

Experiential Learning

General

Experiential learning is a **cycle learning theory** introduced by [David Kolb^{1\)}](#) in 1971²⁾ and was inspired by earlier works of [Kurt Lewin](#), [Jean Piaget](#) and [John Dewey](#). As it was developed within [humanist paradigm](#), experiential learning offers a **holistic perspective on learning** and is orientated mostly on adult learning. Name of this theory was intended to should emphasize the importance of experience in the learning process.

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”³⁾*

What is experiential learning?

The experiential learning theory is based on six propositions claiming that learning is⁴⁾:

1. the process of creating knowledge
2. a holistic process of adaptation to the world
3. best described as a process, not outcome
4. relearning, since it is greatly dependent on already learned material
5. driven by conflict, differences, and disagreement
6. results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment

In his influential book “[Experiential Learning: Experience As The Source Of Learning And Development](#)” (1984) Kolb describes learning as *“the process whereby **knowledge is created through the transformation of experience**”*. Kolb suggests two opposite modes of getting experience:

- **concrete experience** or **CE (feeling)** through practical experiencing),
- **abstract conceptualization** or **AC** (concluding and **thinking** about the experience),

and two opposite modes of transforming that experience to knowledge:

- **reflective observation** or **RO** (actively **observing** experience and its outcomes),
- **active experimentation** or **AE** (planing on how to test something and finally **doing**).

All of these components together form a circle of learning in which they follow one after another: CE→RO→AC→AE→CE→... The very process of **learning can begin in any of them**. Still, every learner develops strengths in some of mentioned modes more than in others and learn better under those conditions, which results in four different **learning styles** identified also by Kolb:

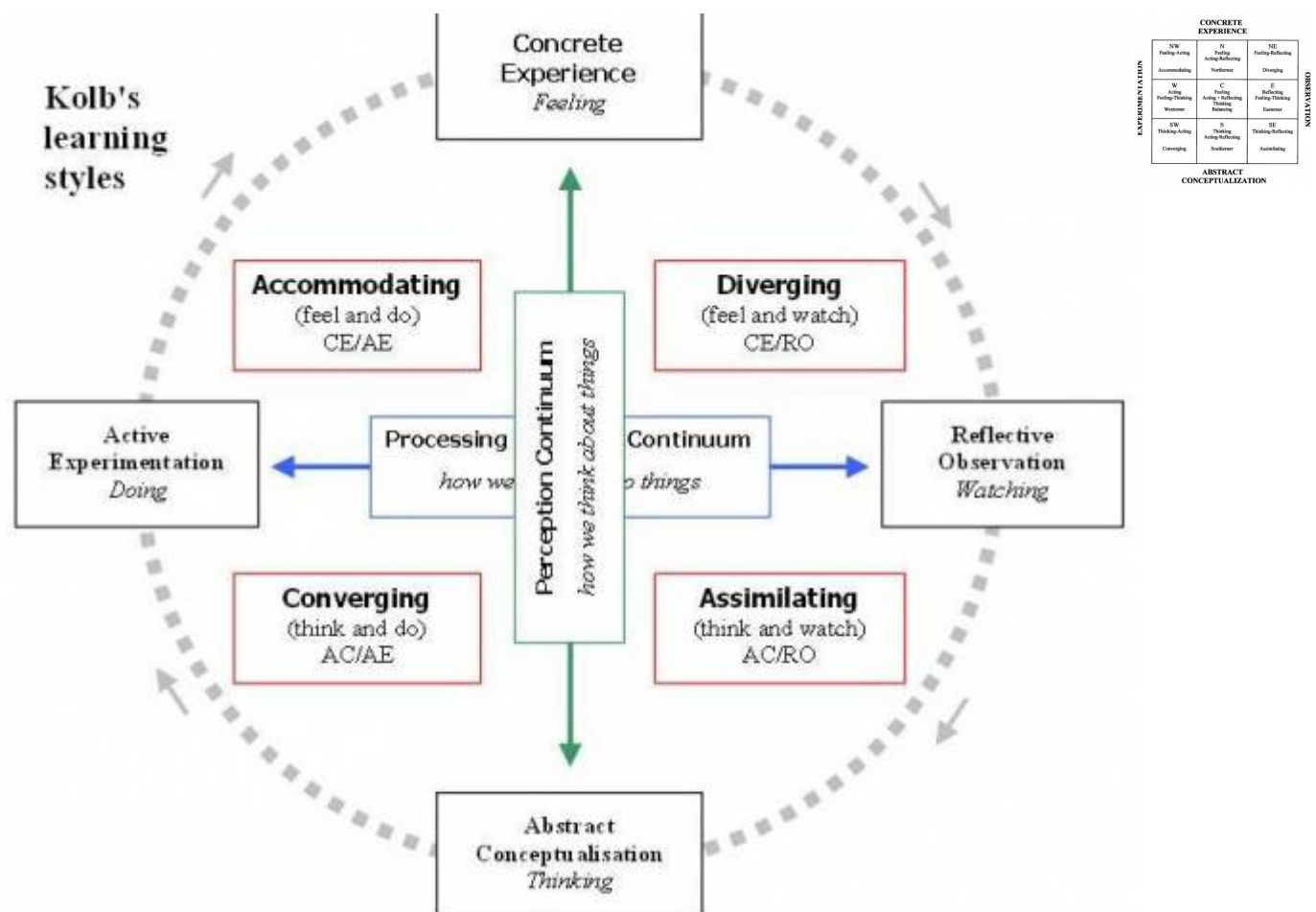
- **Assimilator** - Strong in and RO components. Prefers **abstract conceptualizations** and theoretical models, requires time to think through. Values **logical validity** more than practical applications.
- **Converger** - Strong in AC and AE components. Prefers **practical applications** of concepts and

theories he learns and like experimenting. They are often good problem solvers and like dealing with technical issues.

- **Accommodator** - Strong in CE and AE components. Prefers **practical experiences** and acting more according to the feeling than based on logical analysis or theoretical aspects.
- **Diverger** - Strong in CE and RO modes. Prefers **learning through observing** and **collecting information**, good at viewing concrete situations from different points of view. According to Kolb et al.⁵⁾ research has shown this kind of people are often **imaginative** and emotional, and often specialize in **arts**.

Kolb and other researchers⁶⁾ later improved the resolution of the learning styles grid from 2x2 to 3x3 by introducing five new learning styles, that offered a refinement of the four Kolb's styles:

- **Northerner** - Strong in CE and balanced in AE and RO modes. Has a capacity for deep involvement and learns through experimenting, but has problems with conceptualizations.
- **Westerner** - Strong in AE and balanced in CE and AC modes. Has great action skills and possibilities for thinking and conceptualizing, but problems with analyzing past experience.
- **Easterner** - Strong in RO and balanced in CE and AC modes. Has great observation and reflection skills as well as learning from concrete experience, but problems with putting his plans into action.
- **Southerner** - Strong in AC and balanced in AE and RO modes. Has great conceptualization skills, but little use of practical experiences.
- **Balancing** - Evenly balancing both modes of acquiring experience and both modes of transforming that experience into knowledge.



© concept david kolb, adaptation and design alan chapman 2005-06, based on Kolb's learning styles, 1984

In order to identify preferred learning style in Kolb's model, "**learning style inventory**" method has been developed. This **method for determining an individual's optimal learning style**, strengths and weaknesses consists of a survey which explores one's perceiving (how one prefers to acquire information) and processing (how one makes sense of new things). Various variants of this method can be found in simplified free on-line tests⁷⁾.

What is the practical meaning of experiential learning?

Experiential learning is a model **suggested for adult learners**. General implications of this model are that **teaching/learning process should consist of all four stages of Kolb's model**, but it also suggests **individual changes** should be applied, depending on learners learning style.

- **Assimilators** - prefer **watching, thinking** and **good explanations of theories and ideas** to practical experiences. This kind of learners usually enjoy lectures and readings as well as having enough time to think about new ideas.
- **Convergers** - prefer **doing** and **thinking, finding practical solutions** to problems. This kind of learners usually like new ideas and their practical applications.
- **Accommodators** - prefer **practical experiences** and **intuitive approach** instead of reading instructions. This kind of learners also usually prefer **teamwork**.
- **Divergers** - prefer **watching, collecting information, working in groups** and brainstorm instead of having practical experience.

Kolb's theory was applied in a number of studies on topics that include education, computer and information science, psychology, management, medicine, nursing, accounting and law⁸⁾⁹⁾.

Criticisms

Kolb's theory has influenced other authors to create similar models for determining of preferred learning style. The critique that Kolb's learning styles inventory was difficult to apply to people who never really paid attention to how they learn more efficiently encouraged Peter Honey and Alan Mumford to create their *learning styles questionnaire* (LSQ). It was based on Kolb's theory, but instead of asking people how they learn it was probing for most common learning behaviors.

Some of the criticisms¹⁰⁾ referring to Kolb's theory include¹¹⁾:

- doubts that not everyone's learning process has to undergo Kolb's stages and **not necessarily in that order**,
- **lack of experimental research** and too simplified learning cycle which ignores non-experiential learning, and
- not paying enough attention to the process of **reflection** and **lack of precision**.

Keywords and most important names

- **Concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), active experimentation (AE), assimilator, converger, accomodator, diverger, learning style inventory, learning styles, northerner, westerner, easterner,**

southerner, balancing

- [David Kolb](#)

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Read more

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