

The Experiential Learning Approach¹

The experiential learning cycle

This learning approach is based on experiential learning theory (Kolb and Fry 1975; McCaffery 1986) and is participatory by design. It is a learner-centered approach involving experience followed by a process of reviewing, reflecting, and applying what has been learned. Participatory methods keep learners active in the learning process. They are involving and interactive, and they encourage communication and group work. They are action oriented and experience based.

This experiential and participatory approach was chosen to enhance effective skill transfer, to facilitate conceptual and attitudinal development, and to encourage appropriate changes in learners' behavior. The experiential learning cycle is especially useful for skill training because most of its techniques are designed to involve the learners in practicing the skill. The experiential model helps people assume responsibility for their own learning because it asks them to reflect on their experience, draw conclusions, and identify applications. Learners ground the lessons in their actual environment by considering the question of what can or should be done differently as a result of the learning experience.

The adult learner

Understanding the adult learner is critical to the success of this learning approach. The adult learner has particular needs (Knowles 1978; McCaffery 1986; Zemke and Zemke 1981). Adult learners need continual opportunities to identify their needs and recognize the relevance of their learning in terms of their own lives. Adult learners need self-directed learning opportunities in which they can actively participate. They need to actively think, to do, to reflect on experiences, to discuss with others, and to practice and learn new skills. The adult learner needs interactive communication with both the facilitator and fellow learners, which is different from one-way facilitator-to-learner communication. The learner needs to continually reassess the question, "Where am I now and where do I want to go?"

The facilitator

The role of teacher/trainer/facilitator is to manage or guide the learning process rather than to manage the content of learning. Adult learners need to be able to share the responsibility for learning with the facilitator. The experience of adult learners should be viewed and used as a rich resource in the learning environment and they should be encouraged to contribute to the learning environment whenever possible.

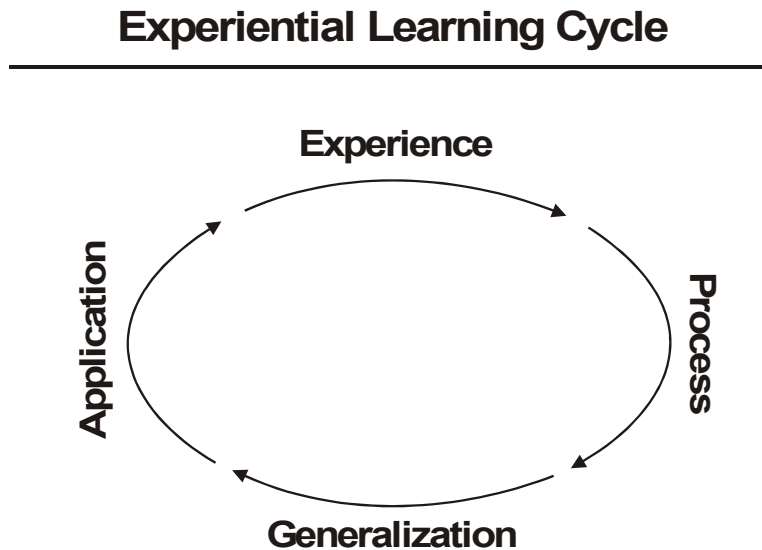
¹ Source: ISNAR Learning Modules (Zenete Franca, Education Specialist as used by Helen Hambly Odame, University of Guelph).

The experiential learning cycle¹

Experiential learning is a phrase often heard in the educational world. The strength of the approach is in the completeness of its cycle, which consists of four stages, each as important as the preceding or following one. The four stages are (1) experience, (2) process, (3) generalization, and (4) application.

The term “experiential” is often misused in practice. Experiential learning seems to mean letting people participate in a presentation, having a question-and-answer session after a lecture, or a role play or case study without the subsequent steps of the model. The final stages are often left out of the design of the program. As a result, the power of experiential learning is significantly diminished or negated altogether.

The stages of the experiential learning cycle are outlined below.



McCaffery (1986) and adapted from Kolb and Fry (1975).

Figure 1. Experiential Learning Cycle

Experience: The experience stage is the initial activity and data-producing part of the cycle. This phase is structured to enable learners to “do” something. “Doing” includes a range of activities, such as participating in a case study, role play, simulation or game, or listening to a lecture, watching a film or slide show, practicing a skill, or completing an exercise.

Process: In this stage, learners reflect on the activity undertaken during the experience stage. They share their reactions in a structured way with other members of the group.

¹ The section on the experiential learning cycle is adapted from USDA/OICD/ITD (no date), Agricultural trainer development: Training of trainers. Instructors’ manual, and J.A. McCaffery 1986. Interdependent effectiveness: A reconsideration of cross-cultural orientation and training, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.

They may speak individually, in small groups, or as a full learning group. They discuss both their intellectual and attitudinal (cognitive and affective) reactions to the activities in which they have engaged. The facilitator helps the learners to think critically about the experience and to verbalize their feelings and perceptions, and he or she draws attention to any recurrent themes or patterns which appear in the learners' reactions. The facilitator must also help the learners conceptualize their reflections so they can move toward drawing conclusions.

Generalization: In the generalization stage, the learners form conclusions and generalizations that might be derived from, or stimulated by, the first two phases of the cycle. The facilitator must help the learners think critically to draw conclusions that might apply generally or theoretically to "real life." This stage is best symbolized by the following questions: "What did you learn from all this?" and "What more general meaning does this have for you?"

Application: After learners have formed some generalizations, the facilitator must guide the learners into the application stage. Drawing upon the insights and conclusions reached during the generalization stage (and previous stages), learners can begin to incorporate what they have learned into their lives by developing plans for more effective behavior in the future. Techniques used to facilitate the application stage can include action plans, reviewing each other's action plans, formulating ideas for action, sharing action plans with the whole group, and identifying additional learning needs. The facilitator assists during this process by helping learners to be as specific as possible.

Evaluation

An integral aspect of the experiential learning approach is evaluation completed at the end of the discussion group. Feedback from learners identifies specific applications of lessons learned. Evaluation can also help to improve future courses.

References

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