

Experiential Learning

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Experiential learning is built primarily upon the theories and work of Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. It subscribes to the following propositions:

Proposition	Translation
<p>1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.</p> <p>"Knowing is a process, not a product."</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Jerome Bruner</i></p>	<p>Older theories said:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealist (traditional pedagogy; atomistic; Locke's "simple ideas"; ideas are fixed and immutable) and • Behaviorist (stimulus-response; the strength of a habit is measured by its resistance to extinction; the more I have "learned" a habit, the longer I will keep doing it even if it is not rewarded) <p>But experiential theory says:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on outcomes as opposed to the process of creative adaptation has had a negative effect on the educational system. • Ideas are formed and re-formed through experience; no two thoughts are ever the same because experience always intervenes. <i>From the experiential point of view, the failure to modify ideas and habits as a result of experience is maladaptive!</i>
<p>2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.</p> <p>"Any experience that does not violate expectation is not worthy of the name experience." <i>Hegel</i></p>	<p>Q: How do I reconcile my own sense of continuity and predictability with what at times appears to be a chaotic and unpredictable world around me?</p> <p>A: It is in the interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fact that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience implies that all learning is <i>relearning</i>. • The learner's mind is not a <i>tabula rasa</i> upon which the teacher scratches the curriculum outline. • Everyone has more or less of an idea about the topic at hand. We are all psychologists, historians, and rocket scientists. It is just that some of our theories are more crude and incorrect than others. • Thus the job of both teacher and learner is to not only create and implant new ideas but to also deconstruct or modify old ideas. <p>See also Dewey's book "Experience and Education."</p>
<p>3. The process of learning requires</p>	<p>Learning results from the resolution of conflicts that arise from the</p>

Proposition	Translation
<p>the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.</p>	<p>tension between these ways of knowing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete experience versus abstract conceptualization (Lewin) • Observation versus action (Lewin) • Impulse (the "moving force" behind ideas) versus reason (where desire gets its direction) (Dewey) • Accommodation versus assimilation (Piaget) • Action versus reflection (Freire) <p>New knowledge, skills, or attitudes are achieved through confrontation among these four modes of experiential learning:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concrete experience (CE) - the ability to involve yourself fully, openly, and without bias in new experience. 2. Reflective observation (RO) - the ability to reflect on and observe your experience from many perspectives. 3. Abstract conceptualization (AC) - the ability to create concepts that integrate your observations into logically sound theories. 4. active experimentation (AE) - The ability to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems. 5. Conclusion: In the process of learning one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer and from specific involvement to detached analysis. The way in which the conflicts between the modes of learning get resolved determines the level of learning that results.
<p>4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning involves the integrated functioning of the whole organism--thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. • Learning is <i>the</i> major process of human adaptation. • The scientific method is the highest philosophical and technological refinement of the basic process of learning. • When learning is seen from a systems point of view, as a holistic adaptive process, it can be used to create bridges across life situations such as school and work and it can easily be seen as a continuous, lifelong process.
<p>5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment.</p>	<p>The importance of these transactions between person and environment can be symbolized in the dual meanings of the word <i>experience</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the subjective, personal meaning referring to your internal state, as in "the experience of joy and happiness" and

Proposition	Translation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the objective, environmental meaning, as in "You have 20 years of experience on this job." • These two forms of experience interpenetrate and interrelate in very complex ways, as for example, in the old saw, "He doesn't have 20 years of experience, but one year repeated 20 times."
<p>6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.</p>	<p>General knowledge is the result of the transaction between</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social knowledge (the objective accumulation of previous human cultural experience) and • personal knowledge (the accumulation of individual subjective life experiences). <p>This process is called "learning!"</p>
<p>Conclusion: Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adaptation and learning are more important than content or outcomes. 2. Knowledge is a transformational process. It is continually created and recreated. It is not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted. 3. Learning transforms both objective and subjective experience. 4. To understand learning we must understand the nature of knowledge and vice versa.

For more about experiential learning see:

Keeton, Morris. *Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics, and Assessment*, Jossey-Bass, 1976.

Kolb, David. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice Hall, 1984.

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