

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

In the modern era, experiential learning obtained widespread recognition as a transformative pedagogical approach that promotes active involvement, critical reflection, and the meaningful structure of knowledge through experience. Among the protruding theoretical frameworks in this field, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Learning Cycle primarily has an impact on contemporary educational vision and practice by modification of teacher-centered instruction into pupil-centered environments. This article presents a picture of comprehensive sight of the theoretical frameworks of experiential learning, with precise emphasis on Kolb's experiential learning model and its implications for educational practice. It critically examines the implementation of the experiential learning cycle across diverse learning contexts, highlighting its potential to enhance cognitive, affective, and professional competencies through reflective and experiential processes. Furthermore, the article discusses the pedagogical benefits, practical challenges, and key considerations associated with the application of Kolb's model, while outlining evidence-informed strategies for its effective integration into teaching and learning. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and practical insights, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of experiential learning as a robust framework for promoting meaningful, lifelong, and transformative learning in contemporary education.

Keywords: Teaching and Learning, Experiential Learning theory, Kolb's learning cycle, hands-on experience.

Introduction

Kolb's theory of experiential learning is among the most well-known and often referenced educational theories (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984). It occupies a significant role in the development of the modernization of Bulgarian education (Kusheva, & Mioh, 2003; Pencheva & Zhekova, 1995). Productive research on Experiential Learning was released in 1984. Since that time, Kolb's influence has grown among educators and trainers, particularly with those teaching students over 16 years old. Kolb stands as one of the most impactful scholars in his area due to the robust theoretical foundation he offers, which is lacking in the writings of numerous other authors. As per Kolb (1984) "Learning is a process whereby knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience." His theories offer a method for structuring and modifying the study process, and they provide a clear comprehension of how a single class or an entire curriculum can be instructed to enhance student learning.

The Experiential Learning theory encompasses learning through four phases linked to doing, sensing, observing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and planning. A key feature of the theories is that various stages are linked to specific learning preferences. Individuals have varying approaches to learning. Acknowledging this is a crucial assumption that allows students to recognize potential alternative methods and to develop greater adaptability in various learning contexts. Educators must recognize their personal learning style as a foundation for creating effective teaching and learning strategies. Learning can be hindered if there is a fundamental mismatch between the approach of the students and the method of the teacher.

Kolb's theory is validated as a learning theory that supports all key components of active learning (Anderson, & Adams, 1992). It offers a theoretical basis for independent learning, experiential learning, workplace learning, and problem-focused learning. The theory encompasses a wide array of applications, such as aiding students in self-discovery, assisting teachers in becoming reflective practitioners, recognizing students' learning styles, and

enhancing essential skills for teachers. It also contributes to the advancement of group project work and determining how information and communication technologies can support the learning process. The benefits of Kolb's theory may be abridged in the following way (Healey, & Jenkins, 2000):

- Offers instant directions for application.
- Provides directions for the compulsory series of educational methods.
- Gives impactful links between theory and practice and deals with theoretical arguments that various teachers need advice and improve their practice.
- Encourages students to reflect and importance of providing feedback in order to stimulate their learning.
- Supports to streamline the learning styles for make it more effective.
- May be utilized in all fields of study effortlessly.

Discussion

David Kolb draws on the writings of John Dewey and Kurt Levin in his research (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984). Kolb, as stated by Zuber-Skerritt, formulates "a comprehensive theory that underpins an educational method and learning as a lifelong process; a process rooted in the intellectual legacies of philosophy, as well as cognitive and social psychology" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a). Kolb's model serves as a broad outline of the process of learning, yet his focus on reflection certainly categorizes him with experiential learning. Boreham (1987) states that "experiential learning essentially refers to learning through reflecting on the experience." If students do not reflect on their experiences, they risk repeatedly making the same mistakes. Kolb's model fundamentally describes learning as a cycle consisting of four distinct phases. The model illustrates how reflection changes experience into ideas and concepts, which are subsequently employed for active experimentation and decision-making in pursuit of new experiences. Kolb interrelates the four stages: Concrete Experience (CE) - engaging, Reflective Observation (RO) - watching, Abstract Conceptualization (AC) - reasoning, and Active Experimentation (AE) - organizing. They follow one after another in a cycle in the following figure:

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Model

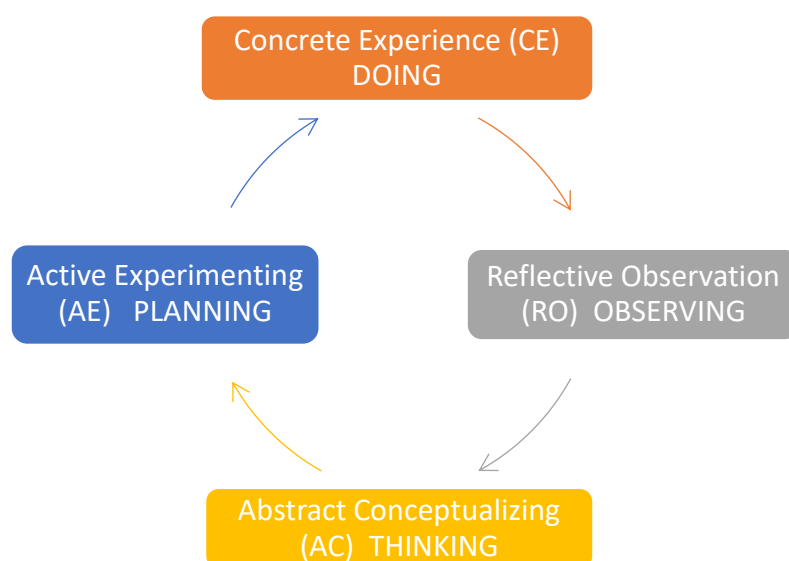


Figure 1: *Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Model* (Source: The Researcher)

One can enter the cycle at any stage, but the phases need to be adhered to in order. In this manner, the learning cycle offers feedback that serves as the foundation for a new action and for assessing the outcomes of the action. The students need to go through the cycle several times. It can then be referred to as a spiral of the cycle. Kolb succinctly defines research as "a spiral of actions and assessments made up of four main phases: planning, executing, observing, and reflecting" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992b). The explanation of every stage in the learning cycle is: **First Phase:** Concrete Experience /attempting or engaging in "action". The person, the group, or the organization simply completes the task. Throughout that period, they do not contemplate it, although they intend to think about it.

Second Phase: Reflective observation.

The reflection involves going back to the task's beginning and assessing what has been accomplished and attempted. Active listening, focus, recognizing distinctions, and utilizing concepts aid in achieving outcomes and communicating them to others. Modifications, principles, and convictions affect the interpretation of specific outcomes. Vocabulary plays a crucial role in articulating and conversing about the perception and understanding of experiences.

Third Phase: Abstract Conceptualization

The conceptualization encompasses the analysis of the highlighted outcomes and grasping the relationships among them. Theory can serve as a foundation for formulating and clarifying the outcomes. During that stage, the modifications, principles, and convictions additionally affect the understanding of the outcomes. In the phase of critical reflection, inquiries arise based on past experiences, whereas in the process of conceptualizing, efforts are made to seek solutions. Generalizations and conclusions are drawn; hypotheses for experience are created. Regarding abstract conceptualization, Kolb states, "During this phase, learning is more about reasoning and concepts rather than emotional comprehension of issues or circumstances." It is common to engage in structured planning and the formulation of theories and concepts to address challenges.

Fourth Phase: Active Experimentation (organizing).

The planning (active experimenting) enables the grasp of new insights and their use in forecasting future events, or determining what further actions should be implemented to enhance our approach to the task. Regarding active experimenting, Kolb states, "Learning in that stage takes on an active form – experimenting, impacting, or altering the situation." It is essential to adopt a hands-on strategy and to focus on what truly proves effective... As the title suggests, the Experiential Learning theory emphasizes the importance of experience. However, it is crucial for the students to experience all four stages of the cycle and to establish strong links between each of these stages. The model is essential for situations where students have minimal preparation for experiences and/or fail to reflect appropriately on them, or do not relate them to the relevant theoretical concepts (Jenkins, 1997). Establishing the appropriate pace of the learning cycle is highly beneficial. If someone waits for a job to be finished before reflecting, they will not be capable of altering his learning approach and enhancing his outcomes. Conversely, prolonged reflection involves dedicating additional time to contemplation rather than action, meaning completing the task. Consequently, the duration for the phases of the learning cycle must be equalized.

Two core dimensions are linked to the learning cycle: abstract – concrete, and active – reflective. These axes represent the two fundamental assessments of the learning process, aligning with the two primary methods through which individuals acquire knowledge. The first is how to understand or interpret new information/experience. The second – how to alter and modify what has been observed (Smith, & Kolb, 1986).

In general, the learning cycle should be implemented (Gibbs, 1988):

- In the early stages of identifying the issue to determine whether prior experience could indicate a solution;
- At the natural break of the task and also at the conclusion of a meeting or workday;
- When progress clearly proceeds positively or negatively.

The model may be utilized by teams (once more):

- Concrete Experience (acting) – the team members engage in a task and in a connection.
- Reflection – the team members engage in open reflection, a conversation for exchanging views and discussing their interactions. They assess both the facilitated and non-facilitated processes within the team.
- Interpretation – the group fosters a unified culture by creating a collective understanding of the occurrences.
- Planning – the team participates in collaborative planning, problem-solving, and articulating a consensus for action.

The ample availability of effective techniques for carrying out each stage of the learning cycle enhances the efficiency of learning (Healey, & Jenkins, 2000):

- For the experience, suitable are: planning actions; setting goals; designing experiments; compiling a list of all observable factors; establishing criteria; education agreements;
- To enhance the realization of the experience – journals, inquiries, deepening the comprehension of emotions, quiet exhibition;
- To facilitate the return of experience and its reflection – journals, audio and video documentation, peer assessment, organized discussions, structured debriefing, self-assessment, reciprocal interviews, a comprehensive list of topics for reflection, reflection following a specific pattern;
- To offer an alternative experience – analyzing cases, games, simulations, role-playing games, assessment through an alternative experience.

Conclusion

“Learning is a process as well as a product”. Kolb’s experiential learning theory offers a wide array of applications, such as aiding students in self-discovery, enabling teachers to become reflective practitioners, recognizing students’ learning preferences, and enhancing essential skills for educators. The cycle’s rationale is to perform minimal actions and implement small enhancements that, when executed by numerous individuals, result in considerable advancements over time. For example, if the teacher evaluates his performance and identifies one small adjustment to enhance his work, numerous improvements will accumulate by year’s end. When this method is adopted as a routine or guideline, it will yield beneficial outcomes.

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