

Overview of Experiential Learning

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Experiential Learning is learning that comes from personal experience, directly with real objects and situations. The learner makes discoveries and experiments with knowledge firsthand, instead of by hearing, reading, or viewing media about others' experiences.

1. First the learner has a genuine experience with something, including examining it, exploring it, playing with it. It is a hands-on, 'doing' interaction. The experience can be staged or be completely spontaneous. There is little or no 'pre-teaching.' The experience may be done solo or with other learners.

If the learner is helped by a 'teacher,' the teacher stays in the background, encourages, poses occasional questions that might add interest to the experience, but does not answer all the learner's questions- the learner takes the lead in the exploration and in creating the answers. The phrases that describe the teacher as 'guide from the side' or someone to 'steer from the rear' remind us that the learner is in the forefront.

2. Next, the learner reflects on that experience through individual thought, discussion, questioning, processing, writing in a journal, etc. They may participate in group processing and discussion. This step sometimes includes use of reflective questions posed by their peers or by a teacher or facilitator.

3. Finally the learner draws conclusions- makes sense of what was experienced, including comparing his/ her own experiences with those of others. The learner may develop theories or conclusions about the experience. He may develop new questions, which can lead to the next experience or explorations. This step can also be done solo or with others. This is sometimes called the "planning" step since by making conclusions about the first experience, the learner is planning what he might do next with these situations or materials— applying their new knowledge to the future, using the new ideas gained from the experience.

Aristotle once said, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them."

Key proponents of experiential learning include David A. Kolb, drawing on the work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and others.

Principles of experiential education practice

(These are reportedly adapted from the outdoor experiential programs of the US Army War College's Strategic Experiential Education)

The principles are:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others, and learner to the world at large.
- The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking, and uncertainty, since the outcomes of experience cannot be totally predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments, and pre-conceptions and how they influence the learner
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.