

# Quick Notes

Here is a quick overview of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). All content this document (except the introduction on Kolb) is extracted and/ or adapted from the following Focus Article, with their corresponding page numbers listed in the subtitles:

- ★ Using Experiential Learning Theory to Promote Student Learning and Development in Programs of Education Abroad, Passarelli M. A., Kolb, D. A. 2012, In Michael Vande Berg, Michael Page, & Kris Lou (Eds.) Student Learning Abroad. Sterling, VA. PDF, 23 Pages <http://learningfromexperience.com/media/2012/02/using-experiential-learning-theory-to-promote-student-learning-and-development-in-programs-of-education-abroad.pdf>

Texts have been broken up, sentences cropped and lines shifted in order to render the text easier on the eyes, and to read more fluently for the purposes of this document. However, the original language and wording has been largely retained. No quotations marks have been used since the corresponding page numbers are provided.

## David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory: An Introduction

Known as the father of ELT, American educational theorist David A. Kolb's groundbreaking work *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development (1984)* moved educational research and practice into a new direction, focusing on the role that experience plays in the learning process. His work is influenced by giants in intelligence psychology and pedagogy like John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget; each of whom emphasise the importance of learning from concrete experience, the ability to develop that knowledge over time (the idea and possibility of growing one's mind versus the view that intelligence is fixed), as well as the transformation of impulses, feelings and desires into goal-oriented, higher order learning action.

Kolb's fundamental idea is that learning occurs in a cycle, and learner's learn best when their learning experience touches on every part of this cycle. His theoretical oeuvre has developed extensively to include other tools such as the **Learning Style Inventory (LSI)**, **Adaptive Style Inventory (ASI)**, **Learning Skills Profile (LSP)**, and the concept of **Learning Space**, most of which are attempts at creating typological tools for assessing learning preferences.

- For more context about how Kolb's work emerged from the theories of Dewey Lewin and Piaget, refer to **p.20–25 of Kolb's *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development***. <http://learningfromexperience.com/media/2010/08/process-of-experiential-learning.pdf>
- To learn about previous research and new directions in ELT, you can read the paper, **"Experiential Learning Theory: Previous Research and New Directions"**. <http://learningfromexperience.com/media/2010/08/experiential-learning-theory.pdf>
- **p. 2–8 of the Focus Article** offers concise introductions to the Kolb's conceptualising of ELT, ELT Cycle, Learning Style, Learning Flexibility and Learning Space.

**Experience Based Learning Systems, Inc** is a company founded and chaired by Kolb in 1981 to "provide on going quality research and practice on experiential learning". A large cache of materials on the topic can be found on the site <http://learningfromexperience.com/about/>.

# Experiential Learning Theory (p. 2–3)

**1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.** Although punctuated by knowledge milestones, learning does not end at an outcome, nor is it always evidenced in performance. Rather, learning occurs through the course of connected experiences in which knowledge is modified and re-formed. As Dewey suggests, "...education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience: ... the process and goal of education are one and the same thing" (1897, p. 79).

**2. All learning is re-learning.** Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the learners' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas. Piaget called this proposition constructivism—individuals construct their knowledge of the world based on their experience.

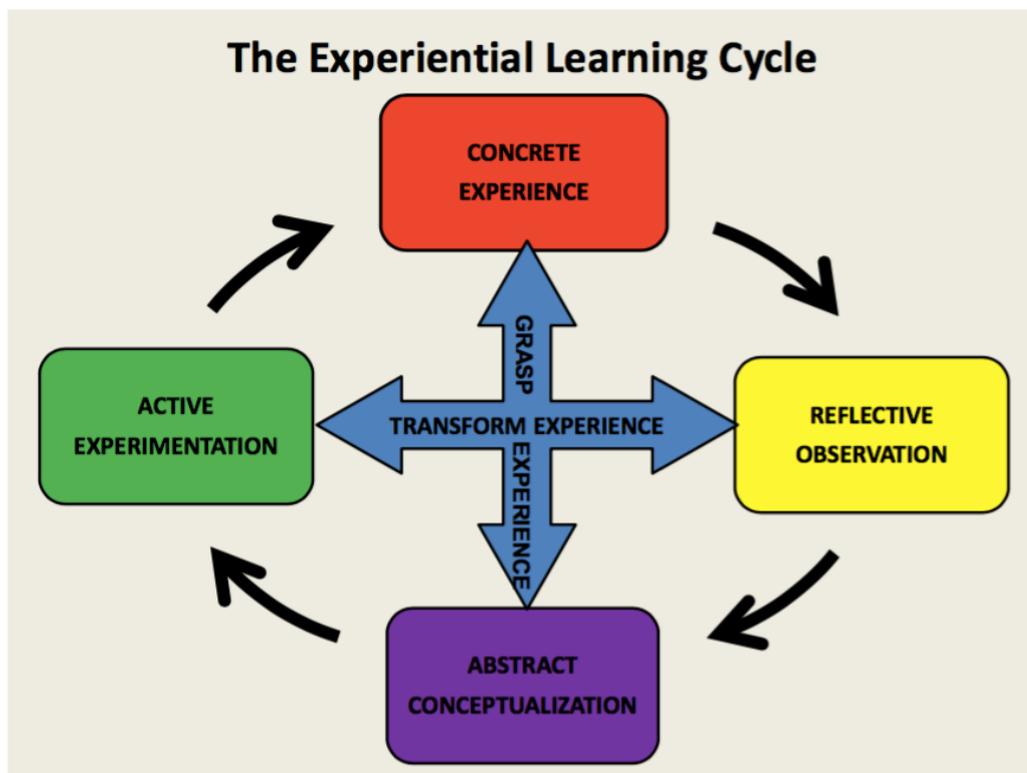
**3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.** Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. These tensions are resolved in iterations of movement back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.

**4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.** Learning is not just the result of cognition but involves the integrated functioning of the total person—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. It encompasses other specialized models of adaptation from the scientific method to problems solving, decision making and creativity.

**5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.** In Piaget's terms, learning occurs through equilibration of the dialectic processes of assimilating new experiences into existing concepts and accommodating existing concepts to new experience. Following Lewin's famous formula that behavior is a function of the person and the environment, ELT holds that learning is influenced by characteristics of the learner and the learning space.

**6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.** In ELT, knowledge is viewed as the transaction between two forms of knowledge: social knowledge, which is co-constructed in a socio-historical context, and personal knowledge, the subjective experience of the learner. This conceptualization of knowledge stands in contrast to that of the "transmission" model of education in which pre-existing, fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner.

## The ELT Cycle (p.3–4)



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). Grasping experience refers to the process of taking in information, and transforming experience is how individuals interpret and act on that information.

The ELT model portrays

- two dialectically related modes of grasping experience— Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and
- two dialectically related modes of transforming experience—Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE).

**Learning arises from the resolution of 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 (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), and acting (AE)—**in a recursive process that is sensitive to the learning situation and what is being learned.** Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn.

# Becoming an Experiential Educator—Principles of ELT (p.9)

To apply principles and practices of ELT is to become an experiential educator. For many this requires a reexamination of one's teaching philosophy and teaching practices. Those who think of experiential learning as techniques and games miss the deeper message that the foundational scholars of experiential learning were trying to convey. The practices of experiential learning are most effective when they are expressions of this fundamental philosophy captured in the following four propositions.

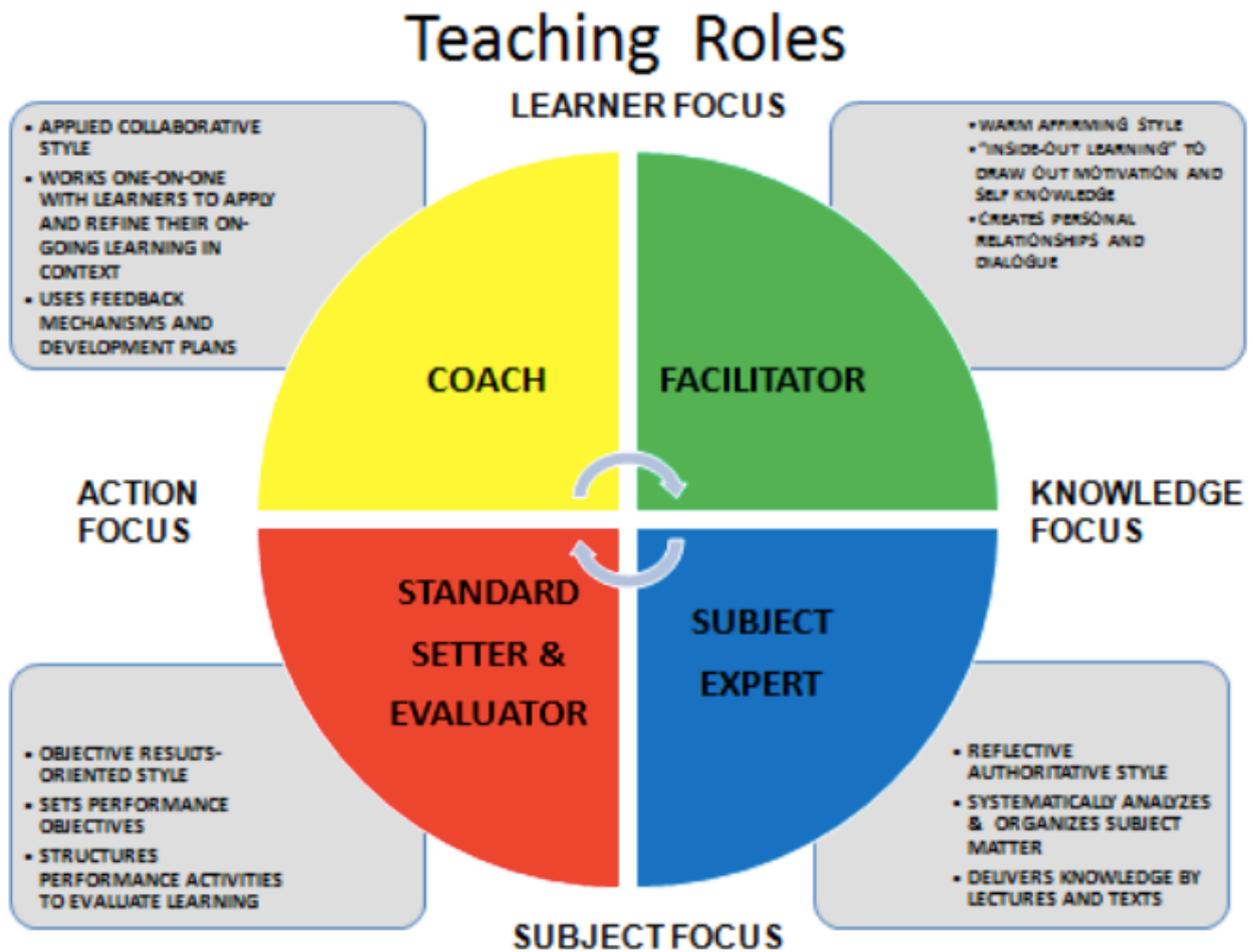
**Educating is a relationship.** In the midst of the multitude of educational theories, learning technologies, and institutional procedures and constraints, it is easy to lose sight of the most important thing—teaching is above all a profound human relationship. We can all think of teachers who have had a major impact on our lives and in most cases this involved a special relationship where we felt recognized, valued, and empowered by the teacher. Parker Palmer (1997) described the courage necessary for a teacher to fully enter into learning relationships with students as a willingness to expose one's inner world; to honor students as complex, relational beings; and to masterfully weave these worlds together with the course content.

**Educating is holistic.** It is about educating the whole person. Educating the whole person means that the goal of education is not solely cognitive knowledge of the facts, but also includes development of social and emotional maturity. In ELT terms it is about facilitating integrated development in affective, perceptual, cognitive and behavioral realms. Rather than acquiring generalized knowledge stripped of any context, learning is situated to the person's life setting and life path (Lave & Wenger, 1991). John Dewey (1897) put it well "I believe that education which does not occur through forms of life that are worth living for their own sake is always a poor substitute for genuine reality and tends to cramp and to deaden."

**Educating is learning-oriented.** The crisis in American education has led to an excessive emphasis on performance and learning outcomes often resulting in rote memorization and "teaching to the test" while ignoring broader developmental activities such as music and the arts. This is in strong contrast to the experiential learning view stated at the outset of this chapter that it is the process of learning that should be the primary focus. Education should focus on how students are arriving at answers by focusing on fundamental concepts, the process of inquiry, critical thinking and choiceful creation of values.

**Educating is learner centered.** ELT scholars put forward a constructivist view of knowledge and learning that emphasizes the importance of organizing the educational process around the experience of learners. This entails meeting them "where they are" in their understanding and building their confidence and competence to the point where they become independent, self directed learners.

## The 4 Teaching Roles (p.10)



**A teaching role is a patterned set of behaviours that emerge in response to the learning environment, including students and the learning task demands.** Each teaching role engages students to learn in a unique manner, using one mode of grasping experience and one mode of transforming experience. These roles can also be organised by their relative focus on the student versus the subject and action versus knowledge as illustrated in figure above.

1. **Facilitator.** Draws on the modes of concrete experience and reflective observation to help learners get in touch with their own experience and reflect on it.
2. **Expert.** Using the modes of reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, helps learners organise and connect their reflection to the knowledge base of the subject matter. Experts may provide models or theories for learners to use in subsequent analysis.
3. **Standard setter and evaluator.** Uses abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation to help students apply knowledge toward performance goals. In this role, educators closely monitor the quality of student performance toward the standards they set, and provide consistent feedback.
4. **Coaching.** Draws on concrete experience and active experimentation to help learners take action on personally meaningful goals.

## Maximising & Moving between the 4 Roles (p. 11–12)

As mentioned above, educators can gain flexibility in enacting the four teaching roles. Just as students can gain proficiency in integrating multiple learning modes, educators can gain flexibility in shifting fluidly among the four teaching roles. The four teaching roles provide a holistic framework for implementing experiential learning. Teaching role selection is influenced by desired student learning mode, student signals, one's teaching identity, and demands of the learning space. Because teaching roles are fluid rather than fixed, mechanisms for shifting among the roles can be employed. Effectively shifting between roles offers a relational way to intervene in student learning.

1. **Narrowly defined assumptions about teaching and learning tend to result in an imbalance in teaching role enactment.** Challenging one's current beliefs about the purpose and process of education could lead to an expanded philosophy that naturally encapsulates more teaching roles. This also applies to students who have their own beliefs about education. The extent to which students are encouraged to understand the learning process and their own learning styles and teaching role preferences will determine the possible range of effective teaching roles.
2. **Empathy is important for responding appropriately to the role requirements of a learning situation (Mead, 1934).** Empathy is the ability to sense others' feelings and perspectives, and take an active interest in their concerns (Boyatzis, 2009). In an educational context, this begins with understanding the class composition – age, gender and learning styles; selected major/minor or concentration; previous exposure to course content; students' previous work experiences; future career goals; and any other variable that might affect academic performance. Empathic responses are even more likely when the teacher gets to know each student as an individual. Information available through these interpersonal relationships allows the teacher to adapt their teaching role to the developmental needs of the students, as well as monitor optimal levels of challenge and support (Sanford, 1968).
3. **Educators can use mechanisms to facilitate smooth transitions between teaching roles.** The first mechanism is to explain the experiential learning cycle and four teaching roles up front so students understand how to respond when they perceive changes in a teacher's behavior toward them. Another mechanism is to establish predictable patterns of role shifting. This can be accomplished by displaying an agenda for each class so that students can follow along and anticipate role shifts. Class routines also assist with establishing predictability. For example, opening each class with a guided writing exercise or quiz helps students assume the appropriate learning mode. A final mechanism deals with utilizing changes in physical location. Physical movement between different spaces, such as large group instruction and small group breakouts or the classroom and the field, often cues a change in learning mode and facilitates smooth teaching role transitions.
4. **Team teaching is a method to achieve enactment of all four teaching roles.** Team teaching must go beyond simply taking turns leading class (such that each faculty member is present for one class per week rather than two). Teaching teammates should work closely together using complimentary strengths to perform all of the educator roles. This allows all roles to be present in the learning system. It also provides role modeling for teachers to learn from one another. In the instance that team teaching is not an option, teachers can engage students as teachers and ask them to play these roles in a peer capacity. \

# Using ELT to Promote Ownership on Learning Process (p. 12–14)

ELT calls for full engagement of students in the learning endeavour. Thus, in addition to the teaching role, consideration must be given to helping students take ownership of the learning process when designing study abroad programs and course activities. One way to do this is to *educate students on the experiential learning cycle and their own learning style preferences*.

1. **Educating students on experiential learning and their learning style helps develop a learning identity.** 'Learning to learn' interventions have led to increased classroom motivation and reversed a decline in grades (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), as well as significant improvements in adolescents' achievement test scores (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003) and higher grades among college students (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Hutt, 2007). It is our contention that an understanding of the experiential learning process will empower students to feel more capable and be more effective at maximizing learning opportunities abroad.
2. **Empower involvement in the learning process is to *create engaging learning environments using a variety of instructional methods*.** Curricula that emphasize active involvement, a variety of learning activities, and an element of choice tend to engender personal investment in learning. A word of clarification must be offered here. Popular practice suggests that curriculum should be designed to match the learning style of learners. While this idea is recommended by many learning style models other than ELT and is the basis for testing the validity of the learning style concept for some researchers (Pashler, et. al., 2008); it is *not* the recommended approach in ELT. **The ELT approach is to build curriculum around the cycle of learning in such a way that all learning modes are used and all styles of learning are engaged.** In this way, every program, course, or class session has something to engage and connect with learners of every style. Learners are also encouraged to develop learning style flexibility and to move freely around the learning cycle.
3. **Students take ownership of learning by *building diverse learning relationships*.** ELT defines learning relationships to be connections between one or more individuals that promote growth and movement through the learning spiral, ultimately inspiring future learning and relationship building. A connection is constituted by an interaction or series of interactions, which build toward a deeper relationship. Similar to Fletcher and Ragins' (2007) description of the development of a mentoring relationship through a series of small 'episodes,' learning relationships evolve as learning interactions increase in quality and frequency. Each interaction carries with it a sentiment, or emotional charge, which sets the tone for learning. Interactions characterized by compassion, mutual respect and support build the trust and positive emotional resources necessary to create space for learning – even when learning is challenging. Such growth-fostering relationships have been found to cultivate an increased sense of vitality; ability to take action; clarity about self and the relationship; sense of self-worth; and desire to form more connections in both parties (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Nevitt Sanford (1968) suggested that one of the environments where authentic student-faculty relationships are best fostered is on foreign campuses. **“In those relatively small communities abroad, many [students] learned for the first time what intellectual fellowship is and how rewarding a teacher can be when he is encouraged to reveal himself as a person. Students have an opportunity to see him in a variety of roles – as husband, father, traveling companion, gourmet, connoisseur of the arts, and member of a complex human community”** (Sanford, 1968, p. 172). Meaningful relationships abroad not only ease the adaptive challenge of living abroad, they also facilitate transformative learning and the development of cultural competence.