

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

A Handout for Teacher Educators

Prepared by

Dr. Vasant D. Bhat

Professor of Education

REGIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, MYSORE

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STRUCTURE

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Background

You are aware that teaching and learning are interdependent processes. As a teacher, you are as much concerned about learning among school age children as you are concerned about organizing teaching. You are also aware that our understanding of learning was made possible by the works of psychologists.

The earliest explanations of learning in the organized discipline of psychology were made by those psychologists who are referred to as behaviourists. Main among them were Pavlov, Watson, Hull and Thorndike. Their explanations of learning dominated the field till 1950s.

According to the behaviourists, learning occurred as a ‘response’ to certain definite and identifiable stimuli in one’s environment. Since it is not possible to observe what is happening inside a learner’s brain, they thought that the efforts in measuring and theorizing about learning must be limited to merely what is going in the stimulus and what is coming out – the response. By the middle of the twentieth century, the S.R. view of learning had emerged as the most accepted explanation of learning in the field of psychology. By virtue of its predominance, the S – R explanation of learning had influenced allied disciplines such as education, linguistics

and sociology. Its influence in the field of education was further strengthened by the works of Shinner and Crowder who translated the theory into systematic procedures of organizing learning which they called as Programmed Learning and which could be applied as such by the teachers.

Such a view of learning was too simplistic considering the fact that learning itself is of different types.

Emergence of Other Views of Learning

The simplistic and reductionist view of learning was challenged first by a set of psychologists called as Gestaltists and subsequently by those who are known as constructivists. As a result, the reductionist view of the behaviourists was displaced by far more complex non-reductionist views in the sixties and seventies. It occurred in psychology through the work of Piaget, Gagne and Bruner to mention a few. In recent years, constructivism has received considerable attention in education, as opined by Richardson (1997). It has been heralded as a more natural, relevant, productive and empowering framework for incorporation in educational practice.

What is Constructivism?

If constructivism has attained so much of significance in the field of education, then you would agree that an understanding of it is essential for a teacher. Constructivism is viewed as a meaning – making theory that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learn.

According to this explanation of learning, “individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come in contact” (Richardson, 1997). Knowledge, as viewed here, is acquired through an involvement with content rather than imitation or repetition (Kroll & Laboskey, 1996).

Learning activities in constructivist setting are characterised by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving and engagement with others. Accordingly, a

teacher's roles in such settings are not merely that of a dispenser of knowledge. The teacher here is a guide, facilitator and co-explorer who encourages learners to question, challenge and formulate their own ideas, opinions and conclusions. However, a teacher who follows the constructivist views on learning will not look for 'correct answers' and will de-emphasise single interpretations.

In conclusion, we may state the following with respect to the differences between the behaviourists and a constructivist in so far as learning is concerned.

Behaviourism, as Freire considers, follows a 'banking' model in which the teacher fill students with deposits of information considered by the teacher as true knowledge and the students are required to retain this till such time as needed. Hence, a teacher employing behaviourism follows didactic, memory-oriented transmission strategy. The difficulty with such a strategy is that knowledge acquired is not well integrated with prior-knowledge and is often accessed and articulated only for formal academic occasions such as examination constructivist approaches, in contrast, are regarded as producing greater internalization and deeper understanding than traditional methods.

Experiential Learning

By the eighties, constructivism had made a profound influence on the conceptualization of learning and the way teaching needs to be organized. Further advancement in the field occurred when authors such as Mezirow, Freire and others stressed that the way we process experience and our critical response of experience are central to any conception of learning. They spoke of learning as a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and later leads to action, which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection (Rogers, 1996). The importance of experience in learning was acknowledged by more and more psychologists.

Experiential learning is not just 'field work' or 'praxis', which mean connecting of learning to real life situation. On the contrary, it is a theory that defines

the cognitive processes of learning and it asserts the importance of critical reflection in learning.

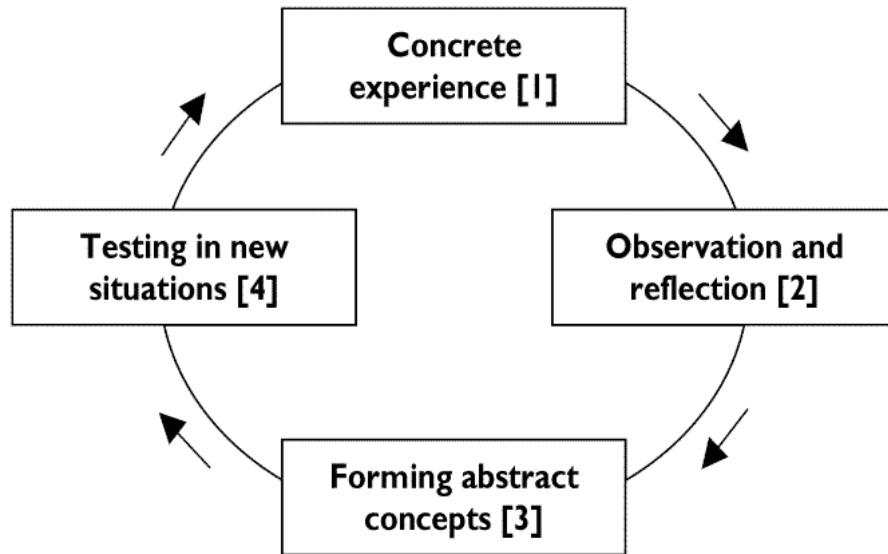
As observed by Stephen Brookfield (1983) the term ‘experiential learning’ is being used with two connotations. On the one hand, it is used to describe the learning where a student acquires and applies knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting. It thus involves a ‘direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it’ (Borzak, 1981).

The second connotation of experiential learning is “education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life” (Houle, 1980). Unlike in the first connotation, learning here is not sponsored by some formal educational institution but is undertaken by people themselves. It is learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience and is the way that most of us do our learning.

The central reference point for discussion on experiential learning comes from the work of David A Kolb and his associate Roger Fry (1975). Presented below is their conceptualization of experiential learning.

Kolb developed the model of experiential learning on the basis of the work of Lewin. Lewin’s research discovered that learning is best facilitated when there is a conflict between a learner’s immediate concrete experience and a detached analysis of it by the individual. His cycle of action, reflection, generalization, and testing is characteristic of experiential learning.

Kolb’s model called ‘experiential learning cycle’ as shown in the figure below consists of four elements namely, concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situations.



According to Kolb and Fry (1975), the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points mentioned above, though the cycle should be approached as a continuous spiral. In reality, however, the process of learning begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of that action on the situation. From this first step, the learner proceeds to the second step of understanding the effects of his action in the particular situation. This second step has the intention on the part of the learner to anticipate what would follow from the action if the same action were to be taken under same or similar circumstances. Based on this second step, a learner would proceed to the third step of understanding the general principle under which the particular instance falls. The meaning with which the term understanding the general principle is used by Kolb is akin to that of Coleman (1976) which reads as follows.

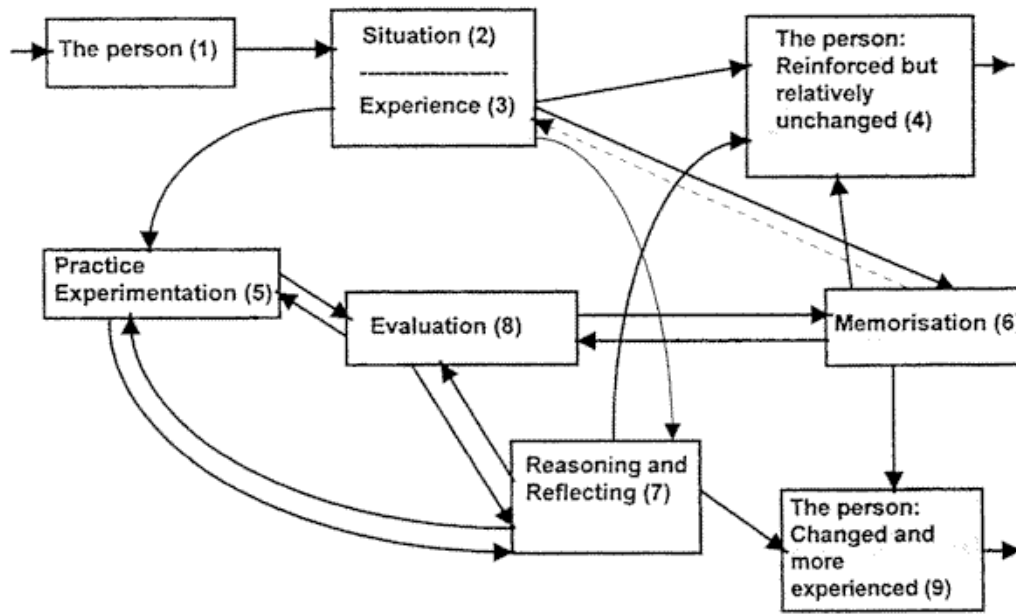
“Generalising may involve actions over a range of circumstances to gain experience beyond the particular instance and suggest the general principle. Understanding the general principle does not imply, in this sequence, an ability to express the principle in a symbolic medium, that is, the ability to put it into words. It implies only the ability to see a connection between the actions and effects over a range of circumstances”.

Learning which has occurred in this way may result into formation or strengthening of various rules of thumb or generalisations about what to do in different situations. The learner will be able to say what action to take in a situation but may not be able to verbalise his actions in psychodynamic or sociological terms. There may thus be difficulty in transferability of his learning to other settings and situations. Equipped with an understanding of the general principle, the learner proceeds to the last step of cycle of its application through action in a new circumstance within the range of generalization.

Two aspects stand out in Kolb's explanation of experiential learning. One, the use of concrete or 'here and now' experience to test ideas and two, the use of feedback to change practices and theories.

Further developments in Experiential Learning Theory: The work of Peter Jarvis

Peter Jarvis (1987, 1995) starting with Kolb's model, evolved quite an elaborate model to show that there are a number of responses to the potential learning situation. For developing his model, Jarvis used the method of consultation with adult groups whom he asked to explore Kolb's model based on their own experience of learning. Thus he was able to develop a model which allowed different routes taken by learners in an experiential learning situation. Depending upon the route taken by a learner, the end product is either non-learning or non-reflective learning or reflective learning. This could be better understood by a study of the trajectories on the diagram produced by Jarvis.



Non-learning: The trajectory indicated in boxes 1 to 4 is indicative of non-learning. This is where a person either does not respond to a potential learning situation or responds through patterned behaviours only such as saying ‘hello’.

Non-reflective Learning:

The non-reflective learning occurs in more than one way. Several experiences in daily life are not really thought about and where practice is not involved (Boxes 1 – 3 to 6 to either 4 or 9). Acquisition of manual and physical skills as evident in a training situation where reflection is not necessarily involved is another instance of non-reflective learning (boxes 1-3 to 5 to 8 to 6 to either 4 or 9). Memorisation is another instance of non-reflective learning (boxes 1-3 to 6 to 8 to 6 to either 4 or 9).

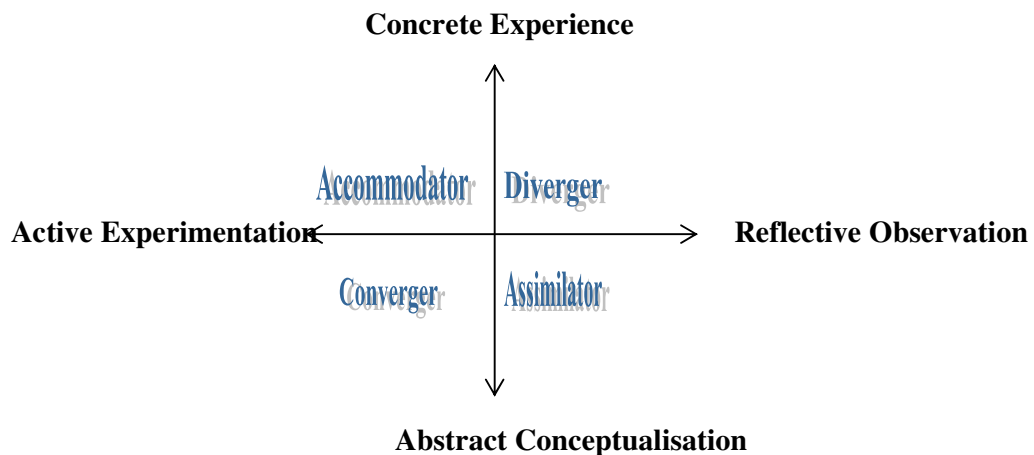
Reflective Learning

Just as in the case of non-reflective learning, there are several ways in which reflecting learning occurs in people. ‘Contemplation’ is when one considers an experience and makes intellectual decision about it (boxes 1-3 to 7 to 8 to 6 to 9). ‘Reflective practice’ occurs when a person makes reflection on and in action. (boxes 1-3 to 7 to 5 to 6 to 9). Lastly, ‘Experiential learning’, according to Jarvis refers to

the way in which pragmatic knowledge may be learned (boxes 1-3 to 6 to 5 to 7 to 8 to 6 to 9).

Abilities and Learning Styles in Experiential Learning

Based on the four elements of his model, as discussed earlier, Kolb agrees that effective learning entails the possession of four different abilities. They are concrete experience abilities, reflective observation abilities, abstract conceptualization abilities and active experimentation abilities. These four abilities manifest in four basic learning styles involved learning characteristics on two different continue of learning viz. concrete experience to abstract conceptualization and active experimentation to reflective observation. The four basic learning styles are that of converger, diverger, assimilator and accommodator.



Tennant (1996) presents a description of these four learning styles as given in the table below.

Learning Style	Learning Characteristic	Description
Converger	Abstract Conceptualisation + Active Experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong in practical application of ideas • Can focus on hypo-deductive reasoning on specific problems • Unemotional • Has narrow interests
Diverger	Concrete experience + Reflective observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong in imaginative ability • Good at generating ideas and

		seeing things from different perspectives. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested in people. • Broad cultural interests.
Assimilator	Abstract conceptualisation + Reflective observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong ability to create theoretical models. • Excels in inductive reasoning. • Concerned with abstract concepts rather than people.
Accommodator	Concrete experience + Active experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greatest strength in doing things. • More of a risk taker. • Performs well when required to react to immediate circumstances. • Solves problems intuitively.

Applications in Education

The constructivism in general and the experiential learning in particular present to teachers and teacher educators the formidable task of translating a learning theory into a theory of teaching. (Mac Kinnon and Scarff-Scatter, 1997). This in turn raises questions about what teachers used to know and be able to do.

As discussed in the earlier sections, the learners have their preferred learning styles. Understanding one's learning style helps in understanding one's strengths and weaknesses in experiencing a learning situation. If knowledge of weakness guides us to acquire proficiency in other modes, the knowledge of strengths would have direct bearing on areas such as selecting one's career. According to Knox (1986), such knowledge helps one make transitions to higher levels of personal and cognitive functioning.

As far as a classroom teacher is concerned, knowledge of the diversity in learning styles in a classroom enables selection or development of learning material that best fits the diversity of the classroom. The very idea of experiential learning directs our attention to the importance of experience in learning and guards against limiting teaching to a mere presentation of information and facts.

A teacher who understands experiential learning would not overlook student needs to reflect upon experiences. As Brookfield (1990) points out the importance of “praxis” wherein opportunities for the interplay of action and reflection are ensured. Praxis means that curricula are not studied in some kind of artificial isolation, but that ideas, skills and insights learned in a classroom are tested and experienced in real life. Essential to praxis is the opportunity to reflect on experience.

Conclusion

Experiential learning, as far as its central idea is concerned, is not totally new. But it suggests a renewed look at the way teaching and learning get organized in our classrooms. It suggests that the learner must occupy the centre stages of classroom activity and not the teacher. That the approaches which engage students in interdisciplinary exploration, collaborative activity and field based opportunities for experiential learning, reflection and self-examination are used more and more by the teachers.

List of Books

- Brookfield, S (1990). *The Skillful Teacher*, San Francisco: Jossey - Bars.
- Jarvis, P. (1981). *Adults as Learners*, San Francisco, Jossey – Boss.
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