

Why Use Experiential Activities?

There are a wide range of reasons for offering learners the opportunity to take part in experiential learning as part of the training process. The activities which you offer add variety, involvement, challenge and an element of fun to what could otherwise be a programme of instruction.

However, more fundamental to the decision are two elements:

- The process by which adult learners make sense of their experience
- The variety of learning styles which adult learners apply

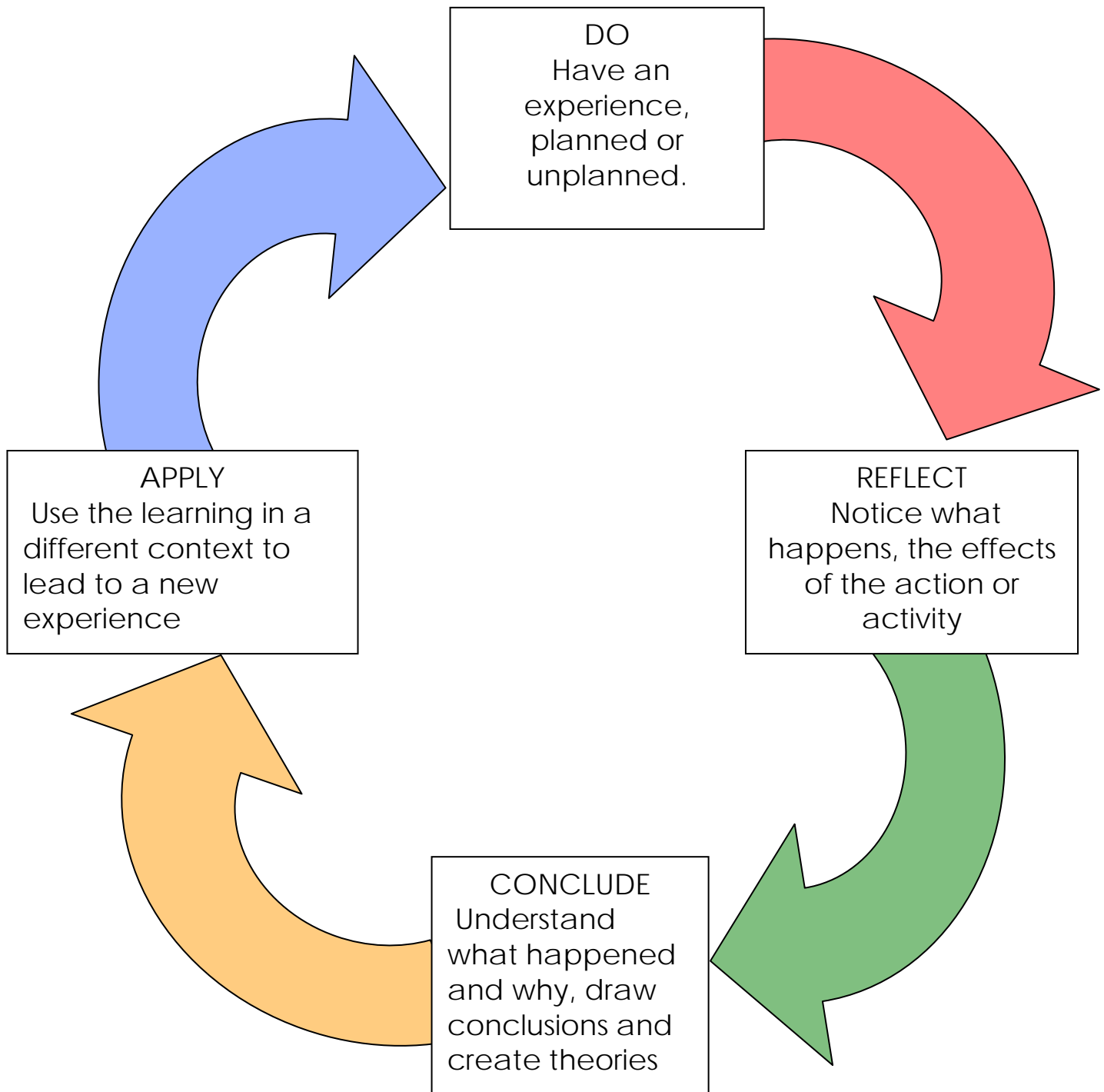
The basic learning cycle (based on the work of Kolb) suggests that adults learn as a result of 4 stages in processing their experience. (See column 1) and Fig 1 overleaf.

In addition, adults use one or more preferred learning styles (see the work of Honey and Mumford), which can be mapped onto the experiential learning cycle. (See column 2)

Column 1 Stage in the learning cycle	Column 2 Preferred learning style
Do/experience ↓ Observe and reflect ↓ Draw conclusions/theories ↓ Apply in new contexts ↓ Do/experience	Activist ↓ Reflector ↓ Theorist ↓ Pragmatist

Fig 1: The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle:

How adults learn from their experiences



Good quality experiential learning takes learners through the learning cycle and repeats this process until the learning is reinforced.

- It begins by offering a carefully selected and controlled experience
- During and immediately after the experience, participants are offered the opportunity to observe what is happening, reflecting upon the events and noticing the outcomes
- There follows a period of structured discussion and exploration of ideas until conclusions are drawn
- These new 'theories' are applied in a new context – a further experience which may be similar to what was experienced before but will never be exactly the same...and so the learning cycle repeats.

It is clear from these stages that different learners will be more at ease in some of the stages than others.

Activist learners are likely to enjoy the trial and error, experimental, hands-on approach which an initial experience may provide. They are likely to be 'first into action', trying things out and learning from their mistakes.

Reflectors, in contrast, are likely to hold back from such active involvement in the early stages. They will probably be more comfortable as observers and will notice the effects of other people's choices, behaviours and decisions before committing themselves to action. Reflectors will provide observations and data to be used during the first stage of the review process.

Theorists need to understand the principles behind what they are being asked to do. They may be reluctant participants in experiential learning activity unless they understand the reasoning behind it and are clear about what it sets out to achieve. Theorists will need time and information in order to build their own conclusions from the activity and the discussions which follow.

Pragmatists are hungry to learn things which have an immediate application. If a solution clearly works they may not need to understand why: they will grab the solution enthusiastically and make it their own.

They will be keen to jump quickly to the application phase of the learning cycle.



An introduction to experiential learning

Useful Background Links:

Kolb:

<http://www.learningfromexperience.com/>

Learning Styles

<http://web.archive.org/web/20001120004600/http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/Learning/instructionaldesign/styles.htm>

Experiential Learning Cycles

<http://reviewing.co.uk/research/learning.cycles.htm>

