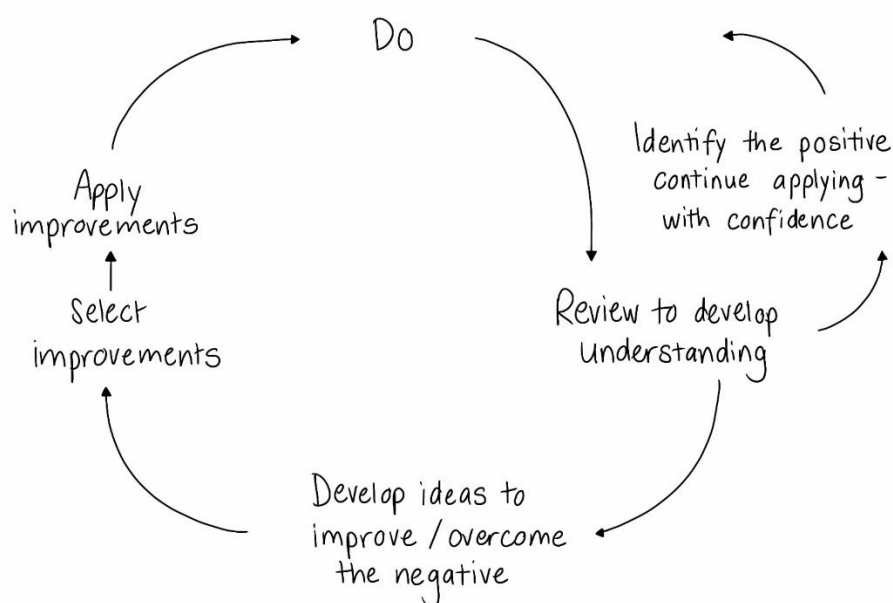


## Experiential Learning in Action:

### Going Beyond the Ropes

#### The Concept

The conceptual basis of the process of experiential learning is often described by Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb and Fry 1975). Their model can be developed and summarised in the following way:



This 'Learning Cycle' provides a useful representation of the process of experiential learning, i.e. do, review, develop and implement ideas for improvement. However the cycle's simplicity masks complexities that an effective facilitator of experiential learning needs to understand and overcome.

Having worked as a facilitator of experiential learning for over 30 years and a developer of experiential activities for over 25 years my understanding of the subject is far from complete. However it's clear to me that some of the underlying principles which appear to be common sense are far from common practice. Let me explain:

#### Principle 1

The learner is central to the process throughout, the facilitator provides the learner with a service.

The principle that the success of the experiential approach to learning depends on the learners is fundamental. Therefore the facilitator must understand that learners can only make best use of their opportunities if they are ready, willing and able to become personally involved in the learning process: learners have to be prepared to actively develop their understanding, critique and evaluate the messages in their context and then work hard to apply appropriate learning.

## Principle 2

Individuals can and do learn without facilitation.

Learners learn experientially by reflecting on their experiences, developing personal insights and understandings through involvement in intellectual, emotional and physical activity. This can be (and often is) done by an individual without any external help. A facilitator is not a prerequisite.

Experiential learning involves people in working things through for themselves and developing their own understanding, so facilitators should always be seeking ways to enable this to happen. Although effective facilitation can add tremendous value, facilitators should remember that inappropriate facilitation can hinder, rather than help learning; they should not instruct, proffer knowledge, proscribe or offer personal wisdom.



## Principle 3

A facilitator should help create learning opportunities and enable others to recognise and make good use of these opportunities.

The facilitator can provide help during each element of the learning cycle by creating an appropriate learning environment, providing an activity that will initiate the learning process, creating an atmosphere and framework conducive to constructively critical review, (guiding thinking and challenging to developing understanding) ensuring that any conceptual thinking is progressed to meaningful conclusions and opportunities for improvement identified.

Facilitation is a complex and skilled process.

## Principle 4

You cannot predict the learning an individual will take from an activity.

Because individuals are personally involved in experiential learning individuals can take very different messages from a single event. An obvious example is one where a person fails to listen to another. If they are to learn, both individuals need to understand their part in their failure to communicate, but the causes could be numerous and therefore each persons learning very different.

So for example, behaviours seen in an individual who isn't heard could be; doesn't express ideas clearly, doesn't check the 'listener has understood', speaks when the other person isn't ready to listen, doesn't help the listener understand the significance of the information, fails to develop the idea, backs down when challenged etc.

Similarly example reasons why a 'listener' doesn't listen could be; doesn't see the issue as being important, had prejudged the issue, is distracted by personal thoughts, doesn't respect the other person (and or their views).

Therefore one event can provide the individuals involved with quite different or even diametrically opposed learning.



### Principle 5

There is potential for the learning to be at several levels.

In the example used in 'Principle 4' above I gave behaviours for not being heard, but reasons for not listening. Typically addressing and developing behavioural change is less challenging than addressing the reasons.

Taking the example from above, it can be seen that there is a hierarchy of challenge that the facilitator can encourage the learner to address:

- + realising the need (e.g. I won't be listened to if the other person is speaking)
- + developing the skill (e.g. speaking clearly and concisely)
- + developing the confidence or self esteem (e.g. believing that I and my views are of value)
- + challenging personal attitudes (e.g. questioning personal drivers and belief systems).

### Principle 6

Developing basic skills in a supportive environment is relatively simple, changing day to day behaviour is another matter.

After having read 'Principle 6' it might be tempting to go straight to the fundamentals and target attitudes first. (If you have a positive attitude and personal confidence it is easier to implement personal change.) However remembering that the learner has to want to learn, it is far safer to build the learners confidence through success with skill development and behavioural change in simple or superficial areas first. When some progress has been made you can consider raising and tackling more fundamental issues like personal confidence and attitudes to others.

It's worth being aware however, that a knock on effect of individuals beginning to use new skills and realise their benefits can be a growth in self esteem and personal confidence.

### Principle 7

A learning activity is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The purpose of an experiential learning activity is to create an opportunity for valuable and memorable personal learning. The ideal activity will engage, stimulate and challenge with individuals becoming absorbed in the task as themselves. It will not involve role play.

All activities must be designed, managed and facilitated carefully so that the activity has impact, but it isn't so memorable that these 'activity memories' override the impact and memory of the learning. If this happens the lasting memory may be an aspect of the activity, not the learning that was realised.

### Principle 8

An effective activity provides the opportunities for learning with as few distractions as possible.

It can be great fun to run 'big activities' (although some people hate them) and there is no doubt that ropes courses and outdoor team challenges can generate real learning opportunities, but take care. Besides the potential their impact has to overpower the messages, the duration of these activities often means that many learning opportunities are lost; valuable incidents can get forgotten, overlooked or submerged in the complexity of the task.

Although less memorable in themselves, running several short activities (10 – 30minutes) each followed by its own review will often have far greater long term impact than one big activity.

### Principle 9

The learning review is a vital stage of every activity. It should be planned as part of the design, not left to chance.

Reviews can take many forms but all must engage the learners. The ideal review will involve the learner in personal thought, challenge and discussion before coming to some form of conclusion. It is often useful if a period of individual reflection, guided by open-ended or tick-box questionnaires, is followed by a facilitated discussion.

If it is to be of real benefit, the review must be an honest critique of what happened and the contributions of each individual. Real issues should not be swept under the carpet, but equally criticism must be constructive.

### Principle 10

Remember to learn from the positives

It is all too easy to focus on the negatives. It's obvious that if something goes wrong, or just doesn't go as well as we hoped, there will be benefit in review and change. It can, however, be equally beneficial to review what's gone well. It's not only motivating to recognise and focus on success, but finding out what caused the success and seeking ways to make greater or wider use of it can reap tangible rewards.

### Principle 11

A review discussion is an opportunity for learners, helped by the facilitator, to develop their own understanding and draw their own conclusions.

The role of the facilitator is to enable others to learn by drawing out the issues and developing the learning that is relevant to the individuals. The facilitator should ask questions that will stimulate thought about relevant issues and enable the group to use answers given to develop further thought and learning.

#### Principle 12

Don't tell people what they should learn.

An observer is in a privileged position, often seeing aspects that are not obvious to others. If you observe a point that isn't raised during a review it is legitimate to raise it, but only through questioning. If, despite questioning, individuals don't relate to the point, there is no benefit in pursuing as any 'learning' will not be theirs. A better option is for you to run another activity designed to focus more attention on this specific point.

Whatever happens, don't be tempted to provide a 'professional analysis' as this approach takes the ownership of the learning away from the individual.

#### Principle 13

Believe in the learners: they can and will make experiential learning opportunities work for them

To be an effective facilitator of experiential learning you have to **believe, really believe**, in others. You have to **believe** that they have the potential to make progress and be committed to the fact that your role is to provide opportunities for others to learn and progress.

#### Principle 14

Forget your ego. Your success is individuals capitalising on their personal learning.

As an effective facilitator you have to be satisfied with the knowledge that you offer and develop opportunities for others to learn, many of which will go unused or undervalued. You have to accept that you are not offering 'tangible and technical' contributions and therefore will not be able to look back and say 'I taught this person x or y'.

If you're lucky however, every now and again in the years to come you will hear of some far reaching consequences that will go way beyond what you could ever have hoped or imagined.

