David Kolb, The Theory of Experiential Learning and ESL

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It will soon be twenty years old, but the Theory of Experiential Learning has had little presence in ESL. "Experiential" learning is not just "fieldwork" or "praxis" (the connecting of learning to real life situations) although it is the basis for these approaches, it is a theory that defines the cognitive processes of learning. In particular, it asserts the importance of critical reflection in learning. As we shall see, David Kolb was one of the key contributors.

Background: 20th Century Theories of Learning

In my opinion, the greatest single event in this century that has shaped our view of teaching did not occur in the field of education at all, but rather, in psychology. It was the dramatic shift in the early sixties from the reductionist view of human behavior to non-reductionist view.

In the first half of this century, a reductionist view of human behavior - behaviorialism - dominated the field. Behaviorialism, a Pavlovian view of human learning developed by Watson, Hull and Thorndike reached its heyday in the 1950's, in B.F. Skinner's work on operant psychology and reinforcement. It was reductionist because it used a "black box" approach based in empiricism, much like the approach a chemist might use. Since one cannot observe what is happening in the brain, we should limit our measurements and theories to merely what is going in - the stimulus - and what is coming out - the response. By mid-century, the S-R view was so powerful that it dominated other fields of human science as well: education, linguistics and sociology. But such a simplified view left much to be desired. Classical conditioning alone could not explain what Jean Piaget had observed, that children go through stages of development that have no relation to external stimuli. Somehow, he proposed, the brain itself is actively involved in the learning process.

As a result, the sixties and seventies saw the reductionist view displaced by far more complex non-reductionist views. The break was so dramatic as to be a major paradigm shift. It occurred in psychology through the work of Piaget - child development and schema - and Gagne - eight categories of learning (Travers, 1977), while in linguistics it occurred as a result of Noam Chomskey's introduction of transformational grammar. The non-reductionist perspective did not lead directly to the Theory of Experiential Learning itself, but, it spawned a number of its predecessors: new interpretations known as as cognitive theories and revitalized progressivism known as humanist theories. Cognitive theorists, such as Bloom, dealt with the hierarchical nature of knowledge in the cognitive domain, while humanists, such as Maslow, concentrated of the affective domain and how "learners attempts to take control of their own life processes" (Rogers, 1996, p. 100).

Both fields acknowledged the importance of experience, but neither could formulate an adequate theory as to its function in learning. Even as late as 1980, experience was seen as merely being a source of stimuli. Even in the fourth edition of Travers' widely-used Essentials of Learning, a college-level textbook on Educational Psychology, there is no index entry for "experience" and learning is defined as "a relative permanent change in a response R as a result of exposure to stimuli S." (Travers, 1977, pp. 616, 618, & 6)

However, cognitive and humanistic research pointed more and more towards the importance of experience. For example, we can see the rudiments of the experiential theory in Saljo's 1979 hierarchy of student views of learning.

1. Learning brings about increase in knowledge. (knowing a lot)
2. Learning is memorizing. (storing information for easy recall)
3. Learning is about developing skills and methods, and acquiring facts that can be used as necessary.
4. Learning is about making sense of information, extracting meaning and relating information to everyday life.
5. Learning is about understanding the world through reinterpreting knowledge.

Saljo found that the more life experience a student has the more likely they are to view learning as an internal, experience-based process, as in steps four and five, rather than as an external process as in steps one through three. (Saljo, 1979, summarized in Banyard, 1994. pp. 303-4) Nonetheless, the theory of experiential learning did not gain prominence until the work of Mezirow, Freire, Kolb and Gregorc in the 1980's.

Experiential Learning Theory

In the early 1980's, Mezirow, Freire and others stressed that the heart of all learning lies in the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflection of experience. They spoke of learning as a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and later leads to action, which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection (Rogers, 1996). For example, a teacher might have an encounter with an angry student who failed a test. This is the experience. Reflection of this experience would involve trying to explain it to oneself: comparing it to previous experiences to determine what is the same and what is unique, analyzing it according to personal or institutional standards, and formulating a course of action connected to the experiences of others, such as talking to other teachers who have also faced angry students. Talking to other teachers, the action, will then lead to further reflection.

Kolb further refined the concept of reflection by dividing it into two separate learning activities, perceiving and processing. (Algonquin, 1996) He thus added another stage, called "Abstract Conceptualization." Whereas in the Critical Reflection stage we ask questions about the experience in terms of previous experiences, in the Abstract Conceptualization stage, we try to find the answers. We make generalizations, draw conclusions and form hypotheses about the experience. The Action phase, in light of his interpretation, then becomes a phase of Active Experimentation, where we try the hypotheses out. As Kolb says:

Abstract Conceptualization:

"In this stage, learning involves using logic and ideas, rather than feelings to understand problems or situations. Typically, you would rely on systematic planning and develop theories and ideas to solve problems."

Active Experimentation:

"Learning in this stage takes an active form - experimenting with, influencing or changing situations. You would take a practical approach and be concerned with what really works..." (p.4)
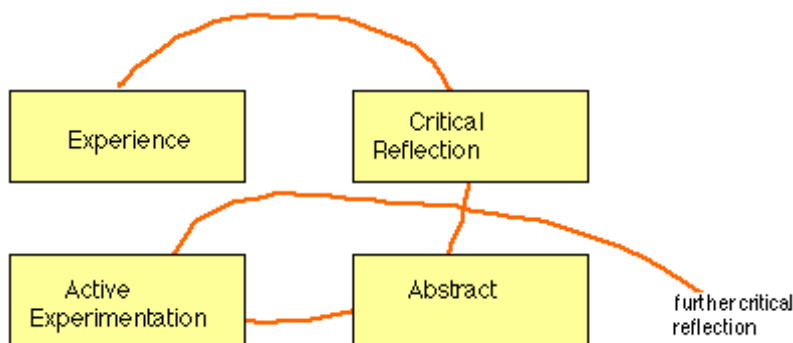
Figure 1. Experiential learning cycle

Kolb went on to develop the Learning Style Inventory to help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses. The inventory measures the learner's preferences in the four stages learning. Preference of one or more stages over others indicates a preferred learning style. The learning styles are:

Figure 2. Experiential learning styles

For those interested, a copy of the inventory, called the LSI - IIa, can be purchased for a few dollars from:

McBer & Company
Training Resources Group
116 Huntington Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts USA 02116
(617) 437-7080

Applications

Understanding one's preferred learning style has two benefits. It helps us understand our areas of weakness, giving us the opportunity to work on becoming more proficient in the other modes or it helps us realize our strengths, which might be useful in certain social situations, such as deciding on a career.

In an ESL institution, use of the inventory has two benefits for learners. It helps them understand their learning styles, and thus "make transitions to higher levels of personal and cognitive functioning." (Knox, 1986, p. 25) It also allows teachers to cover materials in a way that best fits the diversity of the classroom. It must be added, however, that the Learning Style Inventory was never intended to be used as a tool to segregate students with different learning styles. (Rogers, 1996; Kolb, 1993)

In my opinion, the major benefit from use of the inventory lies not in its effect on learners, but rather, in its effect on educators. Regardless of what results the inventory might produce, its mere presence reemphasizes experience as an critical part of learning. Even today, most education is still essentialist, an approach that ignores learner experience. Also, as Brookfield points out, teachers tend to be so concerned with presenting information that they overlook student needs to reflect upon it. Instead, he encourages "praxis ," thereby:

> "...ensuring that opportunities for the interplay between action and reflection are available in a balanced way for students. Praxis means that curricula are not studied in some kind of artificial isolation, but that ideas, skills, and insights learned in a classroom are tested and experienced in real life. Essential to praxis is the opportunity to reflect on experience, so that formal study is informed by some appreciation of reality." (Brookfield, 1990, p. 50)

The Theory of Experiential Learning can also be integrated in one's way of teaching. For example, after introducing a new grammar or difficult point, the instructor might give the students a minute or two of silence to reflect and then another minute or two to discuss. The Learning Style Inventory serves as a reminder that the internal processes of learning need just as much care as the external.

Limitations of Kolb's Theory and Inventory

Not all writers agree with Kolb's theory. Rogers, for example points out that "learning includes goals, purposes, intentions, choice and decision-making, and it is not at all clear where these elements fit into the learning cycle." (Rogers, 1996, p. 108) Habermas has also proposed that there are at least three kinds of learning and that we have different learning styles for each. (Rogers,1996, p. 110)

As for the Inventory, Kolb, himself, points out its greatest limitation. The results are based solely on the way learners rate themselves. It does not rate learning style preferences through standards or behavior, as some other personal style inventories do, and it only gives relative strengths within the individual learner, not in relation to others. In my own case, I found the results dubious. The wording in the questions seemed vague and the results did not jive with my own view of my preferred learning style.

Nonetheless, Kolb's contributions cannot be underestimated. Whatever their limitations, by presenting a model of experience in a scientific form, he has helped move educational thought from the locus of the instructor back to the learner. As many of the major contributors to the field have pointed out, experience has once again become a viable topic of discussion. (Brookfield, 1990; Cross, 1981; Jarvis, 1995; Kemp, 1996; Knowles, 1990, McKeachie, 1994, Peters, 1991)

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