Kolb's Learning Cycle

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About David Kolb

David Kolb has been a Professor of Organisational Behaviour in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University of Cleveland, since 1976. Most trainers know of his work simply through the Kolb Learning Cycle – of which more later - and realise the foundation of his work is in understanding how learning takes place.

What Kolb Means by 'Learning'

What is generally not well understood is that Kolb has a very different definition of learning than the one that we as trainers are generally familiar, i.e. 'that learning changes behaviour'. Kolb describes '*Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*' 1984[1]. In other words, while behaviour (experience) *may* change, it does not do so unwittingly but *consciously* as a result of knowledge gained.

Learning, in the traditional training sense, does not necessarily include this conscious element. In training, especially for simple tasks, it is often enough (though not particularly good training practice) for a learner simply to do something in a desired way, without necessarily understanding how or why it needs to be done like that.

Experiential Learning

Kolb, together with his colleague Roger Fry, explored the idea of experiential learning by examining the processes associated with making sense of experiences and the different styles of learning that might be involved. Their work builds on that of Piaget, Dewey and, particularly, Kurt Lewin's 'action research' approach which involves a spiral of steps, '*each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action*'[2].

The Experiential Learning Cycle Model

The Experiential Learning Cycle model is composed of four stages of :

- Concrete experience
- Reflective observation
- Abstract conceptualisation
- Active experimentation

(see fig one)

Kolb and Fry say that **the cycle may be entered at any point, but the stages should be followed in sequence**. However, they suggest that the process often works in this way

1. Having an experience about an action/idea. (I'm writing this article.). CE
2. Observing it in a reflective, thoughtful way as I am writing. (How does it sound? Is it accurate? Do I like it?). RO

[1] Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall. 256 pages.

[2] Lewin, K. (1948) *Resolving social conflicts; selected papers on group dynamics.* Gertrude W. Lewin (ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1948.

3. Thinking about it in an abstract, theoretical way while I am writing. (Could I have approached it differently? Is there a writing plan or method I could I have followed?). AC
4. Experimenting with the idea/action based on the original experience. (I try a different method for the next one or I change tack while writing this one. AE

Key points about the Learning Cycle Model

Using the example of writing this article it is easy to see that, as Kolb and Fry suggest:

- Learning is not a complete and finite cycle but each phase inevitably leads to the next – more a spiral than a circle of learning.
- Experiential learning does not consist of activity generated in the training room alone. Learners do not acquire knowledge only from the trainer but learn through this process of taking the new information found in the training room and testing it against their real-life experiences.
- The timing of the Learning cycle is important. Waiting for a task to be finished (CE) before entering the RO phase means there is no opportunity to change the approach (AC/AE)until a similar task arises –which may be a long way off. Conversely, continual reflection leaves the learner spending more time thinking than acting. The logic of the learning cycle is to make small and incremental improvements.

Table One

Using the learning cycle in training design	
Concrete Experience **'Do something'**	Any learning activity that actively involves the learner. Includes 'here and now' activities discussion; business games, competitive teamwork tasks, role plays, presentations; case studies
Reflective Observation **'Review it'**	Any opportunity the learners have to review the experience. They are encouraged to observe and/or think about activities. They ask themselves questions. What happened? What did you observe? Includes observing; watching a video; learning logs; writing up a diary or a report; debriefing, and group discussion following an activity
Abstract Conceptualisation **'Develop it'**	Any opportunity learners have to develop theories and look at patterns. Questions to be asked are: How do you account for what you observed? What does it mean for you? How is it significant? What conclusions can you draw? What general principles can you derive? Includes lectures showing how an activity relates to a system, model, concept, theory. Research, Question and answer sessions, and tests.
Active Experimentation **'Try it a different way'**	The phase in which learners suggest how will apply and use what they have learned back in the 'real world'. Includes simulations; coaching/feedback from a credible expert; case studies, drawing up action plans and workplace projects.

The Learning Cycle and Learning Styles

Kolb and Fry noticed that each learner generally had a preference for two phases of the cycle in the way that he or she approached learning and developed an inventory to assess a learner's preferences[3]. Fig 2 explains these phases. The preferred style of a learner is only a tendency – it is not fixed and can be adapted and changed. Indeed, learners may adopt different learning preferences in different situations but, the suggestion is, they tend to favour some learning behaviours over others. Kolb and Fry argue that to be an effective learner means having abilities at each stage of the learning cycle so that learning is completed.

Table Two shows the characteristics of each style and its phases.

Watch Point

Learners will tend to do what is easiest for them, which is to use their own preferred learning style. Similarly trainers may train in ways that reflect their own learning style and may assume that all their learners will prefer to learn that way. Both approaches lead to incomplete learning – the reason why training may not be applied in the workplace. The trick is to ensure that each element of a training 'lesson' encourages students – and trainers - to use all the stages of the learning cycle. and

Expert Advice

The Kolb Learning cycle provides a model that enables learners to draw from their past experiences to find new knowledge and skills they can apply at work. Although most explanations of the model break into it at the Concrete Experience stage it would be a mistake to think it can only be done this way.

Basically, wherever a learner is on the spectrum is where they should start and then systematically work their way through the other stages. And, of course, trainers should start from where the learner is too.

Questions and Answers

This seems very simple and I'm thinking it would be useful to use the inventory in my training. Is it valid?

Yes and no is the answer. The theory is definitely useful for 'complete' training design because it provides a good framework for planning training. It can help in understanding people's learning difficulties and in career counselling.
It is obvious that being devoted to one, and only one, learning style will seriously disadvantage the learner. So, anything that helps learners to identify what they may avoid when learning is probably useful. However, there are some problems to be aware of:

1. Several commentators suggest that the learning styles are too simplistic and, whilst they fit neatly into Kolb's cycle, they fail to take account of ways of learning other than experiential**.** The problem is that the experiential learning model does not apply to all situations. For instance, we effectively assimilate knowledge in all sorts of ways – watching television, reading, observing others, memorising facts and so on - without necessarily going through the whole of the cycle.
2. The Inventory has been used within a fairly limited range of (mainly Western) cultures and thus the assumptions that underpin the Kolb and Fry model are Western. There is a need to consider the different cultural models of selfhood – that is the way human beings come

[3] Kolb, D. (1985). Learning style inventory. Boston, MA: McBer and Company.

to understand ourselves and our relationships - since learning is also likely to be affected by our cultural experience.

3. The idea of a nice set of neat learning stages does not equate to most people's reality**.** The problem is that a number of processes can occur at once and stages can be jumped or missed out completely.
4. The experimental research base for the model was small, and there have only been a few further studies.

Hmm. Okay. Maybe I'll stick with what I know –so tell me – how are Kolb's learning styles like those developed by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford?

Very similar – because their model is based on Kolb's learning cycle. It identifies four types of learning preference:

- Activists – roughly equivalent to Accommodators
- Reflectors – roughly equivalent to Divergers
- Theorists- roughly equivalent to Assimilators
- Pragmatists - roughly equivalent to **Convergers**

The inventory[4] they developed seems to have more face validity and is certainly better known.

So what would you suggest?

Use the Kolb Learning Cycle to inform your training design making sure you: provide opportunities for learner action; build in plenty of opportunities for reflection; underpin the knowledge element with a sound theoretical basis and help learners to see how they can apply their learning in the workplace. Use the Honey and Mumford Learning Styles inventory, rather than Kolb's, to help you analyse why and how a particular learner may get stuck and give them the impetus to move through the whole of the learning cycle.

[4] Available from www.peterhoney.com

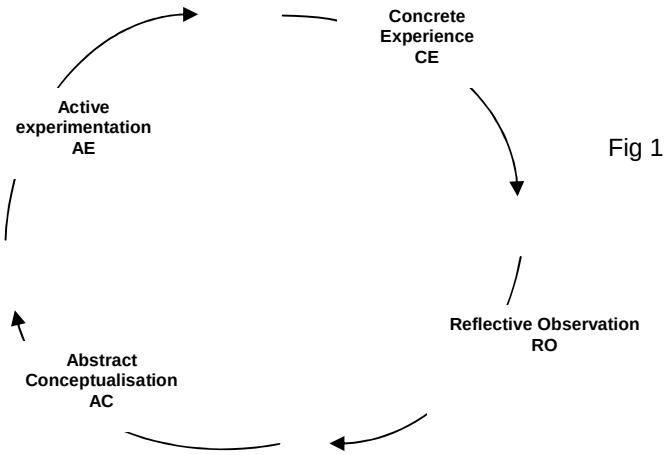
Concrete
Experience
CE
Reflective Observation
RO
Abstract
Conceptualisation
AC
Active
experimentation
AE

Fig 1

Fig two

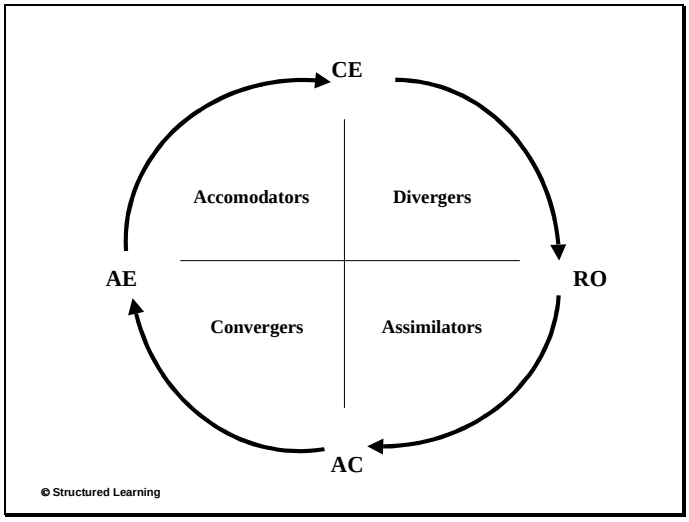
CE
Accomodators
Divergers
AE
RO
Convergers
Assimilators
AC
© Structured Learning

Table Two

Learning style	Learning preferences	Description
Converger	Abstract conceptualisation + active experimentation	• Greatest strength is in practical application of ideas • Good at deductive reasoning for specific problems • Tends to be unemotional • Focused, narrow generally technical interests • Prefers to deal with things rather than people. • Succeeds in situations where there is a single correct answer or solution to a question or problem.
Diverger	Concrete experience + reflective observation	• Greatest strength is creative/imaginative ability • Good at originating ideas and looking at a situation from different perspectives • People and emotion - focused • Broad range of interests and tend to specialise in the arts

Assimilator	Abstract conceptualisation + reflective observation	• Greatest strength is developing theoretical models • Good at inductive reasoning – pulling together different things into an integrated explanation • Focuses on abstract concepts • Less interested in people and practice • Stressed the importance that a theory is logically sound and precise. • Prefers basic sciences rather than applied sciences
Accommodator	Concrete experience + active experimentation	• Greatest strength is taking action, carrying out plans and experiments • Tend to be risk takers • Adapt themselves to specific immediate circumstances • Adapts well to change • Good at immediate decision making • Solves problems intuitively • In situations where the theory or plans do not fit the facts, they will most likely discard the plan or theory. The opposite style type, the assimilator, • Sometimes seen as impatient and 'pushy'.

Kolb's Definition of Experiential Learning

For Kolb, the experiential way of learning is about how the learner applies the information received from the trainer to their experiences. Experiential learning does not takeplace solely in the training room; nor does the learner only obtain knowledge from the trainer. Instead the learner learns through taking new information derived in the training room and testing it against his or her usual reality. Through this process, both the information and the experience is metamorphosed into new knowledge.