

# Become an Experiential Educator From the **INSIDE OUT**

Identifying your own learning process will help you design and deliver better programs for learners.



BY KAY PETERSON

**E**mployees are expected to learn more, faster—and experiential learning initiatives can help them achieve this. Educators and learners alike who understand the process of learning and their own approach to using it are empowered to be more successful during formal training; then, they continue learning daily through developmental interactions and hands-on experience. Thus, trainers and instructional designers will want to become experiential educators, an inside-out process, as David Hunt suggests in his book *Beginning with Ourselves*.

Many people believe experiential learning is a pedagogy or application, such as a team building exercise. In reality, it makes explicit a research-based model for learning (the learning cycle), defines nine approaches to using it (the learning styles), and proposes a model of development. Experiential learning is holistic; it takes into account all parts of a person—feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and actions—and can be applied to all areas of life. When you make a decision, work on a team, or interact with family, you are learning.

This method is not to be confused with the dozens of learning cycles or learning styles that are often debunked as a style-matching approach. Since David Kolb developed experiential learning nearly 50 years ago, thousands of research studies have confirmed its value, placing it among the most valued approaches to management education. It is

uniquely suited to address the learning challenges of the 21st century by empowering learners to take charge of their own learning.

Experiential learning is expanding from the academic classroom to corporate training and coaching in such places as the U.S. military, state supreme court systems, and service and healthcare organizations. The Institute for Experiential Learning has created programs to develop experiential educators who understand both theory and practice and can apply it at the individual, team, and organizational level. The goal is to put experiential learning on the agenda of every organizational change and development effort and anyone looking to enact personal change.

Here is what we suggest you do to become an experiential educator.

### Master the learning cycle process

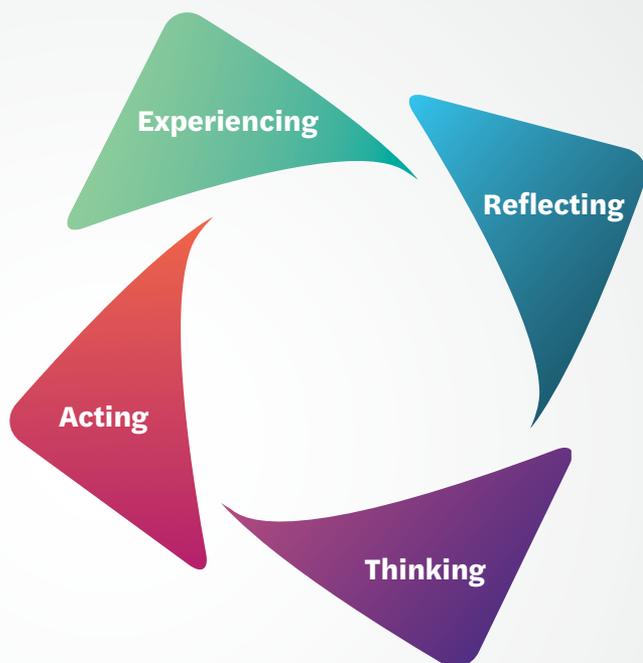
The Experiential Learning Cycle makes explicit an ideal four-step, iterative learning process:

1. **Experiencing.** Attend to your concrete experience in the moment.
2. **Reflecting.** Pause to reflect on that experience to search for meaning.
3. **Thinking.** Engage abstract thinking and generalizations leading to a decision.
4. **Acting.** Do something to test or implement your decision, and the cycle begins again with a new experience.

The learning cycle is simple enough for most people to grasp in just a few minutes, yet, every trainer will notice the two dimensions—the north-south experiencing and thinking pole (ways of taking in information) and the east-west reflecting and acting pole (ways of processing that information)—are pairs of opposites that require different capabilities. The nine learning styles (see sidebar on page 35) can describe the different ways individuals use the learning cycle.

In the Institute for Experiential Learning’s program, educators identify their learning style, raising self-awareness about their own way of navigating the learning cycle and the impact it has on their effectiveness. For instance, one participant, Kent, identified his learning style as imagining, a style that favors experiencing and reflecting steps in the learning process. This style supported his career path as a trainer and internal coach (with the strengths of generating new ideas, seeking others’ opinions, and being empathetic). However, because Kent did not use thinking and acting to the same extent, he had difficulty making decisions, setting

## The Experiential Learning Cycle



SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM *EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EXPERIENCE AS THE SOURCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT, 2ND EDITION*, DAVID A. KOLB, 2017.

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boundaries, and completing projects. This carried over in his work as a trainer: He was strong at creating experiences and helping employees to reflect; yet, he was not as careful to make sure they had time to draw conclusions and practice applying what they learned.

During the program, Kent participated in individual coaching sessions to understand his learning preferences and their impact on his life and current behaviors. Through the discussions, he learned how this preference affected his approach in the team setting, too. Kent's tendency was to watch and listen to others rather than jump in to share ideas before he was certain of the outcome. During stop-action reviews, group members could "zoom out" to notice their own learning preferences in action and then make adjustments so that they were not stuck in implicit habits. For Kent, this meant practicing the thinking and acting steps. As a result, he came to understand that the learning process was as important as the content he delivered to employees.

When training departments make the process of learning explicit—along with the content they are delivering—they provide a shared language so people can navigate the complete cycle together, discussing their preferred styles, exploring how their styles differ, and increasing their effectiveness. Trainers and instructional designers can overlay any topic or process on the steps in the learning cycle, enabling employees to immediately identify the steps they use and the ones they avoid or underuse.

Mukta Arya, head of HR for Southeast Asia and regional head of people and talent development for an international financial services organization, uses experiential learning in a development program for high potentials. "While designing the program, we kept the different learning styles in mind and the experiential learning cycle was the base," she explains. "The modular program, spread over four months, had elements related to experiencing, reflecting, and analyzing and applying it in the form of projects."

Arya says the program has been successful: Using Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation, the program received a rating of 8.5 out of 10 (satisfying Level 1 reaction), and participants presented eight viable projects for the organization (satisfying Level 2 learning and Level 3 behavior change). "The projects were well presented and emphasized the importance of experiential learning," Arya adds. "For the business impact [Level 4 results], we will measure the ROI of the program at the end of the year."

## The Nine Learning Styles of Experiential Learning

Learning styles describe the way an individual uses the learning cycle and are defined in the Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0.

**Experiencing style:** engage, feel, connect

**Team role:** connector

Emphasize feeling while balancing acting and reflecting; pay the least attention to thinking. Ask: Am I present and engaged? What am I feeling?

**Imagining style:** create, diverge, include

**Team role:** dreamer

Emphasize experiencing and reflecting; pay the least attention to deciding. Ask: What are the possibilities? Have I included everyone? How can I help?

**Reflecting style:** listen, examine, process

**Team role:** observer

Emphasize deep reflection while balancing experiencing and thinking; pay the least attention to acting. Ask: Have I considered other perspectives? Have I listened and observed?

**Analyzing style:** analyze, plan, synthesize

**Team role:** planner

Use thinking and reflecting; pay the least attention to initiating. Ask: Have I been thorough and precise? Am I organized?

**Thinking style:** generalize, interpret, conceptualize

**Team role:** questioner

Use abstractions and balance reflecting and acting; pay the least attention to experiencing. Ask: What is my logic telling me? What does the evidence show?

**Deciding style:** commit, decide, converge

**Team role:** judge

Use thinking and acting; pay the least attention to imagining. Ask: Have I committed to a goal? What is the most practical approach?

**Acting style:** achieve, execute, implement

**Team role:** achiever

Take goal-directed action while balancing experiencing and thinking; pay the least attention to reflecting. Ask: What action can I take now to get things done? Are my actions purposeful? Am I completing my checklist?

**Initiating style:** influence, mobilize, improvise

**Team role:** influencer

Use experiencing and acting; pay the least attention to analyzing. Ask: Can I seize this opportunity? Am I resilient?

**Balancing style:** adapt, bridge, shift

**Team role:** adapter

Shift between experiencing and thinking, and acting and reflecting without going to extremes in any style. Ask: Is there a blind spot? Have I filled in the gaps?

## Identify learning style preferences of trainers, then employees

Trainers will want to identify their own preferences for using the learning cycle and learning styles. Learning style may influence the program design if trainers favor certain parts of the process and underuse others.

“The experiential learning program changed my perception of my style and provided me with tactical ways to leverage the strengths of my style,” says Anne Blum, an instructional designer and master facilitator. “I have been more intentional about including opportunities for thinking and reflecting into my program design. The result has been that more participants have reported finding value in the learning experience.”

Learning styles have enabled Chris Nagel, director of team and leadership development in the Cleveland Clinic’s Global Leadership and Learning Institute, to form better relationships with his team. “Understanding learning styles helps me appreciate others as people trying to be their best selves,” he notes. “Instead of seeing differences as roadblocks, I now see them as diverse perspectives. Experiential learning has given me the mindset to actually use all the talent on my team. As I value the diversity that everyone brings, it opens up a whole new world of what could be for our leadership development programs. We create better outcomes. After I seek others’ opinions and perspectives, we tweak programs to make them better.”

## The Educator Roles

	<b>Beliefs</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Educator Style</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Learning Style</b>
<b>Facilitator</b> Relate to learners to elicit interests, intrinsic motivation, and self-knowledge	Learning begins with the learners’ experience.	Empathy and perspective taking	Open, warm, affirming, creative	Group discussion, personal stories, writing in a journal	Experiencing, imagining, reflecting
<b>Expert</b> Connect experiences to knowledge base of subject	Learners will integrate new concepts into existing mental frameworks.	Analytical and conceptual abilities	Logical, authoritative	Short lectures, readings, written assignments	Reflecting, analyzing, thinking
<b>Evaluator</b> Master application to meet performance requirements	Learners need clear standards and feedback.	Problem-solving and decision-making skills	Structured, outcome-oriented, objective	Case studies, graded assignments, laboratories	Thinking, deciding, acting
<b>Coach/Motivator</b> Apply knowledge to achieve goals	Learning takes place in real-life context.	Ability to work with others to achieve outcomes	Applied, collaborative, experiment, risk taking	Practicum, projects in context, field work, role plays, simulations	Acting, initiating, experiencing

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM “ON BECOMING AN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATOR: THE EDUCATOR ROLE PROFILE,” ALICE Y. KOLB, DAVID A. KOLB, ANGELA PASSARELLI, AND GARIMA SHARMA, 2014.

Your own learning style will enable you to identify your strengths and favorite parts of the process and where you may be stretched and challenged, too.

### **Design experiences that spark learning**

Encouraging employees to connect with their own experience is central to experiential learning's success. Remember that it is not the experience itself that triggers learning; it's paying attention to the experience in a particular way rather than simply going through the motions. You will want to interrupt the normal flow of experience in employees, such as when they are stuck with a challenge or struck by the dissonance of something outside their usual experience, as John Dewey suggests. Create incongruity using a contrast or contradiction that challenges existing knowledge. Examples include switching between figure and ground, reconciling two opposing poles, searching for contradictions and opposites, or identifying and examining pre-existing expectations and underlying beliefs.

In *Organizational Resilience*, D. Christopher Kayes writes, "When individuals in organizations are open to new experiences, reflect on successes and failures, update their perspective and take calculated risks and experiment, they learn. Organizations that cultivate learning from experience build organizational resilience."

### **Move the learner all around the learning cycle using four educator roles**

Experiential learning is a complex relational process that requires trainers to pay attention to learners and the content while balancing making meaning and applying it. The Kolb Educator Role Profile framework presents four roles—facilitator, expert, evaluator, and coach—that are bridging strategies to keep trainers moving around the cycle, reminding them to act *with* the learner, not *on* the learner.

While delivering programs or engaging with employees, keep all four roles in mind, regardless of the order in which you use them.

- **Facilitator:** Help learners get in touch with their personal experience and reflect upon it. To do this, adopt a warm, affirming style. Consider using discussions or stories.
- **Expert:** Help learners organize and connect reflections to the general knowledge base of the subject matter. To do this, adopt a more authoritative style. Consider using short lectures or readings that will help learners reach their own conclusions.
- **Evaluator:** Help learners master the application

## **THE LEARNING CYCLE IS SIMPLE ENOUGH FOR MOST PEOPLE TO GRASP IN JUST A FEW MINUTES.**

and skill to meet performance objectives. To do this, adopt a results-oriented style so learners will evaluate their learning.

- **Coach:** Help learners apply knowledge to reach their goal. To do this, adopt an encouraging, motivating style so learners will apply learning in real-life context and seek improvement opportunities for performance.

Educator effectiveness is not achieved by simply matching the learner's preferences but by guiding learners around the entire cycle and empowering them to monitor their own learning process. Angela Passerelli, co-researcher for the Kolb Educator Role Profile, believes that educators must explore personal beliefs, practices, styles, and goals to build flexibility in the four roles.

### **Build relationships that support learning**

Ultimately, the quality of the relationships trainers build with their team and employees will enable them to experiment with new behaviors. Encourage a culture that is free of toxic blame, shame, and put-downs that stifle participants' willingness to stretch from comfort zones. To model this behavior for employees, trainers can share their own learning tensions and flexibility plan. Paradoxically, only when people accept themselves fully—strengths and challenges alike—can they be on firm footing to change.

Becoming an experiential educator requires work from the inside out, then from the outside in. When you provide an experiential learning program—modeled, designed, and delivered as an experiential educator—you are not only sharing content. You are also giving the gift of learning to employees, one that can transform their lives and your own.

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