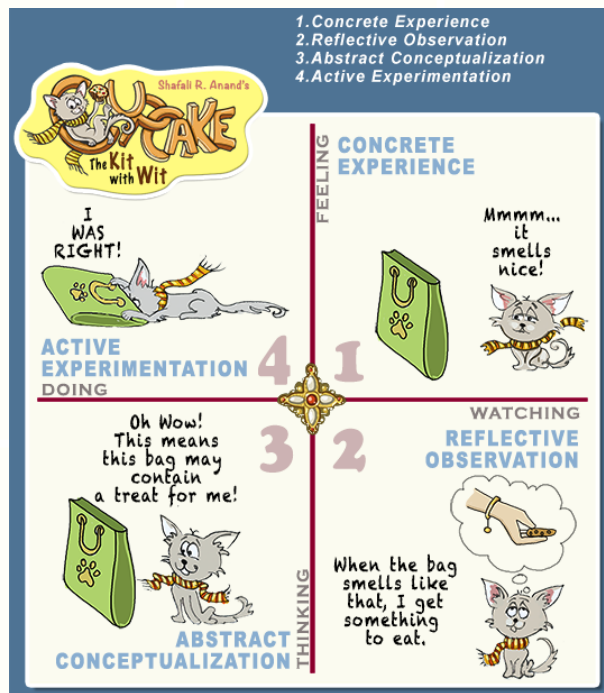


David Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

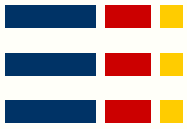


Shafali R. Anand

Founder & Chief Envisionist - Creative Agni
ID Specialist & Learning Solutions Architect
Editor & Publisher - THE FOUNT



The Creative Fire within You



David Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

The Four Stages of Learning & The Four Learner Types

In his book, "Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development," David Kolb proposed the ELT or Experiential Learning Theory, which says that experiences are the source of all learning. Kolb presents four learning stages (compiled as the ELM or the Experiential Learning Model,) as follows:

1. Concrete Experience
2. Reflective Observation
3. Abstract Conceptualization
4. Active Experimentation

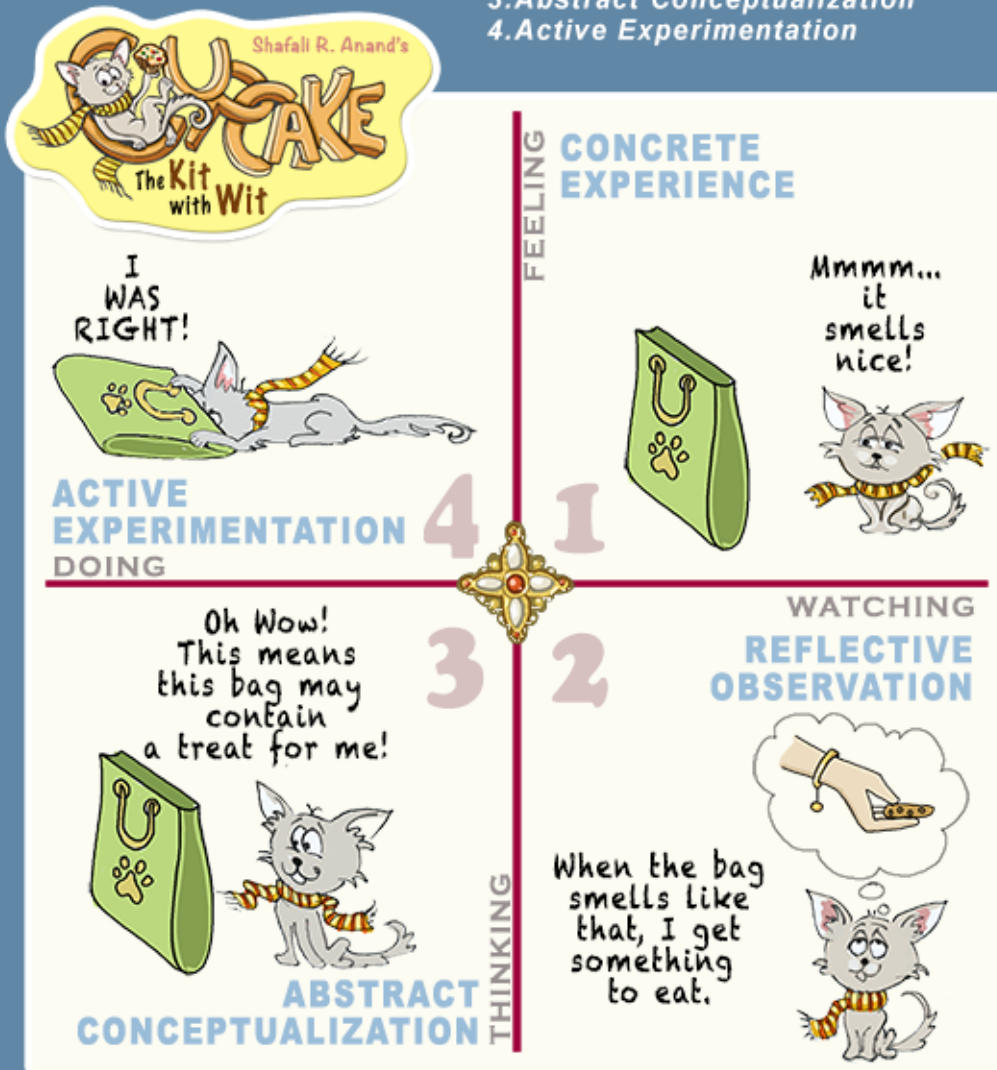
Before we look at each stage in detail, let us look at Kolb's Cycle with a fresh pair of round and curious eyes - those that belong to Cupcake.



KOLB'S CYCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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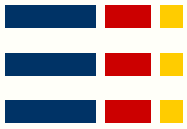
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Let us use the example of two learners - one novice and the other expert, to understand Kolb's Cycle.

Sonia and Monica are going through the same training program on the 4 Ps of marketing.

Let us look at their profiles.



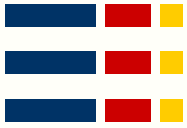
Sonia

Sonia is a History grad who has never gone through Phillip Kotler's 4 Ps of Marketing. She is 28 years old and has about 5 years of work experience.



Monica

Monika is a Business Management Post-grad who has learned about the 4 Ps during her MBA. She is 45 and has been working on and off for the last 20 years.



STAGE 1: Concrete Experience (*Feel*)

Learning begins in **the Concrete Experience stage**, where the learner goes through a new learning experience. At this stage, the learner experiences learning through visual, audio, or kinesthetic means. In the ADDIE cycle, you'd find this stage of Kolb's cycle present in the Implementation Phase.

For a learner, this learning experience may be:

- Entirely New (Novice Learner)
- A new interpretation of an existing experience (Experienced Learner)



In the Concrete Experience stage, Sonia would create a fresh new schema for the 4 Ps (which may be only loosely connected with other schemas, but she has nothing to anchor the new concept strongly to.)

Monica shall activate the prior schema remember the understanding she had development from it, and then add the new knowledge about 4 Ps to it. In this manner, she is already moving into the next stage proposed by David Kolb (The Reflective Observation stage.)



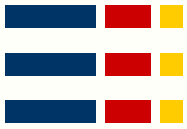
STAGE 2: Reflective Observation (*Watch*)

Next comes **the Reflective Observation stage**, in which the learner reflects upon the learning experience. This could acquire different forms. For instance, if it is a fresh learning experience for the learner (i.e. the learner is a novice learner) she may reflect upon the new learning in view of his past experiences, whereas if she is going through another interpretation of an existing learning, she won't just reflect upon the new learning by viewing it through the lens of her past-experiences, but also compare it with her earlier learning.

Let us review the cases of Sonia and Monika for this stage.



When Sonia enters the Reflective Observation stage, she will reflect upon the four Ps – Product, Price, Place, Promotion in view of her own shopping experience - a Titan Raga watch that she purchased a couple of days ago. She may have purchased the watch online – so her reflection may primarily include online market places, credit card payments, and Facebook ads.



However, Monica's Reflective Observation will not just include her personal marketing/shopping experiences, but also her prior learning of the 4Ps. If her prior learning happened at a time when Digital Marketing was not an option, her reflection on the P of Promotion would include a comparison between the traditional channels and the digital channels. Her reflection on the P of Place will now compare online market places (such as Amazon, Flip-cart) etc., with the traditional markets of the past.



STAGE 3: Abstract Conceptualization (*Think*)

After Reflective Observation, the learner moves into **the Abstract Conceptualization stage**. Now the learner comes to a conclusion after filtering and adjusting the new learning, and thus forms a new schema. So the novice learner now constructs his own understanding of the 4 Ps of Marketing, while the experienced learner modifies (if needed) her past understanding to correct/improve/strengthen it further.



In the Abstract Conceptualization stage, Sonia will form a schema for the 4Ps of marketing that will be focused on her current shopping experiences. Thus, if she is an avid reader of eBooks, the first P for Product for her would be a digital product. We see constructivism playing an important part in this stage, where the learner will formulate her generalizations based on her personal experiences.

Monica, our experienced learner, will revise her existing schema of the 4 Ps and will broaden it to include digital products, online market places, modern pricing techniques, and digital advertising into the 4 Ps. Thus, her generalizations will include both the new and the old ways of doing things.



STAGE 4: Active Experimentation (*Do*)

Finally, the learner applies the new construct of the learning and moves into **the Active Experimentation stage**. Thus, the novice learner now uses the 4Ps of marketing to make a marketing plan by deciding what shall be done for each of the four key factors in any marketing mix – Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. Similarly, the experienced learner uses her enhanced understanding of the concept to achieve the same goal.



Once again, our first-time learner, due to her exposure and preferences may be more tilted toward a digital marketing plan. She may come up with a plan for selling a product (say Happy Puppy Cereals) from a website, market it only online, and accept digital payments for it. She may have a more focused but a somewhat narrow marketing plan that could ignore a lot of traditional buyers.

Monica on the other hand, could come up with a marketing plan that includes the positives of both the digital and the traditional marketing. The underside of it is that she may not have enough faith in the online medium, which could result in a more conservative outlay for online marketing.



The Four Types of Learners

Depending on a learner's inclination (what he/she prefers to do,) Kolb identifies four types of learners:

1. The Diverger
2. The Assimilator
3. The Converger
4. The Accommodator

Kolb identifies four types of learners and places them in four different quadrants of his experiential learning cycle.

1. The Diverger (Reflective observation - Concrete experience)

The Divergers go through the concrete experience and then reflect upon it, attempting to map it to their past experiences (if any) or reflecting on its possibilities. Thus, the Divergers are imaginative, creative, connecting-the-dots kinds of individuals, who like to sit back, feel and watch.

2. The Assimilator (Reflective observation - Abstract conceptualization)

The Assimilators too are interested in Reflective Observation but they are also keen on establishing formulae by generalizing what they have learned. Thus, they prefer to reduce the clutter of discrete learning and have their generalizations ready. These are observant thinkers. (Mr. David Kolb, I have a feeling, would like to classify himself as an Assimilator.)

3. The Converger (Abstract conceptualization – Active Experimentation)

The Convergengers wish to go forward and check the veracity/applicability of their generalizations and thoughts. They are interested in practical applications of the theories proposed by them (or others.) The Convergengers, in my opinion are those who remain cynics until they can see a real-life application of a concept. (This is me!)

4. The Accommodator (Active experimentation - Concrete experience)

The Accommodators are those who engage in experimentation as well as creation of new

experiences. They like to do and learn from their mistakes. They prefer to make their own experiences.

In my opinion,

All the four kinds of learners go through all the four stages, however, they all enjoy different stages in different measures. One of my favorite subjects of study is me. And I find myself fitting in neatly into the shoes of at least three learner-types (I am not all at the same time though. Quite Like Sonia and Monica, I keep changing my shoes – and if possible, I try them all.)

How does ELM help us design Activities/Assignments?

It helps to remember that:

1. There are at least four distinct stages of the learning cycle. Ensure that you have something for each stage.
2. There are four different learner types. Ensure that you have something for each learner type.
3. There's a sequence in learning >> Feel, Watch, Think, Do. It helps to keep your activities sequenced accordingly. Thus, you should provide content with relevant examples (let the learner feel,) give time (so that they may watch/observe,) provide activities that allow them to think and generalize, and finally give them an opportunity to apply. Following the sequence would ensure that there the learners don't lose the thread of learning.

About the Similarities between Honey-Mumford's and Kolb's - A Possible Confusion

Those of you who have already explored the Honey Mumford Model would possibly find a lot of similarities between Kolb's Experiential Learning and Honey Mumford's Learning Styles.

These similarities exist for a reason. Honey and Mumford had based their model on the concepts proposed by David Kolb and they used the four stages of learning as the base for their learning styles. In fact, the learning styles are fairly similar too.

A Life-Lesson

In the similarities between the Honey-Mumford's and Kolb's models, is hidden a life-lesson. Making something easier to understand and use, is as important as coming up with a new concept. Kolb's cycle is a theory (more than a model, as it doesn't tell us what to do, but only how learning takes place) and Honey-Mumford's Learning Styles simplified it and labeled it in an easy-to-remember way. It's quite like the difference between the pure sciences and engineering – while the academicians and researchers come up new construction materials, the engineers build bridges that carry loads and don't fall.

Conclusion

Honey and Mumford as well as David Kolb, all tell us that learning happens in stages and that depending on the inclinations of the learner, the learners can be broadly segmented into four categories. The segmentation as well as the stages help us decide the most effective learning methods for audience and content combination.

About David Kolb and his Works

David A. Kolb was born in 1939 and is known for his work on *Experiential Learning*. In 1984, David Kolb wrote “*Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*.” This book became the basis for the following important concepts:

- 4 Stages of Experiential Learning (The Experiential Learning Model – ELM)
- 4 Learning Styles (The Learning Styles Inventory – LSI)
- 2 Learning Continuums (Processing Continuum & Perception Continuum)



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