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Experiential Learning

Experiential learning as a field of practice is vast - encompassing everything from farming to conflict resolution, from assessment to youth development, from practical skill training to theoretical models, and from personal growth to workplace training and development. All of this is labeled as experiential learning and presented as being part of the experiential learning family.

So, what exactly constitutes experiential learning? For some people it is all about education, and for others it is narrowed down to a specific practice or curriculum model.

Experiential learning can be described as a process by which the experience of the learner is reflected upon and leads to new insights or learnings. The most established model of experiential learning is the one developed by David Kolb.

In his model, the process begins with an experience (concrete experience) followed by reflection (reflective observation). The reflection is then assimilated into a theory (abstract conceptualization), and finally these new (or reformulated) hypotheses are tested in new situations (active experimentation).

Experiential learning refers to a spectrum of meanings, practices and ideologies that emerge out of the work and commitments of policy makers, educators, trainers, change agents, and everyone else all over the world. These people believe that this type of learning is relevant to challenges they currently face in their lives, in education, in institutions, in commerce and industry, in communities, and in society as a whole.

The model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests new concepts and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualization. Most models of experiential learning are cyclical and have three basic phases:

- An experience or problem situation.
- A reflective phase within which the learner examines the experience and draws learnings from that reflection.
- A testing phase within which the new insights or learnings, having been integrated with the learner's own conceptual framework, are applied to a new problem situation or experience.

Across such diversity, however we discern four emphases for experiential learning. Each emphasis forms the basis for a cluster of interrelated ideas and concerns. These clusters of people and ideas are known as 'villages.' The four villages are as follows:

Village one is concerned particularly with the recognition of prior learning through assessing. Informal learning is the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training opportunities.

Village two focuses on experiential learning as the basis for bringing about change in the structures, purposes and curricula of formal education.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Village Three emphasizes experiential learning as the basis for group consciousness raising, community action and social change.

Village four is concerned with personal growth and development, and also with experiential learning approaches that increase self-awareness and group effectiveness.

Experiential learning has a rich history in the United States and around the world. In the 1930's, Dewey (1939) focused on the importance of experiential learning in the natural sciences. After World War II, returning veterans pushed America's educational system to recognize alternative systems of learning.

More than 200 groups currently participate in experiential learning activities, including Ford Motor Company, American Bankers' Association, General Electric, Bell Atlantic, Central Intelligence Agency, ECPI College of Technology, and Society for Human Resource Management.