

Experiential Learning

Reflective thought is “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and that further conclusion to which it tends.” (John Dewey, 1933, p.9).

The *Kolb Learning Cycle* can provide a useful framework for designing adult learning sessions. While every individual learns best from a particular portion of the process, the most effective learning takes place when all four steps are included in your program design. Drawing from the work of John Dewey (1938), David Kolb describes learners as going through a cycle of **concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and practical application**. Kolb emphasized the importance of learners having opportunities to experience all stages of the “experiential learning cycle” as a way to enrich and enhance motivation and “deeper” level learning. From an educator’s perspective, there are many ways to provide challenging experiences for learners, experiences that will challenge their way of seeing themselves or issues in the world around them more deeply. Practica and apprenticeship programs, field research, and volunteer work are all examples of practical experiences. Educators can further help learners reflect on the value of their experiences through discussion, critical incident questionnaires, and journal writing. The following are examples of practical strategies that educators can apply to help their students develop meaningful learning experiences:

Concrete Experience (Primary “hands on” experience)

- Case Study
- Debate
- Simulation/Role Play
- Field Trips
- Film Viewing
- Text Reading
- Drama
- Discussion Groups
- Literature Circles
- Interviews
- Prior Experience

Reflective Observation

- Journal Writing
- Note Taking
- Critical Incident Questionnaire
- Thoughts and conclusions on concrete experience
- Metaphors and Analogies

Abstract Conceptualization

- Theoretical input or concepts
- Theory and model building/development

Formal Research Paper
Analytical Report Writing
Article and Manuscript Writing
Task Analysis Report
Portfolio Development
Lecture that builds upon reflective observation

Practical Application

Action planning or some other structured experience that helps process and/or activate new learning
Application of theoretical perspectives in a new context
Project Development
Formal Presentation
Creative reappraisal of problem
Problem Solving

Teaching/Learning Strategies:

Case studies, debates, critical questioning, and analyses of theoretical perspectives may be of interest to learners who have a preference for analysis and reflection. Working together in pairs or collaborative groups that examine a particular frame of reference may be helpful for individuals who express preferences in self-expression and sharing ideas with others. Concrete and experiential strategies such as field trips and simulations can assist students who prefer “hands on” learning. Games, metaphors, imaging, brainstorming, and arts-based inquiry may appeal to learners who are more intuitive. Kolb emphasized that students need to be introduced to diverse experiences and learning approaches.

Inventory of Instructional Strategies for Adult Learners

- Apprenticeship
- Audio-visual material
- Brainstorming
- Buzz Groups
- Cooperative Learning
- Case Study
- Colloquy
- Debate
- Exhibit
- Experimentation
- Field Trip
- Guest Speaker
- Information Brief

- Inquiry/Discovery Learning
- Interview
- Individualized instruction
- Journal Writing
- Laboratory Instruction
- Language Lab
- Lecture
- Listening Teams
- Panel Discussion
- Practicum
- Questioning Strategies
- Role Play
- Seminar
- Symposium
- Report/Research
- Workshop, Clinic, and Institute

Adapted from:

Dirkx, J. & Prenger, S. (1997). *Planning and implementing instruction for adults: A theme-based approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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