

Learning¹ Approach

This learning module provides trainers (or learning facilitators)² with the information, specific activities and materials they need to effectively plan and deliver a learning programme. Because each trainer and each learning situation is unique, planning is critical to the success of any programme. This module encourages participation and provides hands-on, problem-solving experiences and exercises.

Applying the experiential learning cycle

The learning approach is based on experiential learning theory³ and is participatory by design. It is a learner-centred approach involving experience followed by a process of reviewing, reflecting and applying what has been learned. Participatory methods keep learners active in the learning process. They are involving and interactive, and they encourage communication and group work. They are action oriented and experience based.

This experiential and participatory approach was chosen to enhance effective skills, to facilitate conceptual and attitudinal development, and to encourage appropriate changes in participants' behaviour. The experiential learning cycle is especially useful for skill development because most of its techniques are designed to involve the participants in practising the skill. The experiential model helps people assume responsibility for their own learning because it asks them to reflect on their experience, draw conclusions and identify applications. Participants ground the lessons in their actual work environment by considering the question of what can or should be done differently as a result of this learning experience.

To be effective, this module must be applied in both the design and delivery stages of learning processes. The sessions, activities and notes in this module present trainers with guidelines for reaching the learning objectives by applying the experiential learning methodology. An understanding of the adult learner, the role of the trainer as a facilitator, and the experiential learning cycle is important in this approach.

The adult learner

Understanding the adult learner is critical to the success of this learning approach. The adult learner has particular needs.⁴ Adult learners need continual opportunities to identify their needs and recognize the relevance of their learning in terms of their own lives. Adult learners need self-directed learning opportunities in which they can actively participate. They need to actively think, do, reflect on experiences, discuss with others, and practise and learn new

¹ This module emphasizes *learning* rather than *training* to reinforce the importance of *the learner* in the learning process and reduce the importance of the *trainer* who must play the role of learning facilitator.

² This module also uses the terms (a) *trainer* with the meaning of *learning facilitator* or the *facilitator of the learning process* and (b) *trainee* as *learner* or *workshop participant*.

³ Kolb, D.A. and R. Fry. 1975. Toward an applied theory of experiential learning. In *Theories of Group Processes* (C. Cooper, ed.). John Wiley & Sons, London, UK; McCaffery, J.A. 1986. Independent effectiveness: a reconsideration of cross-cultural orientation and training. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10:159–178.

⁴ Knowles, M.S. 1970. *The modern practice of adult education*. Association Press, New York; Knowles, M.S. 1978. *The Adult learner: a neglected species*. Gulf Publishing Company, Houston, TXexas; McCaffery, J.A. 1986. Independent effectiveness: a reconsideration of cross-cultural orientation and training. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10:159–178; Zemke, R. and S. Zemke. 1981. 30 things we know for sure about adult learning. *Training: The Magazine of Human Resources Development*. Lakewood Publications, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

skills. The adult learner needs interactive communication with both the trainer and fellow learners, which is different from one-way teacher-to-student communication. The learner needs to continually reassess the question, ‘Where am I now and where do I want to go?’

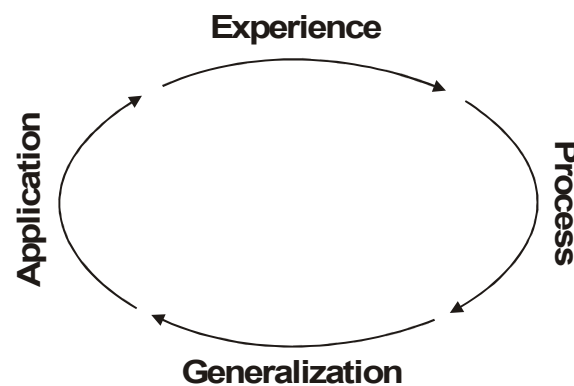
The trainer

The role of trainer/facilitator is to manage or guide the learning process rather than to manage the content of learning. Adult learners need to be able to share the responsibility for learning with the trainer. The experience of adult learners should be viewed and used as a rich resource in the learning environment and they should be encouraged to contribute to the learning environment whenever possible.

The Experiential Learning Cycle⁵

Experiential learning is a phrase often heard in the educational world. The strength of the approach is in the completeness of its cycle, which consists of four stages, each as important as the preceding or following one. The four stages are (1) experience, (2) process, (3) generalization and (4) application (Figure 1.1).

Experiential Learning Cycle



Source: McCaffery (1986) and adapted from Kolb and Fry (1975).

Figure 1.1. Experiential Learning Cycle

The term ‘experiential’ is often misused in practice. Experiential learning seems to mean letting people participate in a presentation, having a question-and-answer session after a lecture, or a role-play or case study without the subsequent steps of the model. The final stages are often left out of the design of the programme. As a result, the power of experiential learning is significantly diminished or negated altogether.

Experience: The experience stage is the initial activity and data-producing part of the cycle. This phase is structured to enable participants to ‘do’ something. ‘Doing’ includes a range of

⁵ The section on the experiential learning cycle is adapted from USDA/OICD/ITD. (no date). Agricultural trainer development, training of trainers. Instructors’ manual (regulation 216 training of trainers). USDA/Office of International Cooperation and Development/Information Technology Division, Washington, DC and J. A. McCaffery. 1986. Interdependent effectiveness: a reconsideration of cross-cultural orientation and training. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10:159-178.

activities, such as participating in a case study, role-play, simulation or game, or listening to a lecture, watching a film or slide show, practising a skill or completing an exercise.

Process: In this stage, participants reflect on the activity undertaken during the experience stage. They share their reactions in a structured way with other members of the group. They may speak individually, in small groups, or as a full training group. They discuss both their intellectual and attitudinal (cognitive and affective) reactions to the activities in which they have engaged. The trainer helps the participants to think critically about the experience and to verbalize their feelings and perceptions, and he or she draws attention to any recurrent themes or patterns that appear in the participants' reactions. The trainer must also help the participants conceptualize their reflections so they can move towards drawing conclusions.

Generalization: In the generalization stage, the participants form conclusions and generalizations that might be derived from, or stimulated by, the first two phases of the cycle. The trainer must help the participants think critically to draw conclusions that might apply generally or theoretically to 'real life'. This stage is best symbolized by the following questions: 'What did you learn from all this?' and 'What more general meaning does this have for you?'

Application: After participants have formed some generalizations, the trainer must guide the participants into the application stage. Drawing upon the insights and conclusions reached during the generalization stage (and previous stages), participants can begin to incorporate what they have learned into their lives by developing plans for more effective behaviour in the future. Techniques used to facilitate the application stage can include action plans, reviewing each other's action plans, formulating ideas for action, sharing action plans with the whole group, and identifying additional learning needs. The trainer assists during this process by helping participants to be as specific as possible.

Participant action plan approach

An integral aspect of the workshop is the ultimate application of the skills by the participants in their work environment. The participant action plan approach (PAPA) was developed by the United States Office of Personnel Management to help participants consider specific applications of lessons learned during training in their work places. Participants commit themselves to action through a written plan developed at the end of the workshop. PAPA can help participants transfer what they learned in the workshop to their jobs, thus reaching the application stage of the experiential learning cycle.