

# What is Experiential Education?

by Steve Chapman, Pam McPhee, and Bill Proudman

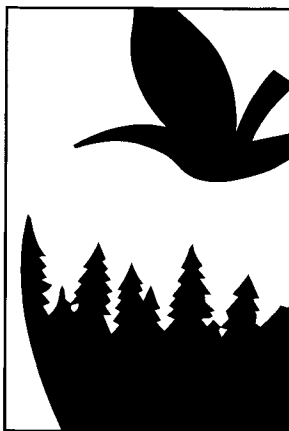
**Editor's Note:** How many times have I been asked the "What is experiential education?" question by a person unfamiliar with the field, only to find myself looking at my feet in a paralyzed state before finally coming up with some sort of circuitous answer which inevitably starts with the comment that experiential education is not easy to define in a few words. Yes, there are whole books written on the topic, but the questioner is not typically looking for a book, just a straightforward answer. As editor of the *Journal*, I would often like to say, "here, just take a look at this brief article." But when has there been an article in the *Journal* which deals with this? I have to go all the way back to a 1981 essay by Laura Joplin titled "On Defining Experiential Education" (Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 17-20). I find it hard to believe that nothing has changed in over a decade—are experiential educators avoiding basic definitional questions? I wonder; I have not seen a direct attempt to address this topic come across my editor's desk in five years.

Who should be writing this sort of essay? My answer is "each and every experiential educator." But that is not practical for the *Journal*. So where does one start? Surely not with those who use lots of long and hard-to-follow academic words; they would likely confuse my naive questioner. If things have changed,

maybe one should search beyond familiar authors who have written at length? Yet, it seems it should be people with a good deal of experience in the field, and people who are reflective of what they are doing and why, at least this seems a sensible start if one is asking that the subtleties of the definitional question be dealt with in a short space. Moreover, it seems highly unlikely, given the history, that just one answer could or would ever satisfy everyone.

This sort of reasoning led Karen Warren, the publications representative on the AEE board, and I to approach a number of people with the request to tackle this question—experienced and reflective practitioners who have not written on the topic previously. We were not asking for ultimate answers, but just a willingness to take on the challenge of re-opening the

question with their personal thoughts and feelings. The following three essays comprise the initial response. There are many other perspectives, but hopefully these efforts will provide some valuable ideas and re-open the debate. The field can not afford to avoid this issue if it is to evolve and develop in relation to the rapid social and educational changes that confront us all. Comments and follow-up responses are welcomed from any and all readers!



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## What is the Question?

by Steve Chapman

People sometimes ask me for a definition of "experiential education." One would think that, as the director of a department of that name and a practitioner for about fifteen years, I should be able to answer those questions easily. The truth is, I can't. It isn't really that I don't know. I'm just not always sure what people are asking. Rather than try to define experiential education, I will just reflect on my own experience. My background is in school programs, but perhaps my experi-

ence in that arena can also shed light elsewhere. Several commonly asked questions help frame my thoughts.

"Oh, experiential education! That's ropes courses, right?" Experiential education can not be understood simply as a particular set of activities. Yes, outdoor adventures, new games and ropes courses all are linked to "experiential education" in the minds of many people. Yet, as valuable as backpacking, rock

climbing, canoe trips and ropes courses are, they comprise only a small part of the potential arena. Cross-cultural homestays, community service projects, urban adventure programs, work-study programs, internships, cooperative education approaches in the classroom—all these (along with much more) provide great opportunities for students to become directly and enthusiastically engaged in real learning.

*“What is it your students learn out there?”* Sometimes people want a definition of experiential education to be presented in terms of content, just as science, history and math usually are. Actually, experiential approaches are better understood in terms of style, and any topic can be explored using such techniques. Whatever is being studied, the point is to place students into a different, more direct relationship with the material. Students are actively engaged—exploring things for themselves—rather than being told answers to questions. Although practitioners often cite their particular favorite outcomes (i.e., development of self-confidence), experiential approaches are not restricted to a specific set of goals or domains.

*“Students need to be active rather than passive. Is that what you mean?”* That depends on what you mean by active. Typical field trips seldom represent what I am talking about. When students are asked to absorb seemingly irrelevant information while walking through a zoo, their senses may become just as dulled as if they were completing classroom worksheets. Active mode refers to how the students’ minds are used, not their legs. I can as easily run a bogus program in the woods as I can in the classroom, carefully explaining the workings of the world to everyone around me.

The adventure aspect of activities is not necessarily the focus. One issue for me is precisely the degree to which many people currently do equate experiential education with various high adrenaline, high challenge, highly physical ventures. Perhaps the role of adventure programs—Outward Bound and the like—in the most recent surge of the experiential education movement

accounts for this confusion. Group initiative problems, wilderness programs, rock climbing and ropes courses are especially fun and motivating. But if used thoughtlessly they become mere diversions—fun, but educationally pointless.

*“I’ve heard experiential education deals with material that is more ‘real.’ Is that the key?”* Well, it comes closer than defining it by content or by the mere presence of adrenaline. But what does ‘real’ mean in this context? Surely simulations are not out of bounds just because they are fake. It is the question under consideration that must be real; students must perceive it to be relevant, and the activity must provide a worthy vehicle for approaching the issue.

The truth of a metaphor is not measured literally, after all. Getting a group over a specially constructed “challenge wall” is a common and effective initiative problem, but how many of us must actually help someone over a fifteen-foot plywood wall on our way to work each morning? Similarly, a mock trial can be a great example of an experiential approach, though the question may be about a fictional circumstance (i.e., “Is Jack, in the novel *Lord of the Flies*, guilty of murder?”)

*“If experiential education is supposed to be student-centered, what is the role of the teacher?”* The description that works best for me is “providing minimum necessary structure.” In other words, the teacher’s role is to give just enough assistance for students to be successful, but no more. If the teacher carries out the role properly, students will accomplish more than they ever could on their own. Yet if the approach is truly student-centered, they may not be aware the teacher had a role at all.

Another critical role for the teacher is to help students make connections. I think most of us would agree that students must eventually understand the point of an experience for it to be educative, and that point seldom emerges fully developed on its own. Some argue that the teacher’s primary role is to guide an effective “de-briefing” discussion (Kjol & Weber, 1990). Getting full value from even the best metaphors

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requires closure, and that takes a good guide.

Others suggest that the leader's principal function is to create the experience in the first place. With some combination of insight, skill, and input from the group, the best facilitators can create experiences so analogous to real life situations that the key points are bound to emerge from within the group's discussion (Gass, 1991). But whether through actively leading a good closing discussion, or by crafting a group's activities so carefully in the first place that the group will naturally process them well, the role of the leader in helping students make connections is essential.

Finally, a fundamental role of the teacher is to be intentional—to have an objective and then to teach toward it. Ropes courses, new games, and tent-camping are just tools, like lectures and textbooks; they do not themselves represent the goal. I like to compare the teaching process to setting a trap. The ultimate goal is to create a situation from which "springs" some revelation—some meaningful insight—for the students. A thoughtful, intentional approach allows the teacher to recognize and develop many seemingly unrelated elements of a course or experience.

For me, the art of teaching has much to do with the ability to develop many disparate pieces of experience—to bring them into place while resisting the temptation to make the points for students. Only when many elements are put together can the trap be sprung. Then all the pieces suddenly fall into place and students have important insights—they suddenly "get it." The teacher must understand the point of activities in these terms in order to set a good trap, and must intentionally teach toward that climactic moment.

*"Are there particular arenas in which experiential techniques are especially effective?"* Though my own schooling suggested otherwise, my adult life has shown that there are many right ways to do most things. Solutions to problems are right if they work. Of course, they are better if they are more efficient or more elegant or otherwise more satisfactory, but there are multiple ways to be right. I believe this principle should lie at the heart of experiential education.

In terms of achieving particular outcomes, I think experiential techniques are especially effective when

trying to address community issues. For example, mainstream schooling offers plenty of practice in competition, and until recently, the more cooperative approaches have been largely ignored. If I want to encourage an understanding of the power of cooperation, I must have my students do more than discuss it. They must experience it—feel it. For many of my students, the experience of what real community feels like has been more important than their experience of adventure or personal accomplishment.

An example comes to mind. A ninth grade boy was struggling with muscular dystrophy, yet wanted very much to join his peers on the five-day backpacking trip that serves as our upper school's orientation program. He did so, but walked with such an unusual gait that the leader asked him quite often if she could check his feet for blisters. The extra attention embarrassed him, but a peer suggested that every

time this student took off his shoes and socks to check, they all should do the same. It was an important moment. I imagine that for this student, his personal accomplishment reigns supreme. But for another in the group, that spontaneous act of understanding and com-

passion represented the most significant event of the trip.

*"So.... What is experiential education?"* It is an approach which has students actively engaged in exploring questions they find relevant and mean-

ingful, and has them trusting that feeling as well as thinking, can lead to knowledge. Teachers are cast as coaches, and are largely removed from their roles as interpreters of reality, purveyors of truth, mediators between students and the world. They are asked to believe that students can draw valid and meaningful conclusions from their own experiences. Learning in this way ultimately proves more meaningful than just relying on other people's conclusions about others' lives.

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# Asking the Question

by Pam McPhee

Of all things that might be true about experiential education the one thing that is unassailably true is that you can't find out by defining it. - John Huie

Having started with this disclaimer, let me follow with descriptive events, experiences that eventually led me on a personal quest... "What is experiential education and what is the use of defining it anyway?"

I have often wondered how I could spend an average of five hours a day for 180 days in front of the same teacher and not remember who he or she was? So maybe elementary school was a while ago. How about the fact that the average college course and minimum studying time consists of 126 hours and I can not even list the courses I had in college. Contrast this with the fact that I can remember many of the different influences that the Greeks and Romans had on modern day architecture—thanks to a trip with Janny Campbell to New York City to photograph the buildings (two trips to be exact because we forgot to put film in the camera the first time). Or that in fourth grade I understood what propaganda was by bringing in empty cereal boxes from the breakfast table. Now don't get me wrong, I do not want to equate memory with learning. However, I do want to stress the impact of "direct first-hand learning opportunities" (Dewey, 1938).

If you have not read *Experience and Education* by John Dewey (1938), do it. It won't give you many answers but it sure will start you thinking about what constitutes an "educational" experience. And that is the point. If we do not ask ourselves the question, "What is experiential education?" we are in peril of

being "technicians implementing techniques rather than educators who teach through the understanding of their trade" (Peters, 1970). The definition is not the answer, rather it is the asking of the question that encourages learning. It is important to see knowledge in not only a consumptive manner, i.e., "if I learn this, how will it help me get the things I want," but also in terms of the intrinsic appreciation of knowing:

And we know that of all the issues in education, the issue of relevance is the phoniest. If life were as predictable and small as the talkers of politics would have it, then the relevance would be a consideration. But life is large and surprising and mysterious, and we don't know what we need to know... A student should know that he (sic) needs to learn everything he can, and he should suppose he needs to know more than he can learn. (Wendall Berry)

The risk of defining experiential education is that once done, the definition is available for those to regurgitate it at will—a written sentence copied and lost between the yellowing pages of one's notebook. The value is the asking of the question, the ever elusive attempt to understand, not solely to better learners and educators, but for the excellence that is intrinsic to it.

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# Experiential Education as Emotionally-Engaged Learning

by Bill Proudman

I believe that experiential education, as promoted by the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), is at an exciting crossroads. We must choose between refining our craft as a unique teaching and learning

process that is applicable in many learning environments, and defining experiential education as simply a set of activities (usually active and taking place outdoors). My purpose in this essay is to argue for the pro-

cess-oriented path. It is time to shift our educational paradigm to be more inclusive of multiple cultures and perspectives. One place to start is in examining what experiential education is not.

Experiential education is not simply “learning by doing.” Living could be described as learning by doing. Often, this is not education, but simply a routinized, prescribed pattern of social conditioning that teaches us to stay in pre-determined boxes for fear of being labeled as outside of the norm.

I have grown tired of listening to professionals describe their “experiential stuff” in terms of what their students are doing, which usually means doing something outdoors with an emphasis on physical adventurous activity. Experiential education is not simply a matter of replacing flag football in the physical education curriculum with a ropes course. The introduction of a tool such as a ropes course does not guarantee that the learning will be experiential. I have seen good educators make flag football more “experiential” than a ropes course.

Good experiential learning combines direct experience that is meaningful to the student with guided reflection and analysis. It is a challenging, active, student-centered process that impels students toward opportunities for taking initiative, responsibility and decision-making. An experiential approach allows numerous opportunities for the student to connect the head with the body, heart, spirit and soul. Whatever the activity, it is the learning and teaching *process* that defines whether a learning experience is experiential. Further, an experiential learning process can be conducted almost anywhere and with any type of activity or learning medium.

Experiential education engages the learner emotionally. Students are so immersed in the learning that they are often uninterested in separating themselves from the learning experience. It is real and they are a part of it. Rather than describing experiential learning as “hands-on” learning (an insensitive and offensive term connoting that one must have hands to learn experientially), maybe we should think of experiential education as emotionally-engaged learning.

### **Experiential Education as a Set of Relationships**

The experiential process can best be described as a series of critical relationships: the learner to self, the learner to teacher, and the learner to the learning envi-

ronment. All three relationships are important and are present to varying degrees during the learning experience. These relationships are two way and highly dynamic.

*Learner to Self:* This relationship involves the learner making sense out of the experience. The learner controls this outcome and is ultimately responsible for the learning and growth that takes place. The learner processes new experiences, information, and values within a personal and holistic framework. The opportunity for guided and structured reflection is a valuable element of the experiential learning process. Examples of this learner to self relationship in action include activities such as structured journaling and small group processing that specifically ask the student to engage in self-reflection and introspection.



*Learner to Teacher:* This relationship is a crucial one, both because of the learner-teacher interaction and because the teacher is responsible for designing and creating the parameters within which the learners will interact with their learning environment. The

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teacher's role is to define the boundaries to ensure a safe learning environment (physically, emotionally, intellectually) within which a student can become totally immersed. The teacher's role is to provide opportunities for the student to make sense of their experiences and to fit them into their ever-changing views of self and the world. It is an atmosphere where mistakes are expected as part of the learning process.

As Keith King (a past AEE Practitioner of the Year) has often said, “the teacher is responsible to, rather than for, their students.” The teacher's primary role is that of problem poser, mediator and coach.

For example, I once designed and led a student-planned eighth grade class trip where the students worked with one another throughout the course of the school year to decide where the five-day trip would go and what it would involve. I first articulated a series of planning guidelines consisting of elements such as mandatory activity components (e.g., need to incorporate service, physical adventure); budget guidelines; and a planning schedule outlining steps and issues to be decided. Over the school year, small sub-committees worked on and reported back to the class about the trip. The class worked within this framework of guidelines and were accountable for the various deadlines prescribed within the planning outline. The planning process itself became as meaningful and signifi-

cant a learning experience as the trip. Once the trip guidelines were articulated to the students, I simply acted as a mediator and coach.

*Learner to Learning Environment:* The learning environment is a broad concept that includes the content material being covered, the people and their relationships directly and indirectly involved with the learner, and the surrounding physical environment. Each context looks very different depending on who the learner is. This relationship involves multiple layers all interacting in differing ways and intensities with the learner. It is obvious that different learners have different learning experiences. Take for instance the varying reactions students have to the same learning environment.

During a recent urban exploration, a group of Euro-American adult students, who were doing a neighborhood investigation in a predominantly African-American section of the city, were invited into a church where they experienced a cultural celebration that was different from their own. The students reacted differently to the environment partly as a result of their own social conditioning and their perceived stereotypes previously developed about that culture. It led to interesting follow-up discussions amongst the students that allowed their differing perceptions to re-question their cultural stereotypes and attitudes, as well as resulting in powerful discussions on American racism.

Too often teachers are so focused on the activity (and their own learning experiences as a student in that activity) that they blindly assume their students will have similar experiences. Besides being myopic, it also is a culturally-biased perspective that negates other cultural and personal interpretations. As experiential educators involved with process, we need to be ever aware of how our own cultural conditioning colors our interpretations of other's learning experiences.

## Experiential Education as Methodology

Simple participation in a prescribed set of learning experiences does not make something experiential. The experiential methodology is not linear, cyclical or even patterned. It is a series of working principles, all of which are equally important, and must be present to varying degrees at some time during experiential learning. These principles are required no matter what activity the student is engaged in or where the learning takes place.

*1. Mixture of Content and Process:* Often, experiential educators are considered to be too process-ori-

ented at the expense of content and/or theory. We need a conscious mixing of content and process. Theory is the critical glue that holds powerful learning experiences together. Edward Demming, the management guru who transformed Japanese corporations, once said that experience was meaningless without theory.

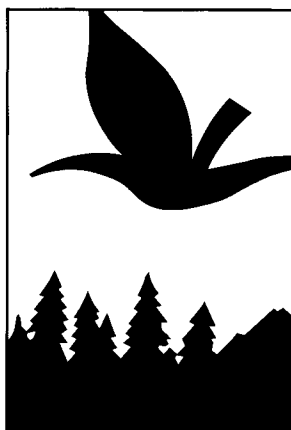
*2. Absence of Excessive Teacher Judgment:* If the teacher truly believes in the experiential process, the teacher will create the safe working boundaries for students and then get out of the way. Responsibility cannot be nurtured in the learner if the teacher creates or expects the learner to learn for the teacher's (or someone else's) sake. While this does not mean that students get whatever they want, I am advocating that within the teacher-defined boundaries, students should have full run of the premises.

Each person is a product of his or her cultural environment. Each person is conditioned over time to react in certain ways to given situations. It is critical that teachers recognize the effects of their conditioning in order to allow students to have their own experiences minus teacher judgment.

As an example, I have experienced teachers excitedly telling students exactly where to place their hands and feet while on a climbing wall under the guise of helping the student succeed and "get to the top." But this approach raises several critical questions: Whose experience is it? Whose definition of success is being used? What is the goal of the activity for the student? How invested is the teacher in guaranteeing a certain student outcome? Too often, teachers allow their unconscious conditioning to interfere with opportunities for student self-discovery.

*3. Engaged in Purposeful Endeavors:* There needs to be meaning for the student in the learning. It needs to be personally relevant. The teacher works in the program design phase to identify opportunities for students to find meaningful interpretations of their experiences. This can be a daunting task for the educator as this means highly personalized instruction. However, the necessary paradigm shift here is to recognize the learner as a self-teacher, or to view a group of learners as providing mentoring and coaching for each other.

A workshop on valuing cultural diversity provides an example of engaging in purposeful endeavors. In this instance the students are given early opportunities to engage in one-to-one talking/listening dyads as a means to articulate their own personal goals after the workshop parameters are identified (the facilitators' assumptions about the workshop content, the group operating agreements, and the workshop goals). The dyad process gives students an opportunity to assess



what they wish to get from the experience in their own terms without critical feedback from the teacher or another student. Dyads give students the opportunity to be listened to, rather than to be questioned or evaluated by others.

**4. Encouraging the Big Picture Perspective:** Experiential methodology provides opportunities for the students to see and feel their relationships with the broader world. It opens doors to limitless relationships and develops in the students an appreciation, understanding and involvement with ideas, other people and environments that can be both similar and different from the students' own experiences. Students need opportunities to better understand and interact with complex systems and environments in order to understand first-hand the interconnectedness of all things and their place in the web.

For example, I recently worked with a group of educators and wanted to have them experience first-hand the ways in which persons who are members of under-represented segments of American society have to conform silently to the norms of the groups who have received preferential treatment from being on the up side of the power chart. Two volunteers were blindfolded for the duration of a problem-solving activity. The well-intentioned group generally ignored the two and simply "packaged" them for the purposes of completing the problem at hand. The two blindfolded members were not involved with planning, weren't asked to volunteer their ideas and opinions and, in the words of one of the sightless group members, were made to feel "stupid and worthless."

Following the experience, group members shared their feelings and perceptions. Light bulbs came on for many. The processing resulted in a powerful discussion about the obvious and subtle forms of institutional and internalized oppression around issues of gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity and class. It was a transformational moment for many in the group and acted as an invitation for the group to explore many of the personal ramifications of oppression.

**5. Teaching with Multiple Learning Styles:** David Kolb's experiential learning model is a good touchstone here (Kolb, 1976). Experiential learning is not simply the active, doing part. Rather, Kolb's model describes a learning cycle that emphasizes that for a person to learn experientially, a teaching routine must

include a cycle of all four learning styles: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

It makes sense that if experiential education professes to address the whole person, then it should teach in a routine that touches all four learning styles. Again, the implication is that experiential learning is not simply a process of adventurous physical activity with some discussion thrown in at the end.

**6. The Role of Reflection:** Piling one experience on top of a previous experience is really no different than the worst childhood nightmares of rote learning in school. The need to mix experience with associated content and guided reflection is critical. The dissonance created in this mixing allows the learner opportunities to bring the theory to life and gain valuable insights about one's self and one's interactions with the world at large.

**7. Creating Emotional Investment:** This element provides one of the major differences that I see between other forms of significant learning and what experiential educators often facilitate. I believe that any experiential learning model which does not recognize the importance of emotional investment diminishes its potential effectiveness for the learner in the long run. The process needs to engage the learner

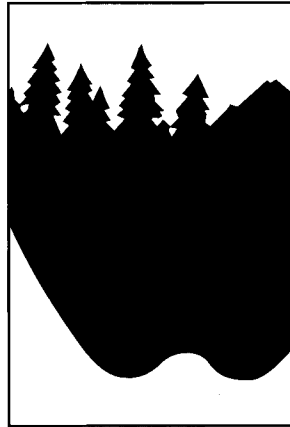
to a point where what is being learned and experienced strikes a critical, central chord within the learner. Learners' motivations to continue are no longer based on what they have to do because

someone or something else tells them they must. Rather, they are fully immersed and engaged in *their* learning experience.

The teacher's challenge is to create a physically and emotionally safe environment (in the eyes of the students) so as to encourage emotional investment. There must not be teacher judgment or a dismissal of the learner's feelings. It means creating an environment where people are fully valued and appreciated.

In working with groups, I make a regular practice to verbally remind students that they are in control of deciding how or even if they wish to be involved with the learning experiences. Giving students true power to make meaningful self-determined choices within a teaching/learning context is extremely important to validating each student as a competent, capable member of a group and developing a climate of mutual trust, respect and regard for each person.

Often, as a facilitator, I have to introduce and



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model this concept in a number of ways because individual's prior conditioning and experiences have negated their own inner voices. The net effect is that the atmosphere of trust and acceptance allows students the space to determine their own level of emotional investment.

8. *The Re-Examination of Values:* When students feel valued and fully appreciated, there is a greater likelihood that they will re-examine and explore their own values. The creation of a safe environment for students is initiated by the teacher through clearly defined educational parameters—group working agreements, activity learning goals, a big picture design plan, etc. Creating opportunities for personal transformational growth is a hallmark of meaningful experiential education.

9. *The Presence of Meaningful Relationships:* Learning is not an abstract process. It is fully embraced when it is experienced as a series of relationships—learner to self, learner to teacher, and learner to learning environment. Learning that takes place without reference to relationships is not experiential as it does not allow learners an opportunity to see how they fit into the bigger picture.

10. *Learning Outside of One's Perceived Comfort Zone:* A learner often needs to be challenged in order to be stretched by a new experience. While experiential learning need not start from a place of discomfort, learning is enhanced when students are given the opportunity to operate outside of their own perceived comfort zones. By comfort zone, I am referring not only to the physical environment but also to the social envi-

ronment (i.e., being accountable for one's actions and owning the consequences).

## In Summary

Experiential education is transformational. A well-conceived and well-led experiential learning endeavor does not just happen to the student. Meaningful education is not something that can be easily packaged. While society tempts many educators to market a cookbook approach, I believe that experiential educators, like all good educators, are artists using a palette of tools and abilities that are ever expanding and changing. As artists, it is dangerous to ever become complacent about how we define and perform our work.

Experiential educators need to continue to grapple with the question of just what is experiential education and similarly, what is good teaching. Let's continue to push the edges of our emerging profession. Let's also recognize that if we truly subscribe to the idea of life-long learning, then our understanding and definition of experiential education will also change and expand.

I am reminded of the simple phrase "the best way to learn something is to teach it." Here's to all of our students who have given us, as teachers, the gift of continued learning. May our journeys continue to be enriched.

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