

The Experiential Learning Cycle

The challenge every trainer faces is how to design training sessions in a way that maximizes the learning potential of each participant. The best training designs take into consideration the ways by which adults learn. The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) provides a tool or template for designing training designs that are closely aligned with the natural process of learning.

The Experiential Learning Cycle consists of five stages: experiencing, publishing, processing, generalizing, and applying.

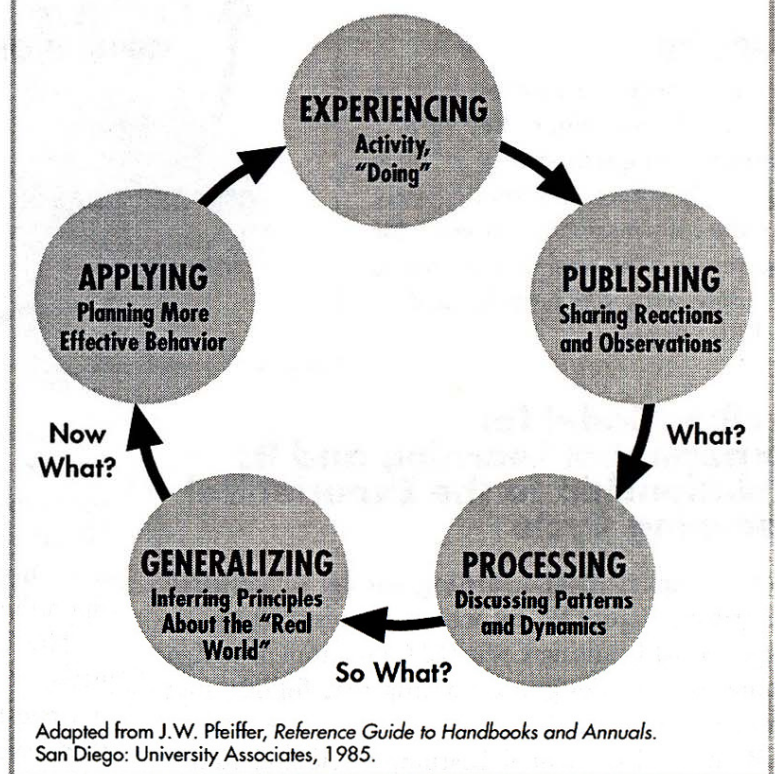
Experiencing

At this stage, the learner engages in an activity such as role-playing, guided imagery, making something, recalling a past experience, watching a demonstration, going on a field trip, problem-solving, filling out a training instrument, listening to a lecture, or watching a video. The goal at this stage is to bring to the surface and tap into the knowledge and experiences that learners bring to the learning situation.

Publishing

At this stage, learners make observations about the experience they have just shared. The question here is "what happened?" Learners may share their observations verbally or record their data on newsprints. Some may prefer creating lists or tallying. The goal at this step is to generate data for further examination.

Figure 4 The Experiential Learning Cycle



Processing

At this stage, learners examine the data in order to identify patterns and dynamics. The question here is "what happened in general?" The goal at this step is to begin sorting the data that has been generated in such a way that key learnings begin to emerge.

Generalizing

At this stage, learners develop real-world principles based on their experience. The question here is “So what?” or, in other words, “What does all this have to do with the real world?” The trainer may relate data to theory or research findings, or help participants develop a list of key learnings or concepts. The goal at this stage is to move from the specific training activity the learners just experienced, into real-world implications.

Applying

Learners begin to plan on how to effectively use what they’ve just learned. The question here is “Now what?” Learners may immediately use the information or set goals for future use. The goal at this step is to apply what has been learned to real-life situations.

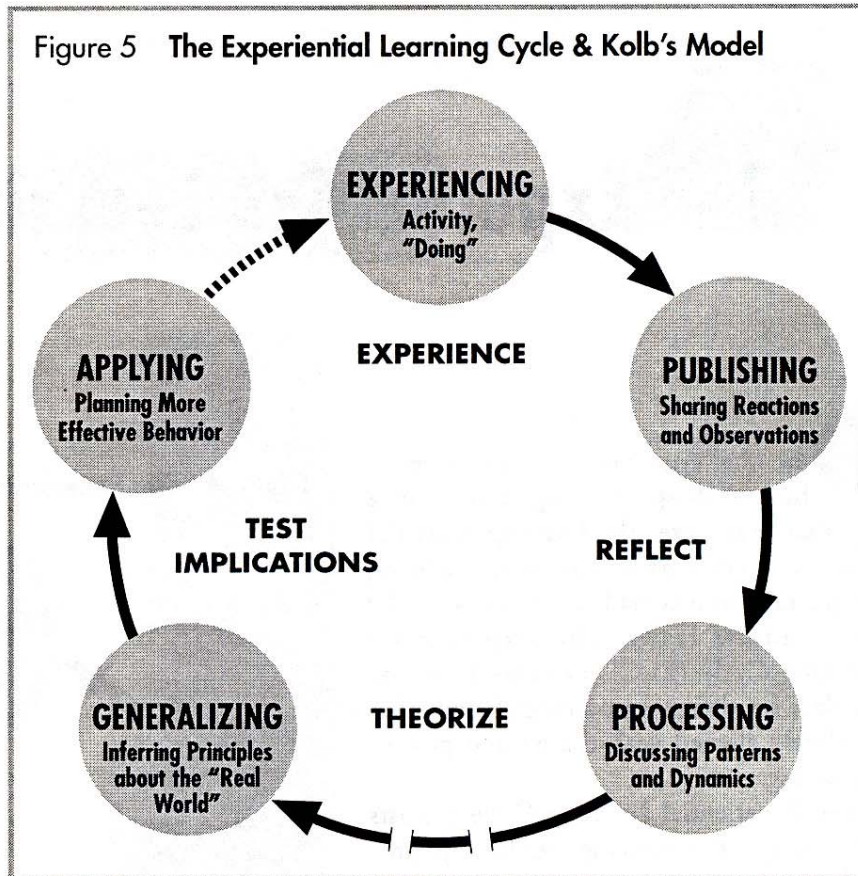
Kolb’s Model for Experiential Learning and Its Relationship to the Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model is a theory describing a process by which people learn. The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is a tool or design framework for designing training that follows that process. (See Figure 5.)

Both the Experiential Learning Cycle and Kolb’s model for experiential learning begin with an experience. One takes place in the classroom, while the other happens in everyday life.

Publishing and processing in the Experiential Learning Cycle are designed to help the learner generate and sort data, similar to the way in which adults reflect upon and assimilate their real-world experiences.

Figure 5 The Experiential Learning Cycle & Kolb’s Model



Processing and generalizing in the ELC helps learners make the connections between their classroom experience and existing theories or models. When people learn outside the classroom, they also draw implications and develop new concepts based upon their real-life experiences.

The ELC helps learners apply what they have newly learned and also helps them develop ways to use the information later, just as adults test what they have learned in new situations outside the classroom.

When used as a design framework, the Experiential Learning Cycle can structure your training design so that it closely parallels the ways in which people naturally learn. This will make learning easier and more comfortable for participants.