

## **The Experiential Approach: Comparing Theories**

These are notes from Manon Tremblay's research paper describing the process by which an occupational therapist appropriates the experiential approach to education.

This excerpt is meant to show the similarities and differences between various experiential learning theories.

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- 1) Clinical supervision. Clinical placement is an important part of university training (roughly 1,000 clinical hours) (Gilbert, 1991; Thompson, 1986).
  - 2) University curriculum (e.g. evaluation and design) (Christiansen, 1975, 1977).
  - 3) Assessment of selected instructional techniques (Ferland, 1980; Forget, 1974; Hachey, 1975).

No one education model has been singled out to frame and support the instruction/ learning dimension where occupational therapy research is concerned. In terms of practice, the training model of education (Joyce and Weil, 1980) is implicitly used, regardless of the occupational therapy practice model chosen. In this sense, the experiential approach ("organismal framework") could provide a worthwhile education model for certain interventions. Four experiential education models are described in the next section.

### **1.3 Experiential approach**

The experiential approach lines up with an organismal human-cognitivist approach. Like Legendre (1988), we define the term "approach" as a general way of examining a matter, addressing a problem or achieving an end (p. 41). The experiential concept currently refers to three different things: 1) the learning process, 2) the education model and 3) the outcome of an experiential process (Chevrier and Charbonneau, 1989). This research effort is concerned solely with the education model.

The experiential approach is one which requires an individual's total commitment (Boud, 1989) spanning the cognitive, emotional and motor dimensions (Charbonneau and Chevrier, 1990). Additionally, it calls for learners to deploy specific attitudes, abilities and metacognitive skills (Charbonneau and Chevrier, 1990). The experiential approach also develops self-direction in learners (Boud, 1989). Subject matter taught through this approach must be meaningful for learners, tying into their environment and applicable in the everyday (Boud, 1989). In the next sections, we describe four experiential education models and attempt to determine how the experiential approach is used in occupational therapy.

#### **1.3.1 Theoretical models using the experiential approach**

The theoretical models of Kolb (1984), Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988), Walter and Marks (1981) and Steinaker and Bell (1979) will be described. These experiential education models emphasize either the learning process or the teaching process. In this case, education models are called experiential learning models or experiential teaching models. The model of Walter and Marks (1981) focuses more on teaching than on learning, consisting of a specific arrangement of activities and interventions and representing a particular type of instruction (Legendre, 1988, p. 381). Conversely, the experiential education models of Kolb (1984), Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) and Steinaker and Bell

(1979) consist of a specific arrangement of selected properties of the elements in a teaching situation and a particular type of learning process (Legendre, 1988, p. 381). Instead of emphasizing instruction, these models describe the stages required of learners in an experiential approach to education. The education models of Joyce and Weil (1980) fall into four main families. The experiential approach is a human-cognitivist approach arising from two families: models based on information processing theories (cognitivist school) and models predicated on respect for the person (humanist school). The other families comprise models drawing on behaviour modification or social interaction.

The best known experiential education model is David Kolb's (1984). According to Kolb, experiential learning is a psychological process wherein learners transform their experience into knowledge, skills and attitudes. Basically, this process unfolds in four stages repeated in a cyclical spiral (see Fig. 3). Those stages are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

The **concrete experience** stage has the learner interacting with an event structure (experience) made of observable elements. Learning may be an external process, as in appropriating a technique, or an interior process, as in transforming one's perception of self. **Reflective observation** requires the learner to reconstitute the elements of an experience and contemplate that experience to grasp it from various perspectives. In this stage, the learner must be able to make comparisons both inter- and intra-experiences. In the **abstract conceptualization** stage of the cycle, the learner uses the observations made in the preceding stage to build a concept, principle (or rule) or structure (system, model or theory) applicable to more than one case or situation. Indeed, these generalizations are meant to be true in several situations or events.

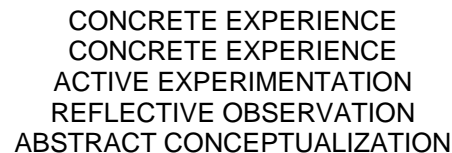


Figure 3. Representation of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984).

**Active experimentation** is the stage in which the learner carries out a new planned experience to verify the veracity or "applicability" of the constructs designed in the preceding stage. This final stage makes the transfer of learning possible.

While Kolb's model is used as the basis for education planning, it is interesting primarily from the learner's vantage. However as a practitioner, the occupational therapist, too, can refer to experiential teaching models to plan interventions. Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) and Walter and Marks (1981) have proposed other experiential education models. Figure 4 draws a parallel between these two models and Kolb's model (1984). Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) have also produced a cyclical diagram of experiential learning, but in five steps by comparison with Kolb's four stages. The terminology used by Walter and Marks (1981) places more emphasis on the practitioner's role.

Kolb (1984)	Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988)	Walter and Marks (1981)
		Planning
		Introduction
Concrete experience	Experiencing	Activity
Reflective observation	Publishing	Debriefing
	Processing	
Abstract conceptualization	Generalizing	Summary
Active experimentation	Applying	
		Evaluation

Figure 4. Comparison of the experiential models of Kolb (1984), Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) and Walter and Marks (1981).

The five steps of the model developed by Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) are: experiencing, publishing, processing, generalizing and applying. The experiencing step is meant to create a concrete experience. The publishing and processing steps, in which learners are asked to verbalize and reflect on their experience, give rise to reflective observation. The generalizing step, in which learners are asked to generalize across several situations, initiates abstract conceptualization. In the applying step, the final stage, learners are asked to draw practical implications. This initiates active experimentation.

Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) suggest teaching tools that educators can use for each step in their cycle. Those tools include key questions and strategies for developing generalizations, stimulating observation and producing data. For example, generalization can be encouraged by having the learner imagine a concrete situation in the home that resembles a situation in a learning environment. These authors also explain the parameters to factor into developing an educational activity (Pfeiffer and Ballew, 1980).

Walter and Marks (1981) define experiential learning as “a sequence of events with one or more identified learning objectives, requiring active involvement by participants at one or more points in the sequence” (p. 1). As can be seen, they approach experiential learning from the practitioner’s perspective and are more interested in establishing an education model than defining a learning process. They view experiential learning as a model of education comprised of six stages: planning, introduction, activity, debriefing, summary and evaluation. Each stage builds on the one before, while requiring a specific type of behaviour of the leader. The authors add a stage in which the leader evaluates the instruction session.

The **planning stage** is intended to develop and organize the learning experience, which may include one or more specific activities. It has two components: decision making about the design of the learning experience and preparation of the specific components of the experience. This is when the practitioner identifies the learners’ needs and the learning objectives and selects the activities.

The **introduction stage** proposes different behaviours for the practitioner, depending on whether the overall experience or one specific activity is addressed. Introduction to the overall experience seeks primarily to create the desired learning atmosphere, especially by inquiring into the learners’ personal involvement in their learning and their receptiveness to the experience, risk taking and attention to the process per se. It further seeks to set the tone for the entire experience by getting learners to own responsibility for their learning (e.g. realize what is expected of them). Introduction

to a specific activity is intended to present the activity to the learners and clarify what role and responsibility they have in it. This should encourage them to react constructively to their feelings during the activity.

The **activity stage** places learners in a series of events for living out a particular experience (concrete experience). Leaders should direct the activity, making certain that their instructions are properly sequenced (order, perspective and appropriate timing) and synchronized (expectations, learners' pace and time consciousness).

The **debriefing stage** gives learners an opportunity to discuss the activity, focusing on both content and process in order to encourage more general learning and thus provide material for reflective observation in particular. Debriefing has a three-fold objective: 1) clarify the details, structure and meaning of the experience, 2) facilitate learning and retention and 3) make future learning more effective.

The **summary stage** seeks mainly to improve learning storage and recall and to develop cognitive structures for organizing the experience and giving it meaning. It requires learners to engage in abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The nature of the summary depends on whether it concerns the overall experience or one particular activity. The summary for one specific activity has the three-fold purpose of 1) linking the activity and learning objectives by highlighting the elements of content and process most relevant to the target learning objectives, 2) linking research-based theory and the actual experience of participants with the activity, and 3) generalizing the learnings and drawing possible applications from them. The summary for the overall experience has two purposes: 1) integrate the learning experience and 2) transfer more important learnings to other contexts. The transfer is made easier by underlining the differences between the "culture" created within the learning context and the culture "at home" and by setting objectives and drawing up plans and contracts.

The **evaluation** stage, the sixth and last, is aimed at determining how effective the learning experience has been. Evaluation is designed as a continuing process that begins back in the planning stage. It may apply to a single activity or the entire experience.

The fourth education model is the experiential learning taxonomy of Steinaker and Bell (1979). This model has five levels of experiential learning: exposure, participation, identification, internalization and dissemination. **Exposure** is the level at which learners demonstrate their willingness to learn and spell out their learning intention. **Participation** is the second level, at which learners make an active effort to do the work requested and begin verifying what they have learned. **Identification** is the level at which participants master their learning. They are fully committed. At the **internalization** level, participants apply what they have learned to other situations. Lastly, at the **dissemination** level, they are encouraged to stimulate others to learn what they have learned.

The experiential approach produces a number of different education models. Kolb's model, although used as the basis for educational planning, is interesting first and foremost from the learner's vantage. The models of Pfeiffer and Ballew (1988) and Walter and Marks (1981) place stronger emphasis on developing and managing educational activities. The model of Steinaker and Bell (1979) highlights the affective dimension, whereas the other three models centre more on the cognitive.

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