

Experiential Learning: Creating Deep Learning Opportunities

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What is experiential learning?

Humans are constantly learning and developing – it is a natural part of our being. However, too often this natural learning process is not connected to classroom instruction, professional development, and the diffusion of innovations. Experiential learning is a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). This type of learning must be grounded in the life experiences of the learner where the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process (Keeton, Morris, & Tate, 1978). Agricultural education is uniquely positioned to capitalize on this holistic view of learning (Baker, Robinson, & Kolb, 2012) if students are connected to agriculture in some authentic way. Learning becomes more about the world of the student and their agricultural interest than the “banking” of information that Freire (2000) criticized.

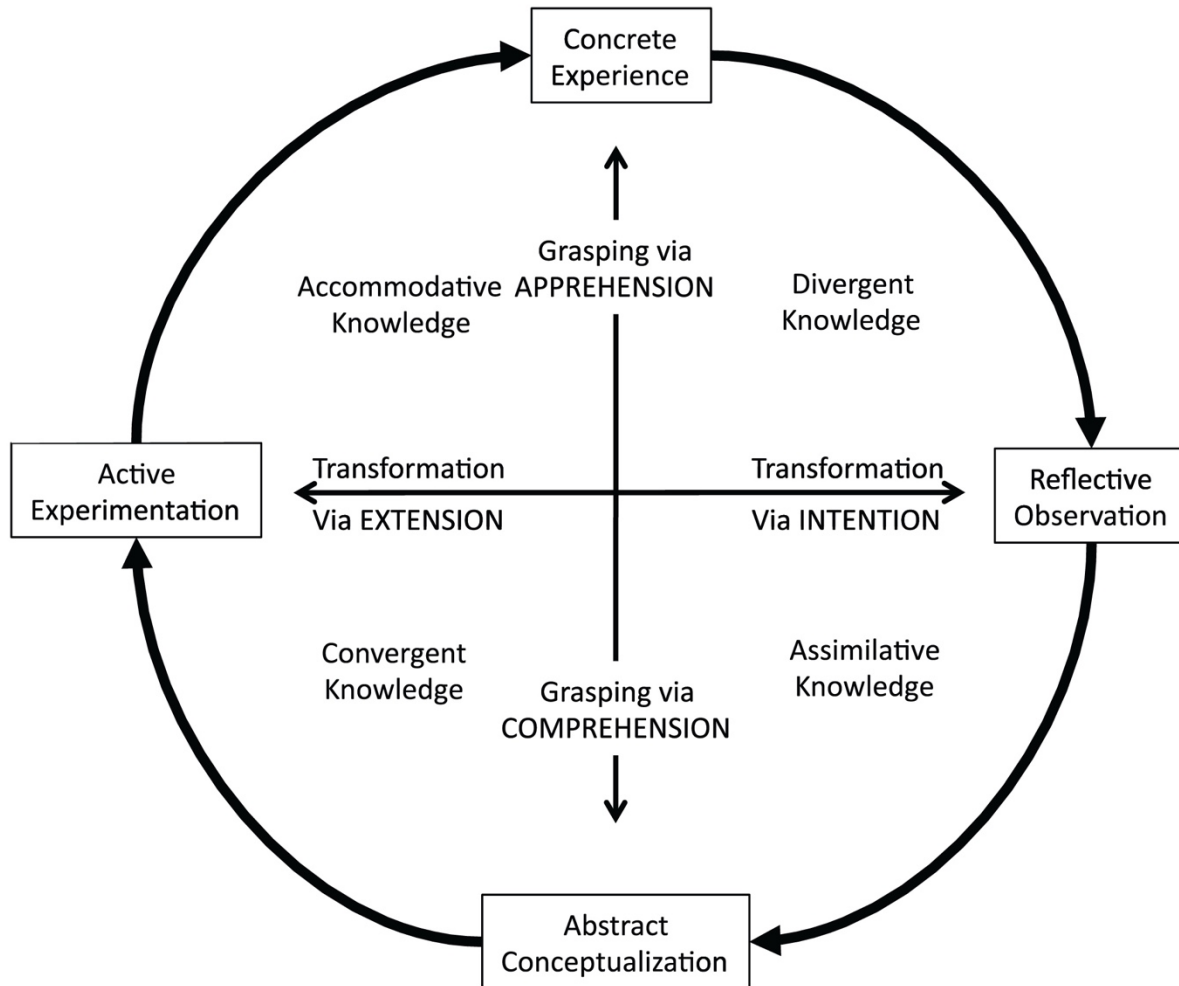
Experiential learning process

Experiential learning is characterized by six key propositions:

1. **Learning is best conceived as a process, not as outcomes.** Teaching and learning is not about banking information, but rather is building one’s ability to think at a higher level in any given context. The purpose of education is to stimulate inquiry and skill acquisition while working to acquire knowledge.
2. **Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.** All learning must be thought of as relearning. Though it is easy to assume that each learner comes as a blank slate awaiting our outlines, each learner brings their own unique experiences to the learning process. It is critical to consider those motivations, ideas, interests, and contexts.
3. **Learning requires the resolution of conflicts as we adapt to the world.** As each of us interact with the world, we have those moments where our current paradigms are challenged. Learning requires new experiences, purposeful reflection, the formation of conclusions, and the testing of those conclusions in our lives.
4. **Learning is a holistic process.** Learning should be providing conceptual bridges between our work, family, school, and social environments. When learning is grounded in one’s experience, it is integrated and meaningful.
5. **Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment.** Human behavior is a function of a person and the environment (Lewin, 1951). So many times we think learning happens personally, but it is constructed socially in an environment.
6. **Learning is the creation of knowledge.** It is essential to take into account the nature of subject matter when helping students learn. We interact socially to create our own personal knowledge on various topics (Kolb, 2015).

The learning process, as defined by Kolb (2015) is depicted in figure 1. At the core of the learning process is how we grasp, or take in, new information, and how we then transform that information into our current thoughts on a topic. The learning process cycle includes a concrete experience where a learner uses their senses to take in various stimuli in the environment. This could include working agricultural land, an interaction with a colleague, an interaction with a neighbor, or a classroom learning experience. The experience is then processed through reflective observation. A learner answers the question, “What happened?” This reflection process helps make sense of the experience. Abstract conceptualization is the development of theories or conclusions as a result of the experience and reflection. We then use those conclusions to guide our actions as we actively experiment with this new knowledge. This learning cycle can begin and/or end at any location and occurs many times as we learn and develop.

Figure 1 Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory



For example, as an educator you may teach class and find students are not interested. You think about that class over the hours following the class and ultimately come to the conclusion that they were tired and needed breaks. As a result, you include breaks during the next class, which starts the next cycle of learning where you reflect on if that was the correct conclusion. This is the natural learning process and the way we naturally learn and develop.



Educator's roles

At this point the learning process seems quite personal and independent, but what is the role of an educator in supporting this learning process? There are four key roles that an educator can play to speed up and improve the learning process: (a) facilitator, (b) expert, (c) evaluator, and (d) coach. (Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli, & Sharma, 2014).

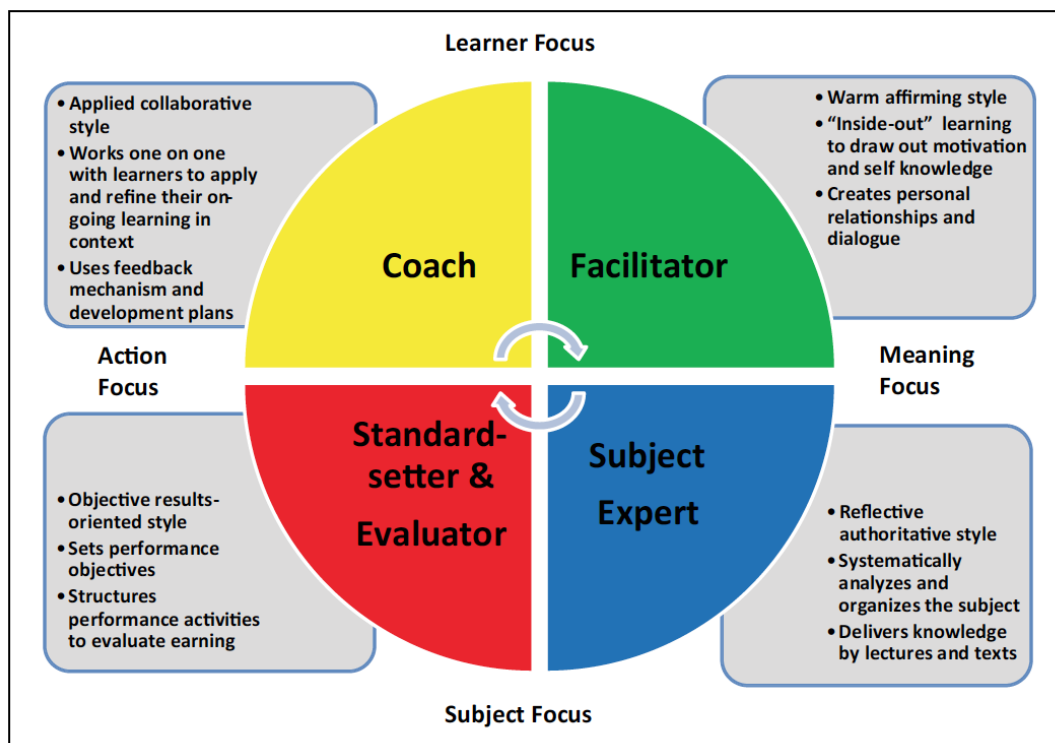
The Facilitator Role. When facilitating, educators help learners get in touch with their personal experience and reflect on it. They adopt a warm affirming style to draw out learners' interests, intrinsic motivation, and self-knowledge. They often do this by facilitating conversation in small groups. They create personal relationships with learners.

The Subject Expert Role. In their role as subject expert, educators help learners organize and connect their reflections to the knowledge base of the subject matter. They adopt an authoritative, reflective style. They often teach by example, modeling and encouraging critical thinking as they systematically organize and analyze the subject matter knowledge. This knowledge is often communicated through lectures and texts.

The Standard-Setter/Evaluator Role. As a standard-setter and evaluator, educators help learners master the application of knowledge and skill in order to meet performance requirements. They adopt an objective results oriented style as they set the knowledge requirements needed for quality performance. They create performance activities for learners to evaluate their learning.

The Coaching Role. In the coaching role, educators help learners apply knowledge to achieve their goals. They adopt a collaborative, encouraging style, often working one-on-one with individuals to help them learn from experiences in their life context. They assist in the creation of personal development plans and provide ways of getting feedback on performance. (Kolb et al., 2014, pp. 220 – 221)

Figure 2 Educator Role Profile. Adapted from Kolb et al, (2014)





Though every educator has a “preferred” role, it is important that you use this framework to consider how you are addressing ALL the roles. Holistic learning best occurs when the full experiential learning cycle is completed by a learner, and it is your job as an educator to ensure that students are personally motivated to learn, are given expertise, provided feedback, and assisted in developing goals leading to improvement.

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This project was made possible by the United States Agency for International Development and the generous support of the American people through USAID Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-L-12-00002