

Is **Experiential Learning** Right for Your Organization?



UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

What type of training are you bringing to your organization? While there's a place for both traditional and experiential learning, we're seeing a huge demand from companies who want their participants to learn in a more "hands-on," reflective and easily transferable training environment. The benefit of experiential learning is that it focuses not just on the learner's intellectual side, but the learning and development of the entire person.

Developed to fulfill specific business objectives, an experiential activity must include several key components to give participants the maximum benefit.

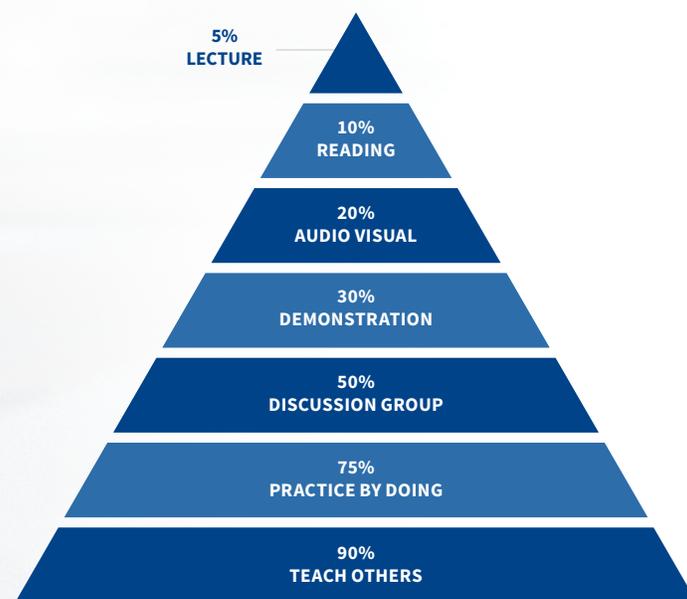
The activity must be:

- Purposeful—Clearly identified goals and intended outcomes
- Facilitated—Guided activities and support for learners
- Reflective—Time for shared findings, group discussions, individual journaling, etc.
- Active—Participation by learner rather than only listening, reading or observing
- Applicable—Learning points relevant to the learner

THE LEARNING PYRAMID

The pyramid, which is based on research from the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine, illustrates the various activities included in both traditional and experiential learning.

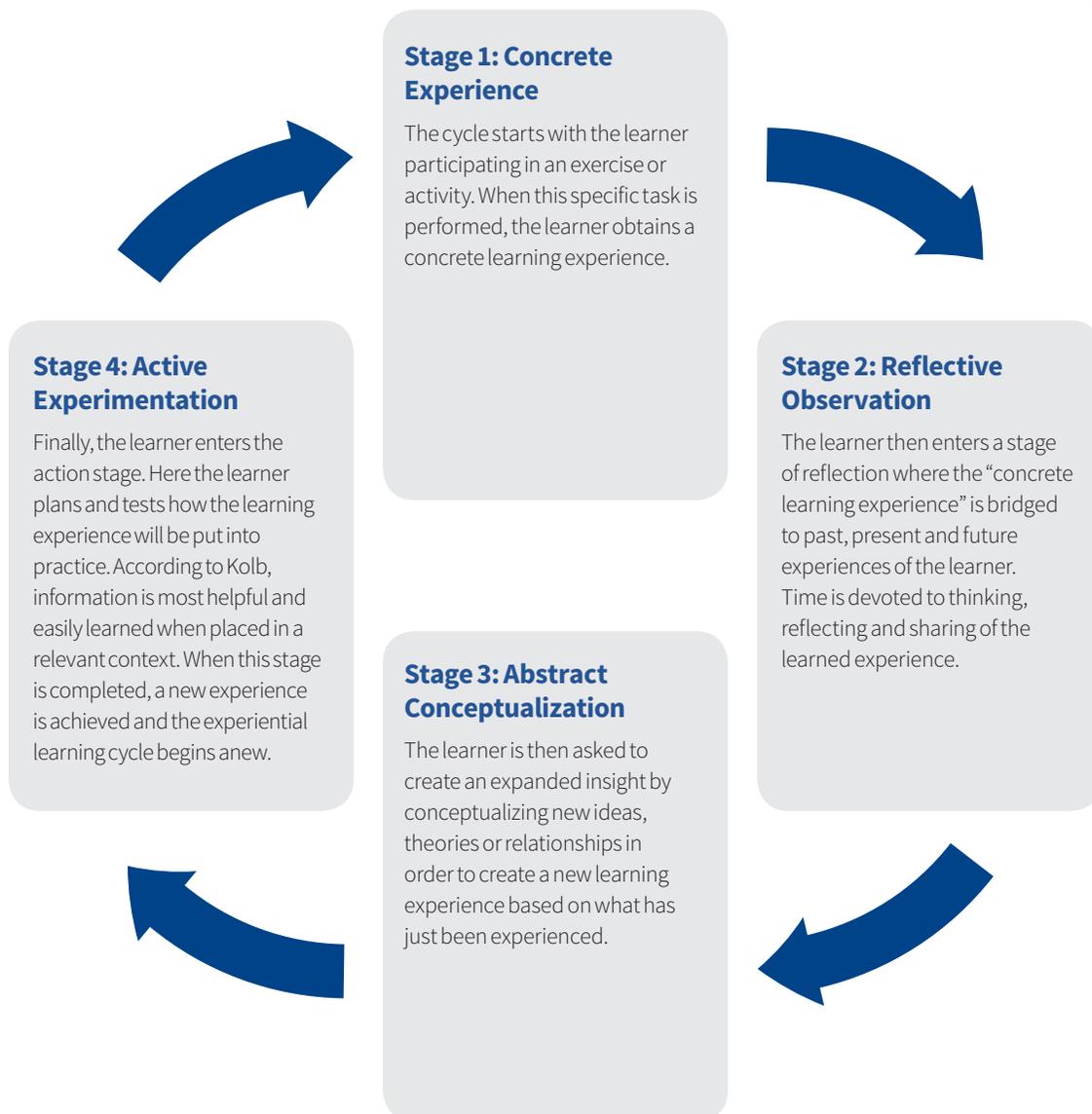
Traditional learning tends to include the top two, and sometimes three, elements of the pyramid. The retention rate for traditional learning using these elements is typically 5 – 10 percent. Well-designed experiential learning tends to capture all areas of the pyramid and typically raises the retention rate to 80 – 90 percent.



Source: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

KOLB'S CYCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and cycle of experiential learning is perhaps the most well-known model. This cycle defines learning in four distinct stages. While other experiential learning cycles may define learning a bit differently, the premises are the same. The cycle begins with the learner realizing that he or she is in a learning situation and then moving into four distinct stages.



THE ROLE OF THE TRAINER

In a traditional, intellectual learning experience where there is far less participatory activity, the trainer is working in a highly structured environment. Most of us have experienced training where the trainer comes in, presents or lectures and facilitates some activities and discussion. This is a form of traditional learning and a highly acceptable method of training.

In the experiential setting, control and even the nature of the content to some extent is often dictated by the learners. The trainer's role is

guiding, supporting and facilitating the learning opportunities. Trainers monitor progress, keep training on track and ask questions that offer learning opportunities. They are also charged with providing feedback and helping integrate the learning objectives into the learner's job responsibilities.

The research shows that experiential training can help people learn faster, change their point of view and develop powerful "aha" moments.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND TRADITIONAL LEARNING: THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF EACH

The following chart indicates the differences between traditional and experiential learning models.

| Experiential Learning Model | Traditional Learning Model |
|---|--|
| Learner-centered (based on doing) | Intellectually centered (based on theory) |
| Flexible | Less flexible due to set design and content |
| Fosters internal growth/discovery | Creates awareness of new skill/knowledge |
| Develops actual skill, knowledge or emotional development through the learning experience | Creates skill awareness by thinking, hearing, reading or observing |
| Minimal facilitation; unstructured; shared experience | Heavily facilitated; trainer-dependent; structured; fixed content and delivery |
| Not locked into time frame; go with flow | Time-sensitive |
| Individually directed | Trainer-led |
| Flexible outcomes | Fixed outcomes |



These activities contain common learning elements that immerse the learners in a “total” learning experience. By engaging both the intellectual and the emotional side of learning, the learners are doing more than just observing, thinking, reading or watching the topic or skill. They become directly involved with the key concepts designed to be taught in each activity.

BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO LEARNERS

Some of the most important benefits of experiential learning are:

- *Learners learn by doing.* In this “learning by doing” approach, the learner practices, practices and practices until there is skill mastery. Theory complements the practical applications.
- *Learners are fully engaged in the learning experience.* Immersed in a learning situation that is frequently new and unfamiliar, learners are able to achieve a personal, authentic understanding of the skill and its application.
- *Learners learn in the context of their job.* According to Kolb, the best type of learning experience is built around relevant and realistic situations.
- *Learners enjoy a dynamic learning situation.* Built to be not only relevant but fun, stimulating and highly enjoyable, the experiential learning situation is memorable and, thus, more readily transferable.
- *Learners retain the learning.* Because the learning was fun, relevant and easily transferable to on-the-job situations, learners are easily able to sustain the learning.

TOOLS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning includes a wide variety of interactive practices so the learners become actively and personally engaged in the learning process. These activities must be designed to give the learners opportunities to learn from their own and each other’s experiences.

Additional tools that are effective in experiential learning programs:

- Personal journals, diaries
- Portfolios
- Reflective personal essays and thought questions
- Team games and problem-solving scenarios
- Role-plays, drama activities
- Games and simulations
- Guided discovery
- Personal stories and case studies
- Visualizations and imaginative activities
- Models, analogies and theory construction
- Empathy-taking activities
- Storytelling, sharing with others
- Discussions and reflection in cooperative groups

WHEN TO USE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The applications for experiential learning abound. Virtually any skill can be adapted to an experiential situation in which the learner can quickly see that the learning is useful to their job and life. There are, however, certain business applications that are ideal for an experiential training class.

Experiential training programs can effectively address organizational challenges such as:

- Managing change
- Implementation of a cultural shift
- Simplifying complex initiatives
- Improving processes and/or procedures
- Implementation of new initiatives
- Introduction of a new skill/skill set
- Improvement of an existing skill set

DOWNSIDE TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO THE ORGANIZATION

While all training has some downside, the largest drawbacks to experiential learning are:

- Tends to be time- and resource-intensive
- Must be conducted by a trained facilitator/trainer who is skilled in administering an experiential training class

BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO THE ORGANIZATION

Once you identify the appropriate situation in which to use experiential learning, you can find it offers your organization significant benefits. This is not to say that it should replace a more traditional form of learning; rather it should be used as one component in a comprehensive learning curriculum.

Experiential learning can:

- Create strong motivation to learn in employees
- Accelerate completion of business goals
- Create synergy and shared ownership in cross-departmental/organizational goals
- Sustain learning retention
- Open discussion and dialogue within the organization
- Reduce resistance to change

BOTTOM LINE

Experiential learning, as with any training method, can only be considered successful if the knowledge being learned is turned into action.





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