3 Teaching and learning

Let's look outside the classroom for a moment. How do people learn things in everyday life? By trial and error? By reading a manual and following the instructions? By sitting next to someone who can tell you what to do and give feedback on whether you're doing OK?

The experiential learning cycle

The process of learning often involves five steps (see Figure 1.1):

1 doing something;
2 recalling what happened;
3 reflecting on that;
4 drawing conclusions from the reflection;
5 using those conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience.

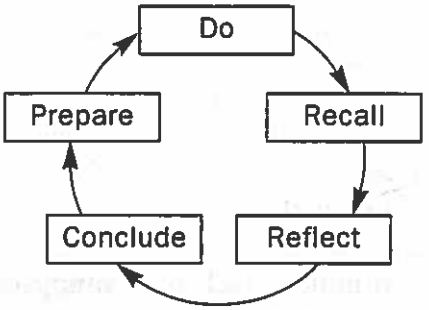


Figure 1.1 An experiential learning cycle

Again, it is important to distinguish between learning and teaching. Information, feedback, guidance and support from other people may come in at any of the five steps of the cycle, as shown in Figure 1.2, but the essential learning experience is in doing the thing yourself.

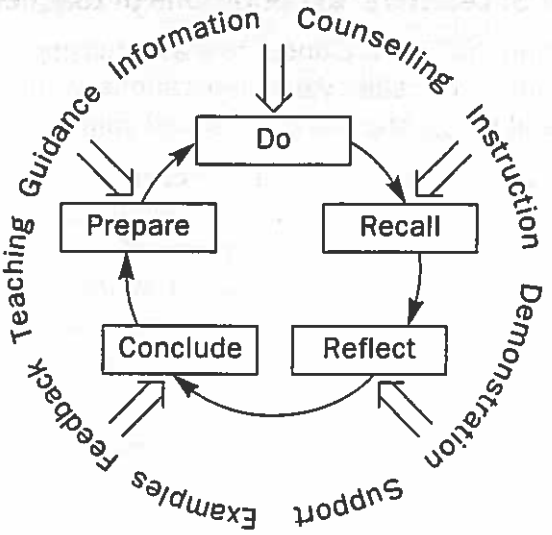
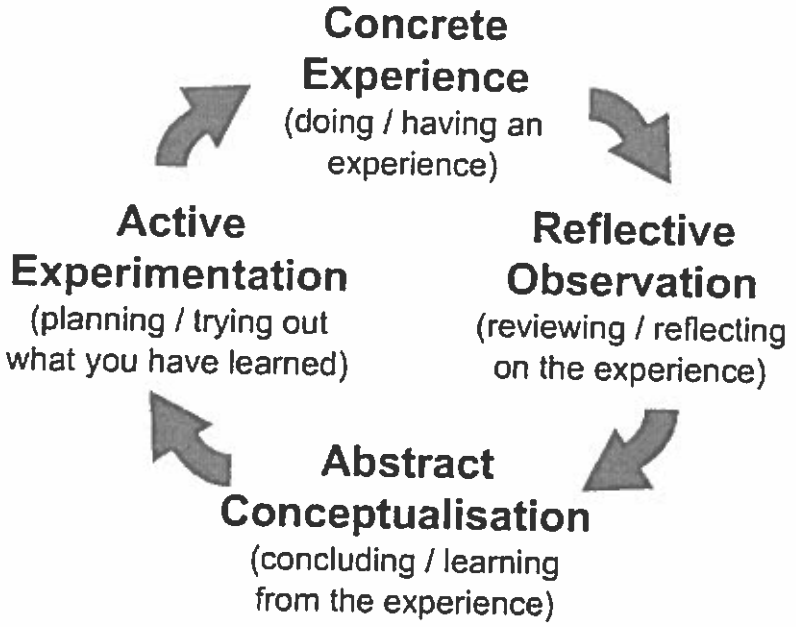


Figure 1.2 Teaching and the experiential learning cycle

Kolb Learning Cycle Tutorial - Static Version

Text and concept by Clara Davies (SDDU, University of Leeds)
Tutorial design by Tony Lowe (LDU, UNversity of Leeds)

Multimedia version (Flash plug-in required).



Introduction

Reflective practice is important to the development of lecturers as professionals as it enables us to learn from our experiences of teaching and facilitating student learning. Developing reflective practice means developing ways of reviewing our own teaching so that it becomes a routine and a process by which we might continuously develop.
Kolb developed a theory of experiential learning that can give us a useful model by which to develop our practice. This is called The Kolb Cycle, The Learning Cycle or The Experiential Learning Cycle. The cycle comprises four different stages of learning from experience and can be entered at any point but all stages must be followed in sequence for successful learning to take place. The Learning Cycle suggests that it is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. It is necessary to reflect on the experience to make generalisations and formulate concepts which can then be applied to new situations. This learning must then be tested out in new situations. The learner must make the link between the theory and action by planning, acting out, reflecting and relating it back to the theory.

Concrete Experience (doing / having an experience)

In the case of the PGCLTHE, the 'Concrete Experience' is the 'doing' component which derives from the content and process of the PGCLTHE programme - through attending the workshops or, in the case of the on-line module, your reading of the on-line learning materials - together with your actual experience of teaching in the classroom plus your other teaching duties and practices. It may also derive from your own experience of being a student.

Reflective Observation (reviewing / reflecting on the experience)

The 'Reflective Observation' element stems from your analysis and judgements of events and the discussion about the learning and teaching that you engage in with your mentor, colleagues and fellow PGCLTHE participants. People naturally reflect on their experiences of teaching, particularly when they are new to it and less confident in their abilities or when an experience has been painful. We've all come out of lectures saying to ourselves 'that went well or badly', in an intuitive sense. This might be termed 'common-sense reflection'. But how do we know it was good or bad and what was good or bad about it? We need to articulate our reflections in some systematic way so that we remember what we thought and build on that experience for next time.
For example this might be through your own self-reflections or evaluations after the event through keeping a

log or journal. It may also include student feedback, peer observation of teaching (e.g. comments made by your mentor or colleague), moderation of assessments, external examiner comments, discussions with your mentor or a fellow participant on the PGCLTHE. All of these can be brought together to give an overall reflection on your practice.
Reflection in itself, though, is insufficient to promote learning and professional development. Twenty years' experience may consist of twenty years teaching the same content in the same way! Unless we act on our reflections of ourselves and on the opinions of others then no development takes place.

Abstract Conceptualisation (concluding / learning from the experience)

In order to plan what we would do differently next time, we need - in addition to our reflections on our experience - to be informed by educational theory e.g. through readings of relevant literature on teaching and learning or by attending staff development or other activities. Reflection is therefore a middle ground that brings together theories and the analysis of past action. It allows us to come to conclusions about our practice - 'Abstract Conceptualism'.

Active Experimentation (planning / trying out what you have learned)

The conclusions we formed from our 'Abstract Conceptualisation' stage then form the basis by which we can plan changes - 'Active Experimentation'. 'Active Experimentation' then starts the cycle again when we implement those changes in our teaching practice to generate another concrete experience which is then followed by reflection and review to form conclusions about the effectiveness of those changes...

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and learning experiences used by the teacher within the [language] teaching and learning process' (Richards, 1990: 35). Any particular methodology usually has a theoretical underpinning that should cause coherence and consistency in the choice of teaching procedures. 'Foreign language teaching', on the other hand, though it naturally includes methodology, has further important components such as lesson planning, classroom discipline, the provision of interest – topics which are relevant and important to teachers of all subjects. Such topics, therefore, are included in this book as well as the more conventional methodology-based ones such as 'teaching reading'.

Models of teacher learning

Various models of teacher learning have been suggested; the three main ones, as described in Wallace (1993), are as follows:

1. The craft model
The trainee learns from the example of a 'master teacher', whom he/she observes and imitates. Professional action is seen as a craft, rather like shoemaking or carpentry, to be learned most effectively through an apprenticeship system and accumulated experience. This is a traditional method, still used as a substitute for postgraduate teaching courses in some countries.

2. The applied science model
The trainee studies theoretical courses in applied linguistics and other allied subjects, which are then, through the construction of an appropriate methodology, applied to classroom practice. Many university- and college-based teacher-training courses are based, explicitly or implicitly, on this idea of teacher learning.

3. The reflective model
The trainee teaches or observes lessons, or recalls past experience; then reflects, alone or in discussion with others, in order to work out theories about teaching; then tries these out again in practice. Such a cycle aims for continuous improvement and the development of personal theories of action (Schön, 1983). This model is used by teacher development groups and in some recently designed training courses.

Which is likely to be most effective? Or, perhaps a better question: how do teachers learn most effectively, and how can this learning be integrated into a formal course of study?

I have several times asked groups of teachers in different countries from what, or whom, they feel they learned their present teaching expertise and knowledge. Various possible sources were suggested, such as colleagues and 'master teachers', the literature, pre- or in-service courses, their own experience as teachers, their students, their own experience as learners; and teachers were asked to rate each of these in importance for professional learning. Every time the majority replied that personal teaching experience was by far the most important. (Try this yourself with teachers you know!)

This answer makes sense on an intuitive, personal level as well. I myself have done my best to read, study, discuss with colleagues, attend courses and conferences in order to improve my professional knowledge. Nevertheless, if asked, I would make the same reply as the teachers in my survey: I have learnt most through (thinking about) my own teaching experience. This does not mean that other sources of knowledge and learning processes do not contribute; but it does mean that they are probably less important.

Thus, I have chosen to base this course primarily on the 'reflective model' as defined at the beginning of this section.

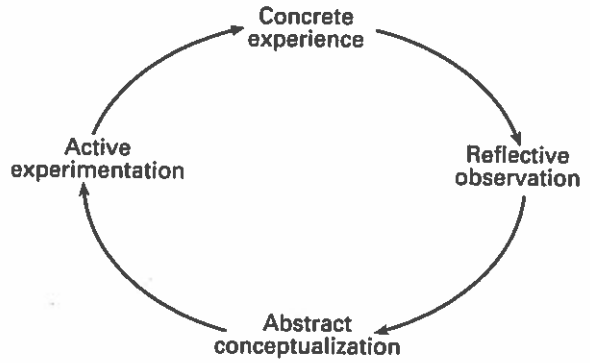
My only reservation is that this model can tend to over-emphasize experience. Courses based on it have sometimes used the (student-) teachers themselves as almost the sole source of knowledge, with a relative neglect of external input – lectures, reading, and so on – which help to make sense of the experiences and can make a very real contribution to understanding. As I see it, the function of teacher reflection is to ensure the processing of any input, regardless of where it comes from, by the individual teacher, so that the knowledge becomes personally significant to him or her. Thus a fully effective reflective model should make room for external as well as personal input.

Perhaps we might call this model 'enriched reflection'! It is described below.

'Enriched reflection'

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning elaborates the idea of 'experience + reflection'. He defines four modes of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In order for optimal learning to take place, the knowledge acquired in any one mode needs to be followed by further processing in the next; and so on, in a recursive cycle. Thus, concrete experience ('something happened to me in the classroom'), which involves intuitive or 'gut' feeling, should be followed by reflective observation ('let me step back and look at what took place'), which involves watching and perception; this in its turn is followed by abstract conceptualization ('what principle, or concept, can I formulate which will account for this event?'), involving intellectual thought; then comes active experimentation ('let me try to implement this idea in practice'), involving real-time action which will entail further concrete experience ... and so on (see Box 0.1).

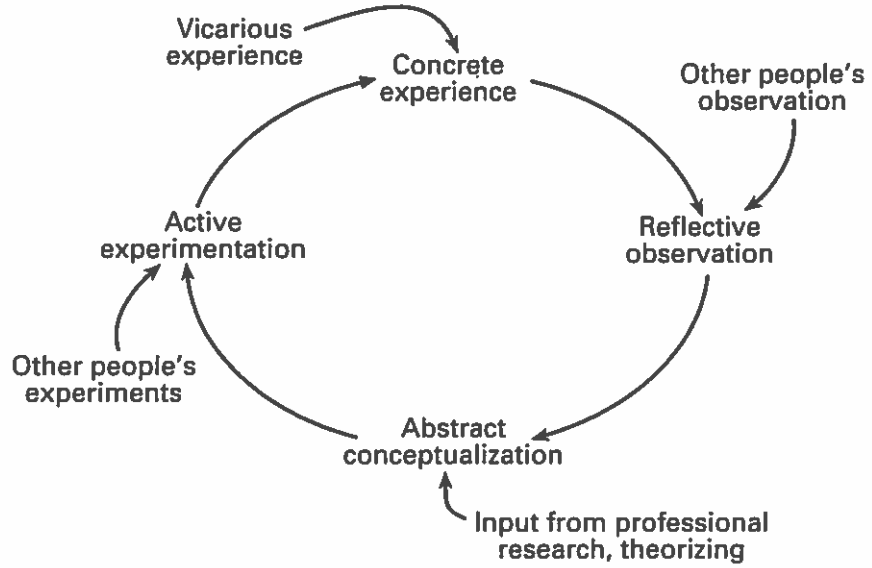
BOX 0.1: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING



(based on D. A. Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, Prentice Hall, 1984, p. 42)

This model, however, needs to be enriched by external sources of input. It is unrealistic and a waste of time to expect trainees to 'reinvent the wheel': this is like expecting physics students to discover known laws of physics through their own experiments. There is a lot to be learnt from experienced teachers (as in the craft model), from experts, from research and from reading (as in the applied science model) – provided all this can be integrated into one's own reflection-based theories. So at each stage of Kolb's circle let us add the external sources: experience can be vicarious (i.e. second-hand, such as observation, anecdote, video, transcripts); descriptions of other people's observations can add to our own; theoretical concepts can come from foreign language researchers and thinkers; ideas for or descriptions of experiments from writers or other professionals. And the initial stimulus for a learning cycle of this kind can occur, of course, at any of the eight points, not just at the point of experience (see Box 0.2).

BOX 0.2: 'ENRICHED REFLECTION'



Thus, sources of knowledge may be either personal experience and thought or input from outside; but in either case this knowledge should, in principle, be integrated into the trainees' own reflective cycle in order that effective learning may take place.

To summarize: the most important basis for learning is personal professional practice; knowledge is most useful when it either derives directly from such practice, or, while deriving originally from other sources, is tested and validated through it. Hence the subtitle of this book: *Practice and Theory*, rather than the more conventional *Theory and Practice*.

The role of the trainer

Such a model of professional learning has, of course, implications for the role of the trainer. In the 'craft model', the trainer is the master teacher, providing an example to be followed. The 'applied science' model also gives the trainer an authoritative role, as the source of theory which the teacher is to interpret in

practice. The conventional 'reflective model', in contrast, casts the trainer in the role of 'facilitator' or 'developer', giving little or no information, but encouraging trainees to develop their own body of knowledge.

According to the model suggested here, the function of the trainer is neither just to 'tell' the trainees what they should be doing, nor – just as bad – to refuse to tell them anything in order for them to develop all their knowledge on their own. The functions of the trainer, I believe, are:

- to encourage trainees to articulate what they know and put forward new ideas of their own;
- to provide input him- or herself and to make available further sources of relevant information;
- and, above all, to get trainees to acquire the habit of processing input from either source through using their own experience and critical faculty, so that they eventually feel personal 'ownership' of the resulting knowledge.

What the trainee should get from the course

Teachers, as mentioned above, generally agree that they learned most from their own experience and reflection while in professional practice. Some even claim that they learned everything from experience and nothing from their pre-service course at all – this is especially true of those who took courses that were predominantly theoretical.

Pre-service courses, however good, cannot normally produce fully competent practitioners who can immediately vie with their experienced colleagues in expertise. This is probably true of training courses in all the professions. On the other hand, without an effective course incoming teachers will merely perpetuate the way they were taught or the way colleagues teach, with little opportunity to encounter new ideas, to benefit from progress made in the field by other professionals, researchers and thinkers, or to develop personal theories of action through systematic study and experiment. The primary aim, then, of such a course is to bring trainees to the point at which they can begin to function competently and thoughtfully, as a basis for further development and improvement in the course of their own professional practice. Occasionally course graduates are already well on their way to excellence, but most of us start(ed) our teaching careers at a fairly modest level of competence.

Thus, a second, important aim of the course is to lay the seeds of further development. The course should be seen as the beginning of a process, not a complete process in itself: participants should be encouraged to develop habits of learning that will carry through into later practice and continue for their entire professional lives (See Module 22: *And beyond*).

Finally, there is a more long-term aim: to promote a view of teachers as autonomous and creative professionals, with responsibility for the wider development of professional theory and practice. This is in clear opposition to the 'applied science' model of teacher learning, which carries with it the implication that there is a hierarchy of prestige and authority. In such a hierarchy, the research experts and academics take the highest place, and the classroom teachers the lowest (Schön, 1983; Bolitho, 1988). The job of the classroom teachers is merely to interpret and implement theory which is handed down to them from the universities. They (the teachers) are allowed to take

decisions, but only those which affect their own classroom practice. In contrast, this book supports a view that teachers can and should develop theories and practices that are useful both within and beyond the limits of their own classrooms (see Stenhouse's writings in Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985); and that such a message should be conveyed through pre- and in-service training. Courses should lead trainees to rely on their own judgement and to be confident enough to discuss and criticize ideas put forward by others, whether local colleagues, trainers, lecturers, or university researchers. They should also promote individual research and innovation, in both practical and theoretical topics, and encourage the writing up and publication of original ideas for sharing with other professionals.

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