

# UNDERSTANDING AND FACILITATING EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION: THE FOURthought MODEL

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**ABSTRACT:** Learning from experience is a central philosophical and theoretical idea in the field of adult learning. Despite its long tradition and pragmatic richness, however, the idea is not grounded in a systematic theory or model of how we learn from experience and what it is that is learned. Current efforts which emphasize reflective thinking and critical reflection have contributed to the development of such a theoretical base but are diverse and incomplete. In this paper we discuss a theoretical model for viewing learning from experience in a more holistic manner. The components of this model are trial and error, reflection, creative expression, and discernment. Implications of this model for understanding and facilitating the process of learning from experience and how this model addresses the infamous research to practice gap are explored.

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of learning from experience has been the focus of scholarship across many disciplines for many years. Whether we come to know the world through our senses or through our minds was a philosophical debate which raged for centuries (Crosby, 1988). Kant resolved this intellectual impasse by suggesting that the source of order in the world was not external but in the human mind. According to Kant, experience is received through an active structuring mind. The idea that both reason and experience are involved in our coming to know the world was further elaborated in the writings of several progressive educators, including John Dewey (1938), Eduard Lindeman (1926), and Mary Parker Follet (1932). For Dewey and other progressive educators, experience was to be used intentionally to evolve distinctive qualities from an otherwise indeterminate, immediate, and felt quality of experience. Experience was to help us learn about and function more effectively in our world. In turn, these progressivists have shaped the work of several prominent, modern-day theorists of adult learning, including Malcom Knowles (1990), Jack Mezirow (1991), and Stephen Brookfield (1986). Although these scholars differ considerably on a number of important issues about adult learning, they all place considerable emphasis on the importance of the learner's experiences in the learning process.

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Thus, learning from one's experiences is an idea that has enjoyed a long and rich tradition within educational scholarship. It is now widely accepted as a key "principle" in understanding how adults learn and is one of the most central ideas in the field of adult and continuing education. It also represents one of those few ideas that provides a promising basis for bridging the oft cited gap between research and practice.

### **PRACTICE IN SEARCH OF A THEORY**

Despite its enduring philosophical roots, however, and its theoretical richness, learning from experience is a practice phenomenon that has received little systematic and critical study by either theorists or scholar-practitioners in the field of adult education. How this centrally important idea is glossed over by many in the field is illustrated in Stewart's (1987) intellectual biography of Eduard Lindeman. Arguably more than any other scholar in the field, Lindeman stressed the importance of experience in adult learning. Even though Stewart devotes an entire chapter to this very question, the reader leaves this work with no clear theoretical understanding of what learning from experience meant to Lindeman, what it is that is learned through this process, or a theoretical view of how this form of learning takes place. Current scholars, such as Knowles and Brookfield offer little beyond repeating Lindeman's original dictum: "the highest resource of value in adult education is the learner's experience" (Stewart, 1987, p. 103).

In a critique of the Experiential Education Movement, Wichman (1988) points to a lack of rigorous research in the field and a reluctance among those committed to experiential forms of learning to engage in serious philosophical and theoretical exploration. This has had the effect of restricting a more multi-dimensional and holistic view of learning from experience. According to Wichman (1988), this lack of willingness to seriously reflect on and theorize about experience-based learning has led to the "learning by doing heresy" and its syndromes: 1) the blind faith syndrome; 2) the cookbook syndrome; and 3) the process-centered syndrome. That is, facilitators using experience-based learning accept experiential activities as inherently good, focus on the development of specific "how-to" procedures, and emphasize activities rather than outcomes. In the words of one experiential educator, this means, "Let the mountains speak for themselves" (Nold, 1977).

The conceptual meaning of the idea of experience-based learning remains illusive and many practitioners are not clear on what specific approaches to use to facilitate this form of learning or when to use them. As a result, for participants in adult education programs, experience-based learning is often more a promise than a reality. According to Wichman (1988), "What is needed now is the development of specific theories of experiential learning and instruction based upon a general philosophy of experiential education" (p. 71). An obviously central component to this theory-building is an attempt to understand how learning from experience occurs and what it is that is learned in the process.

While the preceding critique portrays learning from experience as an aspect of practice intellectually barren of research and theory, there has been a small but concerted effort recently to address the questions of what experience means within a theory of adult learning and how adults learn from experience.

### **Research on the Process of Learning From Experience**

Similar to the more pragmatic literature which largely precedes it, theoretical and conceptual work on learning from experience reflects a heterogeneous blend of perspectives. These perspectives, however, can be grouped roughly into two larger orientations: 1) Perspectives oriented to the individual and grounded in a more humanistic view of the learning process; and 2) Perspectives oriented to the learner's socio-political context and grounded in a more sociological view of the learning process. A third group of studies reflect more of a focus on developing a theoretical basis for facilitating the process of learning from experience.

Research which exemplifies the first orientation tends to focus on the individual learner, the subjective meaning of his or her experiences, and how this meaning is derived through the learning process. Within this orientation, it is possible to identify at least two subgroups of research thrusts. The first of these subgroups relies on a cognitive formulation of the problem and emphasizes the process of deriving meaning from experience as a reasoning skill problem. For this subgroup, the process of reflection occupies a crucial role in the process of learning from experience. Learning from experience as a reflective, cognitive activity is typically conceptualized as a cyclical or phase-like process. Researchers who illustrate this particular approach to conceptualizing the process of learning to learn are Kolb (1984), Cell (1987), Boud, Keough, and Walker (1985a), and Boyd and Fales (1983). Also loosely related to this view are researchers, such as Schon (1983, 1987) and Argyris (1985) who incorporate more of a tacit dimension into the reflective process and who are somewhat less systematic in their description of how reflection facilitates learning from experience. Jarvis (1987) attempts to construct a view of learning from experience located within a socio-cultural framework. His theoretical approach, however, suggests more of an individualistic, humanistic orientation (Usher, 1989). For this reason, he is included in this group.

The second, smaller subgroup of studies tends to be framed more from the perspective of transformations or development of consciousness. Here the emphasis is on learning for self-recognition or self-knowledge, as opposed to the more problem-oriented focus of the first humanistic subgroup. Learning from experience is a way to learn about one's self and the relationship of the self to the broader society of which it is a part. These views of experience-based learning are often informed by either adult development theory and/or depth psychology. Examples of researchers exemplifying this approach to learning from experience include Torbert (1972), Daloz (1986), Boyd and Myers (1988), Boyd (1991), and Boud & Walker, (1990). Also closely associated with this perspective, although somewhat different in their theoretical views, are certain feminist scholars who work from a developmental perspective, such as Belenky et al (1986).

The second major orientation to learning from experience that we have identified addresses the question of how adults learn more from the learner's socio-political context. These authors stress more the role of context in the process of learning from experience and the need to view multiple construction of realities before knowledge can be brought to bear on a specific problem. For educators in this orientation, experience and learning are not regarded as neutral and what is to be learned cannot be considered outside of the social relationships in which experiences occur. Analysis often focuses on the relationship of various social structures to the distribution of power among groups. The aim of facilitators working from this perspective is the transformation of meaning perspectives and/or the development of critical consciousness among their learners. Examples of scholars who have addressed the question of learning from experience from this orientation are Freire (1971), Cunningham (1983), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Usher (1985, 1986, 1989), Weedon (1987), Mezirow and Associates (1990), and Mezirow (1991).

In addition to these more conceptually oriented studies, a few researchers are attempting to ground the process of facilitating learning from experience in a more theoretically oriented view of learning from experience. These works typically represent a mixture of both attempts to explain or understand the process as well as prescriptions for practice. Examples of works in this group are Walter and Marks (1981), Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985b), Schon (1987), and Mezirow and Associates (1990).

Thus, the small but budding inquiry into how adults learn from experience already reflects a diverse set of perspectives with markedly differing assumptions regarding how adults come to know their world. To the uninitiated, this inchoate chorus of voices can be confusing and disconcerting. It is our position, however, that this diversity of perspectives represents the diverse ways in which adults actually learn from their experiences. In this regard, however, the chorus is incomplete, for it neglects other ways of learning from experience, such as trial and error, creative expression, and discernment, which come to represent rich sources of knowledge for adults about their world. In the next section, these various perspectives are brought together within a phenomenological model of learning from experience. We refer to this model as the FOURthought model of experience-based learning.

## **THE FOURTHOUGHT MODEL OF EXPERIENCE-BASED LEARNING**

The model builds on and attempts to bring under one conceptual roof many of the theoretical studies regarding experience-based learning mentioned earlier. It is structured around four fundamental ways of coming to know (or "thought") about ourselves and our world from our experiences. These are 1) Trial and error; 2) Rationality/reflection; 3) Creative expression; and 4) Discernment. Trial and error learning stresses the sensate world and coming to know about it through methods which are usually unsystematic, random, and arbitrary. Although learning of this type may be intentional, it is often unintentional and "accidental". Trial and error learning emphasizes instrumental and utilitarian values and is frequently associated with processes of enculturation, socialization, or habituation. For example, in a rush for time and inadequately prepared for a workshop, a facilitator may arbitrarily select an experiential activity to "keep them busy". In implementing this method, however, he or she may learn that it is a powerful tool for developing cooperative interaction. This learning then becomes incorporated into the facilitator's overall instructional philosophy.

Rational and reflective views of learning from experience place emphasis on the learner as a thoughtful, order-seeking agent. There are several versions of this orientation, including scientific problem solving of Dewey (1938), to the humanistic reflection of Boyd and Fales (1983), the reflective practice concept of Schon (1983) and the critical reflection processes of Mezirow (1990, 1991) and others (Freire 1971; Cunningham, 1983; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Usher, 1985, 1986, 1989; Weedon, 1987) Although these versions reflect important differences in aims, purposes, and methods, they emphasize the role of rationality and systematic reflection in the process of learning from experience and the capacity of the

learner to "step back" from his or her experience in order to reflect on and learn from it.

Creative expression views of learning from experience stress the importance of expressing one's creativity as a way of coming to know one's self and its relation to the world. This orientation includes the use of narrative or the telling of one's story" (Polkinghorne, 1988), craft, art, and music, as well as other forms of creative expression. The central premise of this view is that creative expression is a way for deeper part of the psychological self to communicate with its outer world (Neuman, 1979) and to help learners connect with and learn from significant aspects of their life experiences. Although it is intentional, creative expression is guided more by our emotional rather than our rational dimensions. Its manifestation is often symbolic and mythical, rather than logical and concrete. For example, one of the author's, in writing and developing the argument for this paper, experienced a sense of "rightness" about the place and activity of his writing. Although engaged in a reflective and theoretical work, much of the activity involved creative use of ideas and literature. The sense of rightness that emerged reminded the author of what it is that is truly meaningful and worthwhile for him. This is an illustration of how creative expression helps us better understand our selves and our worlds.

Finally, discernment views of experience-based learning emphasize experience as an interior phenomenon (Boyd, 1991; Boyd and Myers, 1988). Approaches to facilitating this form of learning help adults understand and discern the symbolic meaning that particular outer events hold for their inner lives. Like creative expression, discernment focuses primarily on emotional or affective aspects of our experiences. Unlike the reflective/rational approaches, the methods used to facilitate discernment de-emphasize the role of rationality and stress the significance of listening quietly and passively to a deeper source of knowledge within one's self. Popular manifestations of this approach are journaling of and dialoging with dreams and meditation.

The various components of the FOURthought model are best viewed in a holistic and inter-related fashion. For example, facilitation involves certain performance skills which are sometimes modified through trial and error. More reflective techniques allow us to develop a deeper understanding and meaning of particular aspects of our facilitating. Furthermore, we are often compelled to talk about (tell stories) our experiences as a facilitator, from which we learn more about ourselves as facilitators. Finally, in facilitation practitioner-client relationships often become the context for the expression of powerful emotional forces. These forces sometimes express themselves in symbolic ways. These symbols can be used as a means to access the deeper parts of ourselves and our relationships with others. Thus, these different components can all be manifest within the context of a particular life experience, such as facilitation. The components are also transactional, in that one form of coming to know from experience often influences others.

### **Implications for Research to Practice Issues**

Experience-based learning is a concept and a phenomenon which represents the core of the research-to-practice issue. As a phenomenon, the term refers to the fact that learning takes place within the crucible of our life experiences and cannot be separated from them. As a concept, experience-based learning provides a means of developing a theoretical understanding of how lived experiences influence what is learned and vice-versa. The concept and the phenomenon cannot be understood apart from each other. The FOURthought model provides a framework for deepening our understanding of this inter-relationship. It suggests that experience-based learning manifests itself in several different ways. Each of these forms of learning implies its own way of coming to know. These different ways of knowing, in turn, imply different approaches to facilitating the learning process. Thus, a kind of cyclical perspective of learning is implied by the model. The cycle first starts with observations of the learner in a concrete setting. The framework then provides a conceptual basis for understanding the various ways in which learners express the process of learning from experience, whether it be from trial and error, reflection, creative expression, or symbolic understandings. This model is an expansion of previous theoretical work in the area of experience-based learning. It incorporates previous views into a more holistic approach and adds two additional dimensions - creative expression and discernment - previously overlooked in these studies.

To fully achieve the promise of experience-based learning, adult educators need to develop a full awareness of the depth and complexity of this phenomenon. It is not just trial and error, or reflection, or creative expression, or discernment. All of us, at one time or another have knowingly or unknowingly used all four of these dimensions in our process of learning from our experiences. Similarly, in an attempt to make meaning of their lives, our students move in and out of each of these dimensions. Recognizing what dimension a particular learner or group of learners seems drawn to and being able to facilitate learning within that dimension are critical aspects of an adult educator's role. The FOURthought model of experience-based learning provides a means for researchers and scholar-practitioners to conceptualize this process and deepen their understanding of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of this process.

Collaborative work among research and practitioners is needed to address several questions associated with this model. Studies need to further corroborate the manifestations of the model's various components in the lives of adult educators and their learners. We are also unsure at this point the extent to which this manifestation expresses a kind of preference similar to or different from other issues in the area of individual differences, such as learning or personality styles. Numerous methodological issues also need to be explored, such as the appropriateness of designing learning activities that encourage learners to explore ways of learning from experience with which they may not be comfortable or familiar.

Experience-based learning is ideal for participatory forms of research, which blend research and practice with the goal of improving learning for our participants and deepening our understanding of what it means to learn from experience. The FOURthought model of experience-based learning provides a framework in which this collaboration can take place.

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