

# The Role of Reflection and Creativity in Experiential Learning Theory

Jennifer Hakola

July 21, 2023

## **Introduction**

Experiential learning can feel as easy as learning by doing, but Kolb and others have strived to find out *how* and *why* we learn so efficiently and effectively in this way. He worked to discover what it is about doing something that leads us to learn in deep and lasting ways. Kolb's work made strides in exploring and generating experiential learning theory (ELT). This theoretical concept may seem constructed of two opposing terms; *experiential learning* and *theory*. It may be counter-intuitive to move away from reading the written words of the past towards experiencing it for ourselves, only to then need to write it down again. We may feel that writing and studying written theory is the quintessential dialectic of doing, being and practicing in the real lived world, however we would be overlooking some of the most crucial aspects of experiential learning; reflection and writing. Each individual and unique personal cycle of experiencing, reflecting and writing builds on the previous cycle; expanding learning and building the foundation of knowledge to be strong and robust. ELT attempts to generate knowledge about what is actually happening when we are acting and reflecting as students and as teachers. Studying how reflective practice can enhance and formalize learning through experience allows theorists to better understand how to educate effectively and evaluate the experience of students' learning more subjectively. The benefits of experiential learning and reflection are many, in essence enhancing the skills and development of the students and teachers. Thinking about both of these participant groups, or communities of practice as co-learners can alleviate some of the power dynamics that can stand in the way of personal and professional growth for both. Spending time at the beginning of courses to establish how and why we are learning through experience and sharing in ELT concepts and ideas can further benefit the learning process of any discipline.

## **History**

Sharing background on ELT, such as the differences in teaching styles and intentions, prior to engaging in course content instruction can support students' understanding of what the experience and

expectations are throughout the learning process. By being transparent, both students and teachers engage in learning from the same starting point of understanding. Both parties can feel empowered with a clear vision of what the learning framework is that supports and contains them. Students can often enter into a learning scenario with pre-conceived ideas about what the instruction will be like and can become uncomfortable when the banking method, as Freire (1974) refers to it, or other traditional teaching methods are not offered as they are accustomed to. When the teacher is not going to tell the students in lectures and readings all they need to know, students can benefit from being aware of the historical trajectory behind this intention. Tracing a historical line through the theories of Piaget, Dewey and Lewin to Kolb and ELT can offer a feeling of security and stability in the educational approach of reflection and experiential learning. Students can feel strengthened to know that this form of learning allows for space to incorporate their subjective and lived experience; that the outcomes are not predetermined by past behavioural or cognitive concepts. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lewin proposed a cycle of learning, that was quite mechanistic by today's standards, but at the time incorporated much-valued scientific methods such as action research and the importance of feedback loops, moving the theory of learning forward (Kolb, 2014:32).

While Dewey's contribution to the foundation of ELT was somewhat similar to Lewin's, there was room for the human element and unique human intellect. Like incorporating a safety net, Dewey allowed for the ever-important *pause* before action; gathering of information, a planning stage, a place for thoughtful decision making. He recognized that our impulses from experience are valid as the driving momentum and force moving toward action, but ultimately there is a crucial in-between place that requires humans to use their intellectual strengths to guide the force towards purpose, not impulse alone (Kolb, 2014:34).

Piaget's work with children and their development in learning and understanding the world, inspired his concepts of *assimilation* and *accommodation*. For him, these two processes of engaging the

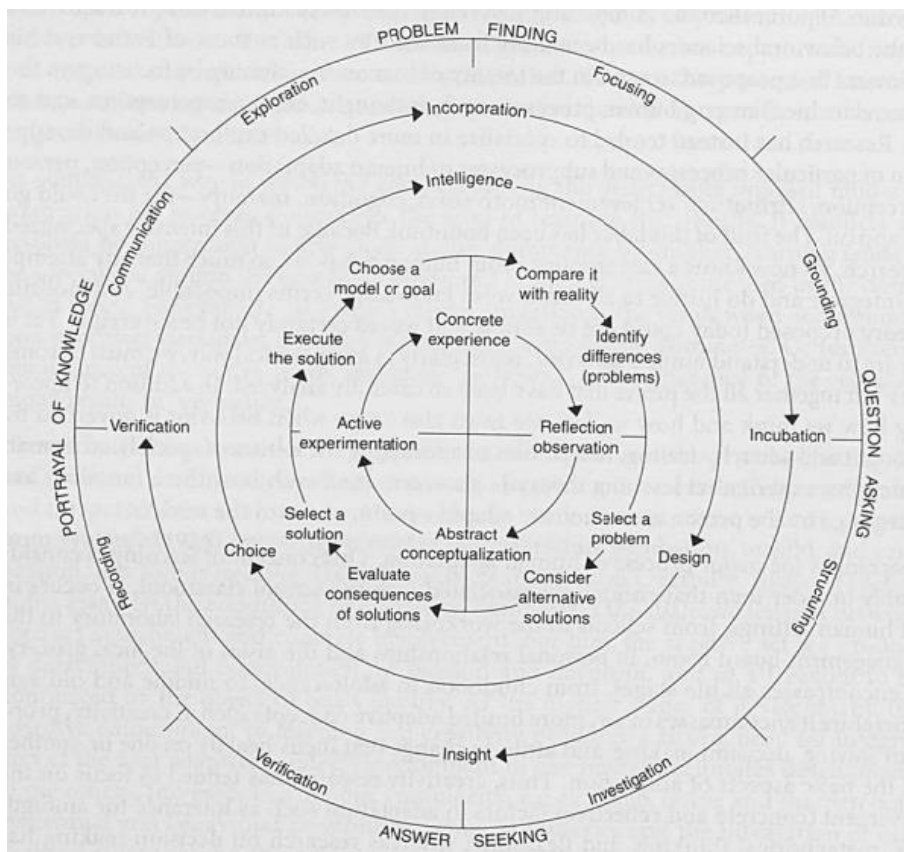
environment around us and integrating the experience was an ongoing cyclical way of intellectually growing into adults with ever-increasing cognitive abilities. Piaget's cycle of learning and cognitive development provided another layer of human development to an already robust foundation of scientific and human elemental theoretical building blocks. These theories combined with the Enlightenment's recognition of an inner human consciousness as a subject for exploration laid the path for Kolb to expand his theories of experiential learning, wanting to, "create a model for explaining how individuals learn and to empower learners to trust their own experience and gain mastery over their own learning." (Kolb, 2014:53). Students can indeed gain an understanding of how their current experience of learning is situated in a trusted, broader, historical context of development built upon by many minds. This understanding of how learning can be objectively studied can inspire their own subjective curiosity towards how they themselves are learning through experience and reflection.

### **Conflict and Creativity**

Initial introduction about the process behind learning can motivate students to really engage freely in creative thinking and problem solving. Understanding that there are inherent internal conflicts between experiencing while conceptualizing, and even between observing and doing can prepare students for this eventuality. Better still, when they learn that these conflicts are recognized as being resolved through creativity, they can relax into the learning challenges ahead instead of resisting them. Tension between aspects of learning is where the new knowledge, skills and perceptions are instigated. This is because, while learners need to be able to engage in all areas of the experiential learning cycle, of concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE), the real skill is being able to choose when to engage in which aspect of the cycle. This tension occurs because we are not able to do all aspects simultaneously. Learners move around in varied directions in the learning cycle, sometimes observing, sometimes doing, and sometimes integrating and to varying degrees. Kolb suggests the resolution to these ongoing conflicts in the learner

are resolved by adaptation through creative synthesis.

Theory of creativity from Bruner, has long acknowledged the tension and conflict involved in creativity; between the abstract detachment and concrete involvement required of the artist (Bruner, 1966). Attempting to understand the dialectics found in experiential learning and their relationship to the resolutions found in creativity provide the students with a stage upon which to welcome conflict and unease knowing that resolution will come to them through creative adaptation to the discomfort. Learners can feel confident that, along with creativity will come integration and ultimately personal growth. Kolb refers to Wallas' (1926) theory of creativity as another source where creativity is recognized as demonstrating conflict and resolution occurring naturally within the process.



(Fig. 1)

Figure 1 shows an overlay of adaptive processes and theories; central is experiential learning

theory, followed outward by problem solving (Pounds, 1965), then decision making (Simon, 1947), followed outward by creativity (Wallas, 1926) and then inquiry/research (Kolb, 2014: 44: fig 2.4). It is shown how the creativity cycle is in relationship with experiential learning. Wallas' creative process cycles through incorporation, incubation, insight, and verification. Kolb indicates these concepts as connecting with CO, RO, AC, and AE respectively. When learners are aware in the beginning of the cyclical nature of these styles of learning, they can avoid feeling despair and a sense of being stuck, knowing that they naturally move throughout these on varying natural timelines. By expecting to experience creative solutions to problem solving when engaging in experiential learning, learners can be freer in their learning approach to the subject matter, knowing that there is inherent value in exploring creatively. "Thus, complexity and the integration of dialectic conflicts among the adaptive modes are the hallmarks of true creativity and growth." (Kolb, 2014:42).

Adaptation is one of the main processes through which humans learn regardless of environment and age. When faced with needing to be in the moment of experience (CE) and be reflective (RO) on the experience, it is creativity of adaptation that moves us smoothly between the two. Creativity is used naturally and instinctually in learning because it engages parts of us that can tolerate ambiguity whether consciously or not. Through various creative ways of experiencing the world, we can be both acting and testing out in the field, while simultaneously integrating complex concepts through symbolic and metaphorical understanding and language. "Learning arises from the resolution of creative tension among the four learning modes." (Kolb, 2014:51). Learners can benefit from knowing prior to generating knowledge that the four stages can be experienced in two phases. The first connects experiencing (CE) and thinking (AC) while the second phase connects the reflecting (RO) and acting (AE). The experiential learning cycle offers movement and space for learners' unique ways of approaching learning, however it is thought most effective to engage all four stages of the cycle regardless of order. Learners knowing this ahead of time will support them in understanding the expectations for the learning process.

Dewey and Schon recognized that art and artistry can be the result of conflict and uncertainty in regular daily functioning (Dewey, 1958:10) (Schon, 1983:34). When discussing reflective practice anchored in experiential learning theory, they have a desire for the *aesthetics* of the experience to be remembered and accounted for. Dewey wrote, “not knowledge but art is the final flowering of experience...” (Dewey, 1929: 4 in Kinsella, 2009). This is an important distinction they make, not based on nostalgia harkening back to another era, but in demand that what was lost must be reinstated into the world’s understanding that creativity and artistry deliver humans through challenges having learned through an experience that was ultimately *aesthetic*. Incorporating a sense of artistry into the perception of how we work when we are accomplishing something with great unique skill and finesse allows and invites the learners and professionals to feel a sense of meaning and purpose in their working lives.

### **Social justice**

By having an opportunity to engage with ELT theory prior to the subject of their course work, students have a chance to perceive the significance of their voice in history through the lens of a forward trajectory. They can see their learning is not just a moment on top of many others’ ideas, but that it is a single step that leads to the future and anywhere they want to take not just their learning, but also their learning about *how* they learn. “... experiential learning theory has much to offer critical cultural theory in pedagogy, feminist theory, post-structural scholarship, social constructionism, post-colonial, and indigenous culture studies.” (Kolb, 2014:54). Culturally responsive pedagogy allows space for all skills, cultural understandings and knowledge of diverse learners. The SSHRC has defined the term Indigenous Knowledge as, “traditional knowledge is specific to place, usually transmitted orally, and rooted in the experience of multiple generations...is determined by land, environment, region, culture and language.... As holistic, involving body, mind, feelings and spirit.” (Ragoonaden, 2017:23). Experiential learning within communities of practice encourages hearing and understanding diverse perspectives and ways of knowing. Empowering students to value their cultural frames of reference will add to learning and lead

to further discovery and exploration of the subject matter being shared.

Rejecting a traditional, hierarchical relationship between teachers and students by connecting both participating parties as *co-learners*, a wealth of knowledge can be shared while simultaneously working to eliminate oppressive practices that reinforce class, gender and race inequalities. As Ragoonaden found, “peer mentoring facilitated the narrative of shared experiences and provided socio-emotional and academic support.” (Ragoonaden, 2017:36). This is the process through which the world and its hierarchies of oppression can be changed. Freire referred to this as the essence of *praxis*, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1974:36). Kolb attempts here to define learning, knowledge, and the process of experience through transformation all in one statement, “(Experiential) learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” (Kolb, 2014:49). He emphasized that knowledge is a process, not a thing to be achieved. Perhaps if he revisited this definition today, he may change the word *created* to *generated*, highlighting the process of learning further. As he has theorized himself, knowledge is not just created, but rather many driving forces of self, environment, and relationships turn in unified yet unique momentum to energetically bring forth dynamic, malleable and fluid knowledge. By knowing this ahead of entering into course content, learners can feel a sense of meaning in their exploration and motivated to bring about change in the social structures that oppress them. Dewey in *Art as Experience*, (1958) recognized art and creativity in a new way, one that was, “an embodied, expressively refined excretion of natural energies engaged in our living interaction with our natural and cultural context for purposes of making life more fulfilling.” (Shusterman, 2010:28). This expression has room to happen through experiential learning where it was limited in traditional learning models.

## **Reflection**

Explaining to learners that experiential learning is a process can alleviate some of the pressure they can feel in time-based courses with assessed outcomes. Helping students to understand the process



of learning, and that this is only one step in their path of learning, can support them in having the confidence to move courageously through the material, knowing that with each cycle of experiential learning they will gain more and more through forming and reforming their ideas. When we think of all education as re-learning, then we avoid disrespecting the learners by perceiving them as blank slates, but support them in examination, modification, and distillation, of their previous held beliefs and concepts.

Learners are asked to be reflective, without instruction on the background theories of reflection itself. Courses are content-based on the subject matter and need to first be clear about how the learning is expected to happen and why it is being delivered in this way as opposed to other traditional methods. Instructors having a reflective practice and encouraging students to also adopt one is a good start, but without outlining what it can be and what it is not can leave learners feeling lost or stalled. Sharing with them that reflective practice is based on many decades of theory development since Schon first coined the term in the eighties can bring a sense of understanding and acceptance. It isn't fair to send learners down a path of reflection without first advising them of what to be prepared for, and what is expected upon returning from reflective time. Everyone will approach reflection in their own unique way, but a framework can still be offered as a guide and support for those that are not confident in the reflective process for learning as well as for those who feel they know how. Schon's idea for reflective practice is about becoming better in your professional life by taking time to critically assess your behaviour. Ideally, this practice connects thinking and acting in a way that will bring about improvement and awareness. Reflection can be further understood as being a two-phase process. Reflection *in action* occurs while we are doing, this allows us to pivot and adapt during work. Reflection *on action* happens after the activity which will potentially influence our future work. Students can benefit from perceiving reflection as not only an individual undertaking, but also a collaborative venture. "Reflection in isolation can become retroreflection, a turning in on itself that isolates the learners in their own self-confirming world unable to

reach conclusions or test them in action.” (Kolb, 2014:57). Sharing ideas gleaned during reflective practice can help to avoid perpetuating problematic perceptions of the self and the world around us.

Students can benefit from having an awareness of the theoretical concept of communities of practice to gain a sense of belonging in a relationship of sharing and learning. Having an understanding in the beginning of courses that there is an expectation to share as a team in learning can help students make connections and learn abstract concepts more easily through social learning. This type of learning has a framework in which to explore topics referred to as modes of belonging. Thinking of a cohort or team in this way can make clear expectations for participating through engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 2000:226). Social learning is more than just looking at outcomes, but rather how learning with others and imagining how the world can be, connects us with our higher life goals. When students understand *how* they are expected to learn, not just what they are learning, they can enhance their knowledge and skills by focusing their attention on the subject more efficiently and effectively.

## **Conclusion**

Sharing ELT concepts and theory on reflection at the beginning of courses is spending time and effort to establish value in how and why students are learning can further benefit the process of learning for students and teachers. As Rose (2013) suggests, reflection can be thought of as so much more than just a problem-solving tool if inspired in the right context, proposing that reflection cannot be simply taught through steps, but is more of a way of *being* that needs to be learned through a process of growing (Rose, 2013:102). In order to transform education and society, learners need to be allowed space to consider the meta-theory and intention behind their education. Merleau-Ponty described the generative nature of reflection as, “meanings sometimes recombine to form new thought... and we are transported to the heart of the matter, we find the source.” (Thoreau, 2004:80 in Rose, 2013:19). Learners can gain a feeling of purpose, importance and meaning in their experiential ventures, knowing “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and

because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique and if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.” (Graham in Kolb, 2014:53). Having confidence in the creative process can bring forth a freedom in experimentation that will help to generate new ideas and ways of being. Understanding ourselves in the greater context of the world will bring a sense of meaning and self-awareness to our motivation for continued learning.

## References

- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Massachusetts.: Belkapp Press.
- Dewey J. (1929). Experience, nature and art. In: *Art and education* (eds J. Dewey, A. Barnes, L. Buermeyer, T. Munro, P. Guillaume, M. Mullen & V. DeMazia), pp. 3– 12. New Jersey: Barnes Foundation Ltd.
- Dewey J. (1958). *Art As Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Freire, P. (1974). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Continuum Publishing.
- Kinsella, E. A. (2009). Professional knowledge and the epistemology of reflective practice. *Nursing Philosophy*, 11(1), 3–1.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). The Process of Experiential. In, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, (pp. 31-64). Pearson FT press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2003). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. 1958. Reprinted London: Routledge.
- Ragoonaden, K. (2017). Culturally responsive pedagogy: Indigenizing curriculum. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 47(2), 22 – 46.
- Rose, E. (2013). *On Reflection*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. External tool
- Schön D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Shusterman, R. (2010). Dewey's *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 26-43. University of Illinois Press
- Thoreau, H. D. (2004) *Walden: A fully annotated edition*, edited by Jefferey S. Cramer 1854. Reprinted, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wallas, G. (1926). *The art of thought*. London: J. Cape.
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, 7(2), 225-246.