

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING DUALITIES IN REFLECTING LIFE EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows the intertwining of experiential learning, reflection of life events and motivation. It also reveals that crucial to reflection is being able to see the 'two selves' in the way memory recall transpires, which affects ones interpretation. Through the narratives of selected women leaders of a national women's organization in the Philippines, the dualities of self-meanings in ones self- reflection were clarified, which when deciphered, leads to better decisions and solutions to problems. The role of motivation is integrated as a significant push for action.

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on experiences and learning from them has been a general process and a usual track in education – informal or formal. Similarly and connectedly, experiential learning becomes part of the whole process. Experiential learning has always been associated with adult education, lifelong learning, self-directed and informal learning based on practical occurrences in life. Valuable lessons can be derived from all these. In fact, experiential learning has been a well-trodden area of research in adult education and community organizing. Adult experiences are most often shared through story-telling. Our childhood, whatever our nationalities are, somehow contains stories told by grandparents and/or older people we have encountered. In the Philippines, there is what is called, "*Mga Kwento ni Lola Basyang*" – translated as, *The Stories of Grandmother Basyang*, where at certain time of the day, children in the neighborhood would gather around the grandmother to listen to her stories. Stories are narrated as they are and as they come when conditions permit among adult friends, children, neighbors and relatives.

Stories, being sources of knowledge, when re-told can be part of learning, if we know how to make use of them. Beyond learning, they become community wisdom and village history. Stories and narratives go through reflections, remembering, recalling past experiences and most often end in extracting and culling out what lessons have been gained. It has become a pattern of inquiry in qualitative research to make respondents re-tell events, notice highlights, and cull out life lessons. Narrating life events legitimizes experiences as sources of knowledge and lay down kaleidoscopic visions of shared memories. Narratives vary depending on the specific focus in life we want to know. This article puts to fore narrations of women community leaders referred to here as the learners.

The study used the results of a SWOT analysis workshop and leadership orientation cum interview and narration and first-hand data put together as the data sources (DALUYONG, 2015). These were culled out basically through reflections. During the workshops, the community women leaders were allowed to do reflection, deep recall and consultation with their peers. The researchers aimed to explore these narratives, to get into their thoughts, impressions, and self-assessments of their experiences.

The paper, specifically, aims to:

1. Understand how DALUYONG (a national organization of rural women) women leaders see themselves, the transformation process from being homemakers to community leaders;
2. Weave and make sense of these narratives towards deciphering what make up for their happiness and well-being (which from the narratives could be two different things); and
3. Share a community/national development model that may provide some energy and insights for a more inspired and reconfigured work of DALUYONG.

ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: NARRATION, DUALITIES AND REFLEXIVITY

This section sets the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the study. Some themes are highlighted to show how they influence the analytical framework.

Learning is a process -

When one narrates, the subject undergoes a process of reflection. For Fenwick (2001), this puts the subject as the main actor in the process of life recall and making meaning of life events. In here, memories are surfaced and given new meanings based on ones interpretation, how they were able to see those experiences in the now context. Through reflection, the subject recalls and tries to remember events that occurred in one's past. Part of it is weighing or valuating the importance of what transpired and gauging the effect of those events in ones overall life situation. As reflection takes place, one cannot avoid recalling memories beyond ones own. Aside from self, families, friends and relatives, organizational and workplace memories come out as well.

Fenwick considers experiential learning as a "process of human cognition" (Fenwick 2001). She further defines 'cognition' as broadly similar to 'learning.' She sets the question then for us to think 'what manner of learning can be conceived that is not experiential.' Because Fenwick avers experience can be through deep thought (reflective) and awareness of body movements (kinesthetic), both conscious and unconscious, and overall dynamics of life events of the subjects.

Learning by Doing -

It creates new knowledge emanating from action-interactions of people (Dewey 1938). As early as 1938, John Dewey already broached the idea of 'learning by doing.' Linking experience and education, he believes in the 'hands on' approach and experiences can be sources of learning, but also avers that not all experiences educate. In order for learning to take place, the experience must have *continuity*, where the learner must know how to connect certain aspects of the new learning with what she/he already has. Secondly, there should be *interaction*. The learner should be actively engaging with his/ her environment checking lessons gained. This is Dewey's idea of coherence of experiences.

In Vince and Reynolds (2007), learning from organized groups can be managed. As one reflects, the possibility of encountering two levels of reflections and outcomes can appear. While one is reflecting on one's personal life, the group or organizational dynamics where the learner is involved, surface as well (Vince and Reynolds, 2007). The incorporation of reflecting on the organization provides the possibility of finding or discovering untapped unconscious, even emotional forces which the subjects never realized were part and parcel of the influencing factors in their lives.

In Gherardi and Poggio (2009), very clearly the stance of feminism as an approach to research is through narration of stories. They sat with women managers and allowed them to talk about the dynamics inside the organization they are in. As a tool of expression, narrative was very effective. The women participants in retrospect rolled out their stories, recalling, analyzing the past events related to their work, thought out the meanings for them of their respective experiences. For Gherardi and Poggio (2009, page 56) Narrating is a way of "re-appropriating experience," recalling and reconstructing to put together past events in one's life. By recalling, the subjects are given the opportunity to a renewed projection, interpretation, and making meanings. In essence, it becomes a "practice of transformation, reflection, reconstruction, recognition and re-structuration of the self" (Gamelli, 1995 in Gherardi and Poggio, 2009).

Fenwick (2001) likewise, inquires into how life experiences are understood. Gherardi and Poggio (2009) see this as the learner's interpretative perspectives. What they see, how they see them, inevitably entails meaning configurations of their own reflections.

Introspection during narration can result in deepening analysis of organizational dynamics, thus under covering grounded and hidden conflicts. These conflicts may not be the learner's own personal experience, but that of the organization's operational settings, possibly finding out organizational flaws. Recounting 'signs and traces' of events are pieces of puzzles that when put together by the narrator can give a complete picture. Findings of conflicts, pose threats and uncertainties. But on the other hand, these findings can commence a re-direction of how the organization will be run.

Learning and gendered leadership -

Leadership has been associated with the male functions, roles and competencies. But taking off from a feminist perspective of experiential learning, narration and reflexivity, we ensue experiences of women as not just personal and organizational roles. In learning by doing, gaining experiences with new knowledge, skills and

attitude, the female narrators are actually ‘re-designing their self-esteem’ (Piccardo 1998 in Gherardi and Poggio, 2009) as a person with value added to note. This new form of leadership is relational and constructive. It veers away from the ‘inborn’ nature of a leader. Rather, it considers leadership to possibly emanate from amongst co-workers, co-participants, co-members. Leadership in this way is something interpersonal, not individualistic.

Leadership is also a situated practice, meaning, it cannot be taken out of context. There has to be interactions, both verbally (whatever the language is) and physically. Interactions are not simply ‘transactional’, which mostly male leaders do, but ‘transformational’ where relationality is given weight, to promote positive interactions, trust, and collective ends. Gendered leadership shares power, exercises control by the group, not control over the group. Chodorow (1978 in Gherardi and Poggio, 2009) avers that women gained this capacity to relate and enhance affective skill thru primary socialization and communication with others whereby they are exposed to attending to listening, sharing stories and experiences, and expressing concerns naturally. These activities, across time, have become society’s expectations and socially-created assignments to women (e.g., child-rearing, physical and psychological family care, negotiating, settlement of conflicts and even finding building block solutions to problems. However, at the societal level, even organizational, they rarely practice these capacities, as most often, men are identified as leaders. The lack of opportunity to employ formal authority in an organization, for example, led women to adapt the strategy of feeling their way thru, as they anticipate reactions from others they relate with.

In some societies though, women leadership was more associated with spirituality and being religious leaders (like the *babaylans* in the Philippines). But the *babaylans*’ capacities overflowed beyond spirituality when they were also recognized as healers, shamans, seers, and community ‘miracle workers.’

Contradiction in realities in learning experiences -

Britzman (2003) explains the ‘contradictory realities’ in learning. She specifically used teaching as the direct experience observed and analyzed. She theorizes that when teachers teach, they are ‘shaped by their work’ and ‘shaping their work’ at the same time. Applying and associating this with other types of work, we can similarly say that the contradiction is in - how the processes of the work affect the worker (‘express something about the subjectivities of the worker’), and how the worker construct their working identities. Put in a different light, Britzman (2003) pursues that ‘learning to teach is like teaching itself’ - one transforms in the process of teaching, the ‘teachers construct themselves, while they are being constructed by others.’ It is like a process of becoming: a time of ‘formation and transformation.’

When we teach, it is not rooted on producing and imparting knowledge alone, but we are projecting a public image of ourselves. One is expected to be custodians – enforcing school’s rules, communicates textbook knowledge, gives grades to students, and manages discipline norms. Unseen are – the ways teachers translate the contents and their experiences, their creativity in innovating facilitation of understanding the subject matter, culling out and working out students’ concerns, and balancing the requirements of the curriculum and the teacher’s desire to impart ‘what it means to know’ (Britzman, 2003).

Adding our insights on Britzman’s thoughts, we would refer to this as *reflexivity in teaching* or the *dialectics of teaching*, where teachers undergo the spiraling process of teaching-learning-theorizing-teaching – and learning again, but as they undergo the spiral process, they elevate their status in terms of quality – in the way/s of teaching, the ways of being teachers, the content/s or substance of knowledge learned and shared.

ENGAGING OUR TWO MENTAL OPERATING SYSTEMS

In TED Talk 2010, Daniel Kahneman talked about ‘our two selves.’ This was of great interest to the researchers particularly in linking it with experiential learning, narratives and reflections. In his presentation, Kahneman surfaced the concepts of ‘the experiencing self’ and ‘the remembering self.’

In recalling one’s life story, one can talk of the ‘experiencing self’ which is re-living the present. One can also talk of the ‘remembering self’ that keeps the record of the story of his/her life. The remembering self tells the story through our memory. In telling a story, Kahneman (2010) emphasizes three elements that define it – *changes*, *significant moments* and *endings*. For him, endings are very important because they dominate the story, they are usually retained, hence, most remembered.

Kahneman in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), also talks of two mental operating systems which were originally proposed by two psychologists, Keith Stanovich and Richard West. System 1 operates much quickly,

with not much effort and sense of control. System 2 is done with more mental effort, like doing complex mathematical computations requiring more concentration before making a choice.

Juxtaposing them with the experiencing self and the remembering self, Kahneman views them as ‘System 1 relates with the experiencing self’; and ‘System 2 relates with the remembering self.’ System 1 is quick to express what it thinks is. As Kahneman would say, the experiencing self answers the query: “Does it hurt now?” On the other hand, associated with the remembering self, System 2 is not as quick to decide what is or how is, but it takes more effort to recall carefully what transpired, goes back to the stock of memories of the past, and answers the question: “How was it, on the whole?”

Juxtaposing further, when people try to recall past experiences, i.e., community engagements as an organizer, one’s life as an educator, a community development manager, a human resource specialist, an education development specialist, they recall in two ways, the ‘remembering self’ and the ‘experiencing self.’ The *remembering self* is the ‘story-teller’ when one recalls past experiences. Remembering entails narrating stories. What defines a story? For Kahneman, a story contains changes, significant moments, and endings. Emphasizing further, the importance of ‘endings’ in a story, when we recall thru our remembering self, we value much the ‘endings.’ This is the one that we remember, hence, the one that makes decisions.

Our insight on the matter, by linking it with experiential learning, memories recalled include what have been done and the learning from them – good or bad. But learning most often come in positive notes. Aware of the not so good experience, we try to cull out our learning from it and learning always comes as positive effects on one’s life. The ‘learning’ is realized as the ‘ending.’

The ‘experiencing self’ has no voice when we choose what decision to take. According to Kahneman (2010), “We don’t choose between experiences. We choose between memories of experiences.” To remind, it is the ‘remembering self’ that takes stock of memories.

So applying this to perceptions of ‘happiness’, Kahneman further clarifies, ‘the experiencing self’ sees ‘happiness’ as the moments of the experience, complications across process, how happily a person has lived and emotions felt over time. While ‘the remembering self’ talks about ‘how satisfied and pleased the person is when she/he recalls their lives.’ Hence, to emphasize Kahneman, we have to critically learn to decipher the distinction between ‘happiness of the experiencing self’ and the ‘satisfaction of the remembering self,’ if we need to use them for policy decision-making.

A STUDY OF LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RURAL WOMEN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

This paper uses Kahneman’s ‘two selves’ in analyzing the experiences, learning, happiness and satisfaction of certain organized rural women leaders in the Philippines. The women’s organization is called DALUYONG. It was organized in 2003 by the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), one of the oldest and biggest non-government organizations in the country, so far. Its scope cuts across 13 provinces, 58 municipalities/towns with 5,146 members.

Table 1. Scope of operations of DALUYONG

13 Provinces	Members	58 Municipalities (Towns)
Ifugao	302	3
Nueva Vizcaya	223	4
Nueva Ecija	106	5
Bataan	1,210	4
Cavite	201	4
Albay	18	5
Camarines Sur	450	6
Camarines Norte	300	4
Quezon	520	6
Marinduque	232	5
Camiguin	250	5
Negros Occidental	242	3
North Cotabato	1,092	4
TOTAL	5,146	58

Why study DALUYONG and look into its experiences –

The inclusion of DALUYONG in the study posits a form of theorizing, which is the ‘search for or making meanings’ emanating from real life experiences. This is a combination of critique, constructivism, and interpretative forms (Britzman, 2003). It is done largely thru narration of experiences, viewed as an advantage because even if lived experiences are not recoverable, they can be re-told thru ethnographic narratives (Brodkey, 1987). As Brodkey says, ‘ethnography is the study of lived experience.’

DALUYONG is eighteen (18) years old. It laid its foundations across thirteen (13) provinces, covering 58 municipalities, with 5,146 members. The expanse and extent of women organizing are amongst – farmers, fishers, traders, local and small entrepreneurs. After 18 years, the researchers wanted to know if the leaders (Executive Committee representing the provinces) are satisfied with their accomplishments and experiences, as a whole; and specifically, are they happy as women leaders.

The researchers sat down with seven (7) of the Executive Committee leaders (2 were absent). To start and reflect on their journeys, the participants were asked the question: Are you happy now as a woman – within the family, the organization, and the community and/or the country? This was done to sort of give the women leaders brief time to reflect on their journeys as community leaders.

In summary, the answers expressed were:

- (1) Empowered women - ‘Yes’ they are happy as ‘empowered women’ compared to when they were not members of DALUYONG. Now, they have broader and deeper knowledge about life in different aspects – socio-cultural context of women’s oppression and gender inequality; the complexities of the political situation of the country and its governance; and the economics of resources a country has, its usage and equitability of benefits to affect the poverty situation they are in, plus the others in similar case.
- (2) Awareness of women’s rights - They are now aware of their rights as women, in the context of their respective households, local-based organization, and the community.
- (3) Confident of their capacities - They are more confident of what they can do, especially as members and officers of their organization, representing their respective provinces to the Executive Committee. Most of them have been with DALUYONG for over 10 years. It is in DALUYONG that they have become more learned in terms of public speaking, engaging with officials in the local government when they have to raise their local issues in the community, and dealing with other organizations. They are now positive influence on others; a realization of how much their minds can reach (comprehensively), and able to link and synthesize multi-concerns like: poverty, environmental integrity, abuse of natural resources, corruption in governance, etc.
- (4) Citizenship - Contributing to the community in terms of identifying problems, finding solutions, e.g., family health and nutrition, food security; gender relations and counseling; coordinating with the church, school, youth and senior citizen-support activities.
- (5) Community recognition - Gained the respect and recognition of people in their respective barangays and other organizations.
- (6) Resource mobilization - They learned to make/write project proposals to start up social enterprises for DALUYONG members.

MEETING THE TWO SELVES –

Kahneman’s theory of the two selves and Brodkey’s search for meaning/s approach can be used in understanding the narratives from each woman-leader based on recalled experiences and how *Saemaul Undong* (South Korea’s successful community development model) served as inspiration and motivation.

In telling the story of looking back at past experiences, Kahneman explains that what we recall are memories of our experiences which the storyteller narrates. He emphasized the point that what really defines or gives identity and meaning/s to a story are: changes, significant moments and endings. These elements are found in the ‘remembering self’ rather than the ‘experiencing self’ because it is the former that holds the stock of memories. The latter is more aware of what exist in the present yet can recall the past.

The ‘remembering self’ and satisfaction –

So when asked if they are happy, the women leaders recall the memories of the changes that transpired in their lives – from being ordinary, not-so-knowledgeable housewives (according to them), or simply a farmer’s wife and mother to their children, extending unpaid labor, helping out in the farm to augment family food on the table, or a fisher’s wife selling fishes. If not sold, she dries and salts the fish for longer shelf life adding value to them. The recollection focusing on the transformation/changes in their lives were significant moments. From being silent, learning how to teach and organize other women, discussing community issues, engaging the local government, negotiating their needs, and tapping resources for community projects.

All the expressed themes mentioned above (i.e., empowerment, awareness of women's rights, confidence in one's capacities, citizenship, community recognition, and resource mobilization) are enormous changes and very significant moments in the women leaders' lives. It was their '*remembering self*' doing the recall. They were just happy to narrate the memories they had, like trainings, meetings, orientations, the knowledge and skills learned, the feelings of elation from getting recognition in their communities, and the feeling of empowerment.

But there seems to be a hanging question in their mind. Were they satisfied? Following Kahneman further, another element that defines a story is the ending. For these women, at the outset, empowerment could be the ending. As part of experiential learning, this ending dominated in their narratives.

The 'experiencing self' and happiness -

But is it really the end? Or is there something more for these women leaders? Apparently, we observed and looked deeper into the recent SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) results previous to the narration session. Noticeable are expressions of 'dissatisfaction' despite 'happiness.' Happiness and satisfaction are the expressed realities from stock memories of changes in the women's lives. These are their achievements. These are significant moments of being recognized in the community, memories of places they have been to, people they have met and projects they worked on, which contributed to economic gains. Despite expression of happiness of their past lives, there is dissatisfaction when they thought of the here and now. It is the experiencing self conveying this feeling.

In DALUYONG's case, happiness and satisfaction is experiencing and seeing solutions resolving existing concerns. Hence, the ending is yet to be realized. The ending seems to be never-ending because it is a moving target continuously rolling out. This is what the 'experiencing self' encounters in the present. In other words, one can be happy with good memories but may not yet be satisfied.

In matters of public welfare, banking on Kahneman's thought, "we should not mistake happiness as a substitute for welfare" (2003). DALUYONG's strategic goals of sustained growth and development and better quality of life are something for the 'experiencing self' to get. Decisions on social and public welfare, he is saying, should be based on what the 'experiencing self' sees.

In summary, the SWOT results were:

STRENGTHS: The national council and executive committee regularly meet; 85% of local formations still operating; strong links with local government units (LGUs); active in issue advocacy and lobbying; participating in conferences, seminars, trainings; has operating social enterprises but yet to enhance packaging and marketing aspects; accredited by the municipal and provincial government; can participate in LGU decision-making thru the local development councils.

WEAKNESSES: Wearing out of membership expansion; ageing leadership; no ready second-liners; low spirit and enthusiasm of some members; some field chapters stopped regular meetings; some members are unreachable (no more contact and update from DALUYONG chapters in the provinces of Negros Occidental, Cotabato, Camiguin, Ifugao, Nueva Vizcaya); overlooking the potential of resources available in the areas; certain policies need revisions, still weak in product promotion and market sustaining.

OPPORTUNITIES: access to participation in open planning and budgeting from barangay to regional levels thru the bottom-up-budgeting (BUB); passing into law of the Magna Carta for Women; chance to develop more gender and development champions; presence of financial network supportive of women's advocacies and projects (e.g., councilors, *barangay*/village captains, mayors, governors).

THREATS: non-readiness to climate change that can hit farm crops, properties and other resources; bureaucratic system that could deter processes of engagements with government; changes in administration may not favor flagship projects; negative effects of ASEAN integration.

DISSATISFACTION AND THE MOTIVATIONAL ELEMENTS

DALUYONG leaders are hoping for 'better quality of life' for their communities. However, there is a part in their overall reflection that spurs the 'low spirit and enthusiasm' causing frustrations and dissatisfaction as a result of unrealized goals and objectives. At this point, South Korea's Saemaul Undong (SMU), a successful community and national development model, was narrated to the women leaders. Infusing the Saemaul Undong's spirit of diligence, self-help and cooperation, in the context of South Korea's history of recovery from ground zero after the Korean War, the immediate response was remarkable.

Saemaul Undong (SMU) is one classic approach to rural development which first unfolded in South Korea, during the presidency of Park Chung Hee in the 1970s. Saemaul Undong is a New Village Movement launched by President Park in the 1970s. It is a community-driven development (CDD) program which highlighted people-centeredness. It harnessed people's participation with shared vision, shared burden, working together, making sure women participated. SMU's overall aim is to overcome endemic rural poverty in Republic of Korea (ADB 2012).

"The spirit of diligence is to promote healthy work ethics and to emphasize one's voluntary and active involvement in development activities. The spirit of self-help means choosing one's own work and taking responsibility of one's own life. The spirit of cooperation stimulates a sense of community which necessitates harmony and mutual help, not to mention its contribution to increased work efficiency" (Chung 2009).

The leaders responded with heightened interest and enthusiasm that led them to immediately pilot Saemaul Undong learning session in a *barangay* (village) in Marinduque province. The women in that village who participated in the session, inspired by the SMU sharing, immediately requested for a practical learning session on natural farming.

Reconnecting with the 'experiencing self', the intervention was the element to recharge, recoup the strength and dwindling spirit of women leaders, to search for that feeling of satisfaction from their community development efforts. It made them reflect and digress from a 'high-headed' to a 'down-to-earth' mindset, one of which is to return the savings culture among the members, as savings can be the seed of growth of the local economy.

The South Korean SMU experience posed as the lynchpin to the leadership's revival of spirit. The sharing on SMU was an 'aha' moment. It showed the leaders that their goals are achievable and provided valuable insights on the how-tos. The SMU gave them hope and encouragement

CONCLUSION

DALUYONG women leaders in their ten years of service have learned a lot from their experiences. They conveyed that they felt happy when they remembered their experiences as community leaders because there have been positive changes and significant moments in their lives where they gained knowledge, skills and respect from their communities. According to Kahneman's 'two selves', the 'experiencing self' expressed happiness felt at that moment.

On the other hand, DALUYONG women leaders also expressed some frustration and dissatisfaction when they reflected on their experiences because the realization of their organization's goals (i.e., improving the lives of their members and communities) have not yet been significantly addressed. The 'remembering self', according to Kahneman, keeps and recalls experiences as a life story which has three elements that define it – changes, significant moments and endings. The endings are very important because they dominate the story and are usually retained and most remembered. The story of DALUYONG women leaders says experiences which transpired still cannot provide the satisfaction they are looking for because the ending that they desire (i.e., realization of DALUYONG's goals) is still unrealized.

The SMU intervention served to motivate the weakening spirit of some DALUYONG members, which pushed them to commit more, regain their footing as they see clearer direction for the organization and achievability of DALUYONG's goals.

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