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Original Contribution

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The Experiential Learning theory and the Kolb's learning cycle are some of the most widely known modern educational theories. They take an important place at the formulation of the modernisation of the Bulgarian education – in the movement from traditional to person-oriented educational process. The purpose of this article is to show the opportunities of these concepts. The implementation of Kolb's cycle, as well as its advantages, difficulties, and methods are discussed.

Key words: person-oriented educational process, teaching and learning, Experiential Learning theory, Kolb's learning cycle

INTRODUCTION

Kolb's Experiential Learning theory is one of the most popular and most frequently cited educational theories (8, 9). It takes an important place at the formulation of the modernisation of the Bulgarian education (10, 11) Fruitful work on Experiential Learning was published in 1984. Since then, Kolb has had a rising influence on teachers and trainers, especially among those whose students are above 16 years. Kolb is one of the most influential researchers in his field because he provides a solid theoretical base that is absent in the work of many other authors. According to Kolb (1984)(9), "Learning is a process, in which knowledge is created through transformation of experience." His theories present a way of constructing and alternation in the course of study, and provide concrete understanding of how a class or a whole course of study can be taught in order to have better learning by the students.

The Experiential Learning theory involves studying in four phases connected with doing, sensing, observing, reflecting, thinking and planning. An important characteristic of the theories is that different phases are connected with particular learning styles. People differ in their own learning styles. Accepting this is an important premise that enables the students to realise the possible alternative approaches and to become more flexible in different learning situations. Teachers also need to realise their own learning style as a basis for development of effective teaching and study strategies. Studying can suffer if there is an underlined discrepancy between the style of the students and the style of the teacher.

Kolb's theory is affirmed as a learning theory that confirms all main aspects of active learning (1). It provides theoretical argument of independent learning, learning by doing, work-based learning, and problem-based learning. The theory has a vast range of application, including helping students realise themselves, helping teachers become reflexive teachers, identifying learning styles of students, and development of key teacher's skills. It also helps in development of group project work and deciding how information and communication technologies can aid the process of learning. The advantages of Kolb's theory can be summarised in the following way (6):

- Provides ready directions for application.
- Gives directions for the necessary range of education methods.
- Provides effective connection between theory and practice. Offers a theoretical argument of things that many teachers apply and need advice on how to improve their practice.
- Clearly formulates the importance of students to reflect and the importance of

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providing feedback in order to stimulate their studying.
- Helps to rationalise the way of combining learning styles so that learning can become more effective.
- Without any effort, can be used in all subject areas.
- Can be used by an individual, by teams, or by whole organisations.
- Can be used in a particular lesson, session, or long course of study.

DISSCUSSION

In his research David Kolb uses works by John Dewey and Kurt Levin (8, 9). Kolb, according to Zuber-Skerritt, creates "a broad theory that provides the basis of education approach and learning as a process of lifelong learning; a process that is based on the intellectual traditions of the philosophy, the cognitive and social psychology" (14). Kolb's model can be used as a general description of the learning process, but his emphasis on reflection definitely puts him in the group of learning based on experience. Boreham (1987) (2) says that "the concept of experiential learning really means learning by reflection on the experience". Without reflection on experience, students are in danger to continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.

The essence of Kolb's model is just a description of the learning process, which is pictured as a cycle made of four phases. In the model it is shown how experience is transformed through reflection in ideas and concepts, which in turn are used for active experimenting and choice for new experience. Kolb connects with those four phases the Concrete Experience (CE) -doing, Reflexive Observation (RO) - observing, Abstract Conceptualising (AC) – thinking, and Active Experimenting (AE) – planning. They follow one after another in a cycle (**Fig. 1**).

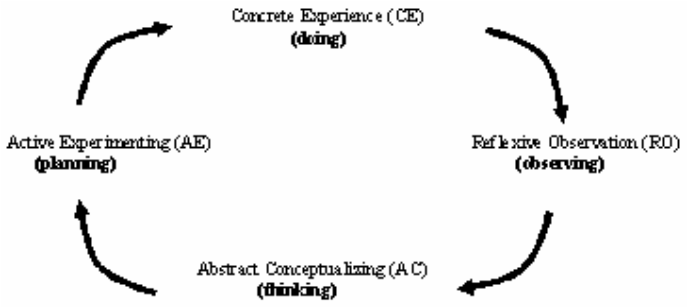

Figure 1:

Concrete Experience – the student is an active participant
Reflexive Observation – the student consciously reflexes on experience
Abstract Conceptualising – the student tries to conceptualise theory or model of what he has observed
Active Experimenting – the student tries to plan how to test the model, or the theory, or the plan for the forthcoming experience

The cycle can be entered at any point, but the phases must be followed consecutively. In that way the learning cycle provides feedback that is the base of a new action and evaluating the consequences of the action. The students must pass through the cycle a couple of times. Then it can be called a spiral of cycle. Kolb briefly conceptualises the process of research as "a spiral of action and examinations consisting of four general moments: plan, action, observation, and reflection" (15). The description of all the learning cycle phases is:

First phase. Concrete Experience /trying or involving in "doing".

The individual, the team, or the organisation just does the task. During that time, they do not reflect on it but have intention to reflect on it.

Second phase. Reflexive observing.

The reflection includes returning to the beginning point of the task and review what is done and tried. Listening skills, paying attention, distinguishing the differences, and applying ideas help finding results and sharing them with the others. Adjustments, values, and beliefs influence on the definition of particular results. The vocabulary is important for the verbalising and discussing the perceiving and comprehending of the experience.

Third phase. Abstract conceptualising.

The conceptualising includes interpretation of the marked results and understanding the connections between them. Theory can be useful as a base of shaping and explaining the results. In that phase the adjustments, values, and beliefs also have influence on the interpretation of the results. During the critical reflection questions are asked from the perspective of the previous experience, while during the phase of conceptualising an attempt to find answers is done. Generalisation and conclusions are made; hypotheses for experience are formed. About the abstract conceptualising, Kolb says, "In that phase learning involves more logic and ideas than feelings of understanding the problems or the situations. It is typical to follow systematic planning and development of theories and ideas for solving problems."

Fourth phase. Active experimenting (planning).

The planning (active experimenting) gives an opportunity to master the new understanding and its carrying to predicting which is likely to happen later, or what other actions must be taken for improving the way that we treat the task. About the active experimenting, Kolb thinks, "Learning during that phase has an active form – experimenting, influence or change of the situation. You have to have a practical approach and to be interested in what is actually working…"

As the name hints, the Experiential Learning theory affirms the significance of experience. But apart from that, it is extremely important for the students to pass through all four phases of the cycle, and to have effective connections between each of these phases. The model is critical to action where students make a small preparation for experience and/or do not reflect effectively on experience, or do not connect it with the corresponding theoretical aspects (7).

Defining the correct tempo of learning cycle is very valuable. If somebody waits for a task to be completed, and then to reflect, he will not be able to improve it until a similar task reoccurs. For instance, if a student does only one test at the end of the semester, he will not be able to change his learning style and to improve his results. On the other hand, long reflection means spending more time in thinking instead of doing, i.e. bringing the task to an end. Therefore, the time for the learning cycle phases must be balanced.

Two fundamental axes are connected with the learning cycle: abstract – concrete, and active – reflexive. These axes reflect the two basic measurements of the learning process, corresponding to the two basic ways, which people use to learn. The first is how to perceive or comprehend new information/experience. The second – how to manipulate and transform what has been perceived (12).

Generally the learning cycle must be used (13):

- During the initial defining of the problem in order to find out if the previous experience might suggest a method;
- During the natural interruption of the task as well as in the end of a meeting or working day;
- When the advancement obviously goes well or badly.

The model can be used by teams (there again):

- Concrete Experience (doing) – the team members are involved in a task and in a relationship;
- Reflection – the team members use open reflection, a dialogue for sharing the perception and how they interact. They evaluate the facilitated and not facilitated processes in the team;
- Interpretation – the team develops a common culture through building the shared significance of the events;
- Planning – the team is engaged in common planning, solution, and expression of an agreement for action.

The abundant supply of practical methods for completing each of the phases of the learning cycle increases the learning effectiveness (6):

- For the experience planning are suitable; planning of actions; defining the goals; planning of experiments; a list of everything that will be observed; defining criteria; educational agreements;
- For increasing the realisation of the experience – diaries, questions, increasing the understanding of the feelings, silent demonstration;
- For returning the experience back and reflection on it – diaries, using audio and video records, mutual evaluation, structured discussions, structured briefing, self-evaluation, mutual interview, a list of everything, on which will be reflected, reflection after a pattern;
- For providing a replacing experience – studying of cases, games, simulations, role games, evaluation through replacing experience.

CONCLUSION

"Learning is a process as well as an outcome."

(14)

The Kolb's experiential learning theory has a vast range of application, including helping students realise themselves, helping teachers become reflexive teachers, identifying learning styles of students, and development of key teacher's skills. The logic of the cycle is to do very little and increasing improvements that, when done by many people, lead to significant improvements later. For instance, if every day the teacher reflects his work and defines one little thing to change in order to improve his work, then at the end of the year there will be many improvements. When this procedure is put into practice as a habit or rule, there will be positive results.

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