

**EASTERN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:  
EASTERN PRINCIPLES FOR LEARNING WHOLENESS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although Experiential Learning Theory originated in the work of Western scholars, many of their theoretical principles have a decidedly Eastern orientation. In this essay we draw out these Eastern principles of experiential learning and suggest an Eastern perspective on learning wholeness in one's life and career based on an ontological approach to adult development that emphasizes existential ways of being in the here and now—centering, balance, harmony and flowing in the watercourse way.

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## INTRODUCTION

The theme of this special issue of the *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, “Recovering Craft: Holistic Work and Empowerment” identifies a serious problem—the alienating impact of much work and many workplaces in today’s economy and the consequences of these conditions for workers’ sense of fulfillment and sense of efficacy in their life, work and career. It also offers a pathway to the solution—the rediscovery of a sense of wholeness in our approach to life, work and career that empowers a strong, authentic, choiceful self with a deep sense of calling and purpose that brings our past, present and future together into a meaningful life plan.

In this essay we suggest that this wholeness can be the result of a lifelong commitment to learning from experience. We present an approach to learning based on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT—Kolb, 1984). ELT draws on the work of prominent Western 20th century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development – notably William James, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others—developing a dynamic, holistic model of the process of learning from experience and a multi-dimensional model of adult development. From their varied professions and cultural perspectives, these great Western scholars have had a profound impact on our thinking about learning and development, challenging and inspiring us to better ways of learning and growing as human beings. Interestingly, they all accomplished these advances while standing at the boundaries of their fields and the traditional educational establishment; working from theoretical and methodical perspectives that ran counter to the prevailing scientific norms of their time. Their approaches were in many respects more consistent with the East Asian Confucian and Taoist spiritual traditions that were influenced by the 5000 year old Chinese text *Yijing* (易經—the Book of Changes) (Trinh, 2011). In this essay we will examine this Eastern perspective on experiential learning and development based on East Asian spiritual traditions and draw out the implications of these ideas for learning wholeness.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY AND DEVELOPMENT TOWARD WHOLENESS

*“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”*  
(Confucius)

ELT describes a four stage cycle of learning—experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), and acting (AE)—that pervades our waking lives. ELT is a dynamic, holistic theory that defines learning as the major process of human adaptation involving the whole person. ELT shows how deep engagement with the cycle of learning can lead to the development of the integrated, holistic self described above. In ELT adult development occurs through learning from experience. This is based on the idea that the experiential learning cycle is actually a learning *spiral*. When a concrete experience is enriched by reflection, given meaning by thinking and transformed by action, the new experience created becomes richer, broader and deeper. Further iterations of the cycle continue the exploration and transfer to experiences in other

contexts. In this process learning is integrated with other knowledge and generalized to other contexts.

The ELT developmental model (D. A. Kolb, 1984) follows Carl Jung's theory that adult development moves from a specialized way of adapting toward a holistic integrated stage that he calls individuation. Of the foundational scholars of experiential learning, Jung is the most explicit in his articulation of the Eastern influence on his thinking. Jung was deeply influenced by his study of the *Yijing* from which he developed his concept of synchronicity that challenged Western concepts of causality. His theory of development was inspired by the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who himself was influenced by ancient Eastern thought. Jung focused on Heraclitus' theory of the unity of opposites and the principle of *enantiodromia*, a term meaning that everything turns into its opposite.

“I use the term *enantiodromia* for the emergence of the unconscious opposite in the course of time. This characteristic phenomenon practically always occurs when an extreme one-sided tendency dominates conscious life; in time an equally powerful counter position is built up which first inhibits the conscious performance and subsequently breaks through the conscious control” (Jung, 1923, 1966, p. 426). “The problem of opposites usually comes up in the second half of life when all the illusions we projected upon the world come back to haunt us. The energy streaming back from these manifold relationships falls into an unconscious and activates all the things we had neglected to develop... To the man in the second half of life, the development of the functions of the opposites lying dormant in the unconscious means a renewal” (1923, 1966, pp. 59-61).

Based on this dynamic model of adult development the ELT model defines three stages: (1) *acquisition*, from birth to adolescence where basic abilities and cognitive structures develop; (2) *specialization*, from formal schooling through the early work and personal experiences of adulthood where social, educational, and organizational socialization forces shape the development of a particular, specialized learning style; and (3) *integration* in mid-career and later life where non-dominant modes of learning are expressed in work and personal life. Development through these stages is characterized by increased integration of the dialectic conflicts between the four primary learning modes (AC-CE and AE-RO) and by increasing complexity and relativism in adapting to the world. Each of the learning modes is associated with a form of complexity that is used in conscious experience to transform sensory data into knowledge such that development of CE increases affective complexity, of RO increases perceptual complexity, of AC increases symbolic complexity, and of AE increases behavioral complexity (Figure 1). These learning modes and complexities create a multi-dimensional developmental process that is guided by an individual's particular learning style and life path.

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In Western developed societies the stage of specialization is often marked by increases in abstract, symbolic complexity and active behavioral complexity. As a result the quest for integration and wholeness at mid-life often takes the form of involvement in concrete, non-abstract ways of being. Charland (2011) quotes Susan McChesney of the North Bennet Street

School in Boston which offers courses in crafts such as preservation carpentry. “We’ve had a lot of career changers,” McChesney commented. “People have been wanting to find a balance in their lives, and that often comes down to working with their hands.”

An empirical study by Clarke and colleagues (1977) of the accounting and marketing professions used the ELT developmental model to illustrate this developmental progression. The study compared the learning styles of cross-sectional samples of accounting and marketing students and professionals in school and at lower, middle and senior level career stages. The learning styles of marketing and accounting students were similar, being fairly balanced among the four learning modes. Lower level accountants had convergent, abstract and active learning styles, and this convergent emphasis was even more pronounced in middle-level accountants, reflecting a highly technical specialization. The senior level accountants, however, became more accommodative in learning style integrating their non-dominant concrete learning orientation. Clarke found a similar pattern of development in the marketing profession.

Gypen (1981) found the same move from specialization to integration in his study of the learning styles of a cross-sectional sample of social work and engineering university alumni from early to late career. “As engineers move up from the bench to management positions, they complement their initial strengths in abstraction and action with the previously non-dominant orientations of experience and reflection. As social workers move from direct service into administrative positions they move in the opposite direction of the engineers.” (1981, p. ii)

Western approaches to adult development, influenced as they are by Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, tend to emphasize the epistemological dimensions of knowledge acquisition and integration. Eastern approaches focus more on the ontological, existential dimensions of immediate experience and context awareness. To make an analogy, epistemological development is like decorating a tree with the ornaments representing generalized knowledge and skills acquired from education and experience and arranging these into an integrated, aesthetically pleasing whole. Ontological development is concerned with the tree’s rootedness in the life sustaining ground and adaptation to the surrounding environment. Holistic development requires both dimensions. Epistemological development alone can lead to a cut tree destined to die or be replaced by an imitation of plastic and steel whose sole function is to display the “ornamentation” of knowledge. Ontological development alone means that knowledge to act must be recreated repeatedly in every concrete situation without the benefit of generalized knowledge and experience. In the ELT model of development shown in Figure 1, epistemological social knowledge is acquired through abstract conceptualization and results in increased symbolic complexity. Ontological personal knowledge is acquired through concrete experience and results in increased affective complexity.

The ontological and epistemological ways of thinking and living characterizing Chinese and Westerners were summarized well by Fung Yu-Lan in his review of Liang Shuming’s work *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies*:

Since the European mood of life is to struggle forward, the European culture is characterized by ability in controlling nature, the scientific method, and democracy in the sense that each and every individual claims his own right to oppose authority. These are its excellences. With them side by side come its defects. There is too much intellect,

calculation, and self-assertion along with selfishness. The individual stands in the center of the universe and treats everything outside of him as either material or rivals. Means is for the end; present for the future. There is too much to do, but too little to enjoy.

The Chinese mood of life, of which Mr. Liang chose Confucianism as the representative, is just the opposite. Its fundamental idea is to repudiate calculation and intellect. It teaches not doing for something, but "doing for nothing." Following natural feeling, or what Mr. Liang called intuition, a mother loves her baby, and a baby loves its mother. This love is not means for the future, but the end in and for itself (1922, p. 612).

These “moods of life” described 1922 are still seen today. This is in spite of the fact that Western modes of development and epistemological knowledge are transforming developing Asian economies and Eastern spiritual traditions of ontological development have been steadily gaining acceptance in the West.

The different “moods of life” are starkly different. On the one hand, with the lightning speed of modern technology, the pace of life has become much faster, more specialized and knowledge intensive. On the other hand, there are many who seek to revitalize ancient wisdom; to invest in yoga, meditation, Zen, mindfulness, and returning to nature. They gain wholeness being in the here and now. They seem to navigate themselves better, live a healthy and fulfilling life. This sense of contentment comes from staying in touch with and connected to both themselves and what is around them—family, friends, community, and nature. These people have moved beyond simply taking in what society throws at them; instead, they transform their experience and connections into a unique way of life. They cease to demand more of themselves and others. They give back and find themselves loved among a circle of others. That, we observe, is the traditional Eastern way of life.

### **THE EASTERN WAY OF LIFE**

*As it acts in the world, the Tao is like the bending of a bow.  
The top is bent downward the bottom is bent up.  
It adjusts excess and deficiency so that there is perfect balance.  
It takes from what is too much and gives to what isn't enough.  
(Laozi)*

Although cultural artifacts from the Far East have been transmitted to the West along the Silk Road for a long time, it has only been recently made explicit that the Eastern way of life is very different from that in the West (Cheng, 1987; Liang, 1922, 2001). Some of these differences between East and West include respectively, long-term vs. short-term thinking, harmony and community vs. individualism (Chen & Miller, 2010), harmonization vs. realization of desires, artistic vs. scientific inquiry (Fung, 1922; Liang, 1922, 2001); and at a more micro, cognitive level, continuity vs. discreteness, field vs. object, relationship and similarities vs. categories and rules, dialectics vs. foundational principles and logic, and experience-based knowledge vs. abstract analysis (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Here we use “Eastern” to refer to East Asian cultures, and “Eastern thinking” is centered on the ancient Chinese text *Yijing*. Though frequently associated with divination and oracles, the *Yijing* is the ancient Chinese system of philosophy and cosmology—one that laid the foundation for all subsequent Chinese,

and East Asian, thoughts and worldview. It focuses on the idea that changes in the world are constant and driven by the two complementary yet opposite forces *Yin* and *Yang* (Robinet & Wissing, 1990). It subsequently had large influences on both Confucianism and Daoism; the former took a humanistic derivation from the *Yijing*; the latter a naturalistic one (Cheng, 2002). Three fundamental principles in this classic are outlined below (Peng, Spencer-Rodgers, & Nian, 2006).

### **Principle of Holism**

The principle of holism maintains that in reality, everything is relational and connected (Peng et al., 2006). This principle is sometimes called “part-whole inter-determination,” which emphasizes that everything in existence belongs to a unified whole, and no individual thing or entity can be determined, evaluated, or understood without reference to the whole to which it belongs. Nothing exists in isolation, and in order to understand one thing we must also look at other things it is connected to.

In a broader sense, this principle goes against Plato’s separation of ideas and matter, Aristotle’s distinction of form and matter, and all other schools that stem from them, including the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century rationalists and empiricists. It maintains that form and matter cannot be separated, and that reason and experience are unified. “Chinese philosophical knowledge and its attainment are the results of discovering reason (principles) in experience and inducing experience in reason” (Cheng, 1987, p. 28). Along the same line, the principle of holism asserts that theory and action (or practice) are not only intimately related but also two aspects of the same thing. In any given theory there is always implication for action, and likewise no action lacks a theoretical justification to it.

### **Principle of Contradiction**

The principle of contradiction argues that reality is complex and full of contradictions or relative polarities. The Chinese think that reality is a dynamic exchange of two opposite, competing, yet complementary, containing, principles, referred to as *Yin* and *Yang* (Cheng, 1987). They oppose, interact, transform, and ultimately balance each other to construe reality as it is. *Yin* is often associated with being slow, soft, passive; whereas *Yang* being fast, hard, and active. Despite their seemingly dialectical nature, they are two irreplaceable parts of a unified whole; thus accordingly all things should be understood as a totality that includes both sides of a contradiction.

Balance and harmony, two characteristics frequently associated with East Asian cultures, are implications grown out of the principle of contradiction. The Chinese believe that *Yin* and *Yang* forces in the universe must be balanced, just like people should maintain an integrated life by balancing these extremes. Static as they seem, both balance and harmony imply a dynamic concept—“an active harmonious integration of opposites rather than a reactive compromise between them” (Chen, 2002, p. 183). Yet this integration is better called “balancing” rather than “balance,” for a constant balance rarely, if ever, exists. It is a ceaseless process in which *Yin* and *Yang* struggle to integrate with each other to gain equilibrium and return to the unified whole,

just like represented in the well-known *Taijitu* (太極圖). It is this process balancing back and forth that brings out energy and life force—struggle is the basis of development.

### Principle of Change

The principle of change emphasizes that reality is a dynamic fluid process that never stands still and is constantly flowing. Chinese thinkers posit that there is no absolute truth or falsity and that “reality has a rich content that unfolds in a polaristic process of change and transformation” (Cheng, 1987, p. 36). For that reason, words, names, concepts, or categories are meaningless, for they are ephemeral. The first sentence of the *Daodejing* (道德經) reads: “The Dao that can be said is not the Eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the Eternal name.” Because things are always changing, there is no need to cling to transient things such as wealth, fame, and beauty. Also because things are always changing, there are infinite ways to see and interpret any given thing, phenomenon, or entity.

### Eastern Principles and ELT

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In many ways, these three Eastern principles are reflected in the basic assumptions of ELT (summarized in Table 1). ELT conceives *learning as a process*, not as outcome, and asserts that *all learning is re-learning*, which are consistent with the principle of change. For the Eastern mind, an “outcome” or an end-goal is only relative because it will change again in the next moment. Thinking of learning as a constant process set one up for constant progress and development. You learn, and learn again. Over time, because you change, people and things around you change as well; the same learning will never be quite the same. Confucius said in the *Analects*: “It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop.” There is also a Chinese proverb emphasizing the continuity of learning: “Learning is like rowing a boat upstream; if you can’t move up then you will inevitably fall back.”

In addition, ELT posits that *learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world*. This is a mirror image of the principle of contradiction. In ELT, there are two dialectics: one grasping knowledge (CE-AC) and the other transforming knowledge (RO-AE). The two modes of learning in each of these dialectics are opposite (thinking vs. feeling, acting vs. reflecting) yet complementary (one cannot always think without feeling), and the conflicts between them are inevitable and permanent. It must be noted that some people will be able to resolve these conflicts easier than others. Some will immediately find a comfortable learning space in one way of learning. Some will find themselves switching back and forth between different modes of learning over time, trying to encompass both sides of the dialectic and achieve wholeness. The Eastern prescription is to find and maintain a balance (Nisbett et al., 2001).

Speaking in a broader sense, the “balance” of interest is not just the balance within one’s own preference in learning (cognitive vs. affective, reflective vs. behavioral). This balance must also be sought between oneself and one’s external environment. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning “whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge

of the learner” (A. Y. Kolb & D. A. Kolb, 2009, p. 44). Knowledge of the individual predetermines what is going on in the society, and knowledge of the society helps make sense of the individual’s experience. Learning happens in a context, and you ought to choose your context wisely, for *learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment*. Think of the self as *Yin*, and the environment—the “other”—as *Yang*. The two are undoubtedly interdependent and inseparable, but sometimes you need to be by yourself in a quiet place; other times you want to be around other people and be motivated to learn, to teach, to grow, or simply to achieve something. This tension between the internal self and the external environment is also what drives the learning process. From those tensions, conflicts, differences, *knowledge is created*. That’s how humans learn and grow.

Finally, ELT’s idea of experiential learning *encompasses all functions of a total human being*—thinking, feeling, acting, reflecting. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation. We are not human thinkings, human feelings, human actings, or human reflectings, but human beings—that “being” is all of the above combined, and much more. We feel the need to be whole. We can’t just think all the time and neglect our emotions. We can’t keep moving from one place to another doing one thing after another without having to sit back and reflect. Since everything is connected to everything else, body parts and body functioning cannot and must not be separated. When one does something, it involves both one’s whole body and mind at the same time. This emphasis on wholeness is the main theme of this special issue as well as this essay, which we shall proceed to discuss in the following section.

### EASTERN WAYS FOR LEARNING WHOLENESS

*“If you do not know how to keep still in this crazy world, you will be drawn into all kinds of unnecessary trouble. You will lose your view of the Way, and, when you realize it, it will be too late, for in losing the Way, you have also lost yourself.”*  
(Liezi)

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The Eastern principles for learning wholeness are represented in the Eastern ELT model (Figure 2). In this model, active experimentation (AE) is illustrated with Utmost *Yang*, or the Big Sun (太陽). As you are acting, vibrantly interacting with the world, that energy is as radiant as the sun gloriously shining at noon. This energy gradually fades as the sun travels west, as you are more conscious of the experience, getting more in touch with yourself and what is happening around you. When you have concrete experience (CE), the Big Sun now becomes the Small Sun (少陽). The more the sun sets, the more space there is for shadow to grow. Thus after this follows reflective observation (RO). You are in deep contemplation, sometimes in silence and stillness, reflecting about all that’s happened to you, and making sense of your own experience. This space, represented by the Big Shadow (太陰), is the Utmost *Yin*, the most inactive part of the cycle. Then, shadow decreases as the sun begins to rise, as your energy becomes more active



as you move into thinking. Abstract conceptualization (AC) at that point is illustrated by the Small Shadow (少陰), setting momentum for you to spring out into action.

The Eastern experiential learning model can be interpreted in many ways. For one, it highlights the intrapersonal dynamic between epistemological and ontological knowing. The *Yin* half, composing of reflection and conceptualization, represents knowledge acquired by generalization and transformed by thoughts; while the *Yang* half, which includes experience and action, represents knowledge acquired by direct experience and transformed by concrete actions. The former is more analytic, the latter more intuitive; the former more conceptual, the latter more contextual. Wholeness comes from balancing and integrating the two halves. Just like a tree cannot live without the flowing water and the dazing sunlight, people cannot grow from simply taking whatever given to them for granted and not experience that for themselves. Thinking without experiencing, or acting without reflecting, is both lopsided developments.

While this model emphasizes on balancing experiential and analytical knowledge rather than preferring one over the other, in reality this is often difficult. The modern world is inundated with information, know-how books, and technology to find and generate pretty much whatever is in demand. The nature of the work place puts heavy pressure on people to perform—simply stick to certain guidelines and get things done. What is removed from this picture is the experience of the human living in the here and now. How long has it been since you last experienced something so profound that leaves you in awe with nothing else but the greatest sense of appreciation? Have you felt at some point a deep passion and calling that makes you feel whole and amazed at the one small life which somehow happens to be your own? Do you spend your lives “in memory, wishes, narrative, plans, autobiography, and conceptualization—anything but their present situation”? (Rosch, 2001) When we immerse ourselves in the world and yet neglect our own experience of being and living, this imbalance calls for a return to the present, to who we are, to the beginner’s mind—“that which is seen as most primal and enveloping and deeply true” (James, 1902, p. 34). The ontological way of learning is “being aware of life without thinking about it, and then carrying this on even while one is thinking, so that thoughts are not confused with nature” (Watts, 1975, p. 107). Everything then boils down to experience.

Another interpretation of the Eastern model is the interacting and balancing between the internal self and the external environment, including the surroundings, the community, the work, the people, etc. The *Yin* half represents what happens inside one’s head—what one is thinking about. It does not necessarily require interaction with the external world. The *Yang* half, however, represents the self as immersed in the world—it is in a specific context that one is experiencing something, and also with others that one is acting. We experience this in our everyday lives: there are times when we take in something from others, there are times when we put out to others. There are times when we are in need of company, but there are also times when we need to be alone and have some quiet moments for ourselves. Wholeness, again, comes from a balance of both. We cannot keep doing and giving to others, we also need to receive something in return. We cannot keep going with others’ pace at work without occasionally pulling ourselves back and slowing down a little. “Wise is he who knows what is enough and when to stop” (Daodejing).

An extended implication of this principle readily applies in the way we live our lives and interact with our community. Even though Confucianism and Daoism both stress the quest for self-cultivation as the highest purpose, the Eastern “self” is conceived as a dynamic, holistic, and

open system—just the opposite of the privatized ego in the West (Tu, 1985). Daoists seek unity with the world: “the universe comes into being with us together; with us, all things are one” (Zhuangzi); while Confucians strive to expand or cultivate the self through daily interactions with others. Growing up in society, one learns to be a son or daughter, a student, a friend; then later on a teacher, a parent, a worker, a member of the community. Through this myriad of human relatedness, one learns to be fully human and engages in “a ceaseless process through which humanity in its all-embracing fullness is concretely realized” (Tu, 1985, p. 52). In order to find grounding and navigate ourselves in life, balancing then means returning to nature, to the community, to old friends, to our hobbies, to all the ties that we are connected with as humans. Without others, there is no self. One person alone cannot make a difference in this world.

### **FLOWING—THE WATERCOURSE WAY**

*“Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.”*  
(Laozi)

Daoism has been called the watercourse way, an approach to living that inspires us to live in a way that integrates strength and yielding like a flowing stream. Water flows from high to low places, fills the space that is empty, bends around rocks and obstacles, and creates the perfect uninterrupted stream of harmony. When it is still and calm, it reflects the is-ness of the world without corruption. When it gets violent it cleanses and sweeps away everything on its path. Laozi calls it the highest of all good, the closest to the Dao, while Zhuangzi associates water with the mind of the sage and virtue of the perfect man. How things would change if we could live our life and our career flowing like water! There will always be changes and challenges in the world; some unexpected, some not. If we can curve our ways of living and adjust ourselves in the world, taking from what is too much and giving to what is not enough to achieve perfect balance, we can overcome obstacles as if there is no obstacle at all. Yes, this path may not be immediately visible. Yes, it may be counterintuitive. Yes, it may take a long time to see the results. But there is nothing more natural than being yourself, developing yourself, and becoming the best you can be. Stay true to yourself; for you, too, are flowing.

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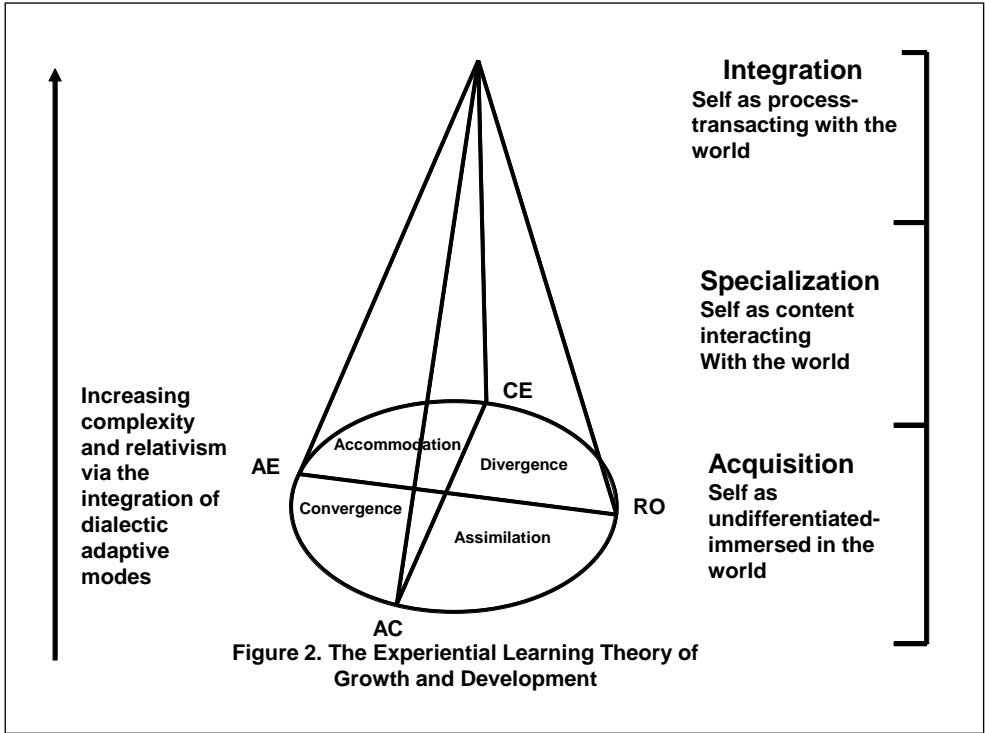
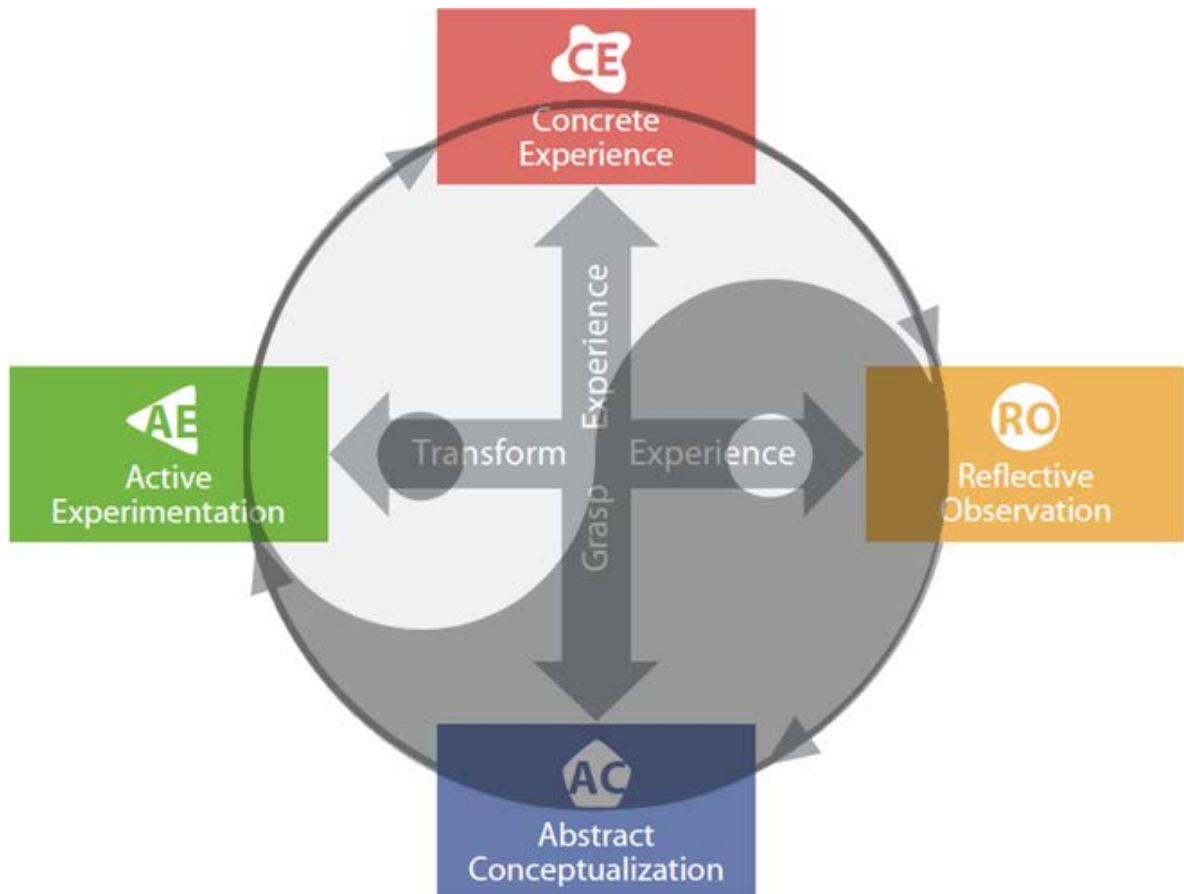


FIGURE 2

## Eastern Experiential Learning Model



**TABLE 1**

**Six Assumptions of Experiential Learning Theory and Principles of the *Yijing***

<b>Assumptions of Experiential Learning Theory</b>	<b>Principles of the <i>Yijing</i></b>
Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.	Principle of Change
All learning is re-learning.	
Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.	Principle of Contradiction
Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment. Personal and social knowledge, constructionism vs. constructivism	
Learning is the process of creating knowledge.	
Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.	Principle of Holism