PAPER
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Experiential learning

Dick, Bob (2002) The design of experiential learning activities. Unpublished paper (mimeo).

A handout on experiential learning, itself designed as a miniature experiential learning activity.

This brief handout introduces some of the principles of experiential learning design. It first addresses the different learning styles which different people bring to a learning experience. It then discusses the overall shape of a typical experiential learning activity.

Introduction

Imagine that you have attended a weekend workshop, let's say on team-building. Perhaps it is one of the regular professional development days organised by the Queensland Branch of the Australian Institute of Training and Development (AITD), usually held at Bardon Professional Development Centre.

To cater for expected large numbers, there are four different streams on offer, each with a different coordinator. So that you have some choice in which stream you attend, each coordinator has been asked to describe the approach she intends to take. You are then asked to indicate your preferences. The AITD will then allocate you to as preferred a stream as it can, while still balancing numbers across the four streams.

The introductions by the four coordinators are given below. Read them carefully; then decide which you would choose, for whatever reason. Write "1" next to your most preferred option, "2" next to your second most preferred, "3" next to your third preference, and "4" next to your least preferred option.

Assume that all coordinators are known to be competent. In all respects, except the actual learning approach, the four options are equivalent...

a ☐ **Learning by doing...**

"I propose that we get together, and try to develop ourselves into an effective team. As we do this, we can study what things help us to develop good team work, and which things get in the way.

"In other words, we will begin to *do* team building; and as we do, we will learn about it."

b ☐ **Pooling experience...**

"Each of us already has a lifetime of experience in working in groups, and developing good working relationships with other people. At some level of our being, we already know what helps and what doesn't. We will pool this collective experience, and then work out from it what are the principles of team building.

"In other words, we will deduce what good team building is from our collective experience, past and present."

c ☐ **Applying the principles...**

"There is already an enormous amount on team building, written by people with extensive experience. I've summarised the key principles from the recognised authorities. We will draw upon these principles to devise step-by-step approaches to team building which suit our various situations.

"In other words, I propose that we learn from the literature and the authorities, but that we plan our own applications of the accepted principles."

d ☐ **Using a package in practice...**

"There are many detailed and effective team-building packages. I have brought multiple copies of one of the best of them. We will use this package to develop ourselves into a team, doing whatever fine-tuning is needed for it to work.

"In other words, we will try out a package, and modify it until it suits us and our situation."

On the next page you will find brief descriptions of the four approaches, and the learning style they imply. Before turning the page, what conclusions do *you* draw about the design of learning activities from your answers?

a   **Learning by doing**. Here the learner prefers to learn actively, through hands-on experience. The learning occurs at the same time as the doing. It is almost as if, out of awareness, the learner reviews what she has done, and stores the knowledge or skills somewhere in her experience.
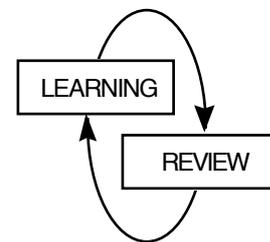
b   **Pooling experience**. Here the learner prefers to reflect upon past and present experience, both from herself and others. From the mass of information which she is able to compile, she can then work out the principles. On later occasions she can then use the principles and theories which she has devised.
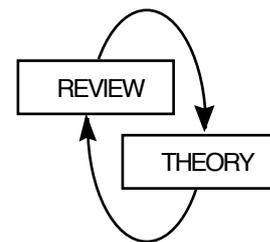
c   **Applying the principles**. Here the learner prefers first to understand the theory, for example by reading or by learning from recognised experts. She then wants to be able to use the theory to plan what can be done in the future.
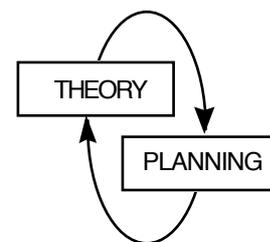
d   **Applying the principles in practice**. Here the learner prefers to have a detailed and step-by-step "package" which can be followed. She can then "fine-tune" the package in the light of her experience with it, so that it suits her, and her situation, and the other people who will use it.
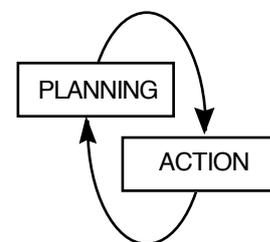
What you will find is that different people have different preferences about how they learn. And unfortunately, some most prefer the very approach that others would avoid if they could. The task of the consultant or trainer is then to devise a process which allows all learning styles to be satisfied to some extent. This has the added advantage that some of the disadvantages of each style can be over-come ...

■ When people learn by doing, their learning often remains out of awareness. They may then fail to use it outside the actual situations where it was learned.

■ For those who prefer to develop principles from experience, there is a danger that eventually the review and theorising becomes a closed loop divorced from activity.

■ Those who prefer to apply accepted principles in planning may also become divorced from practice, as they may continue to apply the principles when they no longer work.

■ Packages, like recipes, can work well when they work. But the learner has no fall-back position when the package does not apply.

Fortunately, the four styles can be put together to form a complete cycle: the "experiential learning cycle". Action feeds into review; review precedes theory; theories are applied in planning, and then planning is implemented as action.

Notice that each learning style is catered for during part of the cycle, and that the other parts to some extent remedy the shortcomings of each of the styles.
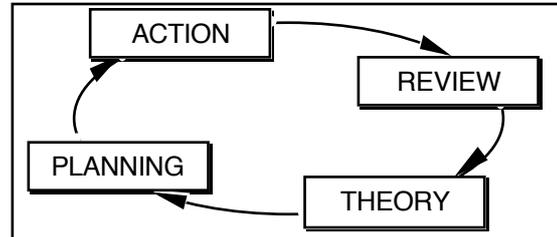
A number of variations have been proposed. The one above is very nearly that of David Kolb. Most of the literature talks as if it begins with action; in practice it can start anywhere provided the cycle is closed. Other proposals recommend providing for an interchange of information between learners (for example Pfeiffer and Jones, 1976). Their suggestion is that it occurs between action and review; but again it can happen anywhere that it is useful.

Sometimes the cycle *must* start somewhere other than with action. For example, the action sometimes takes place outside the classroom.

However, all of this is pointless if you
don't have the attention and interest of
participants. Effective learning activities
therefore give a lot of attention to what
might be called "energy management".
This if often most important at the transi-
tion from one segment of a learning activ-
ity to the next. It is especially important
at the beginning and end of the work-
shop, where it usually requires special
attention.
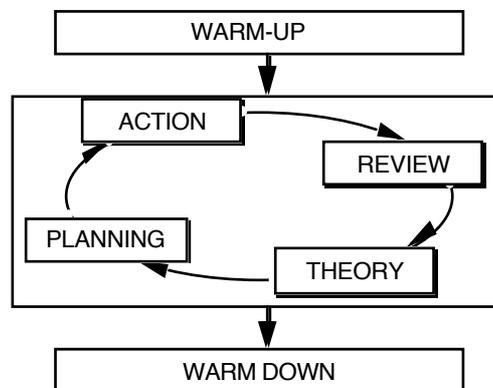
It is common to talk about the end activity as "closure". But if you tie off the
experience too neatly, they may not take any of it with them. The best conclusion
to aim for, I think, is one where people have thought about the later uses they can
make of the material, but are not too distracted by it. You might think of it as
emotional closure, but not cognitive or behavioural closure.

Think of some workshops you might facilitate in the future. How can you make
use of what you have learned from this document?

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Kolb, D. (1984), *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and develop-
        ment*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Pfeiffer, J.W. and Jones, J.E. (1976), Introduction to the instrumentation section.
        The 1976 annual handbook for group facilitators. La Jolla, Ca.: University
        Associates.