KOLB

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

EXPERIENCE AS THE SOURCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Foreword

This is a very special and important book. I say that at the outset because the book is written with such grace and gentleness, with such clarity and directness, that you will know that David Kolb has written an excellent treatise on learning theory, certainly for educators and quite possibly for Educated Persons, whatever that means. But as you read on—as *I* read on, I had to catch my breath every once in a while, wondering if the velocity of my excitement would ever cease.

Kolb has written a wonderful book, one I've been waiting for—without quite realizing it—for a long time. It's a book (I'm only guessing here) that he took a very, *very* long time to write, since it is crafted so carefully and is so deeply nuanced that you are certain that it's been filtered and re-set and re-drafted many times, like a precious stone, turned and polished into a lapidary's gem.

Why this excitement? Well, the hyper-ventilation I alluded to above is based on Kolb's achievement in providing the missing link between theory and practice, between the abstract generalization and the concrete instance, between the affective and cognitive domains. By this BIG achievement he demonstrates conclusively—and is the first to do so—that learning is a social process based on carefully cultivated experience which challenges every precept and concept of what nowadays passes for "teaching." And with this major achievement he knowingly shifts the ecology of learning away from the exclusivity of the classroom (and its companion, the Lecture) to the workplace, the family, the carpool, the community, or wherever we gather to work or play or love.

The significance for educators is profound because, among other things, Kolb leads us (again, so gently) away from the traditional concerns of credit hours and calendar time toward competence, working knowledge, and information truly pertinent to jobs, families, and communities.

The book is no "piece of cake." Despite its graceful aesthetic and illuminating diagrams, from mandalas to tight-lipped 2 × 2 tables that management professors love to show on the overhead screen, the author takes us on a fascinating but densely written journey in and around some of the most seminal thinkers who laid the foundations of "experience-based learning"—great minds such as Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. Nor does he neglect other auxiliary players like Maslow, Rogers, and Erikson. Aside from creating a framework that removes whatever residual guilt those of us have felt or feel when using experience-based learning within the formal classroom boundaries, Kolb provides a thick texture of understanding by building his framework on the wonderful armatures of that trinity: Dewey, Lewin and Piaget.

As I say, this is an important book, one the field has been waiting for, worth every ounce of energy it takes to read. But, because of its revolutionary undertones, read it at your own risk. For each reader must take the risk of creating a life of his or her own. When you think about it, you are the thread that holds the events of your life together. That's what Kolb gets us to understand.

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Preface

It has been seventeen years since I first began exploring the implications of experiential learning theory and experimenting with techniques of learning from experience. This involvement with experiential learning has been one of the most stimulating and rewarding associations of my adult life. The rewards of this long involvement have been multifaceted, ranging from the discovery of an intellectual perspective on human learning and development that is at once pragmatic and humanistic, to techniques of experience-based education that have added vitality to my teaching and to a personally enriching network of colleagues interested in experiential learning—researchers, educators, and practitioners.

My purpose in writing this book is to share these rewards through a systematic statement of the theory of experiential learning and its applications to education, work, and adult development. Drawing from the intellectual origins of experiential learning in the works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, this book describes the process of experiential learning and proposes a model of the underlying structure of the learning process based on research in psychology, philosophy, and physiology. This structural model leads to a typology of individual learning styles and corresponding structures of knowledge in the different academic disciplines, professions, and careers. The developmental focus of the book is based on the thesis, first articulated by the great Russian cognitive theorist L.S. Vygotsky, that learning from experience is the process whereby human development occurs. This developmental perspective forms the basis for applications of experiential learning to education, work, and adult development.

Part I "Experience and Learning" begins in Chapter One with a review of the history of experiential learning as it emerged in the works of Dewey, Lewin,

and Piaget and an analysis of the contemporary applications of experiential learning theory in education, organization development, management development, and adult development. Chapter Two compares the learning models of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget and identifies the common themes that characterize the experiential learning process.

Part II "The Structure of Learning and Knowledge" begins in Chapter Three with a structured model of the learning process depicting two basic dimensions—a prehension or "grasping" dimension and a transformation dimension. Philosophical, physiological, and psychological evidence for this model are reviewed. Chapter Four focuses on individuality in learning with the development of a typology of learning styles based on the structural model of learning presented in Chapter Three. Assessment of individual learning styles, using the Learning Style Inventory is described. Data are presented relating individual learning styles to personality type, educational specialization, professional career, current job, and adaptive competencies. Chapter Five presents a typology of social knowledge structures—formism, contextualism, mechanism, and organicism—and relates these knowledge structures to academic fields of study and career paths.

Part III "Learning and Development" begins in Chapter Six with a statement of the experiential learning theory of development wherein adult development is portrayed in three stages—acquisition, specialization, and integration. The chapter describes how conscious experience changes through these developmental stages via higher levels of learning. Chapter Seven documents specialization as the major developmental process in higher education, describing the consequences of matches and mismatches between student learning styles and the knowledge structures of different fields of study. Relationships between professional education and later career adaptation are also examined. This section called "managing the learning process" describes applications of experiential learning theory to teaching and administration. Chapter Eight describes the challenges of integrative development in adulthood by examining the life structures of integrated and adaptively flexible individuals as measured by the Adaptive Style Inventory. Integrity is posed as the pinnacle of development, conceived as the highest form of learning.

I want to acknowledge those colleagues who have been instrumental in the creation of this work. First are those close co-workers who have struggled with me on innumerable theoretical and methodological issues—Ronald Fry, Mark Plovnick, Donald Wolfe, Marcia Mentkowski, and Sister Austin Doherty at Alverno College, and our CWRU research team, especially Ronald Sims, Walter Griggs, Jan Gypen, and the late Glen Gish. I also wish to thank my colleagues at the Council for Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL), notably Morris Keeton and Arthur Chickering, for encouraging me in the application of experiential learning theory to higher education and adult learning. I have enjoyed a similar creative collaboration with Richard Baker in the applications of experiential learning theory to management, whereas Bernice McCarthy has been a major collaborator in the world of elementary and

secondary education. I am particularly grateful to Suresh Srivastva, Richard Boyatzis, and Richard Boland for their careful review and helpful feedback on an earlier draft of the manuscript. I am indebted to the Spencer Foundation and the National Institute of Education for their support of some of the research reported in this work. Finally I wish to acknowledge the able and dedicated assistance of Marian Hogue in the preparation of the manuscript. The quality of this book has been enhanced by all these contributions.

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Cleveland, Ohio

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The Foundations of Contemporary Approaches to Experiential Learning

The modern discovery of inner experience, of a realm of purely personal events that are always at the individual's command and that are his exclusively as well as inexpensively for refuge, consolidation and thrill, is also a great and liberating discovery. It implies a new worth and sense of dignity in human individuality, a sense that an individual is not merely a property of nature, set in place according to a scheme independent of him . . . but that he adds something, that he makes a contribution. It is the counterpart of what distinguishes modern science, experimental hypothetical, a logic of discovery having therefore opportunity for individual temperament, ingenuity, invention. It is the counterpart of modern politics, art, religion and industry where individuality is given room and movement, in contrast to the ancient scheme of experience, which held individuals tightly within a given order subordinate to its structure and patterns.

John Dewey, Experience and Nature

Human beings are unique among all living organisms in that their primary adaptive specialization lies not in some particular physical form or skill or fits in an ecological niche, but rather in identification with the process of adaptation itself—in the process of learning. We are thus the learning species, and our survival depends on our ability to adapt not only in the reactive sense of fitting into the physical and social worlds, but in the proactive sense of creating and shaping those worlds.

Our species long ago left the harmony of a nonreflective union with the "natural" order to embark on an adaptive journey of its own choosing. With this choosing has come responsibility for a world that is increasingly of our own

creation—a world paved in concrete, girded in steel, wrapped in plastic, and positively awash in symbolic communications. From those first few shards of clay recording inventories of ancient commerce has sprung a symbol store that is exploding at exponential rates, and that has been growing thus for hundreds of years. On paper, through wires and glass, on cables into our homes—even the invisible air around us is filled with songs and stories, news and commerce interlaced on precisely encoded radio waves and microwaves.

The risks and rewards of mankind's fateful choice have become increasingly apparent to us all as our transforming and creative capacities shower us with the bounty of technology and haunt us with the nightmare of a world that ends with the final countdown, ". . . three, two, one, *zero*." This is civilization on the high wire, where one misstep can send us cascading into oblivion. We cannot go back, for the processes we have initiated now have their own momentum. Machines have begun talking to machines, and we grow accustomed to obeying their conclusions. We cannot step off—"drop out"—for the safety net of the natural order has been torn and weakened by our aggressive creativity. We can only go forward on this path—nature's "human" experiment in survival.

We have cast our lot with learning, and learning will pull us through. But this learning process must be reimbued with the texture and feeling of human experiences shared and interpreted through dialogue with one another. In the overeager embrace of the rational, scientific, and technological, our concept of the learning process itself was distorted first by rationalism and later by behaviorism. We lost touch with our own experience as the source of personal learning and development and, in the process, lost that experiential centeredness necessary to counterbalance the loss of "scientific" centeredness that has been progressively slipping away since Copernicus.

That learning is an increasing preoccupation for everyone is not surprising. The emerging "global village," where events in places we have barely heard of quickly disrupt our daily lives, the dizzying rate of change, and the exponential growth of knowledge all generate nearly overwhelming needs to learn just to survive. Indeed, it might well be said that learning is an increasing *occupation* for us all; for in every aspect of our life and work, to stay abreast of events and to keep our skills up to the "state of the art" requires more and more of our time and energy. For individuals and organizations alike, learning to adapt to new "rules of the game" is becoming as critical as performing well under the old rules. In moving toward what some are optimistically heralding as "the future learning society," some monumental problems and challenges are before us. According to some observers, we are on the brink of a revolution in the educational system—sparked by wrenching economic and demographic forces and fueled by rapid social and technological changes that render a "front-loaded" educational strategy obsolete. New challenges for social justice and equal opportunity are arising, based on Supreme Court decisions affirming the individual's right of access to education and work based on proven ability to perform; these decisions challenge the validity of traditional diplomas and tests

as measures of that ability. Organizations need new ways to renew and revitalize themselves and to forestall obsolescence for the organization and the people in it. But perhaps most of all, the future learning society represents a personal challenge for millions of adults who find learning is no longer "for kids" but a central lifelong task essential for personal development and career success.

Some specifics help to underscore dimensions of this personal challenge:

- ☐ Between 80 and 90 percent of the adult population will carry out at least one learning project this year, and the typical adult will spend 500 hours during the year learning new things (Tough, 1977).
- ☐ Department of Labor statistics estimate that the average American will change jobs seven times and careers three times during his or her lifetime. A 1978 study estimated that 40 million Americans are in a state of job or career transition, and over half these people plan additional education (Arbeiter et al., 1978).
- ☐ A recent study by the American College Testing Program (1982) shows that credit given in colleges and universities for prior learning experience has grown steadily from 1973–74 to 1980–82. In 1980–82, 1¼ million quarter credit hours were awarded for prior learning experience. That learning is a lifelong process is increasingly being recognized by the traditional credit/degree structure of higher education.

People do learn from their experience, and the results of that learning can be reliably assessed and certified for college credit. At the same time, programs of sponsored experiential learning are on the increase in higher education. Internships, field placements, work/study assignments, structured exercises and role plays, gaming simulations, and other forms of experience-based education are playing a larger role in the curricula of undergraduate and professional programs. For many so-called nontraditional students—minorities, the poor, and mature adults—experiential learning has become the method of choice for learning and personal development. Experience-based education has become widely accepted as a method of instruction in colleges and universities across the nation.

Yet in spite of its increasingly widespread use and acceptance, experiential learning has its critics and skeptics. Some see it as gimmicky and faddish, more concerned with technique and process than content and substance. It often appears too thoroughly pragmatic for the academic mind, dangerously associated with the disturbing antiintellectual and vocationalist trends in American society. This book is in one sense addressed to the concerns of these critics and skeptics, for without guiding theory and principles, experiential learning can well become another educational fad—just new techniques for the educator's bag of tricks. Experiential learning theory offers something more substantial and enduring. It offers the foundation for an approach to education and learning as a lifelong process that is soundly based in intellectual traditions of social psychology, philosophy, and cognitive psy-

chology. The experiential learning model pursues a framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development (Figure 1.1). It offers a system of competencies for describing job demands and corresponding educational objectives and emphasizes the critical linkages that can be developed between the classroom and the "real world" with experiential learning methods. It pictures the workplace as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities. And it stresses the role of formal education in lifelong learning and the development of individuals to their full potential as citizens, family members, and human beings.

In this chapter, we will examine the major traditions of experiential learning, exploring the dimensions of current practice and their intellectual origins. By understanding and articulating the themes of these traditions, we will be far more capable of shaping and guiding the development of the exciting new educational programs based on experiential learning. As Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of experiential learning, said in his most famous remark, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE LEGACY OF JOHN DEWEY

In the field of higher education, there is a growing group of educators—faculty, administrators, and interested outsiders—who see experiential education as a way to revitalize the university curriculum and to cope with many of the changes facing higher education today. Although this movement is attributed to the educational philosophy of John Dewey, its source is in reality a diverse group spanning several generations. At one recent conference of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE), a speaker remarked that

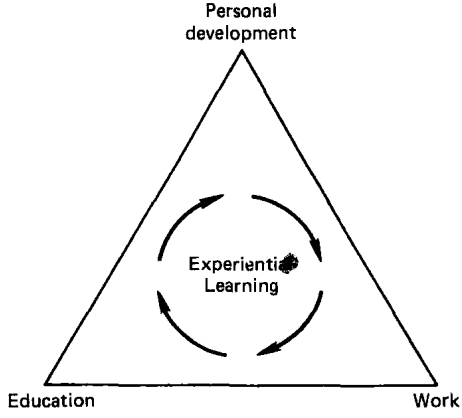

Figure 1.1 Experiential Learning as the Process that Links Education, Work, and Personal Development

there were three identifiable generations in the room: the older generation of Deweyite progressive educators, the now middle-aged children of the 1960s' Peace Corps and civil-rights movement, and Vietnam political activists of the 1970s. Yet it is the work of Dewey, without doubt the most influential educational theorist of the twentieth century, that best articulates the guiding principles for programs of experiential learning in higher education. In 1938, Dewey wrote *Experience and Education* in an attempt to bring some understanding to the growing conflict between "traditional" education and his "progressive" approach. In it he outlined the directions for change implied in his approach:

> *If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of the new education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles. . . . To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world. . . .*
>
> *I take it that the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education. [Dewey, 1938, pp. 19, 20]*

In the last 40 years, many of Dewey's ideas have found their way into "traditional" educational programs, but the challenges his approaches were developed to meet, those of coping with change and lifelong learning, have increased even more dramatically. It is to meeting these challenges that experiential educators in higher education have addressed themselves—not in the polarized spirit of what Arthur Chickering (1977) calls "either/orneriness," but in a spirit of cooperative innovation that integrates the best of the traditional and the experiential. The tools for this work involve many traditional methods that are as old as, or in some cases older than, the formal education system itself. These methods include apprenticeships, internships, work/study programs, cooperative education, studio arts, laboratory studies, and field projects. In all these methods, learning is experiential, in the sense that:

> *. . . the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. . . . It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it. [Keeton and Tate, 1978, p.2]*

In higher education today, these "traditional" experiential learning methods are receiving renewed interest and attention, owing in large measure to the changing educational environment in this country. As universities have moved through open-enrollment programs and so on, to expand educational

opportunities for the poor and minorities, there has been a corresponding need for educational methods that can translate the abstract ideas of academia into the concrete practical realities of these people's lives. Many of these new students have not been rigorously socialized into the classroom/textbook way of learning but have developed their own distinctive approach to learning, sometimes characterized as "survival skills" or "street wisdom." For these, the field placement or work/study program is an empowering experience that allows them to capitalize on their practical strengths while testing the application of ideas discussed in the classroom.

Similarly, as the population in general grows older and the frequency of adult career change continues to increase, the "action" in higher education will be centered around adult learners who demand that the relevance and application of ideas be demonstrated and tested against their own accumulated experience and wisdom. Many now approach education and midlife with a sense of fear ("I've forgotten how to study") and resentment based on unpleasant memories of their childhood schooling. As Rita Weathersby has pointed out, "adults' learning interests are embedded in their personal histories, in their visions of who they are in the world and in what they can do and want to do" (1978, p. 19). For these adults, learning methods that combine work and study, theory and practice provide a more familiar and therefore more productive arena for learning.

Finally, there is a marked trend toward vocationalism in higher education, spurred on by a group of often angry and hostile critics—students who feel cheated because the career expectations created in college have not been met, and employers who feel that the graduates they recruit into their organizations are woefully unprepared. Something has clearly gone awry in the supposed link between education and work, resulting in strong demands that higher education "shape up" and make itself relevant. There are in my view dangerous currents of antiintellectualism in this movement, based on reactionary and counterproductive views of learning and development; but a real problem has been identified here. Experiential learning offers some avenues for solving it constructively.

For another group of educators, experiential learning is not a set of educational methods; it is a statement of fact: People *do learn* from their experiences. The emphasis of this group is on assessment of prior experience-based learning in order to grant academic credit for degree programs or certification for licensing in trades and professions. The granting of credit for prior experience is viewed by some as a movement of great promise:

> *The great significance of systematic recognition of prior learning is the linkage it provides between formal education and adult life; that is, a mechanism for integrating education and work, for recognizing the validity of all learning that is relevant to a college degree and for actively fostering recurrent education. [Willingham et al., 1977, p. 60]*