



## Learning Theories: Experiential Learning

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### Overview

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), accredited to David A. Kolb, is a four-stage, holistic learning process that places emphasis on the role of experience in development. ELT is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). The foundations of ELT are rooted in the works of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin. Kolb relied on these three educational theories in order to create the fundamental principles of the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984):

- Learning is a process, it is not based on outcomes.
- Learning is a cyclical process founded in experience.
- The learning process relies on coordination between dialectically opposed learning styles.
- The process of learning is a holistic adaptation to the world.
- Learning requires inter- and intra- personal interaction.
- Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

### How does learning occur?

ELT is based on the concept that learning is dependent on four polar dimensions. Two types of experience -- Abstract Conceptualization and Concrete Experience, and two methods for processing -- Active Experimentation and Reflective Observation (Kolb, 1999). This cycle is applied in a variety of settings including traditional classrooms, corporate training, and personal development. People participate in a concrete experience - they “do” an activity or play a role in a situation. This experience provides the raw information that people draw observations from, and forms the basis of reflection. From these reflections, learners begin to synthesize abstract concepts. Learners use these concepts to develop new theories to be applied towards the original activity or a new experience. In this way, learners learn directly from an experience, then process their learning before applying it again through experience.

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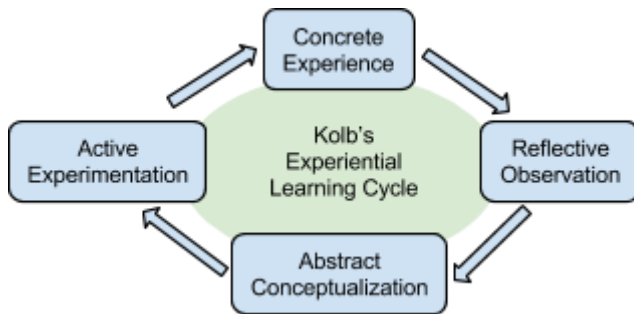
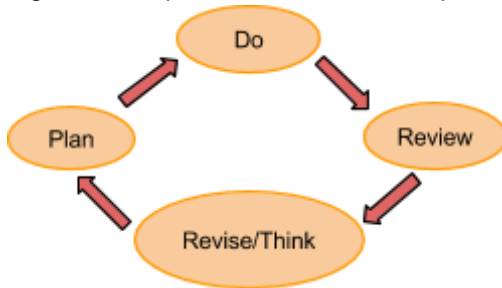


Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, 1984.

Figure 2: Simplified version of the Experiential Learning Cycle



### Implications for the Classroom

The Experiential Learning Theory relies on the application of the experiential learning cycle in the classroom. Experience and reflection are crucial factors in the process of learning. In order to accomplish learning, learners need to have an experience which they can then reflect on, self-author thoughts or solutions, and experiment in the implementation of these thoughts and solutions. The implication of this theory is that learners will learn by doing, including failure and success. The instructor should not intervene when failure is imminent, but instead facilitate the process of learning (the ELT) in order to assist learners in guiding themselves to an effective solution.

Below are some methods to encourage experiential learning in the classroom:

- Incorporating hands-on projects, experiments, and social interactions
  - Choose activities that actively apply the desired skill/knowledge
- Actively encouraging reflection and thought
  - Providing a variety of methods for expressing constructs from this process
    - Group Discussions
    - Individual Reflection

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- Foster revision and creative thought processes
  - Group think tanks
  - No wrong answers/Multiple right answers
    - Encourage innovation over replication/recreation
- Allow time for revision and reattempts
  - Trying again is productive, provided learners have reflected, thought, and planned

### Teaching Strategies that support this Learning Theory

1. Experiential Education
2. Problem-based Learning
3. Project-based Learning
4. Service Learning

### Technology Tools that support this Learning Theory

1. [Online Collaboration](#)
2. [Online Meetings](#)
3. [Interactive eLearning Modules](#)

### On the Web

- [Association for Experiential Education](#)
- [National Society for Experiential Education](#)
- [Online Experiential Simulations](#)

### In the Library / References

Kolb, D.A. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Kolb, D.A, Boyatzis, R.E. & Mainemelis, C. (1999/2000). Experiential Learning Theory: Previous Research and New Directions. In *Perspectives on Cognitive, learning, and thinking styles*. R.J. Sternberg & L.F. Zhang (Eds.). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

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