

Experiential Learning: Strategies for the Malaysian Classroom

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Abstract

The Experiential Learning approach or ELM (Experiential Learning Model) was developed by David Kolb as an alternative to the traditional rote and didactic learning approach. The symbiosis between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation has removed the teacher-centred equation in the traditional classroom to one that focuses on the learning process of the individual. In addition, the ELM emphasizes on the learning of elements that is often personal, reflective, and grounded in experiences that give a multi-dimensional learning paradigm to the learner. In this paper, I will be suggesting some Experiential Learning approaches for the Malaysian classroom in the teaching of humanities, language and other skill-based subjects. While the Experiential Learning Model is not new, this paper utilizes the former and provides a multiplicity of creative approaches in classroom teaching that could be used by language teachers to engage learners in a manner that prioritizes the learning environment and reflective learning.

Experiential Learning: Strategies for the Malaysian Classroom

The concept of Experiential Learning or the Experiential Learning Model (ELM) has been utilized by school teachers and academicians since the conception of the model in the mid-1980's. Peter Jarvis has succinctly defined experiential learning as a form of learning which "is actually about learning from primary experience, which is learning through sense experience" (Jarvis, 1995). True to that definition, the ELM which originated from David A. Kolb and associate, Roger Fry's research, has in its core, Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin's experience-based learning models. Combining the fundamental concerns of the three, from Lewin's "here-and-now" experience of concrete experience to validate and test abstract concepts to Piaget's cognitive development perspective, and Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism ("hands on approach"), Kolb's ELM emphasizes the role of experience in the learning process which sets it apart from the behaviorist theories of learning and other more traditional educational approaches. Drawing from Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin, Kolb lists six characteristics of experiential learning. Firstly, learning is best described as a process, second; learning is a continuous process grounded in experience, and thirdly, Kolb maintains that learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Next, learning is a holistic process and learning involves transactions between the person and the environment. Lastly, learning is the process of creating knowledge (Kolb, 1984)

Kolb and Fry argue that effective learning entails the possession of four such different abilities (Kolb and Fry, 1975) namely: concrete experience, observation, experience, and the formation of abstract concepts and testing. The four phases is located in a circle and is known as

the Kolb cycle. In the cycle, the concrete experience of the learner, be it from watching a movie or role-playing is reflected and pondered. Questions are asked on that experience and the learner is asked to reflect on that experience. From the reflective learning phase, the learner moves on to the conceptualization phase where the learner will begin to form abstract forms patterns and develop theories. More questions are then asked in this phase. In the final phase, the learner moves into the active experimentation phase when they try to apply the methodologies/knowledge/principles that they have learned from the previous three phases.

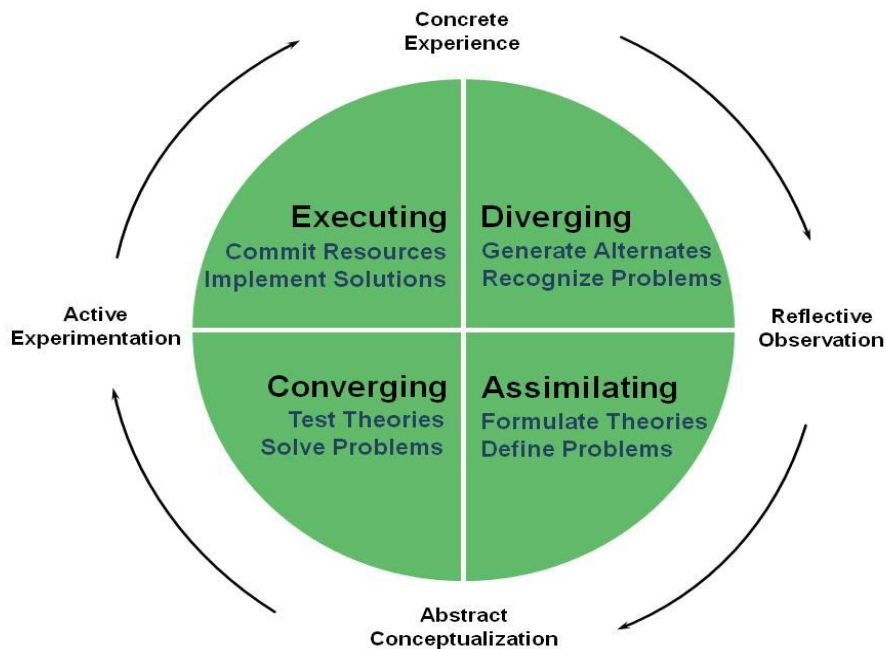
Thus, drawing from the learner's past experiences, the experiential learning provides a platform for the learner to acquire new knowledge and skills that they can now apply in their new setting. The ELM cycle is visually reflected below.



In the ELM, Kolb has emphasized that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984). To further elaborate, the experiential learning model sees the learner applying the information from the instructor to the

experiences of the learner. Such information/knowledge does not solely come from the instructor or teacher. The learner/student learns from the process of information acquisition in class and tests the acquired information/knowledge against the learner's own life experiences. Through the process of acquiring information/knowledge and experience, the learner will be able to learn newer perspectives and gain insights on the subject or topic and thus the experiential learning model would come full circle in terms of producing a learning process that is grounded in experience.

Kolb and Fry also elaborate that for effective learning to take place, the four abilities must be present for it to occur. They are namely, the abilities of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each learner's ability is different and the learner can usually maximize one distinct learning style and utilize less of the other stages (Carlsson, 1976). Kolb and Fry then proceeded to design a learning style inventory to categorize learners according to their learning orientation. What was achieved therefore is a categorization of learners according to the four basic learning styles, the visual below has been adapted from the online site: "<http://mapitknowit.wordpress.com/2013/10/23/kolb-learning-cycle-and-its-application-to-knowledge-mapping>"



The four learning styles, as named by Kolb and Fry are, converger, diverger, assimilator, and accommodator. Each of the learning styles have their own learning characteristic and description. Two examples of learning styles will be highlighted here, a converger and a diverger. A learner who is a “converger”, is described to be someone who has strong deductive reasoning skills, strong application skills, not emotional and has limited interests. A “diverger” meanwhile, has a strong imagination, a creative thinker, has broad interests, good at idea generation, and sees things from a wider perspective. Kolb and Fry’s learning models has thus given a view of the multiplicity of learning styles and the divergent characteristics associated with each of the different dimensions of learning. While these learning styles proposed by Kolb and Fry have their own weaknesses, they provide a fresh perspective on the alternative forms of learning that is beyond the traditional view of learning as a one-dimensional mode.

Strategies for the Malaysian Classroom

The following strategies are proposed suggestions on how Kolb and Fry's Experiential Learning approach could be incorporated into the classroom setting of Malaysian lower, upper secondary or at undergraduate levels. Some of the approaches here were adapted some from Colin Beard's (2006) *Experiential learning: a best practice handbook for educators and trainers*. It must be stressed that the following strategies are exploratory in nature and by no means a guarantee that the objectives and learning outcomes of the subject/unit will be achieved. There will be external factors that influence the outcome and success rate of the suggested approach.

First Strategy – Visual Metaphors and Props



The following are some guidelines for the teacher/instructor to follow. In terms of class size, it is suggested that 30 students/learners will be a suitable number to start with. The first classroom strategy is visual metaphors and props. The use of visual metaphors and props is one of the easiest and most common experiential learning components that could be used in the classroom setting.

This exercise would also be ideal for primary, secondary and tertiary application as it is intended to stimulate thinking, discussion and application. The use of visual metaphors is widely practiced because of the relative ease to obtain images from the digital realm (the Internet). By using and adapting visual metaphors to illustrate and to stimulate, the learner is using the experience from this exercise as a consolidation of the learning experience. The principle behind this approach is the utilization of the 3 “T” which is Transmission, Transaction and Transformational. The act of showing projecting the image is the transmission process which is the vital first step, this is followed by a discussion of the image (transaction of ideas) and lastly, the transformational approach, in which the idea/plan/approach is executed through action. The use of visual metaphors and props is a very common approach in teaching and learning and here one can see that the experience/action from the process of the 3 T’s engages the learner to experience the four learning styles, from diverging to executing.

Second Strategy – Categorization and Movement



The Categorization and Movement Strategy is an approach that makes full use of the visual and physical movement stimuli to incorporate and reinforce better thinking and memory skills for the learner. By this method, learners are how to problem-solving skills with colourful post-it notes which are then applied to the board. Learners are given a scenario and will be asked to brainstorm for possible solutions (in groups) to the issue. The ‘answers’ are then posted on the white board by all members of the group and read aloud. The instructor could arrange the answers in a visual structure and colour-coordinated to make it more appealing and creative. From this activity, the learners will be fully involved in the brainstorming session, the experience of the learner in being fully immersed in the physical action of writing and arranging the answers (post-it notes) will impart a more impressionable memory for the learner. Such physical engagements with the use of colour-coordinated paper or post-it notes will make classroom learning fun and exciting for learners. This is especially so for learners who tend to be hyperactive and physically active during classes/lectures.

Third Strategy – Sensory/cognitive Stimulation



In this third strategy which involves sensory and cognitive stimulation, the instructor would basically carry sensory props related to the subject taught in a backpack. This is usually called the “sensory backpack” and it is usually used in early childhood and special needs education.

In what may be deemed a simple strategy to engage and captivate learners, the instructor will have props and tangible/physical items related to the subject stored in the backpack. For example, if the instructor is teaching History, the instructor could incorporate a fictional photo album depicting the historical characters from the taught. If the instructor is teaching Geography, the instructor could incorporate soil or leaf samples from the site. From science-based subjects to subjects in the humanities and social-sciences, the sensory/cognitive stimulation approach is universal in its usage. The use of the backpack is more for the dramatic effect as well as practical usage as the props/objects used by the instructor would not be revealed until the last minute. The surprise element thus adds another dimension to the element of creative learning and teaching by the instructor and this may produce/create moments of anticipation and classroom learning will become more interesting and varied.

Fourth Strategy – Coffee and Papers



This classroom strategy is useful and effective for students particularly in humanities subjects and undergraduate programmes where reading and research is important. The materials used are texts/content/journal articles that are related to the topics covered in the syllabus. The objective of the activity is to get the learners to concentrate on their reading and understanding (comprehension) without any distractions. Learners must disconnect from the internet and their smartphones for at least one hour. The devices must therefore be surrendered to their instructor/teacher, if this is not possible, the instructor must trust their students to disconnect themselves from the distraction. At the end of the activity, the teacher/lecturer will discuss the articles and the learners will do their reflection on their reading materials. The outcome of this strategy is to ensure the learners spend their time reading materials relevant to their research. This is because many students in this age do not have time allocated for uninterrupted reading. This activity is not only academically good but it acts also as a form of self-reflection for the students.

Fifth Strategy – Sound/Digital Voice in Providing Timely Feedback

One of the most arduous challenge a teacher faces is marking and providing timely feedback to all the students regarding their research paper or essays. This strategy calls for the utilization of voice recording device and software (many of which are available free online such as “Dragon Naturally Speaking” – which is built-in in many computers). The examiners (or teacher) create a new audio file for each assignment as he begins assessing a student’s work. As the marking is going on, the teacher records any comments and feedback about specific part of the student’s work and the software translate this into a word document which can be printed or e-mailed to the student. Applying this, the teacher saves a lot of precious time and the quality of the feedback

provided to the students is increased as it is precise and the teacher will not miss out any important points when returning the assignment.

Conclusion

Experiential Learning is increasingly relevant to the 21st-century learners and students and moves away from the traditional and conservative methods of “one-way” teaching and learning. The students are able to put their experience and sensory exploration into their learning. The challenges educators and teachers face with the vibrant and dynamic students and learners of the 21st century is getting more demanding each day. The traditional methods of classroom delivery can no longer sustain and keep up with the amount of information the students can obtain by themselves via the internet and other electronic resources. Therefore, Experiential Learning offers an alternative of what is precisely lacking in just obtaining information but makes use of the meaningful sense experiences by utilizing class time. The learning experience thus becomes more effective and applicable to real-life capability. Consequently, some of the classroom strategies are also helping the teachers to teach more effectively and efficiently. In conclusion, as the learning techniques of the younger generation of “Digital Natives” evolve, so must our teaching methods.

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