

Kolb's Learning Cycle

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The adult learning specialist, David Kolb, has described the learning process as a four-phase cycle in which the learner: (1) does something concrete or has a specific experience that provides a basis for (2) the learner's observation and reflection on the experience and his or her own response to it. These observations are then (3) assimilated into a conceptual framework or related to other concepts in the learner's past experience and knowledge from which implications for action can be derived; and (4) tested and applied in different situations.

1. **Experiencing** or *immersing oneself in the "doing"* of a task is the first stage in which the individual, team, or organization simply carries out the task assigned. The engaged person is usually not reflecting on the task at this time, but carrying it out with intention.
2. **Reflection** involves stepping back from task involvement and *reviewing what has been done* and experienced. The skills of attending, noticing differences, and applying terms help identify subtle events and communicate them clearly to others. A learner's paradigm (values, attitudes, beliefs) influences whether he or she can differentiate certain events. Vocabulary is also important, since words are necessary for verbalizing and discussing perceptions.
3. **Conceptualization** involves *interpreting the events* that have been noticed and *understanding the relationships* among them. At this stage, theory may be particularly helpful as a template for framing and explaining events. Paradigm again influences the interpretive range a learner is willing or able to entertain.
4. **Planning** enables taking the new understanding and translating it into *predictions* about what is likely to happen next or *what actions should be taken* to refine the way the task is handled.

The logic of the learning cycle is to make many small and incremental improvements. When many people make these improvements, major improvements result over time. Likewise, when the learning cycle becomes habitual, the result is continual improvement.

Stage I: Concrete Experience

Learning initially occurs when a person encounters a new concrete experience and deals with it in terms of observations, feelings, and reactions. Accordingly, the most profound way to promote Stage I learning is by providing the student with exploratory tools e.g. concrete experiences and materials.

Kolb maintains that learners should become actively involved in the exploration of the learning experience if they are to get the most out of it. This can involve drawing up a checklist of things the learner should try to do: actively observing what's going on, producing a log or record of some sort, and formulating appropriate questions.

Stage II: Observation and Reflection

As the student observes the new situation in Stage I, the student adds to or adjusts his or her perceptions based on previous learning. This process compels the student to reflect on past experiences and to think about the current experience as either fitting into previous patterns or not.

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This is generally acknowledged as the most difficult stage of the Kolb cycle, but is probably the most crucial of all. Students and practitioners should reflect on what they learned, how they learned it, why they learned it, whether the learning experience could have been more effective, and so on. Discussion of these reflections with an instructor can prove extremely helpful, as can peer-to-peer discussions, either informally or at a formal debriefing session of some sort.

Stage III: Concept Formation

If the experience fits a pattern, then the student can form a generalization and a set of concepts to define the situation. As the student develops these concepts and generalizations, his or her thinking includes imagining other discrete concrete experiences that invariably raise new questions. The answers to these questions require further learning experimentation and the accompanying development of new concepts. Accordingly, the most profound way to promote Stage III learning is by introducing the student to key concepts e.g. subject vocabulary and relationship diagrams.

This stage is very often left out of experiential learning programs, but is extremely important if learners are to gain the maximum possible benefit from such programs. The main object of this stage is to link the actual learning experience with the theories that describe it, and/or with a greater understanding of the theories that the learning experience was designed to illustrate. Again, discussion with an instructor or advisor can prove extremely helpful during this stage of the Kolb cycle, as can discussion with peers.

Stage IV: Testing Implications in New Situations

When the student realizes that the answers constructed in Stage III are not necessarily complete, further testing is required. The student proposes new concrete experiments and restarts the learning cycle. Accordingly, the most profound way to promote Phase IV learning is by helping the student formulate new situations to be tested.

Kolb believes that the learner must be involved in the planning of the learning experience if experiential learning is to be fully effective. This can be done in a variety of ways—through action planning or preparing a learning contract. The former may involve nothing more than jotting down a set of things to do, or discussing the proposed procedure with the instructor. In either case, it is useful for individual learners to set their own objectives for the action plan. If a formal learning contract is used, this should be drawn up using a standard checklist.

Summary

The four elements are drawn from two dimensions, each of which forms a dialectic and represents the two things that can be done with information. The first is to grasp the information, i.e., to become aware of it. The dialectic lies between grasping information by first-hand experience (concrete experience), which Kolb refers to as apprehension, and grasping by calling up a memory (abstract conceptualization), which Kolb refers to as comprehension. Apprehension is external; the information is only available in the "here and now." For example, only when you are touching a piece of ice does it feel cold. Comprehension is an internal process and is not bound by the instant of time. The second is to transform the information. Similarly, there is dialectic between the external process of active experimentation and the internalized reflective observation. This transformation of information is the key to creating knowledge and is crucial to understanding that learning is an active process.