

Project Proposal: Experience-based Learning
Hannah Stern

My education in the United States has been based upon one of the more unusual aspects of the American school system, namely the ability to receive an education outside of the traditional school system through homeschooling. There are many options that Americans have to choose from when it comes to education, ranging from public schools to private schools and even home education. Homeschooling is in many ways unique to America and is growing increasingly popular, with a current estimated 1,275,000 children being educated at home.

When encountering home education for the first time, many people are puzzled as to what the motives for homeschooling could be. There are as many reasons for homeschooling as there are children educated at home, but the most common reasons include religious beliefs, lack of a good public school in the area, special needs (i.e. a child with a learning disability or a special talent), or a desire to spend time together as a family. There are also several different approaches to home education; these range from very structured, text-book based learning to long-distance courses to “unschooling” or child-directed learning.

There were many considerations that went into my family’s decision to homeschool; one of the main reasons was the amount of traveling we did which created a need for flexibility. Some families choose to facilitate all of the learning at home. However, my family was closely associated with a group of about 100 families that all homeschooled their children. This gave us the option of taking classes with other homeschoolers and being part of a theatre company, as well as other groups.

Experiential learning has played an important role in my education. Defined, experiential learning is learning through reflections on doing and is often contrasted to rote or didactic learning. As Aristotle once said, “for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Another way to describe it is that experience-based learning is making discoveries and experimenting with knowledge firsthand instead of reading or hearing about other’s experiences.

I have benefited from experience-based learning in several ways. Most fundamentally, experience-based learning gave me a high level of ownership and engagement in my education. Learning was not something imposed on me. I was not a passive bystander in my education but rather an active participant. This engagement led to intellectual curiosity and a passion for my studies; I found many different subjects to be interesting and approachable. It also made concepts and subjects that would otherwise have been boring meaningful and accessible. Because I was so involved in the learning and it was tangible, I was able to immerse myself in a way that I never could have if I were just passively receiving information. Finally, learning experientially means looking at a subject from various sides. It has therefore shown me how to approach things from different angles. Because of experience-based learning, I gained much more from my

lessons than just the ability to retain information. I also acquired tools that have been useful outside of a school setting, such as creativity and enthusiasm for a subject.

Experience-based learning helps achieve several overall educational goals that I believe are important to society. Naturally, an education should provide the student with a diversity of facts and knowledge. Moreover, skills that an education should instill in a student are ones that will foster success outside the classroom. This includes intellectual curiosity, creativity, and the ability to make discoveries and experiment with knowledge firsthand, all of which are fostered by experiential learning.

Hands-on activities in the classroom foster intellectual curiosity and engage children. It is generally accepted in the U.S. that interactive classroom activities lead to a higher absorption of information. A child involved in the learning process gains a certain level of ownership of their education. This is because when the child is involved in the process of creating the experience, part of the responsibility rests with the student. This responsibility gives the child practice with analytical and decision-making skills. Experiential learning is a powerful tool for awakening a child's curiosity and teaching students different approaches to learning.

An example from my education that could easily be applied to a classroom setting is our study of history. When studying history we approached the time period in question from different aspects and made it as hands-on as possible. This meant reading the literature of that time period and studying the art, science, religion, philosophy, economy and culinary traditions of the time. Our readings were always augmented with hands-on activities like performing plays from the period, cooking dishes and playing games characteristic of the time, sewing and wearing costumes as well as going to historical fairs and reenactments. By exploring the time period in such depth, we were then able to analyze the ways in which historical trends have contributed to the development of civilization and shaped the world we live in today. This sharply contrasts with traditional ways of teaching history, which tend to merely focus on historical facts and dates.

There are many ways to use hands-on activities for the study of history (and other subjects) in a Chinese classroom. For example, if children were studying China's Golden Age, one of the hands-on activities that could be done is making paper. Students could also try their hand at writing poetry typical of the period. Afterwards, they would be asked to discuss how the invention and production of paper actually contributed to China's Golden age, etc. These are just two of many possibilities.

Based on my contact with the Chinese school system, this method of teaching is not yet widely employed, and this points to a fundamental difference between the American and Chinese education systems. Generally speaking, rote memorization and didactic learning are encouraged in the Chinese school system, and few hands-on activities are included in the curriculum. This produces students who have a vast store of memorized knowledge and facts but often lack the ability to discover new information and to synthesize new, creative ideas. The U.S. school system, on the other hand, tends to encourage students to develop their own ideas and opinions. Along with acquiring

knowledge and facts, students are supposed to examine their own ideas and opinions and learn to do research to test or challenge them. The benefit of this is that facts change over time but how to learn doesn't, thus knowing how to find and use information is often considered more important than the information itself. Experience-based develops these sorts of skills in children. Rather than just reading a book about a period in history and obtaining one person's opinion, experiential learning encourages students to do their own research, get experience of that time period and then synthesize that information in order to produce something.

While my background with experiential learning has taken place in a homeschool setting, many classrooms in traditional school settings are increasingly incorporating experience-based learning into their curriculums. This is because of the creative thinking and problem solving abilities that this method fosters. Creative problem-solvers are in high demand in the business world in order to address the ever-increasing problems we face. Experience-based education is an important and emerging trend in the United States.

I believe the most clear and effective way to introduce and explain these ideas is through Power Point presentations, photographs, and concrete examples of activities. I have many photographs from my elementary and high school education, including several from classes with other homeschoolers, which exemplify the sorts of activities experience-based learning can include.