

Kay Peterson and David A. Kolb

How You Learn



INITIATING



EXPERIENCING



IMAGINING



ACTING



BALANCING



REFLECTING



DECIDING



THINKING



ANALYZING

Is How You Live

USING NINE WAYS OF LEARNING
TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

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Foreword

How You Learn Is How You Live provides a life-enriching formula: become a more attuned learner and you will be better for it. In your career, family, and personal life, a better understanding of the learning process and your learning preferences is the key to a better life.

Kay Peterson and David Kolb provide an engaging look at how to renew your natural ability to learn. Kay and David remind us how exciting and enriching learning can be. By taking what the authors term “the learning way,” you can learn more than you ever imagined.

Since the first time I read David Kolb’s classic book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, I have been hooked on the power of its message: we all learn from experience, and by engaging in the four-phase learning cycle, we can learn almost anything. The ideas and practices associated with learning from experience have informed me professionally and personally. Since being introduced to experiential learning twenty years ago, I have regularly looked for ways to integrate experiential learning into my life, my teaching, and my research. By reading this book and following the learning way, your life will be enriched as well.

If this book marks your first introduction to experiential learning, then you are in for a life-altering experience. The notion that we learn from our experience grew out of the

ideas of philosophers and psychologists. David Kolb found a common theme in the diverse thinking on the topic of experiential learning. His work on experiential learning cycle is among the most influential approaches to learning. In colleges, business, and school systems, it is impossible to talk about learning without the mention of David Kolb.

David also introduced the concept of learning style nearly fifty years ago. Learning style describes an individual's unique preference for learning in different ways. As the author of *The Learning Style Inventory*, now in its fourth iteration, David transformed the experiential learning cycle into a hands-on exercise of self-discovery. The learning style inventory has helped hundreds of thousands of individuals realize their potential as learners.

In *How You Learn Is How You Live*, David has partnered with Kay Peterson, an innovative thinker and sought-after consultant. Kay has seen firsthand the power of experiential learning in transforming lives and careers. In her consulting practice, she has implemented organizational and individual change using the underlying values and ideas of experiential learning. Kay's work has proven that experiential learning should be on the agenda of every organizational change effort and on the reading list of anyone looking to enact personal change.

This partnership between Kay and David has resulted in an extraordinary book. As you will see, the book builds on David's work, making it practical and personal. Kay and David provide step-by-step instructions on how to live the ideas of experiential learning.

If you have already discovered Kay and David's work on experiential learning, you will find new insights in this book. Experiential learning is made more accessible than ever.

Even the avid follower of experiential learning will find new applications of a tried-and-true formula.

One of the key insights I gained from this book is the power of learning flexibility. Learning flexibility describes our potential to change and adapt. Many of us find change difficult, and this difficulty at change can be traced to our learning style preference. We can get stuck and rely only on a limited set of learning tools. This book describes how to embrace change and move beyond our comfort zone. Luckily, Kay and David provide hands-on exercises and descriptive examples of how to overcome our limits and build upon our strengths by embracing learning flexibility.

Just before reading this book for the first time, I was watching a full moon shining over the Maryland Chesapeake Bay. This wonderful experience was cut short. My thoughts turned to a documentary I had watched earlier in the week about the engineering and psychological challenges of landing the first people on the moon. Experiential learning provides a formula for understanding both the experience of the moon shining and the concepts behind the moon shot. For me, understanding the moon from different perspectives, for example, through my direct experience and through abstract concepts, I am able to see the world in a much richer way. This is the power of experiential learning, to be able to learn from different angles. The ultimate promise of this book is that you, too, will learn how to enrich your life, experience events more deeply, and understand situations with greater clarity.

D. Christopher Kayes,
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Introduction

How You Learn Is How You Live is a guide to awakening the power of learning that lies within us—to show how we can increase our capability to learn from experience throughout our lives, in each and every moment. To say that experience is the best teacher is an understatement—it is our only teacher. We are totally enveloped by our experience like a fish is by water. We awake each day to swim in our stream of conscious experience, surrounded once again by the ongoing story of our lives: the trials and tragedies, hopes and dreams, family, friends, and coworkers who make up our world. How we make sense of it all to find meaning, purpose, and direction in our lives is called learning from experience, or experiential learning.

Experiential learning has been studied extensively in the twentieth century by some of the greatest thinkers of our time, including John Dewey, William James, Carl Rogers, and Jean Piaget. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory has integrated the ideas of these scholars into a model of learning from experience that is uniquely suited to the learning challenges of the twenty-first century. Since the turn of the century, research studies on the model have more than quadrupled. The current experiential learning theory bibliography includes over four thousand entries from 1971 to 2016. In the field of management alone, a 2013 review of management education research showed that 27 percent of

the most cited articles in management education journals were about experiential learning and learning styles.¹

In over forty-five years of research on the theory by scholars and practitioners all over the world, the principles and practices of experiential learning have been used to develop and deliver programs in K–12 education, undergraduate education, and professional education. In the workplace, training and development activities and executive coaching practices are based on experiential learning concepts. Practices that are based on experiential learning include service learning, problem-based learning, action learning, adventure education, and simulation and gaming. These practices make use of community service, adventure, and gaming to help people become aware of how they process information and apply that awareness to their personal and professional development.

Like the many people who have been introduced to experiential learning through universities or our organizational programs, you can use the approach deliberately to recreate and transform yourself. Experiential learning gives you the tools to take charge of your life. This process can help you improve your performance, learn something new, and achieve your goals. In this book, you will see how understanding the learning process and your own approach to learning is the key to self-transformation and growth.

The first chapter describes the learning way of living, suggesting how giving learning a top priority in your life can bring great satisfaction and fulfillment of your potential. The learning way is an approach to living that requires deep trust in your own experience and a healthy skepticism about information. It demands both the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. The learning way begins with the awareness that learning is present in every life experience and is an invitation for

us to be engaged in each one. We become aware *that* we are learning, *how* we are learning, and—perhaps most importantly—*what* we are learning.

The second chapter, “I Am a Learner,” introduces two important first steps on the learning way journey: embracing a learning identity and learning how to learn. The starting point for learning from experience is the belief that you *can* learn and develop from your life experiences. Many people think of themselves as having a fixed identity, believing that they are incapable of changing. At the extreme, if you do not believe that you can learn, you won’t.

To thrive on the learning way requires knowing how to learn. The experiential learning cycle is a learning process initiated by a *concrete experience*, which demands *reflective observation* about the experience in a search for meaning that engages *abstract thinking*, leading to a decision to engage in *active experimentation*. This cycle is so simple and natural that people engage in it without being aware that they are learning. It goes on almost effortlessly all the time and is constantly transforming our lives, but we can learn to employ this process actively and take control of our transformation.

Chapter three, “My Learning Style, My Life Path” invites you to examine your own unique approach to learning, your learning style, and its consequences for the path you have taken in your life. You will explore nine ways of living and learning, each of which brings its own joys and satisfactions, presents its own challenges, and brings the learner to a different place. You will probably relate to one way of learning. Other ways will remind you of people you know, friends, family, and coworkers. Understanding your unique way of learning and your learning style will shed light on the path you have taken in your life. It can help you assess your strengths and weaknesses and understand your preferences.

Because each of the learning styles has an upside and downside, it's important to identify the learning styles you use and those you avoid. Recognizing the different paths of learning and living that others are on can illuminate the communication problems that arise when someone you know is coming from a different place. It can bring the team synergy that occurs when a partner's strengths cover your weaknesses and vice versa. You can also model yourself after those with styles different from your own and expand your capabilities.

In chapter four, "Building Learning Style Flexibility," you will think of one thing you would like to change in yourself that is most critical for your success—just one, no matter how small. This may be a quality or capability that you would like to acquire. It may be a strength that is overplayed or a weakness that holds you back. This will be a goal that increases your flexibility to use a learning style that is not as familiar to you. This one step will be the beginning of a lifelong quest to increase your ability to use all nine styles of learning. Being aware of your preferences and broadening your comfort zone will help you avoid getting stuck in a rut. Instead, you can create a path of your own by seeing all the possibilities instead of just one style.

Chapter five, "Learning Flexibility and the Road Ahead," shows how, with learning flexibility, you can use the full learning cycle to master whatever challenges you may face on the road ahead: perfecting your special skills, rising to greater responsibility, changing your career, finding work/life balance, or serving a greater purpose.

Finally, chapter six, "What's Next? Deliberate Learning for Life," offers checklists that support the application of the learning way in your life so that you can master the challenges of continuous, lifelong learning.



What's Your Learning Style?

BEING A LIFELONG LEARNER IS ONE OF THE SECRETS to happiness, success, and personal fulfillment. But what's the best way to become one? Kay Peterson and David Kolb have the answer. They offer deep, research-based insights into the ideal process of learning and guide you in identifying your dominant style. You'll discover how knowing your learning style can help you with all kinds of everyday challenges, from remembering someone's name to adding a crucial professional skill to your repertoire. This book is a guide to awakening the power of learning that lies within each of us.

“Kay Peterson and David Kolb bring nearly a century of research and over 4,000 studies on experiential learning to our fingertips in this pragmatic and profound guide to living life—all of it—as a learner.”

—Ronald E. Fry, PhD, Professor, Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University

“A wonderfully practical and well-crafted exploration of how learning touches all aspects of our lives, transforming experience into knowledge and making you the person you wish to become.”

—Robert M. Gemmill, PhD, Executive Director, TI:GER, Scheller College of Business, Georgia Institute of Technology

“If you have ever wondered how you learn or why others around you may not be adapting and changing, this book will enlighten you.”

—Richard Boyatzis, PhD, Distinguished University Professor, Departments of Psychology, Cognitive Science, and Organizational Behavior, Case Western Reserve University

“Peterson and Kolb provide practical action steps for improving your learning process through entertaining and relatable stories and examples. I was inspired by the quality of their thinking and the beauty of their writing.”

—Susan Fowler, author of *Why Motivating People Doesn't Work . . . and What Does*



Kay Peterson is managing director of the Institute for Experiential Learning and a founding partner of Harlan Peterson Partners.



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