedness, courtesy, beauty, celebration, giving, restoration, obligation, and wildness.”- David W. Orr

## References

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