

# Experiential Learning Theory

## General

Experiential learning theory is a **cycle learning theory** introduced by American educational theorist [David Kolb](#)<sup>1)</sup> in 1971<sup>2)</sup> and was inspired by earlier works of [Kurt Lewin](#), [Jean Piaget](#)<sup>3)</sup> and [John Dewey](#). As it was developed within [humanist paradigm](#), experiential learning offers a **holistic perspective on learning** and is orientated mostly on adult learning. Name of this theory was intended to should emphasize the importance of experience in the learning process.

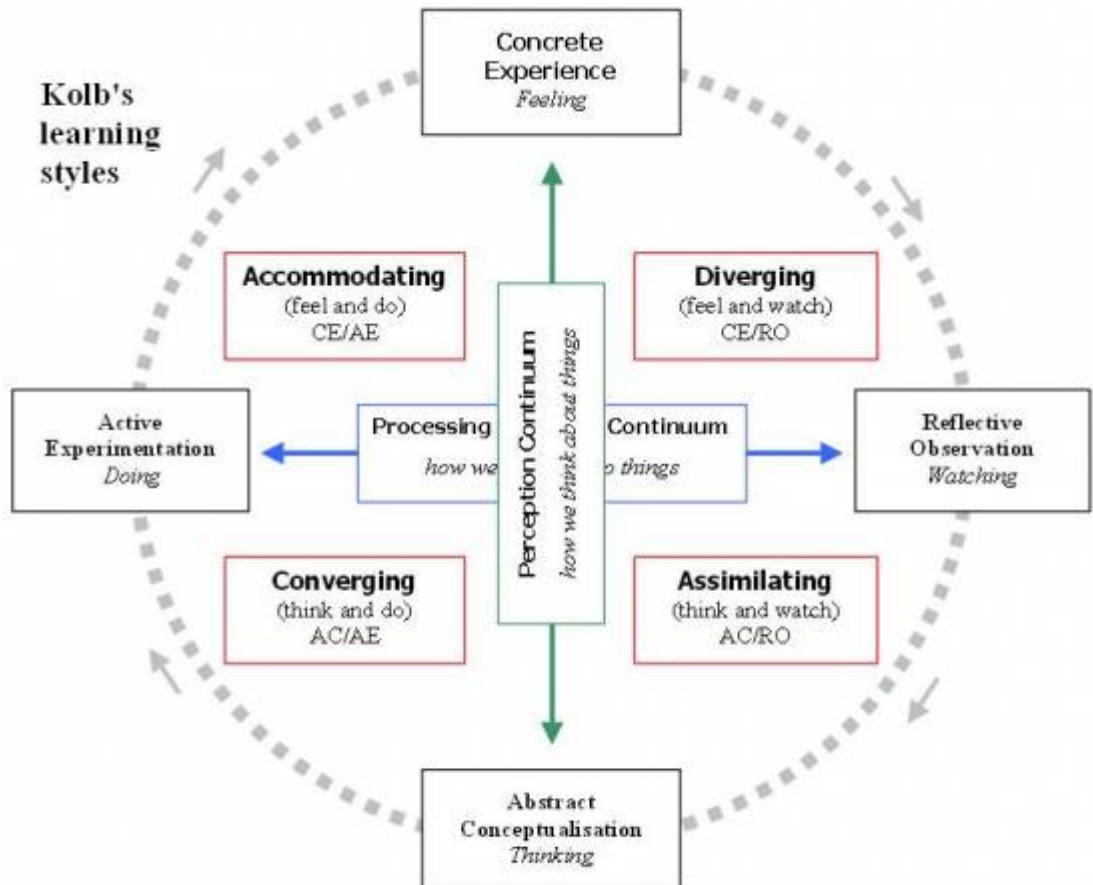
Experiential learning theory defines learning as

- *“the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.”*<sup>4)</sup>

## What is experiential learning?

The experiential learning theory is based on six propositions<sup>5)</sup> short described with the following three:

1. Learning is best described as a holistic process of creating knowledge and adapting to the world.
2. Learning is actually relearning, since it is greatly dependent on already learned material.
3. Learning is driven by conflict, differences, and disagreement and results in assimilation and accommodation.



© concept David Kolb, adaptation and design Alan Chapman 2005-06, based on Kolb's learning styles, 1984  
Not to be sold or published. More free online training resources are at [www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com). Sole risk with user.

Kolb<sup>6)</sup> suggests two opposite modes of acquiring experience:

- **concrete experience** or CE (feeling through practical experiencing),
- **abstract conceptualization** or AC (concluding and thinking about the experience),

and two opposite modes of transforming that experience into knowledge:

- **reflective observation** or RO (actively observing experience and its outcomes),
- **active experimentation** or AE (planning on how to test something and finally doing).

All of these components together form a circle of learning in which they follow one after another: CE→RO→AC→AE→CE→... The very process of **learning can begin in any of them**. Still, every learner develops strengths in some of mentioned modes more than in others and learn better under those conditions, which results in four different **learning styles** identified also by Kolb<sup>78)</sup>:

- **Assimilator** - Strong in AC and RO components. Prefers **abstract conceptualizations** and theoretical models, requires time to think through. Values **logical validity** more than practical applications.
- **Converger** - Strong in AC and AE components. Prefers **practical applications** of concepts and theories he learns and like experimenting. They are often good problem solvers and like dealing with technical issues.
- **Accommodator** - Strong in CE and AE components. Prefers **practical experiences** and acting more according to the feeling than based on logical analysis or theoretical aspects.

- **Diverger** - Strong in CE and RO modes. Prefers **learning through observing and collecting information**, good at viewing concrete situations from different points of view. This kind of people are often imaginative and emotional, and often specialize in arts.<sup>9)</sup>

## EXPERIMENTATION

NW Feeling-Acting Accommodating	N Feeling Acting-Reflecting Northerner	NE Feeling-Reflecting Diverging
W Acting Feeling-Thinking Westerner	C Feeling Acting + Reflecting Thinking Balancing	E Reflecting Feeling-Thinking Easterner
SW Thinking-Acting Converging	S Thinking Acting-Reflecting Southerner	SE Thinking-Reflecting Assimilating

## OBSERVATION

## ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Kolb's model was later refined by himself and other researchers<sup>10)11)12)</sup> through improvement of the learning styles grid resolution from 2×2 to 3×3 by introducing five additional learning styles<sup>13)</sup>:

- **Northerner** - Strong in CE and balanced in AE and RO modes. Has a capacity for deep involvement and learns through experimenting, but has problems with conceptualizations.
- **Westerner** - Strong in AE and balanced in CE and AC modes. Has great action skills and possibilities for thinking and conceptualizing, but problems with analyzing past experience.
- **Easterner** - Strong in RO and balanced in CE and AC modes. Has great observation and reflection skills as well as learning from concrete experience, but problems with putting his plans into action.
- **Southerner** - Strong in AC and balanced in AE and RO modes. Has great conceptualization skills, but little use of practical experiences.
- **Balancing** - Evenly balancing both modes of acquiring experience and both modes of transforming that experience into knowledge.

In order to identify preferred learning style in Kolb's model, "**learning style inventory**" method has been developed. This **method for determining an individual's optimal learning style**, strengths and weaknesses consists of a survey which explores one's perceiving (how one prefers to acquire information) and processing (how one makes sense of new things). Various variants of this method can be found in simplified free on-line tests<sup>14)</sup> and newer methods like *the adaptive style inventory* or *the learning skills profile* have also been introduced<sup>15)</sup>.

Kolb's theory has also influenced other authors to create similar models for determining of preferred learning style. The critique that Kolb's learning styles inventory was difficult to apply to people who never really paid attention to how they learn more efficiently encouraged **Peter Honey** and **Alan Mumford** to create their *Learning Styles Questionnaire*<sup>16)</sup>. It was based on Kolb's theory, but instead of

asking people how they learn it was probing for most common learning behaviors. Other similar models include: [Anthony Gregorc's Mind Styles Model<sup>17\)</sup>](#), [Neil Fleming's VARK Model<sup>18\)</sup>](#) and other.

## What is the practical meaning of experiential learning?

Experiential learning is a model **suggested for adult learners**. General implications of this model are that teaching/learning process should consist of all four stages of Kolb's model, but it also suggests **individual changes** should be applied, depending on learners learning style.

- Assimilators - prefer **watching, thinking** and **good explanations of theories and ideas** to practical experiences. This kind of learners usually enjoy lectures and readings as well as having enough time to think about new ideas.
- Convergers - prefer **doing** and **thinking, finding practical solutions** to problems. This kind of learners usually like new ideas and their practical applications.
- Accomodators - prefer **practical experiences** and **intuitive approach** instead of reading instructions. This kind of learners also usually prefer **teamwork**.
- Divergers - prefer **watching, collecting information, working in groups** and brainstorm instead of having practical experience.

Kolb's theory was applied in a number of studies on topics that include (online) education, computer and information science, psychology, management, medicine, nursing, accounting and law. [19](#)[20](#)[21](#)

## Criticisms

Some of the criticisms referring to Kolb's theory suggest:

- his learning cycle is **oversimplified** and ignores non-experiential ways of learning<sup>22)</sup>,
- his learning cycle pays insufficient attention to **goals, purposes, intentions**, choice and decision-making, which are also a part of learning<sup>23)</sup>
- the results of *learning style inventory* are based solely on the way learners rate themselves which results in **questionable results**<sup>24)</sup>

Results of experimental validation vary: a meta-study of 81 studies implementing experiential learning resulted in 61.7% of the studies supporting it, 16.1% showing mixed support, and 22.2% not support experiential learning theory. <sup>25)</sup> In another meta-study of learning style inventory assessment, out of analyzed studies, 49 showed strong support, 40 showed mixed support, and 12 studies showed no support at all. <sup>26)</sup>

## Keywords and most important names

- **Concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), active experimentation (AE), assimilator, converger, accommodator, diverger, learning style inventory, learning styles, northerner, westerner, easterner, southerner, balancing**

- David Kolb

## Bibliography

Kolb, D. A, R. E Boyatzis, and C. Mainemelis. Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles. The educational psychology series: 227-247. 2001.

Experiential Learning (Kolb). Learning Theories Knowledgebase. Retrieved February 9, 2011.

Kearsley, G. Experiential Learning. Theory Into Practice Database. Retrieved February 8, 2011.

Greenaway, R. Experiential Learning articles and critiques of David Kolb's theory. Retrieved March 21, 2011.

Lowy, Alex, and Phil Hood. The power of the 2x2 matrix: using 2x2 thinking to solve business problems and make better decisions. John Wiley and Sons, 2004.

Big Dog and Little Dog's Performance Juxtaposition: Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire. Retrieved February 8, 2011.

## Read more

Kolb, David A. Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1984.

Kolb, David A. Learning style inventory. Boston, MA: McBer and Company. 1985.

Kolb, D. A, R. E Boyatzis, and Mainemelis, C. Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles: p227-247. 2001.

Kayes, D. Christopher. Experiential Learning and Its Critics: Preserving the Role of Experience in Management Learning and Education. Academy of Management Learning & Education 1, no. 2: 137-149, December 2002.

1)

Some sources like Cooper, S. Theories of Learning in Educational Psychology or Kearsley G. Explorations in Learning & Instruction: The Theory Into Practice Database associate experiential learning with Carl Rogers.

2)

Kolb, D. A. Individual learning styles and the learning process. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1971.

3)

See also: Stage Theory of Cognitive Development

4)

Kolb, David A. Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development. Prentice-Hall, 1984.

5) , 6) , 8) , 13)

Kolb, Alice Y., and David A. Kolb. Learning Styles and Learning Spaces : Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education. Academy of Management Learning Education 4, no. 2: 193-212, 2005.

7)

Kolb, David A. *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall, 1984.

9)

Kolb, D. A, R. E Boyatzis, and C. Mainemelis. Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles. The educational psychology series*: 227-247. 2001.

10)

Abbey, David S., David E. Hunt, and John C. Weiser. Variations on a Theme by Kolb. *The Counseling Psychologist* 13, no. 3: 477 -501, 1985.

11)

Hunt, David Ellis. *Beginning with ourselves in practice, theory, and human affairs*. Brookline Books, 1987.

12)

Mainemelis, Charalampos, Richard E. Boyatzis, and David A. Kolb. Learning Styles and Adaptive Flexibility. *Management Learning* 33, no. 1: 5-33, March 2002.

14)

For example: [Duncan, D. Kolb Learning Style Inventory](#). University of Colorado at Boulder.

15)

Mainemelis, Charalampos, Richard E. Boyatzis, and David A. Kolb. Learning Styles and Adaptive Flexibility. *Management Learning* 33, no. 1: 5 -33, March 2002.

16)

[Honey & Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire \(LSQ\)](#)

17)

[The Mind Styles Model: Theory, Principles, and Applications](#). AFG, 2006.

18)

[VARK a guide to learning styles](#)

19)

Kolb, D. A, R. E Boyatzis, and C. Mainemelis. Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles. The educational psychology series*: 227-247, 2001.

20)

Kolb, D A. *Learning Styles and Learning Spaces : Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education*. *Academy of Management Learning Education* 4, no. 2: 193-212. 2005.

21)

Richmond, A. S, and R. Cummings. Implementing Kolb's learning styles into online distance education. *International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning* 1, no. 1: 45-54, 2005.

22)

Forrest, C. Kolb's Learning Cycle. *Train the Trainer*, 12, 2004. cited by [Greenaway, R. Experiential Learning articles and critiques of David Kolb's theory](#).

23)

Harrison, R. *Supporting Lifelong Learning: Perspectives on learning*. Routledge, 2002.

24)

Curtis, K. David Kolb, The Theory of Experiential Learning and ESL. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. 3(9), September 1997.

25)

Hickcox, L. K. 1991. An historical review of Kolb's formulation of experiential learning theory. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, Corvallis. Cited by [Kolb, Alice Y., and David A. Kolb. Learning Styles and Learning Spaces : Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education. Academy of Management Learning Education](#) 4, no. 2: 193-212, 2005.

26)

Iliff, C. H. 1994. Kolb's Learning Style Inventory: A meta-analysis. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Boston University, Boston, MA. Cited by [Kolb, Alice Y., and David A. Kolb. Learning Styles and Learning](#)

Spaces : Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education. Academy of Management Learning Education 4, no. 2: 193-212, 2005.

From:  
<https://www.learning-theories.org/> - Learning Theories

Permanent link:  
[https://www.learning-theories.org/doku.php?id=learning\\_theories:experiential\\_learning&rev=1326364961](https://www.learning-theories.org/doku.php?id=learning_theories:experiential_learning&rev=1326364961)

Last update: **2023/06/19 15:49**

