

Kolb's Experiential Cycle

The Transformative Power of Mistakes

The only way to improve with practice is to learn from your mistakes! More practice can make you frustrated and confused (and even hopeless) if you don't have a system for improving. Sometimes you may improve by a lot, sometimes your idea doesn't work, and you encounter a different kind of failure or mistake. This is a normal part of the improvement cycle, sometimes you improve, sometimes you don't. Over enough cycles, you will dramatically improve as you learn from each mistake.

Students who avoid making mistakes avoid making progress!

We recommend you engage in a Kolb's cycle as often as possible – ideally every day.

Overview

Each step of this cycle needs to be aligned. Step 1 **leads to** step 2, which **leads to** step 3, which logically resolves in the final step 4. At no point should we be taking "random guesses" or just "random" ideas or hypotheses.

Step 1: Experience

This is the simplest part. Start with a positive or negative experience. It could be to do with studying, time management, attempts and regulating your emotions, interactions you've had with other people, your own behaviour, or anything else you want to change!

- Briefly outline the experience.
- Make a brief note about whether it was good or bad or in between.

Example:

- I tried visually representing my notes today and found it difficult.
- I had an argument with another student which I wanted to avoid.

What's your experience?

Try to work through just one experience at a time so you don't confuse yourself in later steps. A single sentence in step 1 can easily become several paragraphs by step 2 and 3!

Step 2: Reflection

This is where you collect as much information about the experience as possible. The insights from here will become fuel for the next step. If you don't add enough detail here, you will find step 3 very difficult. Consider answering these questions (you don't have to answer all of them, all the time).

- How did you feel?
- When did you feel this way?
- If you struggled, at what points? Were there any triggers?
- How did you react?
- How did others react?
- Were there any factors that might have affected your experience **before** the experience? For example, perhaps you were tired, or it was during a stressful period.
- What did you do at each step? Try to draw out a step-by-step recount or chronology of events.
- How did you respond to difficulty or struggle?
- How did you feel before, during and after the event?

Example:

- Experience: I tried visually representing my notes today and found it difficult.
 - Reflection: I tried using some doodles to reduce the amount of verbal note-taking and to make my notes less linear. The hardest part was thinking about how to make it seem abstract and memorable. Some drawings felt easier than others, especially when it was more conceptual, but the details felt difficult to make abstract. Towards the end of the study session, I put in less effort as I felt lazier...
 - *This reflection example should ideally go on for a bit longer. This example ends here as it is just a demonstration.*
- Experience: I had an argument with another student which I wanted to avoid.
 - Reflection: I gave some feedback about someone's work, and they responded back being defensive and agitated. I felt that I was a little on edge even before giving feedback because I had been stressed from exams and studying. While giving feedback I was annoyed because they didn't seem to be listening to advice, and I didn't feel very patient. When they replied defensively, it made me feel more triggered and I felt myself becoming even more irritated. I replied back in a way that...
 - *Again, this reflection is only just beginning! There is a lot to potentially unpack here. Take your time! You may even want to take a break in between and come back to it in an hour or two.*

What if I struggle?

With any skill, struggling to do a step correctly indicates a lack of competency and fluency! Simply keep practising and try to do your best each time. If your first few reflections aren't very good, try to make your next attempt just 1% better. Over time, it will become easier and more natural.

The best part is that it will start remodelling your brain as well due to 'neuroplasticity', which means you will become naturally more self-aware and critically reflective. Two of the most important signs of maturity!

What's your reflection?

Feel free to use bullet points instead of sentences if you'd like. Some people prefer full sentences as it helps them think through the points more deeply.

Step 3: Abstraction

This step is about taking that comprehensive reflection and asking ourselves why it happened. You may have already done this to an extent in step 2. That's fine!

In the abstraction step, we focus on generalised, transferrable and "abstracted" reasons as to why we experienced all those things we just wrote about in the reflection. The following questions will be helpful.

- How do I **tend** to act in these kinds of situations?
- What about my **approach** or **perspective** or overall **strategy** made me prone to making this error?
- Do I make similar mistakes in other areas as well?
- What **habits** do I seem to have in certain types of situations that make me behave, react or act in this way?

Notice how the focus is on observations about yourself that transcend beyond just this single experience. There's no point having a great way to avoid this situation from happening again, if you make the same mistake in a slightly different situation. This is true whether we are talking about emotions, social interactions, mental health, academic skills, exam performance, musical practice, or any kind of experience.

By the end of this step, we want to have learned a little about the type of person we are and the type of habits we have. Once we know this, we can directly try to experiment on them and improve.

Example:

- **[Taking the example of visualising notes from before]** I tend to think about "abstract" doodles as random ideas, which makes it hard for me to think of something relevant to draw. This also seems to take a lot of energy. Whenever I feel tired, my technique seems to slip and I get lazy. Whenever I focus on the types of images I naturally think of when I read the concept or key word, I tend to be able to turn that into a more memorable picture.
- **[Taking the example of the argument from before]** Whenever I am tired or stressed, I tend to be less patient with others. My tolerance tends to be lower and it's easier for me to get defensive. When I feel my emotions escalating, I tend to respond straight away to try and resolve the issue and feel justified. Sometimes, I feel that I let my emotions get the better of me and I can sometimes regret the things I said or did when I think back on it later...
 - *Once again, this particular experience is very deep and there is surely much more we can abstract on. If you are not used to thinking this deeply and critically, it will be a challenge for you! But as before, you will get better with time and practice.*

What if this makes me feel very anxious or unsafe?

In some cases, deep reflection and expose and make us vulnerable to our unwelcome thoughts, emotions and habits. Sometimes it can remind us of traumatic experience we have had in the past. If you feel unsettled by this process, we highly recommend that you seek the help of a clinical psychologist who can coach you through managing these thoughts and emotions.

The open-mindedness and courage to accept help from a psychologist, face your problems, and let yourself be guided and coached are **extremely rare** signs of maturity that some adults never

develop. Especially among adolescents, it is exceedingly more common to downplay emotional or mental challenges, dismiss external help, or feel so drawn to “fitting in”, “being normal” or seeking social status, that we risk seriously harming our emotional capabilities. This harm we inflict on ourselves by refusing help when we’re younger can take decades to overcome later in life.

What’s your abstraction?

Feel free to use bullet points instead of sentences if you’d like. Some people prefer full sentences as it helps them think through the points more deeply.

Step 4: Experimentation

If you've done all the previous steps correctly, this final step is the easiest.

Here, we will draw on what we have learned about ourselves and combine it with what we have learned about theories, frameworks and techniques. Taking this, we can then create some simple experiments that we think will solve the issue.

We may be right and we may be wrong. But if you're wrong, it's best to learn why we were wrong. This is equally valuable learning.

In the process of improvement, it's normal to have vastly more "wrong" experiments than "right" experiments. After all, what are the chances that you get the 100% accurate diagnosis and solution to a complex issue first try?!

Expect to fail and look forward to learning why. By learning the different ways that a technique doesn't work, we learn a new way not to do things. Each failure is a step closer to getting it right!

Example:

- **[Taking the example of visualising notes from before]**
 - Focus on the images I naturally think of with a concept and try to turn that into a drawing, instead of just thinking desperately for "ideas"
 - When I feel tired, take a break so I don't waste time with incorrect technique
- **[Taking the example of the argument from before]**
 - Whenever I feel tired or stress, be extra mindful of my tone and manner of speaking, whether online or offline.
 - If I feel myself becoming defensive or irritated, taking two minutes to stand up and walk away and grab some water. Take some time to try and genuinely see the other person's perspective and remind myself to respect them equally as I would like to be treated.
 - If I feel that a situation is escalating, ask for a time out and apologise for getting too worked up, then repeat the step above.

Notice how the experiment directly relates to what we abstracted on in step 3. This helps us increase our success rate!

To keep our experiments manageable, only have a few experiments at a time. Otherwise you'll be juggling 20 different improvements across every aspect of your life and you'll fail and not learn from all of them!

Managing Failure

We've already discussed how you're more likely to fail and you should expect this! We've talked about how this is actually a good thing and directly contributes towards getting closer and closer to doing it right. But it's also important learn how we view this failure in the next Kolb's cycle.

Whenever you do an experiment, you want to reflect on how it went in the next cycle. Think about why and how you thought it would succeed, and abstract on the reasons why it didn't go as expected.

- What do you learn about your knowledge, understanding, perspective, or execution?
- Did you develop a deeper understanding of the process by doing this?
- Did you realise that there are things you had overlooked? This would be very common!

This process of going back and forth between experience and theory is the experiential cycle, and the sometimes "messy" process of self-improvement is called "non-linearity" and "recursiveness" in technical speak.

Non-linearity and recursiveness are generally considered unavoidable aspects of the learning process. So if you find yourself doing this, you're probably doing it right!

What's your experiment?

Use bullet points and keep things specific. You don't want vague, abstract plans that you aren't even sure how to follow and execute on a few days from now! We want action points and specific plans.

Avoid making plans that rely on just "trying harder".