Experiential Learning Theory

General

Experiential learning theory is a **cycle learning theory** introduced by American educational theorist David Kolb[1] in 1971[2] and was inspired by earlier works of Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget[3] 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.

Experiential learning theory defines learning as

- "*the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.*"[4]

What is experiential learning?

The experiential learning theory is based on six propositions[5] short described with the following three:

1. Learning is best described as a holistic process of creating knowledge and adapting to the world.
2. Learning is actually relearning, since it is greatly dependent on already learned material.
3. Learning is driven by conflict, differences, and disagreement and results in assimilation and accommodation.
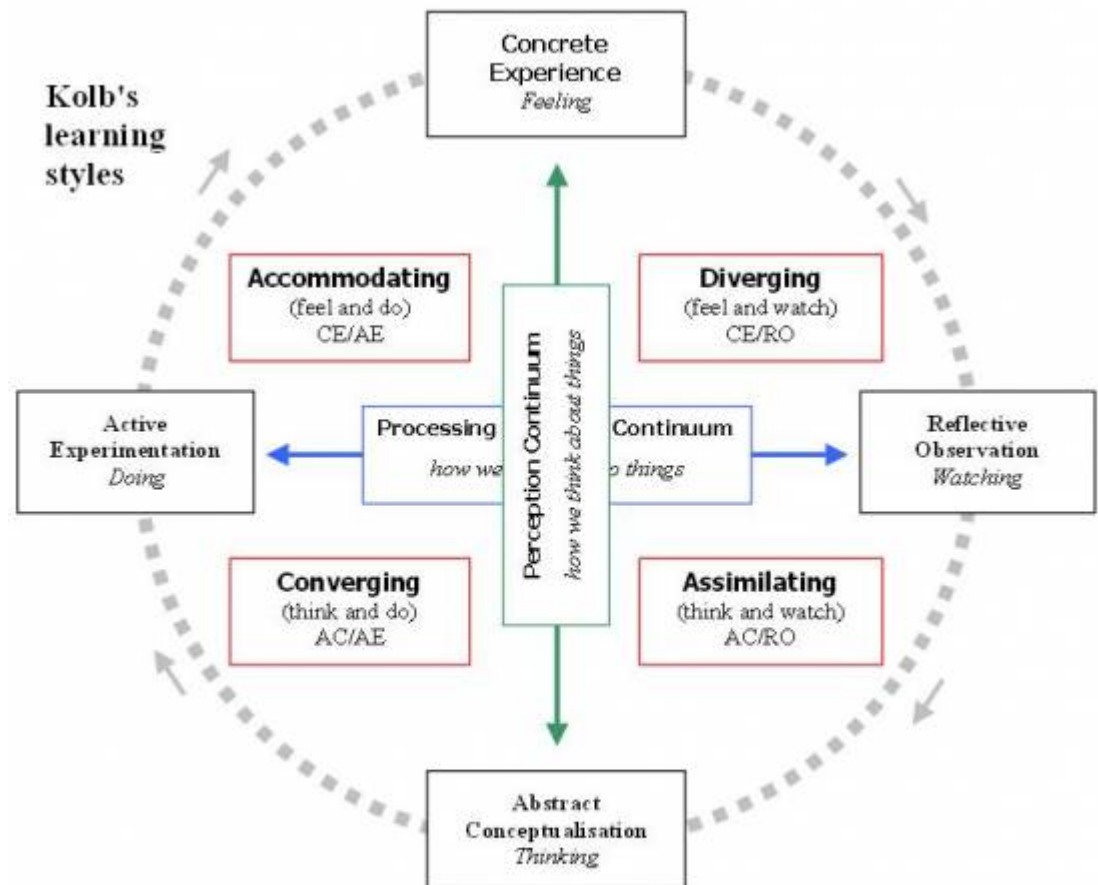
Kolb[6] suggests two opposite modes of acquiring experience:

- **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 into 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[7)8)]:

- **Assimilator** - Strong in AC 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. This kind of people are often imaginative and emotional, and often specialize in arts.[9]
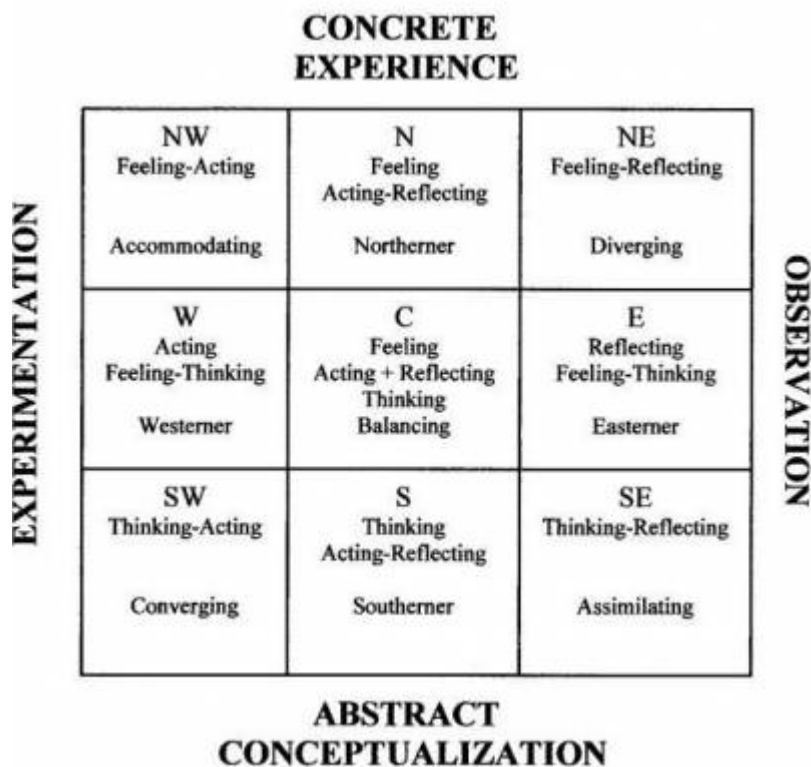
Kolb's model was later refined by himself and other researchers[10][11][12] through improvement of the learning styles grid resolution from 2×2 to 3×3 by introducing five additional learning styles[13]:

- **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.

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 tests[14] and newer methods like *the adaptive style inventory* or *the learning skills profile* have also been introduced[15].

Kolb's theory has also 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*[16]. It was based on Kolb's theory, but instead of

asking people how they learn it was probing for most common learning behaviors. Other similar models include: Anthony Gregorc's *Mind Styles Model*[17], Neil Fleming's VARK Model[18] and other.

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.
- Accomodators - 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 (online) education, computer and information science, psychology, management, medicine, nursing, accounting and law.[19][20][21]

Criticisms

Some of the criticisms[22] referring to Kolb's theory include[23]:

- 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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