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Lens on Learning Theory

What is experiential learning?

Experiential learning is observation, simulation and/or participation that enhances learning through authentic activity, reflection, and application.

Experiential learning at the post secondary level can refer to a broad spectrum of experiences:

- Community/service learning
- Internships
- Co-op experiences
- Simulation activities
- Field placements
- Authentic classroom activities
- Professional development and training activities

Experiential learning principles value multiple ways of knowing and multiple sources of knowledge and can be implemented into a wide range of topics or programs.

Why is experiential learning effective?

- Develops relationships
- Promotes meta-learning
- Creates a kinesthetic imprint
- Encourages risk-taking and builds confidence
- Fosters or develops initiative, independent reasoning, and independent learning
- Supports and strengthens diversity
- Promotes fun

Experiential Learning and Kolb's Learning Cycle

There are several models of experiential learning however Kolb's model is one that is widely adopted. The learning cycle can be entered at any point but for complete learning to occur, all four elements must be incorporated.

Concrete Experience

- Participate in an event or experience
- Absorb sights, smell, tastes, sounds, feelings
- Gain *personal* experience
- Process cues based on personal filters (biases, previous knowledge, assumptions)

Reflective Observation

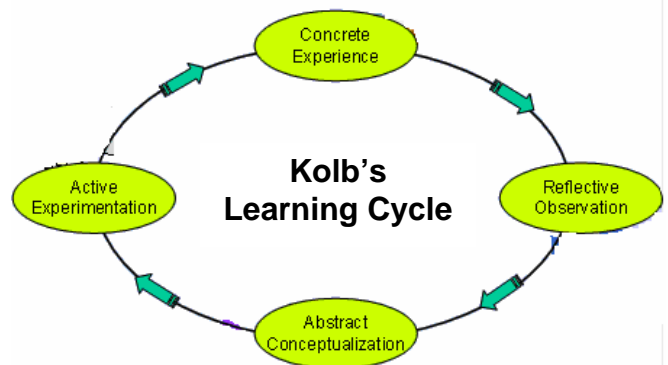
- Process primary experience (organize, integrate)
- View experience from various perspectives
- Make meaning of primary experience based on thoughts and feelings

Abstract Conceptualization

- Make sense of interpreted meaning using theory, analysis and expertise
- Process concepts, data and theoretical foundations

Active Experimentation

- Try something new or different based on new knowledge
- Engage in action informed by theory, analysis and/or expertise
- Try a new approach, idea, skill, or method based on valid information



Reflection on Practice

1. Which learning outcomes in your courses could be enhanced by actually “seeing it” or “doing it”?
2. How can you clearly communicate the objectives of an experiential activity and link it to the outcomes of the course?
3. How can you organize experiential learning activities to include reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation?

Expanding Your Teaching Toolkit

From a practical perspective, it is important to determine the potential benefits before committing a lot of time and energy to planning for experiential learning. One of the most difficult experiences for a teacher to hear is “I don’t understand why we had to do that?”

Kolb’s Phases	Elements for Success	Good Practices	Facilitation Ideas
Concrete Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide experiences that are individualized, sequential, and developmental ▪ Set goals that are realistic for the learner ▪ Set boundaries but provide support mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choose experiences that allow for reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation ▪ Ensure physical and emotional safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Go on a field trip or connect with the community ▪ Link with another faculty or program ▪ Weigh the outcomes against the costs of time, energy, and resources
Reflective Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use effective prompts as a facilitator to reflect on the experience ▪ Meet the learners needs ▪ Balance action, reflection, and application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Debrief experiences with group (Note: This is essential) ▪ Have students keep a journal of their experiences ▪ Engage students in discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide students with prompts to explore in their journals ▪ Design group discussions that promote examination of various perspectives
Abstract Conceptualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Select outcomes that are relevant and connect to real life experiences ▪ Communicate outcomes and meaningful connections clearly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connect the experience to the course outcomes and the “bigger picture” ▪ Relate to the theory and make connections ▪ Find concrete ways of explaining abstract concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Write expectations and outcomes in the assignment ▪ Revisit the outcomes early and often ▪ Involve students in problem-solving activities that connect experience and course concepts
Active Experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Select a setting that provides a physical and/or psychological challenge ▪ Involve an appropriate degree of risk ▪ Monitor and assess progress ▪ Provide feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Design the learning experience to include possibilities to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Design evaluation so students are not penalized for errors, but are able to identify what they would do differently next time

References and More Information

Association for Experiential Learning at <http://www.aee.org>

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