

Do, Review, Learn, Apply:

A Simple Guide to Experiential Learning



Bill Dennison & Roger Kirk

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*A simple guide to
experiential learning*

Bill Dennison
Roger Kirk

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Introduction

This book has four main purposes. First, and probably most practically, it adds to the stock of exercises. However, to aid the other purposes the context in which each of these new exercises was developed is considered. Second, for tutors of all levels of experience, it sets out to consider some of the benefits and problems associated with adapting the 'Do – Review – Learn – Apply' model. Third, it looks in particular at issues associated with selecting, writing and modifying materials; in parallel to this, it discusses the many day-to-day problems which must accompany experiential learning and suggests some solutions which have worked in the past. Fourth, it introduces some of the theoretical perspectives about experiential learning. A further dimension is added by outlining how the techniques of experiential learning have been extended to outdoor activities.

In Part 1 there are four chapters which discuss and analyse some of the theoretical and fundamental issues associated with experiential learning. The links between this and more transmissive styles of teaching and learning are discussed. Tutor and institutional attitudes towards experiential learning are assessed. The idea of the learning community, with the tutor as a fellow-learner, is debated. The notion of the learning cycle is explored, and the ways in which learners behave, relative to their needs and motivations, are reviewed. This section of the book finishes with a study of the limits of experiential learning, and the importance of promoting it through good example.

In Part 2, the practical issues involved in the planning of an experiential programme are considered in some detail. A number of potential problems that arise in practice are identified and methods used – if not to overcome, then certainly to ameliorate, them – are outlined. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 look at the selection, use and production of materials. In Chapter 7, the writing of a new exercise (which developed into three separate activities) is analysed from the time when the tutor perceived a need for some new material. An attempt has been made to provide a complete record of its inception, development and trialling. By contrast, Chapter 8 considers the advantages and disadvantages of using

a 'ready made' exercise. Chapter 9 develops the outdoor element, while Chapter 10 looks at triumphs and disasters and suggests means of encouraging the former and avoiding the latter. This part of the book concludes by considering the vexed issue, so often raised by critics of experiential learning, that the experiences it offers are not real. Perhaps the best way to portray that reality is through the areas of proven worth where experiential learning has established itself in recent years, and these are discussed. Part 3 introduces 15 exercises previously unpublished in their original form.

During the long gestation period of Roger Kirk's earlier *Learning in Action* (Blackwell, 1987), and particularly when the 30 or so activities it described were being trialled and re-written, we became increasingly aware of the many teachers and lecturers who were using the experiential learning methods described. Often, however, they found themselves short of appropriate material. We also became aware of an even larger group of staff who were anxious to extend their range of teaching styles to include the *Do – Review – Learn – Apply* pattern of experiential work which the book tried to encourage. Less obviously, but nevertheless in evidence, were staff who had been pushed (often by falling rolls) into areas of the curriculum where they thought they ought to be using experiential learning methods.

Perhaps staff in all three groups had tried some form of experiential learning with their classes and it had proved unsuccessful. Sometimes, it seemed to us, these tutors were unsure about what would be involved if they pursued an experiential approach. Often they thought it was nothing more than 'learning by doing' – an activity with which their students had always been involved and in which they had no part. They did not appreciate, because no-one had explained to them, the subtle but highly significant difference between learning *by* doing and learning *through* doing (FEU, 1977). More than anything, though, they appeared to be discouraged by the lack of materials and ideas which they thought suitable for use with their classes.

What was most encouraging about the reaction from teachers and lecturers to *Learning in Action* was the positive opinions from staff who either had never tried experiential learning or had previously used such an approach but abandoned it. They reported that they were able to take many of the exercises to complement their existing teaching approaches. They found they could help students construct learning cycles, while learning much for (and about) themselves. The collection of exercises gave them confidence to introduce new approaches.

As was to be expected, problems were mentioned. Some exercises did not 'work' with certain groups, although all have been used successfully. Also it appears that most exercises have proved capable of use in ways the original designers had not conceived, either through tutor or student modification. In our view this is excellent, because it

establishes the potential flexibility of the exercises and demonstrates adaptability in groups. An element of unpredictability can, however, create difficulties particularly for a tutor struggling for confidence, and attention is required to anticipate the unpredictable and to react to it.

The book demonstrates three fundamentals. First, experiential learning can be both successful and useful in certain areas of school and college work. Second, it is not an alternative to more traditional didactic styles of teaching and learning. Each has its place; the skill of the tutor is to decide which is the more suitable and use either didactic or experiential techniques appropriately. Third, the number of tutors confident to use either approach is growing. It is to meet their needs, and maintain this expansion, that this book has been written.

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PART 1

Background

1 Learning experiences

The learning cycle

Most of what we learn comes from doing. From infancy onwards we take actions and we learn. Throughout our lives, learning is taking place all the time as a result of our experiences. So many examples are available to illustrate these processes that to describe even one or two might seem banal, or trivial. Experiential learning (as it will be called throughout this book) is ubiquitous. It goes on continuously even in formal education establishments – sometimes to the consternation of teachers and lecturers.

Essentially, this book concentrates upon situations in which tutors (the word will be used in a generic sense) attempt to organise the experiential learning of their students (taking that word generically also). They might choose to do this for two reasons. First, to improve or enhance this learning in some way. Second, to increase the rate at which learning occurs. To achieve these ends a tutor makes certain (often very simple) arrangements, and provides some materials and ideas. With these aids some semblance of structure can be achieved, to improve and accelerate the learning experience.

For the purposes of this book, therefore, most experiential learning starts with tutors organising an experience for their students: the opportunity of *Doing* something. Sometimes, with more mature groups, other (external) experiences of the students are used and the tutor does not plan a common experience. In both cases, though, what students did is discussed, perhaps as part of the whole group of participants or in conversation with a tutor. Data may have been collected about the experience, or an outsider might provide observations about the ways in which the group or individuals behaved during the experience. More generally after *Doing* there follows a *Review* stage. The first two steps of a learning cycle have, therefore, been constructed.

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So far tutors have some control over the cycle. They can provide a clear framework for *Doing*. They can help motivate students to take part by persuasion and explanation, and while they cannot dictate what is actually done by individual students, they can assist in structuring particular aspects of the experience. Similarly, at the *Review* stage tutors can initiate discussion, involve students reluctant to speak, offer insights about special features of the experience and give guidance to those students who appear unable (or unwilling) to review their experiences.

In the final two stages of the cycle the tutor's role is more tangential. Having experienced, and then reviewed the experience, the intention is (of course) that the students learn and are then in a position to apply what they have learned. The stages of *Learn* and *Apply* thus complete the learning cycle shown in Figure 1.1.

The several arrows emerging from the *Apply* stage are meant to imply the numerous situations in which the skills and knowledge learned might be utilised, as well as the link sought between one learning cycle and the next. However, in the two later stages the tutor's role is changed dramatically. No matter how well organised the experience and the *Review* steps, the processes of learning and application are internal to the individual student, and well beyond the control of a tutor. While a group experience and *Review* have been offered, every student will take individual and, probably, idiosyncratic perceptions from these experiences. There are no certainties during these stages.

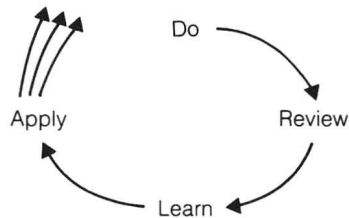


Figure 1.1 Learning cycle devised by the Development Training Advisors Group (Kirk, 1987).

Perhaps the one thing we know with certainty about human learning is that it involves extremely complex processes, few of which we have anything approaching total understanding. We are aware that learning occurs as a result of doing mainly because we can observe changes in behaviour and attitudes, and identify greater knowledge (in ourselves and others) following experience. However, even the most gifted tutor can only claim limited credit for what students learn, or how much or how quickly. The main task of a tutor is to guide each student around an individual cycle. When deliberate efforts are made by tutors to construct such cycles – in the classroom or outside – this will be termed experiential learning.

Conventional teaching

Over the years, learning by doing, as already defined, has attracted other names besides experiential learning. 'Active learning' and 'action learning' are often used, for obvious reasons. Similarly, descriptions like 'humanistic' education or 'holistic' education are not unknown, because of the focus on the individual learner rather than the material to be learned, and the thrust towards the 'wholeness' of the learning experience.

Many other learning cycles have been proposed. Their relationships to that suggested here will be discussed in the next chapter. All, however, involve the organisation of a learning experience as the key element in a learning cycle. As such the real contrast is not between one cycle and another; the significant difference lies between the strategy of experiential learning and the more conventional arrangements for teaching and learning. For it is these arrangements which tend to dominate most school and college courses.

Although the casual visitor to a school or college would be able to pick out many teaching styles – groupwork, tutor's talking, discussions, practical activities and so on – there can be no doubt that for most of the time the prevailing orthodoxy is didacticism. The tutor possesses certain knowledge or particular skills and the main business tends to concentrate upon the transmission of these to students. It is not suggested that all these activities should be replaced by tutors organising experiential learning. Both forms of learning have their place. This book tries to consider the advantages of managing experiential learning in schools and colleges and some of the practical difficulties involved.

If it is assumed that the teacher teaches and the student learns, a highly instrumental view of education follows. In this the focus quite understandably falls upon the material to be transmitted or the skills to be acquired, and all the arrangements necessary to support the processes of transfer. As a result the needs of the individual student as learner receive much less attention. At worst a pedagogy emerges which tries to provide answers when the potential learners have not yet asked the questions.

There are several reasons which account for the predominance of didacticism. It can be made to fit appropriately into the institutional framework of most schools and colleges. They must be seen to be accountable for what they try to teach their students. It is easier to designate objectives, design teaching programmes and examine students when the knowledge to be transmitted is known than it is to discuss learning cycles over which the tutor has only limited control. Most significantly, learning cycles involve individuals while the tutor has responsibility for many students and the institution for every student.

From an institutional perspective a transmissive mode appeals

because of its potential for control and accountability and its economy in the use of time. A syllabus can be produced and progress through it checked. It is also attractive on account of the comparative ease with which a traditional timetable and room arrangements can be accommodated. Indeed, the latter have been constructed on the assumption that this mode will prevail. Similar thinking relates to examination procedures. Examining which knowledge and skills have been successfully transferred to groups of students is much easier than making judgements about the learning cycles of every individual student.

Tutor attitudes

The attitudes of tutors towards didacticism should not be discounted lightly. The tradition in which many have been educated themselves is important. In the main they have done well from a transmissive mode. They were taught in this way for much of their time at school and college, and went on to pass conventional examinations. Such a mode must have held some attractions or they would not have become tutors. Their long formal training has made them knowledgeable, and there are a number of reasons why they should wish to transmit this knowledge in a didactic manner.

First, as likely or not, their knowledge will be subject-based. Even when working on a cross-curricular topic they rely to a large extent on subject expertise. In the main this is the basis for their authority. For them to appear uninformed or unable to predict what might, or ought to happen, next could be perceived as a dereliction of professional duties. According to this view, tutors ought to be able to deal with every conceivable situation as it arises. The students expect that, as do parents, governors, LEA officers and employers.

Second, there is a perception that authority is related to prestige. According to this view, when a didactic approach prevails a tutor has status well above that of the students. If that approach is eschewed it follows that an authority vacuum will result. Thinking like this demonstrates a mistaken view of authority. It assumes that a tutor must *impose* authority, rather than enabling it to emerge through interest in the learning. Similarly, some tutors do not want to vacate their position as the centre of attraction, which happens when attention switches from the transmission of material to the experiential learning needs of each student.

Third, there are issues related to the attitudes, beliefs and feelings of the students. Once students leave primary school they are increasingly exposed to didactic teaching. Most accept this situation (if they reflect upon it) for a combination of reasons – the need to pass examinations, the nature of the material to be learned, the requirements of the timetable, rooms etc. For some, at least, it induces a spirit of security

which tutors might wish to reinforce. Students can remain passive in a transmissive lesson. They do not have to participate in an active sense, and perhaps have what they do observed and described as part of some discussion. What they have or have not learned from the lesson will be determined some time afterwards in a test or examination.

Assumptions about the passiveness of student learning also fuel the fourth attraction of didacticism – tutor security. The combination of knowledge, status and the security needs of students make tutors feel in charge, in that they appear to control events in the classroom. Often this is true. Students behave as intended. The material of the lesson is transmitted. It is expected that the students will leave with good notes, and will be satisfied and secure because these ought to help them complete the course and pass the examination. Simultaneously, the tutor is also secure because he or she has organised activities as planned. Of course this does not always occur but when it does not, the students can be blamed for being inattentive or unruly or badly motivated towards the material; the emphasis is not on them as potential learners, but on the material to be transferred.

Shared experiences

A final attraction of more transmissive modes of teaching is that, by comparison, experiential learning is bound to seem a messy business. Many tutors, and also headteachers and college principals, find this disturbing. Organising a lesson where the main purpose is to convey certain knowledge; or arranging a laboratory class, where students are supposed to learn a particular technique or skill, present few problems. In these situations the starting point is imposed, the means easily defined and reasonably predictable, while the end point (completion of that part of the syllabus) is clear. Sometimes, but not always, overall objectives can be sub-divided into sub-objectives for each session and student progress assessed. While there will be some individualism in this assessment, and in the way the lecturer works with the class, the essential thrust is group-based. The intention is for all students to cover the same material at roughly the same pace; if this is not achieved, there are organisational difficulties.

Organising experiential learning offers new, and greater, challenges. At the nub is student-centredness and the notion of the individual student as a potential learner. Whatever learning is planned, each student comes with a background of previous experience. All have, at the start of a session, a range of needs and requirements. An important task of the tutor is to ensure that students think these may be satisfied.

Irrespective of the success of this process all have expectations (some of which may be negative) of what they might obtain from a

session. Each participant has certain characteristics, affected by intellectual capacity and personality traits, which will influence the contribution made and the traditional learning situation; the difference being that in experiential learning they are part of the components with which the tutor begins to develop objectives, working patterns and possible outcomes.

The numerous differences within any group of students both emphasise the possible benefits of experiential learning and highlight the attributes required of tutors. Traditional teaching is most successful when students in a group are of about the same ability, have similar motivational and commitment patterns, start from equivalent knowledge or skill bases, and intend to reach the same end point. The less such characteristics pertain, the more the possible advantages of experiential learning. If properly organised, differences contribute to the learning experience.

All students can be offered a similar experience – for example, one which focuses on conveying information within groups. Yet this experience can only add a fraction to the previous experiences which each student brings to bear on this planned learning situation. However, many further learning opportunities are opened up through discussing and analysing the experience organised by the tutor; comparing it with previous experiences and the experiences of other group members, and so on. In this particular context (conveying information) the group could be invited to solve a problem, with each member possessing different information about it. Almost certainly, each student will have a different learning cycle as a result of this shared experience. In the first place, they hold different pieces of information; further, commitment, ability and previous experiences will all influence what each student gains from this shared experience.

With a shared group experience, such as that described above, several different elements can be engineered. One student can chair any discussion, others can negotiate specific roles, while some may watch and perform observational tasks. The tutor must accept a substantial organisational responsibility (perhaps by ensuring that all necessary duties are performed by the students themselves) and cannot abrogate responsibility for clarifying objectives, designing procedures, assessing what has been achieved and encouraging student involvement.

Sometimes a student will not wish to participate in a shared experience. Perhaps he or she sees little relevance in what is proposed, has a different priority of needs to other group members, or is embarrassed. A skilled and sensitive tutor can often take such perceptions and integrate them with the experiences of all group members – making this a learning opportunity for both the individual and the group.

The learning community

The main job of the tutor is to help organise the learning. This is quite different from teaching. Tutors cannot *make* students learn, whether through arranging a learning cycle or using a more traditional teaching style. All that can be attempted in experiential learning is to provide an opportunity, and circumstances, which are congruent with student requirements. The tutor organises and by explanation, example or persuasion, motivates the student towards a learning cycle. Sometimes this motivation is unnecessary. On other occasions it will be unsuccessful.

In practice, the range of responses to a formalised experiential learning situation will range from keen acceptance to grudging inclusion. Such attitudes, and any variations in them that accrue over time, can be used to illuminate and elucidate learning about the common experience. The tutor provides a framework by assisting students to extend their experiences, drawing out perceptions about these experiences, and introducing (where appropriate) theoretical perspectives about the learning, the experience or the topic. Although it may sound too grand, what tutors are trying to attain with their students is some form of learning community.

At first there appears to be a paradox between promoting a learning community through experiential learning and the avowed student-centredness of experiential learning. However, concentration on the needs of individual students does not preclude the possibility that they have much to learn from one another during the analysis, discussion and observation which are essential aspects of shared learning experiences. Indeed, when effectively organised, these activities provide the biggest spur to learning, especially for those students (probably the majority) who listen more attentively to their peers than to their tutors. In fact, the real paradox occurs in transmissive modes of teaching. A main advantage (when transmissive teaching is successful) is its efficiency, which is best achieved through a class working with one tutor at the same pace through identical material. Yet within this type of management students work alone. Any gains from co-operative working occur by chance. Indeed, individual students are often competing against one another in striving to achieve standards set by external examining boards.

The learning community concept is not complete, however, unless the tutor belongs to the community. For many tutors the idea that experiential learning can offer as much to them as to their students requires further explanation. Experiential learning affects both parties. The needs of tutors, as well as their previous experiences, attitudes and knowledge are very different from those of their students, but they stand