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**THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE\***

Experiential learning occurs when someone engages in an activity, looks back at the activity critically, gains some useful insight from the analysis, and changes behavior in accordance with the results. Of course, this process is experienced spontaneously in everyone's ordinary life. People never stop learning; with each new experience, we consciously or unconsciously ask ourselves questions such as the following: "How did that feel?," "What really happened?," or "What do I need to remember about that?" It is an *inductive* process, i.e., proceeding from observation rather than from *a priori* "truth" (as in the *deductive* process). Learning can be defined as change in behavior as a result of experience or input, which is usually the purpose of training. The effectiveness of experiential learning is based on the fact that nothing is more relevant to us than ourselves. Someone's own reactions to, observations about, and understanding of something are more important than someone else's opinion about it. Research has shown that people learn best by doing. People remember best what they *know* rather than what they *know about*.

**Structured Experiences**

Daily life generates learning experiences, but they also can be set up to provide opportunities for specific types of learning. A *structured experience* provides a framework in which the inductive process can be facilitated. The experience is structured so that some aspects of the situation are emphasized, and others are not. A set of conditions is established that affects the participants' roles and the process of interaction. The facilitator may introduce a task for the participant group; this task constitutes the dynamics of the learning situation. Participants experience the opportunities and the constraints of the situation and the human behaviors that are generated by the particular set of conditions. One of the major strengths of this approach is that it can be adapted to many situations. Once the particular learning objectives are identified, facilitators can select many types of activities to help ensure participants meet the goals.

After participants have completed the activities or tasks, they need to process, or discuss, what took place. Within the particular focus, participants discover meaning for themselves and validate their own learning. The facilitator helps members extract those elements that capture the essence of the situation and generalize these to situations in the real world so that they gain a greater understanding of the possible effects of a variety of behaviors. The aim is for participants to be able to choose among behaviors when confronted with similar situations in the future.

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\*This resource was adapted from the following: Pfeiffer, J. W., & Ballew, A. C. (1988). *Using structured experiences in human resource development: Vol. 1. University Associates training technologies series*. San Diego, CA: University Associates, Inc. [www.universityassociates.com](http://www.universityassociates.com)

## The Experiential Learning Cycle

The following illustrates steps in the experiential learning cycle.



### Experiencing

Experiencing occurs naturally in all life situations. In the training setting, participants are exposed to a particular type of experience. This initial stage is the data-generating part of a structured experience. It is the step that so often is associated with games or fun. Obviously, if the process stops after this stage, all learning is left to chance, and the facilitator has not completed the task.

Almost any activity that involves either self-assessment or interpersonal interaction can be used as the “doing” part of experiential learning. The following are common activities:

- ◆ Creating models;
- ◆ Solving problems or sharing information;
- ◆ Giving and receiving feedback;
- ◆ Communicating;
- ◆ Analyzing materials;
- ◆ Confronting issues;
- ◆ Negotiating or bargaining;
- ◆ Planning;
- ◆ Collaborating;
- ◆ Writing; and
- ◆ Role playing.

These activities can be carried out individually or in small or large groups. Of course, the learning objectives dictate both the activity and the appropriate groupings.

It is important to note that the objectives of structured experiences must be general and stated in terms such as “to explore,” “to examine,” “to study,” “to identify,” etc. Inductive learning means learning through discovery, and the *exact* things to be learned cannot be specified beforehand. All participants need to do in this stage of the learning cycle is to develop a common framework for the discussion that follows. This means that whatever happens during the activity, whether expected or not, becomes the basis for critical analysis.

The next four steps of the experiential learning cycle are even more important than the experiencing phase. Therefore, the facilitator needs to be careful that the activity does not generate an atmosphere that makes discussion of the results difficult.

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### **Publishing**

The second stage of the cycle is roughly analogous to inputting data, in data-processing terms. People have experienced an activity and now they presumably are ready to share what they observed and/or how they felt during the event. The intent is to let all participants share their experiences.

The facilitator can do the following things to engage participants during this stage:

- ◆ Record levels of productivity, satisfaction, confidence, communication, leadership, etc. and adjectives that capture feelings at various points and then share them with the group.
- ◆ Ask participants to think of quick free-association words/phrases on various topics concerning the activity.
- ◆ Tell the group to generate lists of their observations and/or feelings.
- ◆ Ask the full group to record input on flip charts.
- ◆ Develop rating scales for relevant dimensions of the activity, ask participants to respond, and then tally and average the scores.
- ◆ Interview participants about their experiences during the activity.
- ◆ Ask participants to nominate people to share their experiences during this stage.
- ◆ Tell participants to form groups of two so they can ask each other “what” and “how” questions about the activity.

Publishing can be carried out through unstructured discussion, but this requires that the facilitator be absolutely clear about the differences in the steps of the learning cycle and distinguish sharply among interventions in the discussion. For example, during the publishing phase, it is important to stick to sharing feelings and other reactions and observations and not to allow some participants to skip ahead to generalizing—inferring principles from what happened. Conversely, some group members’ energies may be focused on the completed activity, and they need to be nudged into separating themselves from it in order to learn. Structured techniques such as those previously listed make the transition from stage one to stage two cleaner and easier. That, after all, is the job of the facilitator, i.e., to create clarity and transition with ease.

## Processing

This stage can be thought of as the fulcrum or the pivotal step in experiential learning. It is the *systematic* examination of the participants' commonly shared experiences. During this stage, participants attempt to answer the question "What actually happened?" This is the group dynamics phase of the cycle, in which participants essentially reconstruct the patterns and interactions of the activity from their reports. This "talking through" part of the cycle is critical, and it cannot be either ignored or designed spontaneously if useful learning is to occur. The facilitator needs to plan carefully how the processing will be carried out and focused toward the next stage—generalizing. Participants may perceive unprocessed data as unfinished business, which can distract them from further learning.

The facilitator can do the following things to engage participants during this stage:

- ◆ Engage participants in thematic discussion, i.e., facilitate a discussion of recurring topics.
- ◆ Ask participants to complete sentences, such as "The leadership was ... ," "Participation in this activity led to ... "
- ◆ Develop and distribute a questionnaire.
- ◆ Determine whether there were trends or correlations in participant responses during the publishing stage, and share the results.
- ◆ Post a list of key terms to guide the discussion.
- ◆ Emphasize the effects of participants' behaviors during the activity.

This step should be thoroughly worked through before going on to the next. Participants should be led to look at what happened in terms of group dynamics and behavioral trends, but not in terms of meaning. What occurred was real, of course, but it was also artificially contrived by the structure of the activity. It is important to keep in mind that being aware of the activity dynamics is critical for learning about human relations outside the training setting. Participants often anticipate the next step of the learning cycle and make premature generalizations. The facilitator needs to make certain that the processing has been adequate before moving to the next step.

Once the processing step is done, participants are ready (and should be encouraged) to say goodbye to the content of the structured activity and to focus on learning. This is the point at which learning readiness occurs. The question to be answered next is "So what?"

## Generalizing

A key concept in experiential learning is that of *pattern*. Pattern implies that there is an order to the elements of a situation and that these elements occur with some regularity. Although variations on basic patterns occur because of individual and subcultural differences, they can be understood beyond their differences when seen as a general class of event. The concept of pattern unites previously isolated phenomena. When the arrangement of elements is understood in one situation, this understanding can be generalized and applied to other situations.

Much of experiential learning is concerned with bringing one's characteristic styles of interaction into conscious awareness, evaluating them with respect to their utility for

different personal and professional roles, and modifying those particular aspects of one's style that limit effectiveness.

Also, certain patterns of elements in social situations evoke common behaviors, irrespective of individual styles of interaction. For example, a task group with limited resources tends to feel frustrated. A member's choice of behavior to express this frustration is more a function of the roles and norms of the situation than of his or her personality. A structured training approach emphasizes the patterns in given situations that provide opportunities for certain behavioral alternatives, while limiting opportunities for other behavioral alternatives.

However, if learning is to transfer to the real world, it is important for participants to be able to extrapolate the experience from the training setting to the outside world. An inferential leap has to be made at this point in the structured experience, from the reality inside the activity to the reality of everyday life. The key question here is "So what?" Participants are led to focus their awareness on situations in their personal or work lives that are similar to those in the activity that they experienced. Their task is to extract from the processing phase some principles that can be applied outside. Thus, the generalizations are to be made about "what tends to happen," not "what happened in this particular group."

This step is what makes structured experiences practical, and if it is omitted or hurried through, the learning is likely to be superficial. The facilitator can do the following things to engage participants during this stage:

- ◆ Ask participants to imagine situations in their own lives and determine what they have learned in the discussion that might be applicable.
- ◆ Ask participants to record or state what they learned, what they are beginning to learn, and what they relearned.
- ◆ Post a list of key terms, such as "leadership," "communication," "feelings," etc., to focus participant generalizations.
- ◆ Ask participants to complete sentences, such as "The effectiveness of shared leadership depends on ... "

It is useful in this stage for the group interaction to result in a series of products—generalizations that are presented not only orally but also visually. This strategy helps to facilitate participants' learning. The facilitator needs to remain objective about what is learned, drawing out the reactions of others to generalizations that appear incomplete or controversial. In addition, participants sometimes anticipate the final stage of the learning cycle, and they need to continue clarifying what was learned before discussing what changes are needed.

In the generalizing stage, it is possible for the facilitator to bring in theoretical and research findings to augment the learning. If concepts will be taught, this is the time to do it. Introducing cognitive points here can provide a framework for learning. It is important that any input from the trainer be linked directly to the points that participants have generalized. Also, the practice may encourage dependence on the facilitator as the source of knowledge and may lessen commitment to the final stage of the cycle if participants do not feel they own the information—a common phenomenon of *deductive* processes. Typically, less outside input is needed than one who is not familiar with the process may assume.

### **Applying**

The final stage of the experiential learning cycle is the purpose for which the whole structured experience is designed. The central question here is “Now what?” The facilitator helps participants to apply generalizations to actual situations in which they are involved. Ignoring such discussion jeopardizes the probability that the learning will be used. It is critical that attention be given to designing ways for individual participants and/or groups to use the learning generated during the structured experience to plan more effective behavior.

The facilitator can do the following things to engage participants during this stage:

- ◆ Divide the group into pairs so that participants can help each other consider real-life issues and how to apply generalizations.
- ◆ Ask participants to set goals according to what they learned.
- ◆ Divide participants into topic groups so they can discuss specific generalizations in terms of what can be done more effectively.
- ◆ Engage participants in a role-playing activity so they can practice new behaviors.

Participants are more likely to implement their planned applications if they share them with others. Participants can be asked to report what they intend to do with what they have learned, and this can encourage others to experiment with their own behaviors.

It is important to note that on the diagram of the experiential learning cycle there is an arrow from “applying” to “experiencing.” This is meant to indicate that the actual application of the learning is a new experience for the participant, to be examined inductively. What structured experiences teach is a way of using one’s everyday experiences as data for *conscious* learning about human interactions.

Such learning is an everyday part of everyone’s life. As long as one’s mind is functioning normally, one never stops learning. A major purpose of human resource development is transferring learning from training programs to one’s professional and private lives.

### **Facilitating Considerations**

Although the stages of the model have been presented in discrete terms, it is clear that the interaction between them (and within them) is complex. No learner goes through these phases exactly step by step, and it probably would not be desirable to do so. The danger also exists that participants might become fixed at one level because changing one’s behavior is frightening or emotionally demanding. Some participants may engage in what seems to be whimsical behavior because they fail to see how the training is related to issues in their own lives.

What experiential learning does best is to instill a sense of ownership about what is learned. This is most easily achieved by making certain that each stage of the learning cycle is developed adequately. The implications of the model stress the necessity for adequate planning and sufficient time for each step.

Another element that makes structured experiences so useful as learning devices is their safety. Each individual’s responses to what happens during a structured experience are valid learning for that individual. In didactic learning, in contrast, the teacher has the power to

push his or her interpretations, styles, and experiences, with the result that the participants' own reactions and insights—what they truly know—may be lost. It is imperative that facilitators preserve the integrity of each participant's individual experience.

Another aspect of a structured experience is the psychological safety provided by the boundaries of the activity. When the activity has ended, it is done. The consequences of engaging in the activity can end with that situation. The processing, generalizing, and applying phases of the cycle emphasize going past the generating experience and thinking in terms of what tends to happen and how it might be different next time. Thus, participants can engage wholeheartedly in assigned tasks and then separate themselves from the situation in order to view it in retrospect. In this way, they are less encumbered by the emotional impact of events within the artificial situation. One can learn and be different in the next situation.

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### **Conclusion**

Using the experiential learning model helps participants confront basic psychological and behavioral issues that they have to deal with in their daily lives. The model gives participants an opportunity to examine their feelings and behaviors related to interactions with other people. Examining their feelings and reactions to situations helps expand their awareness and understanding of the function their emotions play in their behaviors. This helps participants stay interested in the time they spend together and contributes significantly to their learning. No other type of learning generates this amount of personal involvement and depth of understanding. The ultimate result is that participants accept responsibility for their own learning and behavior, rather than assigning that responsibility elsewhere.