



The Learning Theory Podcast

Episode 9

Kolb's Experiential Learning

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Introduction

Welcome to episode 9 of the Learning Theory Podcast. I would like to say a special thank you James Coulter from the United Kingdom who contacted me with a request for the topic of this week's episode, David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. This theory is very difficult to explain by words alone. A visual of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is very helpful, and for some like me necessary, for understanding. I have embedded an image of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle into this MP3 file, which you should be able to see any computer or mobile media player capable of displaying album art. This image is also available in the transcript of this episode, available on my website.

Background

Kolb defines Experiential Learning Theory as “a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop” (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis 2000, p. 2). Kolb argues that the emphasis on the role that Experience plays in the learning process differentiates Experiential Learning Theory from both behaviorist learning theories, which disregard the role of “subjective experience in the learning process,” and cognitive learning theories, which focus on “cognition over affect” (Kolb et al., p 2).

The Experiential Learning Circle

Experiential Learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, et al., 2000, citing Kolb, 1984, p. 41). In experiential learning, this learning process occurs within a four stage framework which includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, et al.). This

framework, referred to as Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, is shown the embedded image for this podcast episode, and in figure 1 of the transcript. The Experiential Learning Cycle model suggests that learning starts with concrete experiences, which form the bases for reflective observation. The individual then assimilates the reflections into abstract concepts, which form the basis for actively testing new ideas. Actively testing these new ideas provides new concrete experiences; thus starting the Experiential Learning Cycle anew (Kolb, et al.).



Figure 1. Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2008)

Recall that in experiential learning “knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.” The grasping and transforming of experience form two continuums (Atkinson & Murrell, 1988) within the Experiential Learning Cycle. The concrete-abstract continuum, portrayed in the model presented in figure 1 with the vertical line running

between Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization, represents how learners gather or grasp new information (Atkinson & Murrell). The horizontal line running between Active Experimentation and Reflective Observation portrays the reflective-active continuum which represents how the learner processes or transforms the new information that has been gathered (Atkinson & Murrell).

The way the continuums vertically and horizontally bisect the Experiential Learning Cycle, suggests that within the cycle the learner alternately passes through periods of grasping new knowledge, followed by periods where that new knowledge is processed and transformed. Additionally, the alternate processes of gathering and transforming, further alternately occur at opposite ends of the two continuums, which Kolb suggests require learning abilities that are polar opposites (Kolb, et. al, 2000). This concept is a little challenging to wrap one's mind around, but it is important to understand as it influences how learning styles fit into the Experiential Learning Cycle.

Kolb's Learning Style Index (KLSI)

The vertical and horizontal continuum lines that bisect the Experiential Learning Cycle create four quadrants. Within each of these quadrants, Kolb has assigned a learning style from the Kolb Learning Style Index (Kolb & Kolb, 2008): diverging, assimilating, converging, and accommodating.

The diverging learning style falls in the quadrant between Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation. Kolb suggest that individuals with the diverging learning style learn best when presented with concrete situations and excel in situations, such as brainstorming sessions, where the generation of ideas is required (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). These individuals prefer to work in groups, are good listeners, and thrive on personalized feedback (Kolb & Kolb).

The assimilating learning style falls in the quadrant between abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. Individuals with this learning style are capable of arranging a wide range of information into a concise and logical form (Kolb & Kolb 2008). These individuals prefer gathering information through reading, lectures, studying analytical models; and then taking time to think through the information (Kolb & Kolb).

The converging learning style falls into the abstract conceptualization and active experimentation quadrant. This learning style excels at applying theory to practice to solve problems, but is weak in the social and interpersonal skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). These individuals prefer to experiment with simulations, laboratory experiments, and other theory to practice exercises (Kolb & Kolb).

The accommodating learning style falls into the concrete experience and active experimentation quadrant. This learning style prefers hands-on experiences, and enjoys a challenge (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). People with this learning style can be impulsive and act on gut feel, rather than logical analysis (Kolb & Kolb). These individuals rely heavily on other people for information and prefer to work in groups (Kolb & Kolb).

Implications

The significance of mapping the Kolb Learning Style Index to the quadrants of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is to demonstrate that experiential learning activities cannot be a one size fits all solution. Kolb suggests that some people prefer to gather information by concrete experience while others prefer to gather new information through “symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization” (Kolb, et al., p 3). Similarly, some people prefer to process information by experimenting on their own, while other people prefer to observe others. The implication for the educator here is that when designing experiential learning activities, care

must be taken to ensure that the multiple methods of gathering and transforming information are available for the learners to choose from.

Experiential Learning Teams

There have been over 990 studies and scholarly papers published about Experiential Learning Theory across a wide range of applications (Kolb et al., 2000). One that I find intriguing is a 2005 paper entitled *Experiential Learning in Teams*, by Adams, Kayes, and Kolb. This paper, listed in this episode's transcript references, discusses the historical trends that lead us to the current popularity of learning teams in both the formal education and corporate training environments. What I find most intriguing is how by first using the Kolb Learning Styles Index assessment to determine the preferred learning styles of individual learners, the educator or trainer can make team assignments based on learning styles. Learning teams comprised of individuals with strengths in each quadrant of the Experiential Learning Cycle, could make for a very powerful learning experience.

Wrap up

Thank you for listening! If you would like to provide feedback please visit me at www.dancampbell.us where you can find the transcript for this and other episodes, as well as links to other learning theory resources. I'll be back in two weeks. Until then, go out and learn something new everyday.

References

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