

Experiential Learning: from Discourse Model to Conversation

Interview with David Kolb

Professor Kolb is the DeWindt Professor of Leadership and Enterprise Development at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, USA. His current research focuses on learning and the role of conversation in learning. He is best known for his central role in the development of an approach to experiential learning, especially for the Kolb Cycle, which has frequently been cited in the literature on education and widely applied in practice. His research has also addressed self-directed change and learning, achievement motivation, professional development, and leadership development. He is author or co-author of several books, including: *Experiential Learning: Experience as a Source of Learning and Development* (1984), *Organization Behavior, An Experiential Approach to Human Behavior in Organizations* (with I. Rubin and J. Osland) (1984), *Changing Human Behavior. Principles of Planned Intervention* (with R. Schwitzgebel), and *Innovation in Professional Education* (with R. Boyatzis and S. Cowen) (1995).

KH: Professor Kolb, you have been working for 20-30 years with experiential learning. What has changed during these years in theory and practice in the field?

DK: Actually it's been over 30 years since I became aware of experiential learning, since the time I discovered action research in the works of Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist. What I started out with was trying to improve my own teaching, because I had lots of trouble lecturing as a young professor. That was the beginning for me.

I think there have been two processes going on; I was becoming more aware of all the trends in experiential learning that were going on and also at the same time the experiential learning movement became world-wide, enterprising all sorts of different arenas. We talk in terms of villages of experiential learning. We span a lot of different areas of application of experiential learning. In the United States a number of institutions like Empire State University have been created around these principles. It's now 25 years old so a process of institutionalisation has taken place around its ideas, whereas 20 or even 10 years ago we were all kind of marginal people in education saying, Hey there's a better way to do these things. I'm very excited about the future.

REASON AND EMOTION

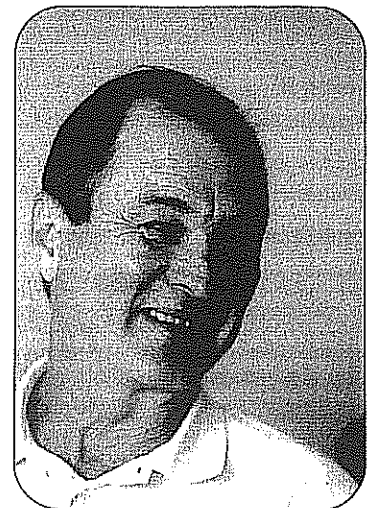
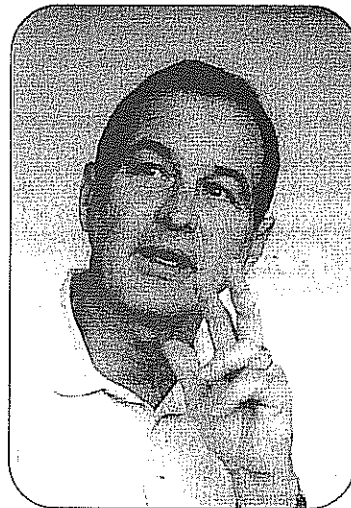
ES: What makes people motivated to learn? Are they naturally interested in learning? I know lots of grown-up people who are afraid of instruction and learning. They have their experiences of it, of course.

DK: Yes, this is a tragedy. People, even educated, hate learning. Largely, it's just because of the discourse model.

If you think about older people, and you take something they are interested in and watch what they do, you see that they are learning. An aspect of the discourse of learning is the stress on reason. Only reason is allowed in the discourse model; emotion is not a part of the learning process. Think about yourself. It's difficult to learn something you're not interested in. Interest is an emotional response, an attraction. I think we have thought about learning as a rational process and have at-

tempted to take emotion out of it. Paradoxically, what has happened is that we have put a huge emotion into it, which is fear. So there's fear in the classroom: Am I going to understand it, am I going to look like a fool?

Another aspect of emotion or motivation that promotes learning, interest, is driven out by the external outside-in knowledge. Again, a principle of experiential learning is that people as human beings are oriented toward learning. They can be blocked in that process. The challenge is how to bring learning to people in the way that follows their interest.



ES: A lot of older people are asking for it, though. They are used to it.

David Kolb

DK: That is why I think experiential learning is very closely associated with adult learning; the two fields are very, very close. Adults are attracted to experiential learning, because it follows interest and it has a different kind of structure. You see in adult learning programmes wide usage of experiential learning, whereas in undergraduate programmes there is less of that.

I must say that my greatest regret in thirty years of teaching is the amount of time I wasted teaching people things they did not want to know. It's amazing to think about it. You are assigned these four courses every year and people are required to take them, we go through them and you can see that people are there to get the grade or something. And why not, given this structure. Sometimes there are a few people, of course, who are truly interested.

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I do think that education would benefit from bringing feelings and interests into the process, having the teacher at least know what the students are interested in, and having the capacity and the relationship between the teachers so that conversation could take place. It would not of course totally change the system.

CONVERSATION AND EXPERIENCE

ES: As grown up persons we often land in a position where we have more experiences and knowledge than our students about the topic discussed. How do you act in this situation so as not to be in an authoritative position? Do you deny your experience from your students in order not to intimidate them? You can't do that; they know that you know.

DK: Do you mean that I hold my expertise from my students? Think of Vygotski, the Russian cognitive theorist, and his idea of the proximal zone of development. It's a very influential theory in education in the States. He says in the proximate theory that there are things that you already know, you are already developed in that area, and there are things that you have no idea of at all, and then there is this proximal zone in which there are things that you have some idea about. Vygotsky says that in the proximal zone of development the more developed consciousness lends itself to a less developed consciousness around a particular material to be developed. He talks about a relationship in which I as a teacher know more and engage in a process of lending my knowledge to someone who happens to know less.

Paulo Freire writes that you can't deny the fact that teachers know more in some regard. I think that it means that knowledge is a dynamic process which changes all the time. In particular in adult learning you see this. While I may know a lot about management, the others may happen to know a lot about engineering or some other kind of expert knowledge. Dialogue among equals doesn't mean that in any single conversation there isn't a point in which one person is an expert and the other person is not.

ES: I was thinking about your college students who do not have a lot of experience yet.

You have a situation in which one is in a position to give and the others to take. How do you organise that situation?

DK: It's a very interesting thing to say that college students do not have experiences. Maybe they've been taught they don't have experiences. They have been in organisations, they've had responsibilities. When we say that they don't have experiences, we mean they don't have the kind of experiences they should have. They've been making sense of their lives. This is again something you are taught in your education. When you come to school you are taught that you don't know anything. I know - you don't. When I try to work with college students on experiential learning, younger students say themselves exactly what you said: We don't have any experience.

CONVERSATION AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

ES: Is equal partnership something that makes conversation as a medium for learning/teaching interesting for you?

DK: A very nice connection. The main new phenomenon for me and a new focus for my research is what I call conversation as experiential learning. How I got to that was that I used to have in my teaching experiential exercises, games or cases. What I noticed in them was that the learning took place not so much in the experience itself but in the dialogue that occurred after the experience among those who had been involved in it. And in that process you could see them going through the experiential cycle. They had had an experience, together in their dialogue, in conversation they reflected on the experience and made some joint meaning of it. And that happens in conversation.

In education we have proceeded into a discourse model of learning, the information transfer model of learning, where one authority stands up in front of the people, imparts one voice that is only in a small way answered by the students. I'm really working towards breaking out of this discourse model into a conversational model. Paulo Freire called that *naming the world together in a*

dialogue among equals. That is a very good way of saying what I see as the orienting principle.

CONVERSATION AS EVALUATION

KH: In higher education the evaluation of teaching is done in many countries with questionnaires, once or twice a year. I don't think that is a good way. You don't have an opportunity for discussion and dialogue.

DK: Why wait till the course is over to evaluate? It's all finished and you can't do anything about it. In conversation, evaluation is occurring in an on-line way. In any normal conversation that's what I'm doing. I hear you say something, I'm evaluating, not good or bad, but what you said.

We have to be careful of dualisms, self-evaluation, evaluation of others. But I think that most social scientists today think of the Self as not separate from others. The Self is developed by the way in which we 'evaluate' how others are reacting to us. We develop that Self in relationship with other people. In some sense that may be where these two can come together. Because the Self is not an isolated mountain that stands there forever, but it's always being formed through conversation and this kind of an evaluation process. If you think about it, think about your own situation, you're seeking evaluation, feedback all the time. You may not ask them, but you are watching whether they are listening to you or not, and you have trusted people who you seek evaluation from. So it's not that you are evaluating yourself without any input. I want input into your self-evaluation, and that's a different sort of strain because there the issue of trust comes up.

I've been experimenting for some ten years now with a conversational learning format in my doctoral seminar. Of course it is easy in a doctoral seminar, because I have about fifteen people, so it is possible to develop a real conversation. The structure of education today makes it difficult with forty people in a class. You see why the discourse model operates, it's cost-effective. In my model I can see if they are learning by what they say or don't say, the questions they ask.

KH: You can also feel the climate.

DK: Of course. To put this into an organisational perspective of programme and evaluation, I think that this whole idea of conversational process of evaluation is something that is often missing.

CONVERSATION AND INTERVENTION

ES: Your conversations, do you structure them to include certain points or do you let them flow by themselves?

DK: This is something I have learned as, in some ways, an evolution from Kurt Lewin. Even in the action research model there is the idea of intervention. An intervention is a kind of structure in conversation that you impose on it. One thing Gadamer says that I keep reminding myself of when working in conversation with my students is that a conversation is always larger than the consciousness of any single player. And that includes the interventionist. He also says somewhere: We don't create conversation, we participate in it. Again, there's the conversation that's going on. It's going on in peoples' heads, it's going on in the reading they've done, it's going on in the room. The whole conversation, I think, has a dynamic and a flow to it, an order that I say to myself is beyond my consciousness to know what it is. So I've become even more radically non-directive in the sense that all of us in the conversation are trying to tap into that flow of the conversation and be in it.

The other thing is the notion that Freire talks about as the dialogue among equals. What I've noticed is - this is something I learned from Carl Rogers, the humanist psychologist - that the minute you intervene, you are in a sense privileging your discourse. I'm the teacher, if I say: How come you're not speaking over there? it's imposing something. That doesn't lead to getting anybody into the conversation but every time I do something like that, intervention has echoes to it. Not only have you heard this but all the other people who have not said anything have heard it and they think: Oh my God, is he now going to point at me and say I'm not talking. It's interruptive. What I've found is that if I can be patient, very often the person who isn't speaking will speak! Or if they

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the German philosopher who in his book *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) introduced the notion of hermeneutical dialogue.

aren't speaking why am I making the judgement that they should speak?

ES: I think it is nice to hear that from an American coming from a very open, social culture. We come from a different culture in which it is absolutely acceptable to be silent in company. To hear an American say that it is acceptable, or who am I to say that they should talk if they don't want to, it's remarkable!

DK: I am learning, am I!

But this is a very good example. I am the leader or the teacher, I happen to be an American, and I am unconsciously imposing my ideas of how this conversation should be going. This to me has been profound from my own peace of mind as a teacher.

KH: I think that this is a big question if you are thinking of the role of the teacher in an educational institution at all levels. There's a big difference, traditionally you are in charge, in control, the one who speaks. In experiential learning you have to be able to be at an equal level with your students. You must have quite good self-confidence as a teacher. If you are not sure of yourself it's difficult to cooperate with others.

DK: There is also a real sense of letting go, and the anxiety that comes with it. What if nobody talks!

ES: For a teacher one of the dangers is also that you're not prepared for new unexpected situations, it's a question of controlling the situation.

DK: This is true. You can see how the wider structure of education promotes this. Because as we begin to develop curricula we cut everything into boxes and say this course is covering this. It's like a painting. The teacher comes to the course and feels the responsibility to cover this type of material. It doesn't matter if the students are interested in the material or if the teacher knows anything about it. Then there is also the evaluation at the end. The teachers are under tremendous pressure and fear about their own performance. If I let it go, we are not going to cover the article we had assigned for today.

Inside-out learning is what experiential learning is about. And yet what we see as the professionalisation of knowledge (accounta-

bility movement, standards movement, etc.) is an outside-in built learning. We've moved in education from *educare* - *educare* means to draw out or to lead out - to *instruare*, instruction, which means to build in. What we find today in the educational process is that we are building in, we are programming people; Freire's concept of banking concept is very close to the information concept of education. Somehow people are to be programmed with information.

I like to think that learning is like breathing. It involves taking in and putting out. When we have moved to the instructional model, education has become a process of taking in, and the expressive part, the putting out part of learning, the showing part of learning, is incredibly neglected. You spend fifteen weeks putting stuff into people's heads and then you give a multiple choice test as their way of expressing what they have learned. You can joke that that's why highly educated people appear so puffed-up! This *educare* part, the part of helping people find their talents and directions and to express and perform what they know is falling away in education as we move toward the professionalisation of knowledge.

STANDARDISATION AND DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

KH: In higher education we are talking more and more about European standards, accreditation systems and standardisation systems. It is part of the international movement which makes it necessary for people to get their credits recognised in other countries, other educational systems.

In business and in education we talk about decentralisation and market orientation, but at the same time we are introducing all kinds of control systems. Do we really trust organisations to take care of their policies. Do we need national follow-up systems?

DK: The structures are different. One dilemma I see is that the pressure towards standardisation drives out the local, the unique. With standardisation comes homogenisation and a kind of pervasive culture which is a kind of lowest common denominator.

The perspective of experiential learning is particularly oriented towards the idea of di-

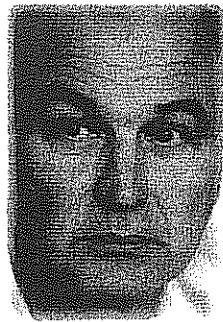
According to David Hunt in inside-out learning you learn from experience through the praxis of critical reflection and self-expression.

versity. When it comes to looking at some of the evaluation and standardisation processes, I have to say that I see diversity being driven out. If you are talking about learning it seems to me that diversity is essential for learning. If everything is the same then how do you discover anything new?

Very often the problem with evaluation is that people who do the evaluation get separated from the people who are doing the action. That then tends to lead to a kind of imposition of standards that may or may not fit with the actual people who are the operators.

Another principle of experiential learning is inside-out learning or self-evaluation. The critical issue from my own perspective, and what I think is the perspective of experiential learning, is the idea of action research, to build the evaluation process into the work process. At the same time you work to promote self-evaluation.

In evaluation there's the idea that to evaluate I have to be objective, and to be objective I can't be involved. It has always struck me as a funny definition of objectivity that the less you are involved the more objective you are. I think that you can just as well argue that the more involved you are the more objective you are.



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ES: But you can never really be objective since you understand everything through your own brain. So that you are involved whether you like it or not.

DK: Very true. You can either be involved in the system you are evaluating or you can be involved in your own professional agendas and evaluation.

The perspective behind the objective, distant evaluator is that there is one objective reality, when in fact most of us today, at least in the social sciences, recognise the plurality of objectives and experiences. The search for the pure research perspective in evaluation is a very difficult one. The idea of a distant, objective observer who is evaluating one reality is the consequence of people being evaluated and turning them into objects, not letting their own consciousness and their own subjective experience and interpretation be an equal part with that of the evaluator. ■

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