

William Shakespeare and Jacob Boehme's Learning Experiences – Experiential Learning and the Use of Allegory in the Search for a Better Self

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Abstract

This paper presents a brief transdisciplinary approach to employing Modern Experiential Learning Theory and Kolb's Learning Cycle to understand both William Shakespeare's (1564 c. – 1616) use of universal allegory in his sonnets and especially Sonnet 8 and his play *The Merchant of Venice* and Jacob Boehme's (1575 – 1624) visionary writings. Both writers sought to articulate finding one's place in life and the cosmos, what Alfred Adler (1870 – 1937) referred to in German as *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. This search for a better self is deeply evidenced by a feeling of Divine oneness as well as a strong connectedness with others.

Keywords: Experiential Learning Theory, Allegory, Shakespeare's Fair Youth and Dark Lady, Jacob Boehme, Adler's *gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

Expériences d'apprentissage à partir de William Shakespeare et de Jacob Boehme – L'apprentissage expérientiel et l'utilisation de l'allégorie dans la recherche d'un meilleur soi

Christopher Eriksson, PhD

Résumé

Cet article présente une brève approche transdisciplinaire de l'utilisation de la théorie actuelle de l'apprentissage expérientiel, dit "cycle d'apprentissage de Kolb", ayant pour but de comprendre l'utilisation de l'allégorie universelle par William Shakespeare (1564-1616) dans ses sonnets - en particulier le huitième sonnet - et dans sa pièce Le Marchand de Venise, ceci s'appliquant également aux écrits visionnaires de Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). Ces deux auteurs ont cherché à expliquer la recherche de la place de chacun dans la vie et dans le cosmos, ce qu'Alfred Adler (1870 - 1937) appelle en allemand "Gemeinschaftsgefühl" (sentiment de communauté). Cette recherche d'un meilleur soi est profondément marquée par un sentiment d'unité divine ainsi que par une forte connexion avec le prochain.

Mots-clés : Théorie de l'apprentissage expérientiel, cycle de Kolb, allégorie, Sonnet 8 de Shakespeare, Jacob Boehme, Gemeinschaftsgefühl d'Adler.

Las Experiencias de Aprendizaje de William Shakespeare y Jacob Boehme – El aprendizaje Experiencial y el Uso de la Alegoría en la Búsqueda de un Yo Mejor

Christopher Eriksson, PhD

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un breve enfoque transdisciplinario para emplear la Teoría Moderna del Aprendizaje Experiencial y el Ciclo de Aprendizaje de Kolb para comprender el uso de la alegoría universal de William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616) en sus sonetos y especialmente el Soneto 8 y su obra El Mercader de Venecia y los escritos visionarios de Jacob Boehme (1575 - 1624). Ambos escritores buscaron articular encontrando el lugar de uno en la vida y el cosmos, lo que Alfred Adler (1870 - 1937) denominó en alemán *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Esta búsqueda de un yo mejor se evidencia profundamente por un sentimiento de unidad Divina, así como una fuerte conexión con los demás.

Palabras clave: Teoría del Aprendizaje Experiencial, Alegoría, La Bella Juventud y Dama Oscura de Shakespeare, Jacob Boehme, *gemeinschaftsgefühl* de Adler.

Experiências de Aprendizagem de William Shakespeare e Jacob Boehme – Aprendizagem Experiencial e o Uso da Alegoria na Busca por um Eu Melhor

Christopher Eriksson, PhD

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma breve abordagem transdisciplinar para empregar a Teoria da Aprendizagem Experiencial Moderna e o Ciclo de Aprendizagem de Kolb a fim de entender o uso da alegoria universal de William Shakespeare (1564-1616) em seus sonetos e, especialmente, Soneto 8 e sua peça O Mercador de Veneza, e as obras visionárias de Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). Ambos os escritores procuraram articular uma forma de encontrar o lugar na vida e no cosmos, a que Alfred Adler (1870 - 1937) se referiu, em alemão, como *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Essa busca por um eu melhor é profundamente evidenciada por um sentimento de unidade Divina, bem como por uma forte conexão com os outros.

Palavras-chave: Teoria da Aprendizagem Experiencial, Alegoria, Belo Rapaz e Dama Escura de Shakespeare, Jacob Boehme, *gemeinschaftsgefühl* de Adler.

Die Lernerfahrungen des William Shakespeare und Jakob Böhme - Erfahrungsbezogenes Lernen und Verwendung von Allegorien für eine Suche nach einem besseren Selbst

Christopher Eriksson, PhD

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag stellt einen kurzen transdisziplinären Denkansatz vor, wobei modernes erfahrungsbezogenes Lernen und der erfahrungsbasierte Lernzyklus von David Kolb angewendet werden, um sowohl William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) universeller Allegorie in seinen Sonetten, insbesondere im Sonett 8, und in seinem Theaterstück „Der Kaufmann von Venedig“, als auch die visionäre Schriften von Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) zu verstehen. Beide Schriftsteller suchten ihren Platz im Leben und im Kosmos genau zu finden. Dies schreibt Alfred Adler (1870-1937) dem deutschen Gemeinschaftsgefühl zu. Diese Suche nach einem besseren Selbst ist

deutlich erkennbar sowohl beim Erlebnis der Einheit mit Gott als auch bei einer starken Verbindung mit den anderen.

Schlüsselworte: Die Theorie des experimentellen Lernen, Allegorie, Shakespeares junger Freund und dunkle Geliebte, Jakob Böhme, das Gemeinschaftsgefühl von Adler

Introduction

Plotinus, the renowned Neoplatonist philosopher of the third century CE, named three broad ways for coming into harmony or resonance with the Infinite, having experienced himself several of what he called his “happy intervals” by the time he was fifty-six years old. These are:

1. the love of beauty which exalts the poet and artist;
2. the devotion to The One and the ascent of science;
3. that love and those prayers by which some devout and ardent soul tends in its moral purity towards perfection.

(Russell 1965, 289; Bucke 2011, 146; Eriksson 2021, 71)

Plotinus’ third way recalls Jacob Boehme, a devout Lutheran and shoemaker who became a mystic, and who was obliged to come to terms with his own inner experiences without the necessary words or concepts to explain them easily to himself or to others (Bourgeault 1997, 29).

Plotinus’s first way, the love of beauty which exalts the poet, recalls William Shakespeare and suggests that Shakespeare, recognized as the universal poet and psychologist, may have described his personal experiences of feeling exalted or ennobled in some of his sonnets, as suggested by R.H. Semple (1881). Allegory has been shown to give psychological meaning to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 8 (Eriksson 2021). Descriptions by Shakespeare of feeling exalted, ennobled, or depressed may therefore be couched in allegory, and can in principle be understood using modern Experiential Learning Theory and The Kolb Learning Cycle depicted below.

A Look at Shakespeare’s Sonnet 8

For the purposes of understanding Shakespeare’s approach, this paper examines his Sonnet 8. It is a poetic description of musical resonance and the family of harmonics in a single note and can be taken as an allegory of the benefits of developing and feeling a oneness or connection with others, as in a happy harmonious family (Eriksson 2021, 71).

Music to hear, why hear’st thou music sadly?
Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy:
Why lov’st thou that which thou receiv’st not gladly,
Or else receiv’st with pleasure thine annoy?
If the true concord of well-tuned sounds,
By unions married, do offend thine ear,
They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,

Strikes each in each by mutual ordering;
 Resembling sire and child and happy mother,
 Who, all in one, one pleasing note do sing:
 Whose speechless song being many, seeming one,
 Sings this to thee: 'Thou single wilt prove none.'

In this sonnet, Shakespeare refers to “one string, sweet husband to another,/strikes each in each by mutual ordering.” This metaphor may refer to the concept of harmonics: how each string of a musical instrument vibrates as a multiple of the fundamental frequency (see Figure 1). The fundamental is here the “husband”; the others “[r]esembling sire and child and happy mother” in this extended metaphor.

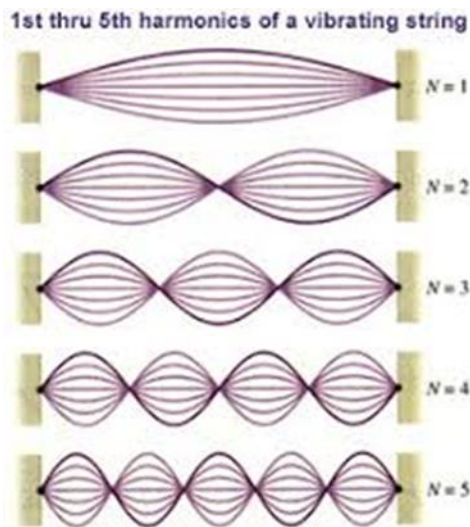


Figure 1. String harmonics visualized. Rachel Mollison-Read, 2015.
[https://calgarychildrenschoir.com/math-and-science-in-music-harmonics/.](https://calgarychildrenschoir.com/math-and-science-in-music-harmonics/)

The use of allegory, which can give a work of art its intended meaning through an extended metaphor or direct comparison, suggests that coming into resonance or a feeling of oneness with the All or Divine may not be the greatest challenge in this type of experiential learning.

Successfully reflecting on one’s own learning experience to a satisfactory conclusion, or understanding another’s explanation, will be required if such experiential learning outcomes are to be used as tools to improve human understanding of life and human roles in it (see Figure 2 below of the Kolb Learning Cycle). In the case of Jacob Boehme, the local nobles, Rosicrucian mystics, and the intelligentsia of the early seventeenth century came to his assistance, which is still largely the case today as Boehme is reportedly not studied in Christian seminaries, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, his work being considered too obscure for analysis (Bourgeault 1997, 29).

Experiential Learning Theory and The Kolb Learning Cycle

For the purposes of this paper, Experiential Learning Theory, which is explained below, is used to understand Shakespeare’s messaging.

Experiential education is a philosophy in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities. Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning. (Gerstein 2022)

The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle, as seen in Figure 2, is the most common framework for understanding Experiential Learning.

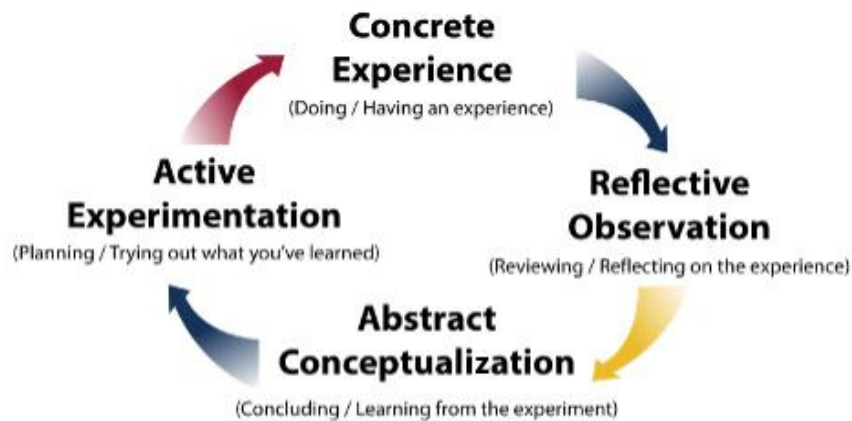


Figure 2. The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle. Image taken from Queen's University at: <https://www.queensu.ca/experientiallearninghub/about/what-experiential-learning>.

Compared to the traditional classroom that is teacher-focused with fixed outcomes and a scoring system, experiential learning has been characterized as:

- being individual student-centered and focused;
- having learning outcomes that are more flexible and open;
- aiming to develop knowledge and skills through experience;
- employing minimal facilitation;
- having flexible structure;
- allowing the student to reflect on personal experience;
- drawing on concepts from the experience and further experiments.

Specific benefits of experiential and hands-on learning have been described as:

- increases in motivation and engagement;
- engagement of most of the senses;
- a greater likelihood to engage emotions;

- engenderment of brain activation;
- increases in retention of learning;
- an expanding of critical thinking skills;
- a preparation for real life;
- a space where making mistakes is seen as a natural part of the learning process.

(Kolb 2015)

Shakespeare’s Learning Experiences Portrayed in the Sonnets

In a psychological study of Shakespeare by R.H. Semple published in 1881, the medical doctor wrote that Shakespeare intrudes none of his personal sentiments upon the attention of his readers, with the exception, perhaps, of some “obscure and vague allusions in the sonnets.” He adds that he sees the psychological energies surrounding Shakespeare as transcendent (Semple 1881). This concurs with the general thesis presented here that Shakespeare was inspired to create the plays during periods of profound harmony, and that some of the sonnets may be viewed as commentaries on his feelings and thoughts, albeit phrased in universal allegories.

Shakespeare’s learning experiences may be seen in some of his sonnets that have been described by scholars as being addressed to a “Fair Youth” whom the poet esteems and loves and describes as the better part of himself (Eriksson 2021). Then there is a person referred to by scholars as the “Dark Lady” who appears in the later sonnets. The Dark Lady is almost the opposite of the Fair Youth and constitutes a traumatic and difficult experience for the poet, yet in these metaphors, the poet shows his resilience and psychology of use in the sonnets. Neither of these “persons” has been identified as real physical individuals in his life. Accordingly, the Fair Youth of the first 126 sonnets has recently been interpreted as a reference to Shakespeare’s more noble Self, which he experiences in intermittent periods of profound and loving harmony, as in a spiritual or mystical experience, and which inspires him to write the plays, as originally suggested by Richard Maurice Bucke (Bucke 2011; Eriksson 2021). This would not be a unique experience as Gertrude of Helfta is reported to have had visions of Christ as a happy baby and a handsome young man (Bynum 2012).

The personality referred to by scholars as the Dark Lady has likewise been interpreted not as a real person, but as a personal accounting by Shakespeare of his own anger-like grief following the departure of his beloved Fair Youth (Eriksson 2022). Applying Alfred Adler’s psychology of use to the sonnets, that behavior and emotions have their goals, suggests that Shakespeare uses his depression to try to protect his self-image, which could not include having grief-like anger against his better self. So, he turns it into a more convenient melancholia and depression which he tries to sustain by pleasing this “Lady Melancholia.” This pleasing, Shakespeare wrote, costs him his peace of mind, and promotes feelings of alienation seen in the later sonnets. He describes this pleasing as “the uncertain sickly appetite to please” in Sonnet 147, and then tells us he knows he has made a grievous mistake and must admit that he needs to rectify the situation. He ends this sonnet by saying, “For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, who art as black as hell, as dark as night,” venting his feelings of alienation (Eriksson 2022).

Shakespeare's Spiritual Stature

Despite numerous biblical references in the plays proving that Shakespeare knew his scripture, Shakespeare is recognized as not being particularly religious and is widely acknowledged as having no religious message. He is non-judgmental, being more of a mirror to human nature through his created characters like Hamlet and Falstaff (Shaheen 2011; Bloom 1998; Dawson and Cockbill 1877). His influence has been seen as the literary equivalent of the scriptures (Bloom 1998, 716). Bloom wrote: "Explaining Shakespeare is an infinite exercise; you will become exhausted long before the plays are emptied out. His universality will defeat you; his plays know more than you do, and your knowingness consequently will be in danger of dwindling into ignorance" (Bloom 1998, 719). Shakespeare's complete works have had the status of a secular Bible for the last two centuries, transcending nations, cultures, languages, and professions, and engendering universal appeal and recognition (Bloom 1998, 716). To Bloom, Shakespeare is the Western canon of literature and the invention of the human as we currently understand personality. If this is not enough praise, Shakespeare is credited as having added at least 1,700 new words and interpretations into the English language along with many household phrases and idioms. And yet, little or nothing is objectively known about the poet's experiential life, outside the sonnets (Bloom 1998, 718).

Boehme as Experiential Learner and Mystic

Boehme became a mystic soon after his first vision in 1600 at the age of 25, described below:

Sitting one day in his room his eyes fell upon a burnished pewter dish, which reflected the sunshine with such marvellous splendour that he fell into an inward ecstasy, and it seemed to him as if he could now look into the principles and deepest foundations of things. He believed that it was only a fancy, and in order to banish it from his mind, he went out upon the green. But here he remarked that he gazed into the very heart of things, the very herbs and grass, and that actual nature harmonized with what he had inwardly seen. He said nothing of this to anyone but praised and thanked the Divine in silence. (Chwalko 2020; Bucke 2011, 180)

Boehme's spiritual experiences as a shoemaker led him to significant tests and trials. He was condemned by the local Lutheran pastor, required to leave his hometown of Görlitz, and after the publication of his first book *Aurora*, told to write nothing further of his spiritual experiences for five years. Support from the local nobles and intelligentsia, which included some followers of Paracelsus, sustained him as they acknowledged him as a mystic with new important knowledge of the Divine.

Having no spiritual training, Boehme battled to understand what he had seen and experienced, which obliged him to couch his new understanding in biblical language like fire and anger. Although Boehme became a mystic, he adopted the attitude and principles of modern science, being absolutely convinced that if anyone should repeat his experiment under the same conditions and with similar attitude, they would get the same results and be admitted to their "treasure house." Boehme knew that he was no different than other people and viewed his illuminating experience as a gift from the Divine by grace. Barker quotes Boehme: "You see the elements I have brought together, and the conditions under which I have placed them. Now, if

you take like elements and place them under like conditions, the result will be the same in your case that it was in mine” (Barker 1920, 6).

One of Boehme’s most significant revelations was that the Divine Essence Itself has opposites, “good and evil” aspects within Its own nature that are metaphysical and not moral. This was entirely new to European theology and philosophy of the time (Chwalko 2020). Boehme saw the outer physical world as a dynamic interplay between two opposing principles, a building up, and a tearing down which may be seen as a principle of balance that facilitates evolution. An equally important revelation from Boehme was that the Christ Light is available to all, regardless of outer religious affiliation.

In summary, throughout his life, Boehme exemplified what is later described by the Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle: having an experience, in his case mystical, reflecting upon it, drawing conclusions from it, and then further moving through the process of active experimentation through his writings.

Alfred Adler’s Community Feeling and Profound Sense of Belonging as Seen in Shakespeare

Adler brings this mystical feeling of oneness and being connected directly into the practice of modern psychology with his concept of community feeling or social interest/social feeling, *gemeinschaftsgefühl* in German. Through taking an active interest in the interests of others, Adler emphasizes the psychological importance to individual mental health of developing a significant community feeling or sense of connection with others and a feeling of having one’s place in life.

That there is a greater whole in the universe which can be experienced individually and that everything fits together, is part of Adler’s meaning of *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Adler wrote, “The innate feeling is actually a cosmic feeling, a reflection of the coherence of everything cosmic, which lives in us, which we cannot dismiss entirely, and which gives us the ability to empathize with things which lie outside our body” (Ansbacher 1968, 134). Acknowledging Shakespeare as one of the great literary influences that led him to his psychological insights, Adler wrote: “Someday soon it will be realized that the artist is the leader of mankind on the path to the absolute truth” (Adler 1964, 329). This concept is dramatized most poetically by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5 Scene 1, as the music of the spheres:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

As Shakespeare wrote, we cannot hear with our ears this music of the spheres or our connectedness to everything, but as Adler emphasized, we can feel it when we have developed sufficient community feeling through taking an active interest in the interests of others.

Shakespeare's thinking is consistent with English philosopher and statesman Sir Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), who promoted the scientific method in *The Advancement of Learning*, first published in 1605: "The poets did well to conjoin Music and Medicine together in Apollo, because the office of medicine is but to tune this curious harp of man's body and to reduce it to harmony" (Bacon 2012).

Later in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1, Shakespeare has Lorenzo comment on the kind of person who is not moved by musical harmony and a feeling for others, telling us straight out that such a person who lacks this community feeling is not to be trusted.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted.

Conclusion

Shakespeare, through his sonnets, appears to be well familiar with his more noble or Divine Self, called by him his "better self." It seems understandable that Shakespeare's writings should speak to various individuals around the world in different yet personally meaningful ways, as they clearly have and continue to do, considering his use of allegories, symbols, and universal situations. Shakespeare knew that the secret to great art is the engagement of the emotions that are the key to motivating people, as great orators have always known.

In contrast, Jacob Boehme has not had the impact of Shakespeare and others, as his writings have not been easily understood, nor have they been widely available, but his messages are still important. He clearly came to understand the importance and need for preparation in the objective planning of experiences, in accordance with Kolb's Learning Cycle. He also, when called for, saw the need to come to meaningful conclusions and concepts using allegories and symbolic associations. Boehme's experiences are testimony to the importance of the approach used by the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) in its use of graded lessons to help facilitate meaningful learning experiences in the quest to unlock the secrets of the universal subconscious mind and a greater mastery of life.

Both men, even though contemporaries, through different pathways may be seen to have arrived at a similar place in search of a better Self while achieving a significant sense of connection with

others. Both sought to find their place in life while also having experienced a mystical sense of Divine oneness.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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