

Deliberate Experiential Learning

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Mastering the Art of Learning from Experience

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Deliberate Experiential Learning: Mastering the Art of Learning from Experience

David A. Kolb & Bauback Yeganeh

Learn

As though you will live forever.

Live

As though you will die tomorrow.

John Wooden

The ancient Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times”, might well apply to all of us living today in the rapidly changing and expanding global community. We daily face new challenges and opportunities at work and in our personal lives. At work there are technological innovations, expanding multi-cultural market opportunities and new organizational forms that demand greater personal responsibility and higher quality and productivity. Our personal lives have grown far more complex with increasing responsibility to manage our financial, health and personal affairs.

To survive and thrive in these “interesting times” individuals are called upon to adapt and learn in ways that are unprecedented in human history. For many years now there has been an increasing emphasis on continuing lifelong learning and on the promotion of learning in education. The emphasis has shifted from teaching to learning (Boyatzis, Cowen and Kolb, 1991) with learner centered educational policies and curricula focused on learning how to learn. Central to this change is a focus on the responsibility of the individual for managing and directing his or her own learning. Expertise at learning has become the key capability necessary for survival, success and fulfillment.

Learning can have magical transformative powers. It opens new doors and pathways, expanding our world and capabilities. It literally can change who we are by creating new professional and personal identities. Learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery. In a very real sense, you are what you learn. In this essay we suggest an approach to living that puts learning first and foremost, an approach that we call “the learning way.” The learning way is about approaching life experiences with a learning attitude. It involves a deep trust in one’s own experience and a healthy skepticism about received knowledge. It requires the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. The learning way is not the easiest way to approach life but in the long run it is the wisest. Other ways of living tempt us with immediate gratification at our peril. The way of dogma, the way of denial, the way of addiction, the way of submission and the way of habit; all offer relief from uncertainty

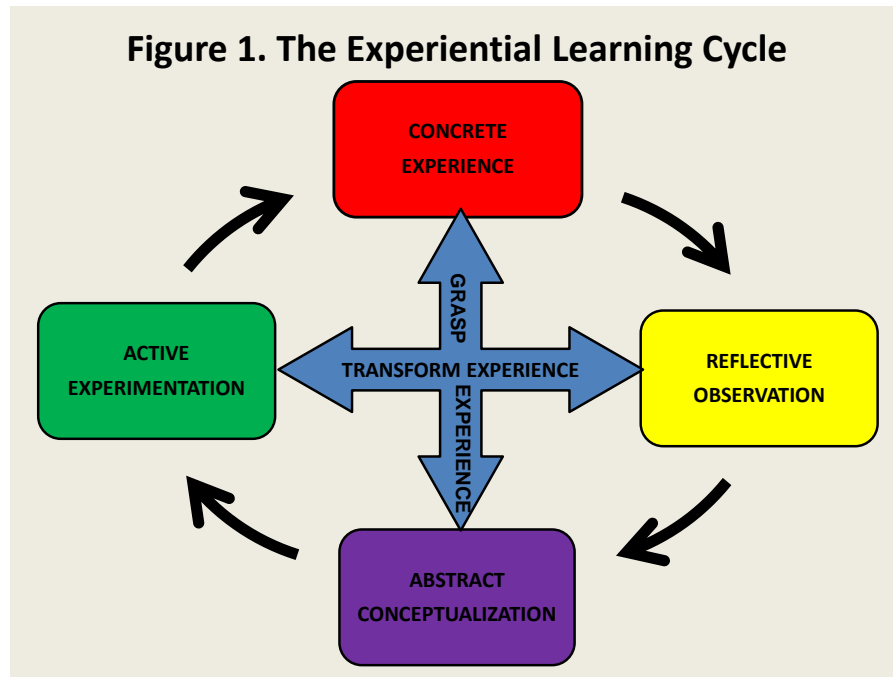
and pain at the cost of entrapment on a path that winds out of our control. The learning way requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure; but opens the way to new, broader and deeper horizons of experience.

Yet, many of us live our daily lives making little or no conscious effort to learn from our experiences. We tend to assume that effective learning happens automatically and have given little thought to how we learn or how we might improve our learning capability. Yet research in many areas has shown that experience alone does not produce much learning. Research on automaticity helps to explain this by suggesting that many of the activities of our daily lives are conducted on “automatic pilot” without conscious awareness and intention (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999).

Learning from Experience

Philosopher John Dewey, one of the founding scholars of experiential learning, recognized that experience alone did not produce learning. He emphasized that learning involved “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience that adds to the meaning of that experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (1944: 74). He argued that it was necessary to reflect on experience in order to draw out the meaning in it and to use that meaning as a guide in future experiences. He observed that the reflective process seemed to be initiated only when we are ‘stuck’ with a problem or difficulty or ‘struck’ by the strangeness of something outside of our usual experience (Dewey 1910).

Following Dewey, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT—Kolb 1984) describes how experience is transformed into learning through a cycle of learning involving experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. ELT defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.41). The ELT model portrays two opposing modes of *grasping* experience—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) -- and two opposing modes of *transforming* experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Learning from experience is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among these four learning modes. This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner “touches all the bases”—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned. Immediate concrete experiences (experiencing) are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts (thinking) from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences (See Figure 1).



In this essay we will show how the experiential learning model can be used to approach learning in a deliberate way, increasing learning effectiveness by understanding how we learn from our experiences and our own unique style of learning. Deliberate strategies and practices for mastering the process of learning from experience will be outlined. Our approach to deliberate experiential learning draws on theories in three areas; meta-cognition (Kolb & Kolb 2009), mindfulness (Yeganeh 2006; Yeganeh & Kolb 2009,) and studies of expert learning called deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer 1993).

Meta-cognition--Understanding yourself as a learner

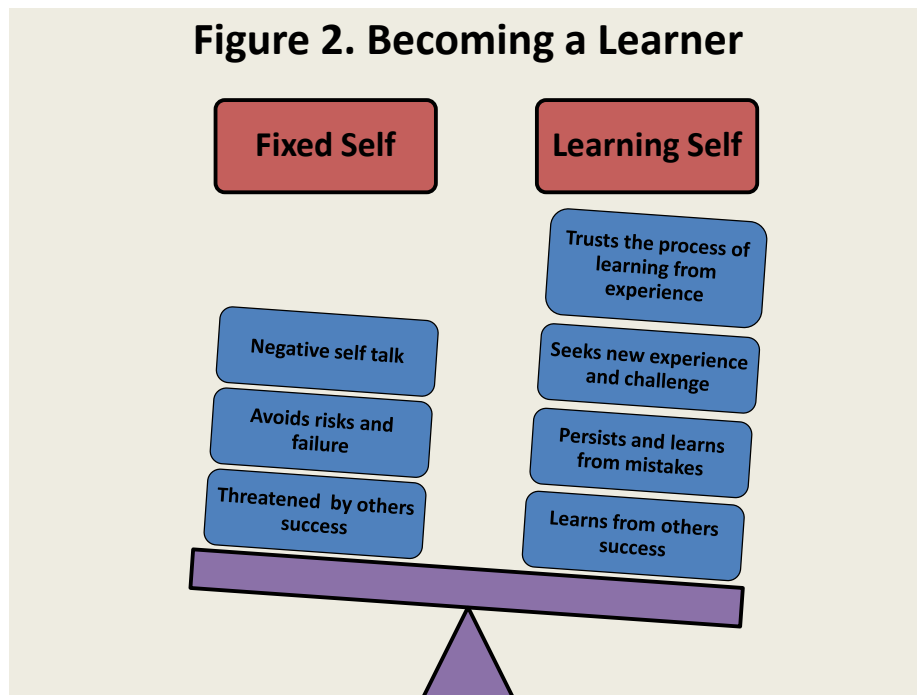
In the late 1970's Flavell (1979) introduced the concept of meta-cognition. He divided meta-cognitive knowledge into three sub-categories: 1) Knowledge of person variables refers to general knowledge about how human beings learn and process information, as well as individual knowledge of one's own learning processes. 2) Task variables include knowledge about the nature of the task and what it will require of the individual. 3) knowledge about strategy variables include knowledge about ways to improve learning as well as conditional knowledge about when and where it is appropriate to use such strategies.

By using the experiential learning model, learners can better understand the learning process, themselves as learners and the appropriate use of learning strategies

based on the learning task and environment. When individuals engaged in the process of learning by reflective monitoring of the learning process they are going through, they can begin to understand important aspects of learning: how they move through each stage of the learning cycle, the way their unique learning style fits with how they are being taught, and the learning demands of what is being taught. This comparison results in strategies for action that can be applied in their ongoing learning process.

Develop a learning identity. A key aspect of learning is person’s beliefs about themselves, particularly their views about their ability to learn. At the extreme, if a person does not believe that they can learn they won’t. Learning requires conscious attention, effort and “time on task”. These activities are a waste of time to someone who does not believe that they have the ability to learn. On the other hand there are many successful individuals who attribute their achievements to a learning attitude. Oprah Winfrey for example has said, “I am a woman in process. I’m just trying like everybody else. I try to take every conflict, every experience, and learn from it. Life is never dull.”

One’s self-identity is deeply held. One is likely to defend against experiences that contradict this identity. For the vast majority of us our self-identity is a mix of fixed and learning beliefs. We may feel that we are good at learning some things like sports and not good at others like mathematics. Every success or failure can trigger a reassessment of one’s learning ability. Figure 3 depicts one’s self-identity as balancing characteristics that reinforce a fixed self and a learning self. Fixed self characteristics shift the balance to the fixed self. Factors associated with the learning self tip the balance toward becoming a learner.



From the above figure we suggest several practical steps for developing a positive meta-cognitive learning identity.

Trust your experience. Place experience at the center of your learning process, making it the focal point of your choices and decisions. This does not mean that you shouldn't learn from experts or the experience of others since this advice is also part of your experience. The key is to own your choices and validate them in your experience. When you do this you take charge of your learning and your life.

Trust the learning process. Avoid an excessive focus on the outcomes of immediate performance and focus instead on the longer term recursive process of learning by tracking your performance progress over time. Rarely is a single performance test a matter of life and death, and to treat it as such only reinforces a fixed identity. Every performance is an occasion for learning and improvement in future performances.

Redefine your relationship to failure. No one likes to fail but failure is an inevitable part of doing something new. Thomas Edison provided a role model for the learning response to failure when he said "Failure is the most important ingredient for success." James Dyson, the inventor of the Dyson vacuum cleaner and founder of Dyson, Inc, sees Edison as a role model saying he, "achieved great success through repeated failure. His 10000 failures pale in comparison to his 1093 US patents. Each one of Edison's inventions, from the Dictaphone to the light bulb came from his inability to give up" (Yang 2008:28).

Failures can also help focus your priorities and life path on your talents and strengths. In her commencement address to the 2008 graduates of Harvard University, J. K. Rowling described the low period in her life after graduation, which was marked by failure on every front, and talked about its benefits; "...failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena where I believed I truly belonged. I was set free because my greatest fear had been realized and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea." (Rowling 2008:56)

Let go of strong emotional responses in order to learn from failure. Failures, losses and mistakes provoke inevitable emotional responses. Yet it is important to learn to regulate emotional reactions that block learning and feed into a fixed identity. Golfers who slam their club and curse themselves and the game after a bad shot lose the opportunity to coolly analyze their mistake and plan for corrections on the next hole. An effective way to deal with the emotions that follow judging oneself a failure is to breath calmly and intentionally while accepting the current moment as it is. This enables a clearer mind with which to move forward. *Risk losing.* Joel Waitzkin in *The art of learning* provides a handbook of his meta-cognitive learning based on his process of

becoming first a chess master and then a martial arts champion. He emphasizes the importance of losing in order to learn how to win. “If a big strong guy comes into a martial arts studio and someone pushes him, he wants to resist and push the guy back to prove that he is a big strong guy. The problem is that he isn’t learning anything by doing this. In order to grow, he needs to give up his current mindset. (Waitzkin 2007: 107).

Reassess your beliefs about how you learn and what you are good at. It is important to consciously reflect on and choose how you define yourself as a learner. Often people are unaware of the way in which they characterize themselves and their abilities.

Monitor the messages you send yourself. Pay attention to your self-talk. Saying to yourself, “I am stupid.” or, “I am no good at ...” matters and reinforces a negative fixed identity; just as saying, “I can do this” reinforces a positive learning identity. Beware of internalized oppression. Some of these messages are introjections from others that you have swallowed without careful examination.

Balance your success/failure accounts. Most of us remember our failures more vividly than our successes. For example, in our experience as teachers we both tend to focus on the one or two negative remarks in our course ratings and ignore the praise and positive reactions. The danger of this type of focus is adjusting one’s teaching style to suit one or two negative comments and risking losing the majority of positive experiences in the room. A deeper danger is that such a focus will negatively shape longer term thoughts and behaviors about oneself (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck 2007:259-260). Sometimes it is useful to make an inventory of learning strengths and successes to balance your accounts.

Learning style. In addition to believing in ourselves as learners, it is also important to understand how it is that we learn best, our learning style. An understanding of one’s unique learning preferences and capabilities, and the match between these and the demands of learning tasks, can increase learning effectiveness. It can suggest why performance is not optimal and suggest strategies for improvement, as well as help explain why some topics and courses are interesting and others are painful. It can also help explain why some develop a non-learning self-identity. Our most gratifying experiences in teaching individuals about their learning style have been when they come up and say, “My whole life I thought I was stupid because I didn’t do well in school. Now I realize that it is just because I learn in a different way than schools teach.”

One way to gain meta-cognitive understanding of how we learn is to take the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI). Those who use the KLSI (Kolb & Kolb 2011) to assess their learning style often decide that they wish to develop their capacity to engage in one or more of the four learning modes, experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC) and acting (AE). In some cases this is based on a desire to develop a weak mode in their learning style. In others it may be to increase capability in a mode that is particularly important for their learning tasks. Because of the dialectic relationships among the learning modes, containing the inhibiting effects of opposing learning modes can be as effective in getting into a mode as actively trying to express it. Overall learning

effectiveness is improved when individuals are highly skilled in engaging all four modes of the learning cycle.

Mindful Experiential Learning

Mindfulness is one special form of meta-cognition that is especially effective for enhancing learning from experience. Mindfulness is an age old set of practices used to overcome the tendency to “sleep walk” automatically through our lives. In recent times these practices have been accepted into mainstream psychology, social psychology, and medicine. Empirical studies are now finding statistical support for what many have known for two millennia: that practicing mindfulness enhances mental and physical health, creativity, and contextual learning.

William James (1890), the originator of the theory of experience on which ELT is based, stated, “no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before” (p.155). The mind often neglects the rich context available for observation. Instead it automatically labels stimuli based on limited exposure and moves on to the next stimulus to under-observe. Labeling experiences as fun, boring, sad, happy, urgent, relaxed, and so on are also often based in automatically categorizing experience, rather than being fully present in the unique context of every moment. For James, everything begins and ends in the continuous flux and flow of experience. This emphasis on immediate direct sensual experience is exactly the focus on here and now experience that characterizes mindfulness. James emphasized the importance of attention, as he noted—“My experience is what I agree to attend to.” (1890, p. 403). This also is a central element of mindfulness.

The practices of mindfulness are aimed at helping the individual: 1) focus on present and direct experience, 2) be intentionally aware and attentive and 3) accept life as an emergent process of change. Our research on mindfulness and experiential learning (Yeganeh 2006, Yeganeh & Kolb 2009) suggests that the practice of mindfulness can help individuals learn from experience by enhancing presence and intentional attention.

To be present and engaged in direct experience, one must anchor in present-centered awareness by attending to the 5 senses. One of the strongest ways to attend to the present moment is through calm and aware breathing (Good & Yeganeh 2006, Yeganeh, 2006, Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). Attending to the present moment serves to quiet the mind; reducing automatic, habitual patterns of thinking and responding. Presence enhances Concrete Experience and allows the learning cycle to begin. In a sense, we cannot learn from experience if we do not first *have* an experience, and often, automatic routines make it difficult for direct experiencing in the moment to occur.

Intentional attention—the process of being aware and choiceful about what we are attending to—is, as James says, the process that creates our experience. Mindfulness becomes important when we consider *how* we choose to process and

learn from the events in our lives. By intentionally guiding the learning process and paying attention to how we are going through the phases of the learning cycle, we make ourselves through learning. How and what we learn determines the way we process the possibilities of each new emerging experience, which in turn determines the range of choices and decisions we see. The choices and decisions we make to some extent determine the events we live through, and these events influence our future choices. Thus, we create ourselves through the choices of the actual occasions they live through. For many, this learning style choice is relatively unconscious, an auto-pilot program for learning. Mindfulness can put the control of our learning and our life back in our hands.

Deliberate Practice—Becoming an Expert Learner

We all know that learning involves repeated practice. However time spent practicing does not necessarily lead to learning and improved performance. Going to the golf practice range and hitting bucket after bucket of balls doesn't necessarily improve your game and in fact may make it worse by ingraining bad habits. Expert performance research initiated in the early 1990's by K. Anders Ericsson (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer 1993; Ericsson & Charness 1994; Ericsson 2006; Baron & Henry 2010) teaches a great deal about learning from practice. The good news from this work is that greatness, for the most part, is not a function of innate talent; it is learned from experience. The not-so-good news is that it involves long term commitment (ten years or 10,000 hours for many top experts) and a particular kind of practice that is hard work, called deliberate practice.

The basic techniques of deliberate practice are useful for improving our ability to learn from experience. Essentially deliberate practice involves intense concentrated, repeated performance that is compared against an ideal or "correct" model of the performance. It requires feedback that compares the actual performance against the ideal to identify "errors" that are corrected in subsequent performance attempts. In this sense deliberate practice can be seen as mindful experiential learning—focused reflection on a concrete performance experience that is analyzed against a meta-cognitive ideal model to improve future action in a recurring cycle of learning. Learning relationships can be of great help in deliberate practice by providing expert models, feedback and support for the focused effort required.

We have created a practical model (Figure 3) from meta-cognition mindfulness and deliberate practice work to identify practices that can be used to develop the capacity to engage in one or more of the four modes of the learning cycle. By practicing the specific action in the Figure 3 one can improve one's ability to fully engage specific experiential learning modes and more fully engage the total process of learning from experience. One should choose practices based on the area of learning one wishes to develop. For example, if one would like to improve the ability to engage in concrete experience, the deliberate learning practices under that titled section will help to accomplish this, and so on. Keep in mind that the key to

being deliberate when learning is intentionality, as opposed to being on auto-pilot in any of the phases.

Figure 3. Deliberate Experiential Learning Practices (Yeganeh & Kolb 2009)

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

CE

- Diaphragm breathing— relaxing the physiological state
- Focus on a new touch, sound, sight, smell, so your mind re-sets and switches off autopilot

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION

RO

- Become aware of critical times that you are impulsive
- Suspend impulsive thoughts and actions
- Practice sitting with thoughts and feelings rather than acting on them
- Practice acceptance rather than judgement

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

AC

- Question assumptions you are making in this moment
- Consider other people's perspectives
- Doubt your personal "truth"
- Seek shades of gray rather than dichotomous thinking

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

AE

- Practice novel questioning— shift the conversation by asking questions that generate possibilities
- Think of thoughts and behaviors that you admire in another during a given situation and practice them
- Experiment by responding to people and events in ways that you normally do not

Conclusion

Cultivating deliberate experiential learning practices can help us become more intentional about how we think and behave in a given learning environment. In order to be more aware of learning processes, learners must find unique ways to engage in routines of momentary awareness. In organizations it is helpful for learners to identify people who they can routinely check-in with on the degree to which they are being intentional in learning situations. These conversational anchors provide environmental cues to stay focused on a mindfulness practice and emotional support to remain optimistic. Finally, we encourage learners not to be discouraged when facing difficulty in starting a deliberate experiential learning practice. It may be best to try 1 or 2 specific learning practices, and go from there. Anything more can be overwhelming and may actually inhibit progress. As techniques are mastered, additional methods can be added. In this chapter, we have provided deliberate experiential learning practices that can improve the quality of learning in the four modes of experiential learning. We encourage others to develop innovative ways to cultivate deliberate experiential learning in organizations and to share the results through articles and presentations so that one day it becomes the norm. We believe it is needed more now than ever before.

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