



**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: A CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING APPROACH FOR HOLISTIC LEARNER DEVELOPMENT**

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**Abstract:**

*Education as a field is constantly evolving which continuously adapts its structure, vision and objectives which enables it to successfully meet the challenges and significant changes occurring in society. Experiential learning is a suitable alternative which directly focuses on the skills and attitudes related to critical thinking and problem solving, being less reliant on mechanical learning and memorizing. We can describe experiential learning as a process. Experiences that we have in our daily lives are generated through our various ongoing interactions and engagement with the world around us and thus learning becomes a definite product of our experience. Experiential learning theory is different from the various other learning theories as it focuses on a more holistic approach. Experiences play a very important role in our learning; they are formed by the interaction of our emotions, cognition and environmental factors. In this paper we aim to look at how experiential learning provides a great scope for research as to what the experiential learning cycle looks like, the practical use in order to improve upon the human thought process and understand the learning in a better way thus giving an insight into the benefits of this model of learning, and its application in different areas of life.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive Development, Abstract Conceptualization, Kinesthetic Imprint.*

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**Introduction:**

Education guides you how to play; experiences master you when to take those right strokes. Everyone deserves optimal access to education, but it is of equal importance to provide opportunities to learn in a manner that respects every individual's needs and differences. Traditional models of learning seem to be more in favour those with a good memory, but learning is much more than just succeeding in an examination. Experiential learning considers the importance of the role that experiences play in the learning process. It lays emphasizes our emotions, cognition and environmental factors. Behaviourists have developed conceptualizations of learning which imply that effectiveness of learning can be measured by the number of facts or habits a person has learned in response to the stimulus conditions. The elements of thoughts are fixed and the present goal is how to acquire more of them. Contrary to this idea experiential learning advocates that the ideas are not fixed, rather they form and re-form through experience. Every experience provides scope for new learning.

The measure of success therefore moves beyond acquisition of facts, learning through experiences become an incipient process where the learner is placed at the centre of the process. Learning through experiences is based on where the learner is, their relationship with what happened previously, and where they want to be in future. With the interaction taking place between the environment and the learner, the resulting experience and



knowledge is found to be more applicable in wider contexts, due to the fact that the knowledge is the result of testing and hypothesis, rather than learning by rote. Learning that is stimulated to provide experiences should contain the following elements:

- ✓ Being able to reflect upon and critically analyze the situation.
- ✓ Provide meaningful opportunities for students to be initiators, decision makers, and thus hold accountability for their results.
- ✓ Provide experiences for students to stimulate their intellect and creativity.
- ✓ Making the learners capable to learn from natural settings and thus learn from their mistakes and successes.

### **What is experiential learning?**

Experiential learning is contributed to two different elements:

- 1) Learning by oneself
- 2) Experiential Instruction

Experiential learning theory explores the continual recurring pattern of all learning experiences through reflection. Experiential learning theory emphasizes on the importance of the role that true experiences play in the learning process. It is this emphasis that distinguishes experiential learning from other learning theories. Cognitive theories lay its emphasis on cognition whereas Behavioural learning theories deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process.

Researches in the field of education mainly perceive two contrasting views on the concept of experiential learning. The first views experiential learning as a of learning which enables learners to apply newly acquired knowledge in a relevant setting. The relevant setting could be any institution of learning with trainers, instructors, teachers or professors to guide them. The other defines experiential learning as “education that is gained through learning by directly participating in the various events of life.”

David. A. Kolb an American educational theorists supports the second definition of experiential learning by developing a model which explains in detail the learning process through experience. Kolb’s (1975) experiential learning model is a continuous process consisting of four basic elements:

- 1) Concrete experience
- 2) Observation and reflection
- 3) Forming abstract concepts
- 4) Testing in new situations

Immediate and concrete experiences form the basis for observation and reflections. These reflections gained through experience are comprehended and broken down into abstract concepts which lays the foundation from which new implications for action can be drawn.

According to the theories of Kolb and Fry (1975), the learner proceeds to the next step once he or she processes their experience in the previous step. This results into a conclusion that learning is not achieved in a formal setting, but through the practice of varied reflection of our daily experiences.

### **The origin of the theory of experiential learning:**

Experiential learning traces its roots back in history and is still found prevalent in our modern day society. It is either found to formalized by educational institutions or occurring informally in day-to-day life. Experiential learning is not an alternative approach, infact it is the most traditional and fundamental method of human



learning. David Kolb is best known for his work on the theory of experiential learning or ELT. Experiential learning theory model was published in 1984, influenced from the work of other great theorists including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. The initial two stages of the cycle i.e. concrete learning and reflective observation involve grasping an experience, the second two i.e. abstract conceptualization and experimentation focus on transforming an experience. Kolb is of the opinion that effective learning is seen as the learner goes through and proceeds into this cyclic experience, and that they can enter into the cycle at any time.

### **The idea of experience:**

As quoted by Albert Einstein “Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience. You need experience to gain wisdom.”

Human body assimilates information through their senses. We take in information through our senses, yet the information is processed into knowledge by doing. First, human senses help us to watch, listen, feel and perceive different thing in our environment. We then attempt doing things on our own. It results into a sense of achievement and sparks our interest thus, motivating us to self-discover. Learning through experiences can be found in various basic activities of our day-to-day life like learning to ride a bicycle, use a mobile phone, or learning to speak. We take an action, see the out-turn of that action, and choose either to continue, or to take a new and different action. In this case what allows us to gain mastery over the new skill is our active participation and our reflection over the learning. Experiences and reflections are found to teach us more than any manual or lecture ever could. Experiential learning is a direct interaction and engagement the phenomena being studied rather than merely considering the possibility of doing something about it. The work of David. A. Kolb in his highly influential book “Experiential Learning: Experience as a source of learning and development” published in 1984, describes learning as a four-step-process. He identifies the steps as:

- 1) watching
- 2) thinking (mind)
- 3) feeling (emotion)
- 4) doing

thus drawing his ideas and inference primarily based on the works of Dewey (who emphasized the need for learning to be grounded in experience) and Jean Piaget. Kolb describes that learners have immediate concrete experiences that allow us to reflect on new experience from different perspectives. It is from these reflective observations, we engage in creating abstract concepts, creating generalizations or principles that culminate our observations into sound theories. These generalizations or the theories act as guidelines for further action. Hands on active experimentation allows us to test what we learn in new and more complex situations.

### **Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle:**

David. A. Kolb, a Professor of Organizational Behaviour has built upon the earlier work by John Dewey and Kurt Levin. According to Kolb “Learning is the process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”.(Kolb,1984). The theory presents a continual model of learning, consisting of four stages as shown below. A learner may enter the process at any stage and follow each other in sequence:

- Concrete experience (Involving themselves in active learning experiences)

- Reflective observation (Observe the outcomes and reflect upon the same)
- Abstract conceptualization (Think rationally and conceptualize)
- Active experimentation (Application)

Kolb’s four stage learning model gives us a brief idea on how experience is interpreted through reflection into concepts, which in turn are used as guidelines for active experimentation and the choice of new experiences. The first stage, concrete experience, in which the learner actively experiences hands on learning which could be in a formal setting or an informal experience. The second stage, reflective observation, this stage involves the learner to mindfully reflect on that experience. The third stage, abstract conceptualization, at this stage the learner attempts to conceptualize the theory or model of what is observed. The fourth stage, active experimentation, is where the learner tries to evaluate his learning and is able to apply and connect with in real world situations. Learning cycle can begin at any of the four points and should be approached as a continuous cycle.

Kolb identified four learning styles that highlight conditions under which learner learns better. These styles are: **Assimilators:** Learners who learn better by understanding and creating theoretical models. They are more often oriented towards abstract ideas.

**Converges:** Learners who develop a better understanding and tend to learn better when provided with practical applications of theories and concepts.

**Accommodators:** Pupils who learn better when they are provided with “hands-on” experiences.

**Diverges:** Pupil who learn better with concrete experiences and reflective observation

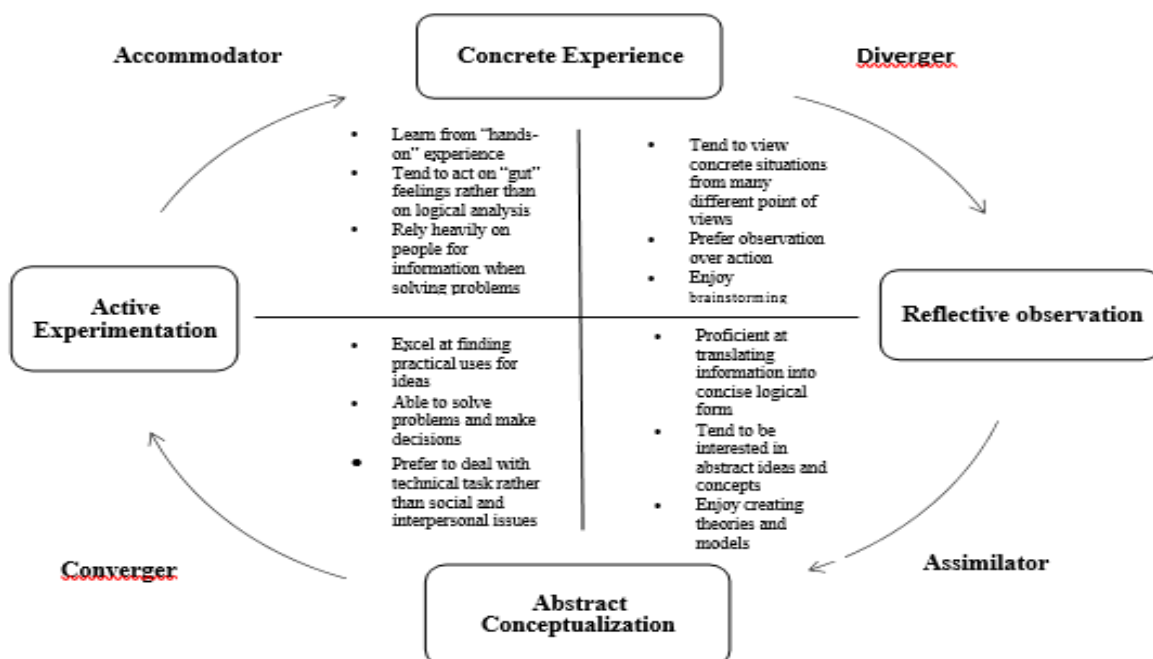


Figure.1 Kolb’s model of learning styles, Adapted from Kolb, 1985<sup>[1]</sup>



Having an understanding of one's preferred learning style has two benefits:

It helps in getting a better understanding of the areas of strengths and weaknesses, thus giving us the opportunity to work on becoming proficient.

It helps an individual to develop likeliness towards a particular experience which might be useful in certain social situations, such as deciding a career.

### **Why is Experiential Learning so effective?**

#### **It provides scope for more equal opportunities:**

There is more scope for novel experiences where all participants are equal in their knowledge about any task and project which they will undertake. Experiential learning provides a unique set of projects and situations require people to draw upon genuine team process skills as opposed to just functional ones.

#### **Creates real-world experiences:**

Experiential learning involves using data and ideas and therefore uses them in hands-on activities, creating real results. Hand-on activities with a connect with real life provides a real experiences that helps the learners to grasp it more easily thus helping them to retain the learning for a long time period.

#### **Experiential learning helps to accelerate meaningful learning outcomes:**

In higher education experiential learning provides opportunities for learners to develop multiple skillset such as problem-solving and effective decision-making skills simultaneously. While applying the theories students learn to discard methods that don't work, the process of trying something new and improving on the outcomes becomes a valuable part of the learning process.

#### **Experiential learning is helpful for Meta learning:**

Reflective observation becomes an integral part of experiential learning. With the help of concrete experiences leading to development of abstract concepts and reflecting on the outcome, students are able to engage their brains into deeper aspects of learning and thus be make personal connections with the material.

#### **Experiential learning leaves a kinesthetic imprint on the learners:**

Learners have a kinesthetic imprint on their mind and body as experiential learning plays a pivotal role in development of cognitive material. Experiential learning helps in the development of cognitive principles because the learning is graphic as it involves multiple dimensions of physical, mental and behavioural development.

#### **Experiential learning encourages risk taking:**

Since learning is based on trial and error students engage in hands-on-tasks thus discovering one approach works better than another. Experiential learning enables the learners and encourages the learners to take new risks and try on new role. It enables them to learn through mistakes without the fear of failure.

#### **Experiential learning nurtures diversity of strengths:**

Co-operative learning encourages team work. Teamwork enables learners to improve their communication and social skills When learners are working as a team they learn how to listen to their leaders in order to perform their individual roles. They learn how to listen to one another in order to function as a cohesive unit. Teamwork nurtures diversity in individual learner differences thus teaching them how to respectfully and confidently



express their ideas and opinions effectively in a group setting.

**Conclusion:**

Principles of modern education are derived from the changes taking place at different levels of the society, thus shaping the educational skills of the learners. Experiential learning had led to elimination of gap between practical experiences and theoretical concepts. It is helpful in creating meaningful connections between formal and informal education thus giving more importance to the practical aspects of the concepts being taught. Effective integration of ICT with experiential learning helps developing the skills and abilities which are essential to face real life challenges.

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