

THE *Experiential* EDUCATOR

Principles and Practices of Experiential Learning



Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb

THE *Experiential* EDUCATOR

Educators who have discovered experiential learning theory and applied its principles have experienced a transformational impact on the learners they serve and on their own professional development. Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb bring you these principles and practices in their new comprehensive handbook, *The Experiential Educator*.

Inside this book you will find a practical description of the principles of experiential learning distilled from foundational scholars from William James and John Dewey to Carl Rogers and Paulo Freire.

The practice of experiential learning begins with the creation of learning spaces that open minds and create good learning conversations that enable learners to move from experience to reflection to conclusions and action.



You will learn how to facilitate this learning process by developing the four key roles of the experiential educator—facilitator, subject expert, standard setter/evaluator, and coach.

Become an experiential educator and unleash the power of experiential learning.

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The Experiential Educator

Principles and Practices of Experiential Learning

ALICE Y. KOLB AND DAVID A. KOLB
Experience Based Learning Systems Inc.

*To: Tokue and Shunzo Oku
Ethel and Jack Kolb
Our Primal Experiential Educators*



Kaunakakai, HI 96748

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Introduction

THE EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATOR AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The future of the world is in my classroom today, a future with the potential for good or bad. . . . Several future presidents are learning from me today; so are the great writers of the next decades, and so are all the so-called ordinary people who will make the decisions in a democracy. I must never forget these same young people could be the thieves and murderers of the future. Only a teacher? Thank God I have a calling to the greatest profession of all! I must be vigilant every day, lest I lose one fragile opportunity to improve tomorrow.

—IVAN WELTON FITZWATER

This book has been many years in the making. It represents the coming to fruition of hundreds, even thousands, of conversations we have had with educators in all arenas of life who come to us through their interest in experiential learning and the promise it might hold for increasing their effectiveness and fulfillment as educators. Many are professors and administrators in higher education, others are in public and private K–12 education. In the business and in the public sector we have encountered

human-resource and organization-development practitioners, coaches and consultants. We have also talked with many leaders in profit and not-for-profit organizations who have recognized that a substantial portion of their work is to help their coworkers to learn how to respond to the challenges they and their organization face. A number have been concerned with their role as educators in their personal lives, raising their children and helping their friends and neighbors. The questions they raise are about learning and particularly about how they can help others learn.

A Focus on Learning

For education, today it is “the best of times and the worst of times.” We have been awakened from our complacency to a true crisis that permeates the educational establishment everywhere. The dimensions of this crisis are multifaceted—political, economic, educational, and cultural; it is beyond the scope of this book to enumerate. It is, however, the best of times as there is a renewed dedication to facing the issues and a realization that fundamental changes are needed. New e-learning technologies such as MOOC’s (Pappano, 2012; Passarelli, 2014), and online degrees, new organizational arrangements, and educational structures such as the flipped classroom are springing up.

Chief among these changes is a focus on learners and learning. Recent efforts to improve higher education, including reports from the National Research Council (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), the American Psychological Association (1997), and a number of other scholars (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1995; Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002; King, 2003; Light, 2001; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000; Zull, 2002, 2011) have focused on improving the learning process in education through the application of research from what has been called “the new science of learning.”

One stream of this research is focused on the concept of experiential learning. Experiential learning is often misunderstood as a set of tools and techniques to provide learners with experiences from which they can

learn. Some have used the term to describe learning that is a mindless recording of experience. In fact, experiential learning is actually a philosophy of education based on what Dewey (1938) called a “theory of experience.” He argued that while traditional education had little need for theory since practice was determined by tradition, the new experiential approach to education needed a sound theory of experience to guide its conduct.

Since their emergence in the early 1970s, the principles and practices of experiential learning have been used to create curricula and conduct educational courses and programs. Many of the nontraditional educational innovations that have flowered during this period, such as college programs for adult learners and prior learning assessment, have used experiential learning as their educational platform. As experiential, learner-centered education has gained widespread acceptance in the twenty-first century (Prince & Felder, 2006; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012), more and more educators are considering or experimenting with experiential learning practices such as service learning (Bielefeldt, Dewoolkar, Caves, Berdanier, & Paterson, 2011; Brower, 2011), problem-based learning (Bethell & Morgan, 2011; Gurpinar, Bati, & Tetik, 2011), action learning (Foy, 1977; Keys, 1994; Revans, 1980), adventure education (Fuller, 2012; Timken, & McNamee, 2012) and simulation and gaming (Schaefer, Vanderbilt, Cason, Bauman, Glavin, Lee, & Navedo, 2011; Shields, Zawadzki, & Johnson, 2011; Taylor, Backlund, & Niklasson, 2012).

Since its first statement in 1971 (Kolb, 1971; Kolb, Rubin, & McIntyre, 1971), there have been many studies using Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) to advance the theory and practice of experiential learning. Since 2000, ELT research in many fields around the world has more than quadrupled. The current ELT bibliographies include over four thousand entries from 1971–2017 (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). A 2013 review of management-education research (Arbaugh, Dearmond, & Rau) showed that 27 percent of the top-cited articles in management-education journals were about experiential learning and learning styles.

Since ELT is a holistic theory of learning that identifies learning-style differences among different academic specialties, it is not surprising to see that ELT research is highly interdisciplinary, addressing learning and educational issues in many fields. ELT is being used extensively by experiential educators as a guide for practice in at least thirty fields and academic disciplines (Kolb & Kolb, 2013a, chapter 7). Included are research studies from every region of the world with many contributions coming from the United States, Canada, Brazil, the United Kingdom, China, India, Australia, Japan, Norway, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Thailand. These studies support the cross-cultural validity of ELT and the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI) and also support practical applicability across cultures. The KLSI has been translated into many languages including English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, Dutch, German, Swedish, Chinese, Romanian, Persian, Thai, and Japanese. The value of the holistic ELT framework for understanding cultural differences has been shown in a number of studies on cross-cultural management (Kayes, Kayes, & Yamazaki, 2005, 2006; Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004, 2007).

The studies cover a broad range of applications using ELT and the KLSI. Some studies have used the KLSI and the experiential learning cycle to understand and manage differences between students' and faculty's learning styles. Some educators have used an experimental design to compare the effectiveness of an experiential learning method with a more traditional course format, whereas others have developed and implemented instructional methods using the experiential learning model as a framework. The principles and concepts of ELT have been used widely to develop and deliver programs in K–12 education (McCarthy, 1996, 2000), undergraduate education (Mentkowski, 2000), and professional education (Boyatzis, Cowan, & Kolb, 1995; Reese, 1998). In human-resource development, many training and development activities and executive coaching practices have been developed based on experiential learning concepts (Chapman, 2006; Matsuo, 2014).

A Journey of Becoming

The journey to become an experiential educator can be challenging, surprising, frustrating, and, ultimately, rewarding, as the following examples illustrate:

- One teacher said, “Actually, teaching was easier before I learned about experiential learning. My main focus was to collect and organize my course material and present it clearly. I had never thought much about how the students were reacting and their thoughts about the material.”
- A gaming educator stressed, “The courage to let the simulation flow, whether the students are making a mess of it or not, or making wrong or unwise decisions. He or she must learn not to interfere...It should be said from experience that this role, which combines that of manager/organizer, facilitator, and learner, is a very difficult one to assume. It can, in the early stages...be very threatening but it is, in the end, very effective and fulfilling (Thatcher, 1990, p. 271).
- An experienced teacher reported, “I was beginning to get really bored presenting the same material year after year. Experiential learning has opened up conversations with the students about their experience and ideas and now I am actually learning new things along with them.”
- An executive coach described how her coaching practice was transformed by the adoption of the ELT concepts of the learning cycle and learning style. “Becoming an experiential coach has increased my understanding of myself as a learner and a coach. This insight allows me to recognize the parts in the coaching process that I might overemphasize and to be deliberate about completing the steps in the process I might underemphasize. The learning cycle provides a process map for any coaching session and, over the longer term, any coaching engagement. During a session, I use the learning cycle to help the client connect with her own experience, to reflect on that experience, to analyze and plan, and to take some action to

experiment with new behaviors or approaches. I also use the KLSI 4.0 to identify the client's learning style so that I will know how best to communicate and structure the session and to understand how the client will approach personal change. By framing the change in an approach that resonates with the client, I am more successful in facilitating this desired change."

- A professor at a university in the Middle East contacted us on our website, saying that he had read the papers on experiential learning there and sought advice about how to apply these ideas in his university. He described how students and faculty alike followed the traditional lecture, memorize, and test process with little participation, questioning, or independent inquiry. "I worked up the courage to experiment with Dewey's ideas about participation in my class but to my dismay after 20 minutes I found myself drifting back into the lecture mode where students seemed more comfortable."
- An organizational-behavior professor at an undergraduate college adopted a textbook based on experiential learning (Osland, Kolb, Rubin, & Turner, 2007) using the experiential exercises in it to experiment with teaching experientially. Initially students were hesitant with the new format that involved them working in learning groups, discussing preclass work in preparation for in-class exercises. However, as the semester progressed, the professor noticed that the students' outlook dramatically improved. They became more engaged in the exercises. The professor noted, "I was able to act as their guide to learning the material, which they then took ownership of." She describes students' involvement in the experiential exercises as enabling them to more fully understand key concepts, such that sometime later the students would recall the experiences and their learning with ease.

Our conversations and our own experiences have led us to the conclusion that becoming an experiential educator is about more than acquiring tips, techniques, and methods for teaching. In fact, many of our K-12 educator

colleagues feel inundated by a parade of one new educational program and technique after another. We have sometimes felt a palpable sense of resistance to our programs on experiential learning with teachers thinking "Here comes another one!" The current focus on educational programs, systems, technologies, and techniques may have caused us to lose sight of the fact the educator relationship is above all a human relationship, where what the educator shows is as important as what he or she says. We can easily forget that we are role models for learners. We display our values, character, integrity, and authenticity for all to see.

We become educators by learning from our experience and it is this hard-won wisdom that is the foundation for our work. As in the title of David Hunt's profound work, we start by *Beginning with Ourselves*. Hunt put it this way:

Working as a practical theorist, I became dissatisfied with the conventional view that if a logical theory were developed and verified through research, then it could be directly applied to classroom practice...but it did not offer a satisfactory account of how we were actually working together. Describing our work together in this abstract way cut us off from our direct experience, thereby removing us from the realities of the practice we were trying to improve. (1987, pp. 1-2)

Hunt proposes an "inside-out" approach rooted in our own experience as the starting point for becoming an experiential educator. Here the "outside-in" knowledge of the expert is not rejected but tested against the realities of the educator's experience-in-context. The experiential educator is a unique person in relationship with equally unique students, influenced by a wide variety of contexts. The findings of scientific research must be implemented by educators integrating scientific knowledge and practical experience. Edlbring (2012) describes this process with a quotation from John Dewey. Dewey argues against educational science providing recipes to educators, and, furthermore, reinforces the artistry responsibility of the teacher to use available science in conjunction with situational knowledge:

It is very easy for science to be regarded as a guarantee that goes with the sale of goods rather than as a light to the eyes and a lamp to the feet. (Dewey 1929, p. 15)...knowledge is therefore not aimed at being *directly* applied in practice but interpreted and enriched by the person taking part of it. The richness is produced when readers (such as educators and other researchers) understand the results from both the perspective they were created in and from their own culture of practice. The perspective of the researcher and readers coincide towards a pragmatic end in an enriching process similar to the fusion of experiences of the author and reader in interpreting cultural understanding of texts. (Gadamer, 1989) (Edelbring 2012, p. 18)

Teachers, coaches, consultants, managers, parents, or others who have jobs and responsibilities to help others learn can benefit by adopting the larger identity of educator in the process of becoming through learning from experience. In our view, the experiential educator is one who embraces this process of becoming through learning, no matter how accomplished and successful he or she might be. To become an experiential educator involves raising our sights from the preoccupations, demands, and institutional constraints of our daily work to embrace a larger vision of what it is to be an educator. A great number of those we have worked with had already discovered through their own practice some of the concepts of experiential learning, such as the value of connecting with and beginning from the learner's experience and individual differences in how learners learn best. They were looking for a guiding framework, theory, or personal philosophy to give a vision and direction to their careers as educators.

Some of our most unsettling conversations have been with educators who are overwhelmed and overstressed by their positions and institutions, often feeling "burned out" in their jobs. Many felt frustrated and trapped by the systems and contexts they worked in, struggling to find ways to focus on learning in spite of system constraints that often are preoccupied with everything but learning—performance, certification, discipline, research

productivity, the list goes on and on. They found it hard not to be cynical about their institutions and their apparent lack of a genuine focus on learners and learning. We could certainly empathize with their cynicism, but we were also aware that even in the most anguished cases there was still a glimmer of hope, a vision of the possibility for fostering learning and development and a desire to overcome the obstacles they faced. They had, after all, come to ask about experiential learning and its promise for educators.

Educating Is a Profoundly Human Activity

We believe that their hope, vision, and desire are deeply rooted in who we are as human beings. As humans we share a capacity for learning with almost all living beings; but we are far more unique in our capacity for educating. The great psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called us the "teaching species" that passes on, through generations, the accumulated wisdom of our collective experience:

For we are a teaching species...Only man can and must extend his solicitude over the long parallel and overlapping childhoods of numerous offspring united in households and communities. As he transmits the rudiments of hope, will, purpose and skill, he imparts meaning to the child's bodily experiences; he conveys a logic much beyond the literal meaning of the words he teaches; and he gradually outlines a particular world image and style of citizenship. I have, therefore, postulated an instinctual and psychosocial stage of generativity. Parenthood is, for most, the first, and for many, the prime generative encounter; yet the continuation of mankind challenges the generative ingenuity of workers and thinkers of many kinds. (Erikson, 1961, pp. 159–160)

The relationship between parent and child is the primal educational relationship and forms the model from which other forms of educating have evolved. As educators we carry with us to some degree the spirit of

unconditional love and selfless giving that characterizes that primal relationship. So it is no surprise that two of the central foundational scholars of experiential learning, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, should have devoted their lives to the study of child development.

The newborn infant is a center of pure experiencing, and in the learning space created by loving parents he or she embarks on a lifelong journey of learning from experience. The pristine nature of this educator relationship gradually becomes more complicated and complex as the child becomes more conscious and independent and the challenges of an expanding life space pose greater learning challenges. The parent as educator is challenged at each successive life stage to convey his or her wisdom while encouraging independent growth and self-direction. For the professional educator the work becomes even more challenging. The loving intimacy of the family is no longer appropriate; it is replaced in the best of cases by authenticity and genuine respect for the learner. The learning agenda for learners becomes larger, more symbolic and abstract than concrete and behavioral. The relationship is no longer private and therefore the educator must contend with the many public contractual, managerial, cultural, and community stakeholders that seek to influence it.

But for most of us, the satisfactions and achievements of our work as educators still retain the vestiges of the primal-educator role. Herb Shepard in his classic article, “A path with heart,” argued that to have such a “path of knowledge, a path with a heart, made for a joyful journey and was the only conceivable way to live” (1984, p. 149).

Learning through Shared Experience

The primal parental educator role, with its emphasis on learning through shared direct experience, has particular relevance for the experiential educator. For educators, the magic of experiential learning lies in the unique relationship that is created between teacher, learner, and the subject matter under study. Traditional approaches to education have relied on an information-transmission model of learning where knowledge about the subject is

communicated, often by lecture, through the teacher’s discourse about the subject. Learners, having no direct contact with the subject, are unable to investigate, explore, and judge for themselves. They are left one-down in a power relationship with only the choice of “taking the teacher’s word for it.” Teachers for their part are left in a one-way “conversation” that is ultimately deadening and boring. Often responses from learners have to be demanded and rewarded by points for participation.

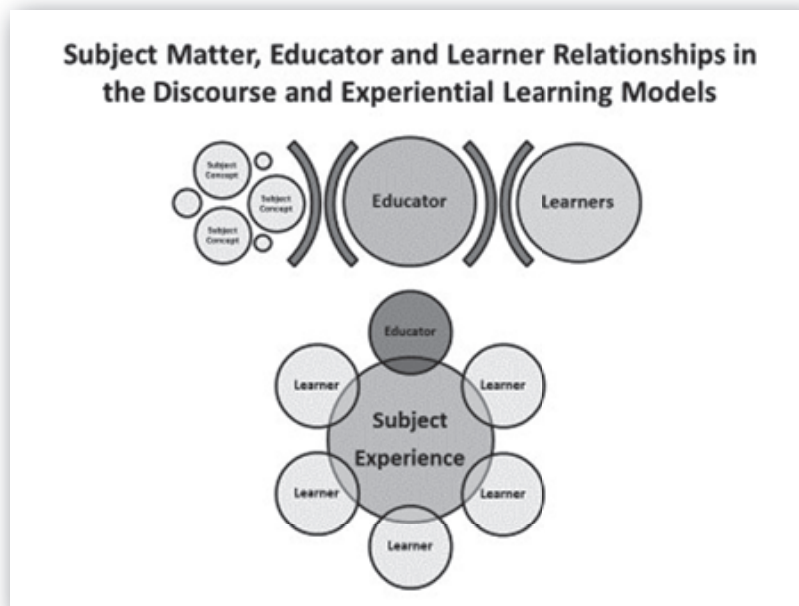
The experiential approach places the subject to be learned in the center, to be experienced by both the educator and learner. This has a leveling effect on their relationship, to the extent that both can directly experience the subject. Everyone has a perspective on the subject. Those with different learning styles, for example, will view the subject experience through their own lens for processing experience. Questioning differences that arise from these multiple perspectives is the fuel for learning and new insights. Challenging the expert’s viewpoint even becomes possible. This can be quite unsettling to novice experiential educators; but also it becomes a source of unpredictable new insight and learning for them. In becoming an experiential educator with this approach, the teacher also becomes an experiential learner. Parker Palmer, a strong advocate for the subject-centered approach, put it this way:

The subject-centered classroom is characterized by the fact that the third thing (the subject) has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do. In such a classroom there are no inert facts. The great thing is so alive that teacher can turn to student or student to teacher, and either can make a claim on the other in the name of that great thing. Here teacher and students have a power beyond themselves to contend with—the power of a subject that transcends our self-absorption and refuses to be reduced to our claims about it. (Palmer, 1998, p. 117)

These contrasting models of learning are shown in figure 0.1. The discourse model of teaching is based on an information-transfer model of learning

whereby concepts are communicated to learners through lecture and texts. Learning is evaluated by how well the learner is able to record the concepts in declarative memory and recall them when asked questions about them. The experiential learning model is more focused on episodic memory. In addition to the “what” of declarative memory it is also concerned with the “how”—how the learner has come to this understanding through the process of inquiry about direct experience. Episodic memory includes, in addition to “the facts,” recall of how the self-in-context achieved understanding about the subject. This self-in-context learning becomes the basis for future actions by the learner in other contexts.

Figure 0.1



The experiential educator in the subject-centered approach is challenged to invent ways to bring experiences of the subject matter that have “a presence so real, so vivid and so vocal” into the center of the conversation. Many experiential learning techniques, such as service learning, problem-based

learning, and internships have been developed for this purpose. Equally important is the creation of learning spaces that stimulate inquiry and open minds and create good learning conversations, enabling participants to move from the experience to deep reflection, conceptualization, and action. This book reports the many ways that the experiential educator can accomplish these objectives.

Overview of the Book

Our goal in writing this book is to share with educators the current state of the art of ELT research and practice. In addition to bringing our latest research and thinking about experiential learning, we also aim to distill the wisdom of those educators who have shared their experiences and research on experiential learning with us; enriching, expanding, and applying ELT. The book is divided into three parts.

Part I describes the basic principles of ELT with an emphasis on how educators can use these ideas to enhance their practice. The first chapter emphasizes the importance for the educator of a personal educational philosophy. It brings the experience and insights of the foundational scholars of experiential learning to this task. Chapter 2 describes the two central concepts of ELT, the learning cycle and learning style, describing how recent research has clarified the inextricable relationship between these concepts. Chapter 3 describes how research on the brain deepens our understanding of the process of experiential learning. Chapter 4 is focused on the relationship between learning and development, describing how the learning cycle is really a spiral of lifelong development. Chapter 5 examines the concept of learning identity and its role in learners’ willingness to engage in learning. Chapter 6 focuses on the concept of deliberate, intentional learning and how educators can assist learners in directing and controlling their own learning process by developing metacognitive skills in the use of mindfulness, learning identity, learning relationships, learning times and spaces, and deliberate practice. Chapter 7 describes how these ELT concepts apply at the level of the team and organization.

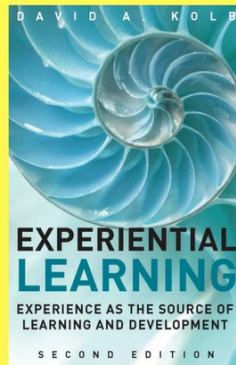
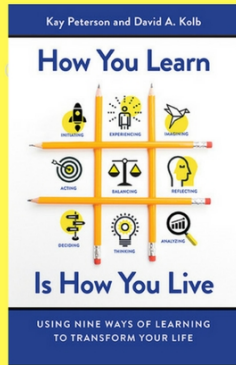
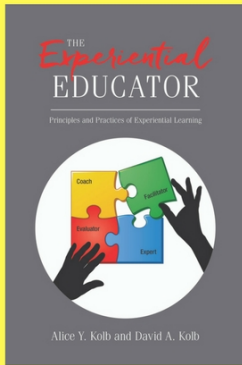
Part II focuses on how educators can create effective spaces for learning. Chapter 8 describes the concept of learning space in ELT, examining the contextual and situated nature of experiential learning where learning is, in Lewin's famous phrase, a function of the person and the environment. Chapter 9 is about how to create a hospitable, safe space for learning that achieves an optimal mix of challenge and support. Chapter 10 describes the principles for the creation of good conversation and dialogue in the learning space. Chapter 11 is focused on the creation of learner-centered learning spaces. Chapter 12 is about the construction of learning spaces for reflective thinking. Chapter 13, the ludic learning space, is about creating play spaces for creative learning. Chapter 14 explores learning spaces that deepen and sustain learning.

Part III concentrates on the practice of experiential education. It begins in chapter 15 with a case study of curriculum change through the application of experiential learning principles and learning space concepts showing how experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting are integrated, making room for learners to complete the whole learning cycle. Chapter 16 focuses on an important principle of ELT—teaching around the learning cycle. It describes how educators can assist learners in traversing the cycle by adopting educator roles appropriate to the stages of the learning cycle. Chapter 17 describes in detail the best practices for each of the educator roles—coach, facilitator, subject expert, and evaluator.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not share a confession with you. We both, Alice and David, began our work on this book with the feeling that we were pretty good educators—not great teachers with lots of teaching awards, but workmanlike educators with many successful courses, training programs, and consulting experiences that we felt good about. As we reach the conclusion of this project, we now see that in many cases we could have done so much better with the benefit of what we have learned in writing this book. Through our studies of these many great scholars and practitioners of learning and education, we have been humbled by the recognition that we have much to learn; that we, too, are continuing in our own process of becoming experiential educators.

Part I

PRINCIPLES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY



**Our latest on
experiential
learning**

[www.amazon.com/author/
davidkolbexperientiallearning](http://www.amazon.com/author/davidkolbexperientiallearning)