

# Kolbs experiential learning theory



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BUSTER**

Experiential learning has its roots in the works of Dewey, Lewis, and Piaget. In fact Kolb (2005) in a recent article quotes Kurt Lewin, “ There is nothing so practical as a good theory”, and John Dewey “ There is a need of forming a theory of experience in order that education may be intelligently conducted upon the basis of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 193).

Experiential learning theories have been viewed as more “ holistic” than behavioral or cognitive learning theories as they “ merge experience, perception, cognition, and behavior” (McCarthy, 2010). In essence, the philosophy of Experiential learning theory is that “ knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” which entails both the “ grasping and transforming of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). This transformative experience is also evolving constantly as the learner is choosing which set of learning styles to use in a particular situation. “ Supporters of experiential theory believe it promotes greater interest in the subject material, enhances intrinsic learning satisfaction, increases understanding, and retention of course material, develops the desire and ability to be continuous learners, improves communication, and interpersonal skills, problem solving, analytical thinking, and the critical thinking of students” (McCarthy, 2010, p. 136).

Having developed an experiential learning theory over many years David A. Kolb published his learning styles model in 1984. His theory advocates that to be effective learner one must perceive information reflect on how it will impact some aspect of their life compare how it fits into their own experiences, and think about how this information offers new ways for someone to act. Learning requires more than seeing, hearing, moving, or

touching (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In other words the learner integrates what he or she senses, and thinks with what he or she feels. One of the most important aspects of this learning style model is that “ learning results from synergistic transactions between the learner and the environment” and “ learning is a holistic process of adaption to the world that integrates — thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

This paper will concentrate on one aspect of the application of Kolb’s learning styles theory from the faculty’s point of view especially business faculty where the current focus is on optimizing the chances students can move easily into their chosen careers or meet their desired goals when they graduate. This learning issue has even become more pressing with the recent economic depression which has now lasted for over 2 years the collapse of Wall Street and the real estate market, the decrease in opportunities in the job market, increasing competition as more college graduates are entering that market, and the prospect that more jobs will move from the United States to China, and India.

In addition the current economic and job market are producing more “ nontraditional learners” who are seeking college degrees, and demanding different and engaging classroom experiences. Colleges in response to this demand have also shifted their emphasis often times because of budgetary priorities, to student recruitment, retention, and completion rates. These have now become factors that are strongly influencing college faculty too in their choice of techniques and pedagogy in the classroom (McCarthy, 2010).

As a result many college faculty are recognizing the need to provide more experiential learning opportunities in their courses, and to make learning more concrete and relevant for students. This has in turn has caused more studies and research to emerge that are encompassing many disciplines offered in colleges. Therefore the focus of this paper will be on the disciplines that are studied by students in the hopes of pursuing business careers although many of the same techniques, and pedagogy could be applied to other disciplines too.

### **Discussion**

Kolb (2005) believes that learners have immediate concrete experiences that allow them to reflect on new experience from different perspectives. From these reflective observations the learners engage in “ abstract conceptualization” creating generalizations or principles that integrate their observations into sound theories. Finally these generalizations or theories are used as guides to further action of the learner. This experimentation allows the learner to test what has been learned in other, and more complex situations. Often times the result is another concrete experience, but one that is experienced at much more complex level even subconsciously (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The application of this theory suggests that when a learner is in a situation which is synchronized with their learning style a higher level of achievement in that particular situation will occur (Wolfe, Bates, Manikowske, & Amundsen, 2005). The implication of this theory is that if a faculty member could assess the particular learning style of the students she was teaching she could possibly choose the methods of teaching, and the assessment of

the learning outcomes of students in a classroom that reflected those styles more closely. Researchers do not completely agree that these learning styles can be reliably measured using instruments such as Prices' Learning Style Inventory, Myers-Briggs Type Indicators, or the Learning Preference Inventor (Terry, 2001). Other researchers have found little evidence that " matching" learning styles with " learning methods is correlated with improving learning outcomes". In spite of that fact the use of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory has been proven " psychometrically reliable" (Terry, 2001, p. 3).

As experiential learning is based more on the premise of the active word of " doing" rather than the passive phrase of " being done" it presents numerous challenges and hurdles for business faculty. Essentially students in this environment are expected to practice the very skills they are learning in the classroom as they are more likely to transfer that experience to their chosen careers or professions. Learning thereby becomes " experiential" when it also contains the important ingredients of reflection, transfer, and support for the student. Faculty teaching business subjects are often unaware of this important process of learning as most courses in business schools are taught primarily using lecture, and the teacher playing the role of " master of ceremonies".

This paper does not advocate that lecture should be avoided or removed from the classrooms, but instead modified. Lecture could incorporate along with the emphasis of the principles, concepts, and theory or the cause of the situation the effect or proof of it on the business environment using practical or real world examples. The lecture could then have a broader appeal, and message for either Assimilators " thinker-watchers", or those who use logic

for the purpose of theory-building, and Convergencers “ thinker-doers” or those who prefer technical tasks and practical situations (Terry, 2001). Another hurdle for faculty to overcome when business subjects are being taught primarily by lecture is that many applications of the theories or concepts may not pertain to the students’ current situation. One strategy to clear this hurdle is to include as part of the requirements of a course that students bring in current related news articles from periodicals or magazines, and copy and distribute them with a one page executive summary. This exercise not only appeals to the Convergencers, but also the discussion that could ensue as a result of the article would appeal to the Accommodators “ feeler-doers” or those that prefer hands-on experience, and depend on gut-level feelings. Finally even the students that do not participate or are Divergencers “ feeler-watchers” would benefit. They enjoy situations that foster a wide range of ideas as those that might emerge in a discussion or brainstorming session (Terry, 2001). Of course another challenge for some business faculty would be to adopt the role of the facilitator in order to address the different learning styles in the classroom with provocative and probing questions in a safe and comfortable environment.

There are other reasons that applying this learning theory in the classroom would be a lucrative idea. One study had found a strong correlation between the “ Kolb-designed instruction” and community college students’ preference for “ teleconferencing courses”. Another study using Kolb’s LSI-II with adult students also had “ similar results” (Terry, 2001). In fact students who preferred to learn using their feelings were found to prefer discussions, and debate while students who learned by watching would prefer videos to

reading or listening to lectures. On the other hand those who feel more comfortable learning by analyzing or reasoning would prefer problem-solving techniques, and role-playing scenarios or simulations. The important point of the application of this theory for business faculty is that most of them have preferred teaching styles, and these may not always coincide with the learning styles of their students (Wolfe, Bates, Manikowske, & Amundsen, 2005). Therefore many faculty members may be effectively teaching about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the students in the classroom throughout the semester.

Therefore the implication of this theory strongly suggests that the process of planning classroom learning when a course is being designed by faculty within the business curriculum is that they need to be aware of Kolb's learning theory, and incorporate a wide variety of learning styles, activities, and assessments. For example there should be some "class and small group discussions, and student led discussions" with some assessment too based on individual student choices that is balanced with exercises or problems that are structured, and are often readily available for assignment in business textbooks (Wolfe, Bates, Manikowske, & Amundsen, 2005). For example in a Computer Science or Information Systems course some lab exercises can be assigned from the textbook, and a class project could be assigned once or twice in a semester that contains the same basic requirements and objectives for the students in the class, but has different choices of vehicles to achieve those results, and allow those choices to be based on individual interest, careers, or focus. This not only allows for the learner to feel that have more control of the project, but motivates the learner as the project is based on their preferred interest, and current focus.

Another strategy is to use an essay or research writing assignment which is usually done independently, and require that it be done in small groups. This strategy would not only enable a learner to better understand the way others learn, but also have him focus on the learning styles of other students. As learners may not be as comfortable in this situation it may force them to be aware of the other stages of learning, and foster working relationships in the group which may be very similar to those they may encounter in the business world (Wolfe, Bates, Manikowske, & Amundsen, 2005).

Finally this should extend not only to the design of assignments or projects, but also to the type of evaluation used to assess the learner. Although most student prefer exams that are reliable and consistent most exams for business courses have one format such as multiple choice, true and false, or short and long answer problems. In order to accommodate different learners and their styles choices of the type of questions or portion to answer could be given to students or some combination of the choice of questions based on certain conditions (Terry, 2001). This would include the preferences of a wide variety of learning styles, and still be an objective assessment tool.

### **Conclusion**

According to reports from the National Research Council, and The American Psychological Association, efforts to improve higher education have focused on “ improving the learning process in education with the application of research” which is referred to as “ the new science of learning” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 193). The philosophy of Experiential Learning Theory advocates that “ all learning is relearning and that learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students’ beliefs and ideas about a topic so that it can be



examined, tested, and integrated with new, and refined ideas” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Within this context David A. Kolb believes that there are four preferred learning styles: diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The selection of learning styles is a reflection of a learner’s individual abilities, personality, environment, and learning history. Therefore these are formed long before students enter a classroom for a course with particular faculty member. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory may give business faculty some insight into the learning process, and preferences for learners in a classroom. When designing a course or syllabus, and the delivery of the content for that course it may enable business faculty in particular to deliver the material in more concrete and practical manner, fostering interest of the subject matter, and achieving better retention of the material. Kolb’s work may also assist them in “reaching out to a wide number of diverse learners” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 207).

Although the implications are positive for its application in designing learning activities, assessment tools, and classroom techniques, and to having a better understanding of the learning process it has its limitations. One of them is that many students have been conditioned from previous experiences in education to be passive learners in the process, and look to the faculty member for the responsibility and control of their learning. Another limitation is for this learning theory to be applied “holistically” it would need to be applied uniformly across an institution or else students would receive conflicting, and sometimes inconsistent or negative experiences in some classes. Kolb (2005) calls this “mis-educative” where learners feel

alienated and isolated in the classroom or institution. Dewey believed that any experience that is “ mis-educative” would distort the growth of further experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 205).

This would mean changes would have to be made across the curriculum, and programs in faculty development, student development, and with administrative and staff members (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In addition Kolb (2005) believes “ learning is best conceived as a process and not in terms of outcomes” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Many institutions who measure the success of initiatives primarily using outcomes might find it difficult to justify the economic soundness or time and effort expended by personnel across the institution.

In spite of these limitations business faculty could enhance the learning that takes place in their classrooms. Faculty could become more aware of the different preferences and learning styles of students, and foster an appreciation of those differences by other students. Eventually it would also motivate students to be more effective learners by encouraging them to develop and use all four learning styles. In addition assessment of the learning styles in a particular classroom using Kolb’s LSI-II instrument which has been found to be “ psychometrically reliable” would enable faculty to choose the methods that would reflect the different learning styles of their students. Results from the assessment could also be used to form small diverse groups so that students within those groups could develop an appreciation of different learning styles which may assist them in the workplace too (Wolfe, Bates, Manikowske, & Amundsen, 2005, p. 21).

Therefore there are many applications for business faculty of Kolb's experiential learning theory, and it should be kept in mind by colleges.