

What is Experiential Learning?

Aims:

To improve understanding of the key elements of experiential learning

To be aware of the 'central concerns' of experiential trainers

To simulate some of the difficulties participants new to experiential learning must face

Resources required:

Training room and small group spaces; flipchart, OHP and pens; a few small mirrors, lego bricks and items suitable for juggling with.

- 3.1 'Pre-conditions for experiential learning' OHP transparency
 - 3.2 'Knowing What Is Happening' OHP transparency
 - 3.3 'Cycle of experiential learning' handout copies
 - 3.4 'Cycle of experiential learning' OHP transparency
 - 3.5 'Cycle of experiential learning' OHP transparency overlay
 - 4.1 'Diamond Ranking' exercise participants' instruction sheets
 - 4.2 'New Learning' exercise participants' instruction sheets
- 'Learning log' sheets

1 Background notes

**"I hear and I forget
I see and I remember;
I do and I understand"**



We have long known that we learn best by doing, rather than from hearing or seeing - the quote above is from Confucius! It is another way of expressing Dale's 'Cone of Experience', illustrated in Chapter 1.

Sure, we can learn from reading or listening, but we *really* learn from our own experience, and from reflecting on it. In this way the implications and meaning of our experience become clear to us and we can progress to making decisions and choices which are based on this direct knowledge rather than on received wisdom or unchallenged assumptions.

This process of experiential learning is the only sure way of making sense of the world. It is also the most effective way of developing the self.

Your task in delivering this section of the training course is

to highlight the process, power and efficacy of experiential methods; the consequent implications for participants and trainers of these methods should also be tackled.

The experiential learning process can have an enormously powerful and positive effect on participants, so much so that it is not unusual for people to claim that a particular course has changed their life for the better.

At worst, though, experiential methods in the wrong hands can trigger raw emotional responses which can easily get out of control. The three 'Preconditions for Experiential Learning' (OHP/Handout 3.1) offer essential insights to the reality of working with experiential processes. They are:

The use of experience

It's what you do with experience which is important

In Experiential Learning we use experience in a planned way

Contracting in

You must set clear objectives before you can evaluate anything

We learn by being open to what the experience communicates

We will maximise learning if we contract into achievable learning objectives and openness

Individual responsibility

Encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own learning is a central concern of the trainer

Trainers must understand both the nature of experience and how to use it. As it is *experience itself* which is important it should be evident that *any* experience is an actual or potential piece of learning. This includes personal experience.

We take the position that professional and personal development are inextricably linked. So in experiential learning we can learn from the enormous variety of experiences that the individuals in a training group have had in their professional and personal lives. We can also create new shared experiences, targeted on our learning objectives, to focus our thoughts and actions.

The fact that we all experience the same events differently means that we have to be open to disclosing and sharing some of this if we are to make sense of the real world, and learn from it. The 'golden key' to learning is that you have to do it for yourself - no-one can do it for you and no-one can *make* you learn.

It can be challenging and confusing for trainers to 'keep to task' when awash with all this experience and emotion. It is important to work *with* your training group, *with* their immediate experiences, and with your own intuitions.

CHAPTER 2:

'Knowing What Is Happening', taken from John Heiders 'The Tao of Leadership' explains this very well (3.2):

Knowing What Is Happening

When you cannot see what is happening in a group, do not stare harder. Relax and look gently with your inner eye.

When you do not understand what a person is saying, do not grasp for every word. Give up your efforts. Become silent inside and listen with your deepest self.

When you are puzzled by what you see or hear, do not strive to figure things out. Stand back for a moment and become calm.

When a person is calm, complex events appear simple.

To know what is happening, push less, open out and be aware.

See without staring. Listen quietly rather than listening hard. Use intuition and reflection rather than trying to figure things out.

The more you can let go of trying, and the more open and receptive you become, the more easily you will know what is happening.

Also, stay in the present. The present is more available than either memories of the past or fantasies of the future.

So attend to what is happening now.

No matter John Heider's eloquence, the fundamental 'experience' aspect of learning can be very difficult for participants to grasp. The Diamond Ranking exercise (4.1) is designed to expose polarised positions on the 'experience' issue.

In Chapter 1 we considered how adults learn, and the crucial role experience plays in all of this. We can now identify four key elements of the experiential learning process which form a *cycle*:

Experience

Whatever is being investigated or 'taught,' must exist in participants' own concrete experience. Where it does not, or there is benefit in participants having a shared experience, the trainer will devise an exercise enabling the participants to directly experience the learning point.

Observation and reflection

There is a saying that some people have many years of experience while others have one experience repeated many times. It is not the fact of having an experience that is important; rather it is what we do with it. When we observe and reflect on it and when we test out consequent conclusions, then we *really* learn.

This phase of the learning cycle stresses the importance of observing all aspects of an experience and then reflecting on the possible meaning. Many experiential techniques involve the use of an observer to add third party insight to a dialogue.

Work done during this phase will help to illustrate that situations can have different interpretations, depending on who is doing the interpreting. The quality of the work done here and the level of disclosure of participants, will determine the quality of the concepts generated in the next phase.

Conclusions and generalisations

Once they have been tested out in new situations and reviewed, conclusions reached following observation and reflection on concrete experience are as near to 'truth' as we can get.

This phase of the cycle stresses openness to a number of possible conclusions flowing from the first two phases.

Reality testing

Concepts and conclusions can now be tested out in new situations and refined if necessary. So the cycle ends where it began, with concrete experience.

Processing all four stages of the 'cycle of experiential learning' well comes naturally to very few of us. Generally, then, our ability to learn from experience is limited by our skill in handling each stage of the cycle. An understanding of the trainer's role in facilitating each stage of the cycle is essential, as illustrated in 3.3.

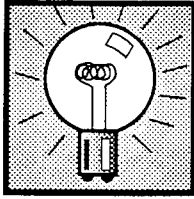
Honey and Mumford detail how our learning styles (reflector, activist, theorist, pragmatist) dictate preferences for a particular stage of the cycle.

To learn effectively, we need to rehearse the skills which will take us stage by stage through the cycle. As trainers we should take every opportunity of empowering people by introducing them to the theory and cyclical nature of experiential learning.

Experiential learning is all about enabling people to break out of their existing 'preferred' learning styles and to develop and apply the skills necessary to fully complete the cycle of experiential learning.

CHAPTER 2 :

2 Suggestions for using these materials

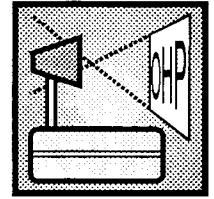


• • • Notes

- 1 Introduce the session and its aims.
- 2 Introductory input/discussion on 'Pre-conditions for experiential learning,' using the background notes (2) and OHP transparencies 3.1 and 3.2.
- 3 Presentation on the 'Cycle of experiential learning' using OHP transparency overlays 3.4 and 3.5. Stress the role the trainer plays in creating an effective learning environment, and distribute handout copies 3.3.
- 4 Make absolutely sure that participants comprehend the cycle by using feedback techniques of your choice (see Chapter 17). In plenary session elicit the learning points from this exercise and spend some time on the implications for trainers.
- 5 Run the 'Diamond Ranking' exercise (4.1) by creating small groups of six - eight to discuss the issues prior to ranking them. The issues have been designed to be controversial and you should therefore expect some heated discussion. Ideally allow at least 45 minutes for the discussion and group consensus. Make sure that a trainer is available to facilitate the small group discussions.
- 6 In plenary session take feedback from the small groups and encourage a short discussion on learning points from the exercise.
- 7 Run the 'New Learning' exercise and debrief using the discussion points in the instruction sheet (4.2) as a guide.
- 8 Debrief and summarise learning points from the whole session.
- 9 Distribute 'Learning log'.
- 10 Close the session by reviewing its aims and making reference to future sessions if appropriate.

3.1 OHP Transparency/Handout

Pre-conditions for experiential learning



The Use of experience

- It's what you do with experience which is important
- In Experiential Learning we use experience in a planned way

Contracting in

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 - We learn by being open to what the experience communicates
- We will maximise learning if we contract into achievable learning objectives and openness

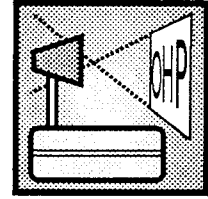
Individual responsibility

- Encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own learning is a central concern of the Trainer

CHAPTER 2 :

3.2 OHP Transparency/Handout

'Knowing What Is Happening'



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When you do not understand what a person is saying, do not grasp for every word. Give up your efforts. Become silent inside and listen with your deepest self.

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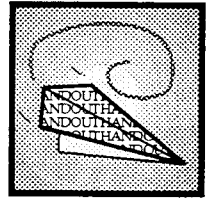


from *The Tao of Leadership* by John Heider (Wildwood House)

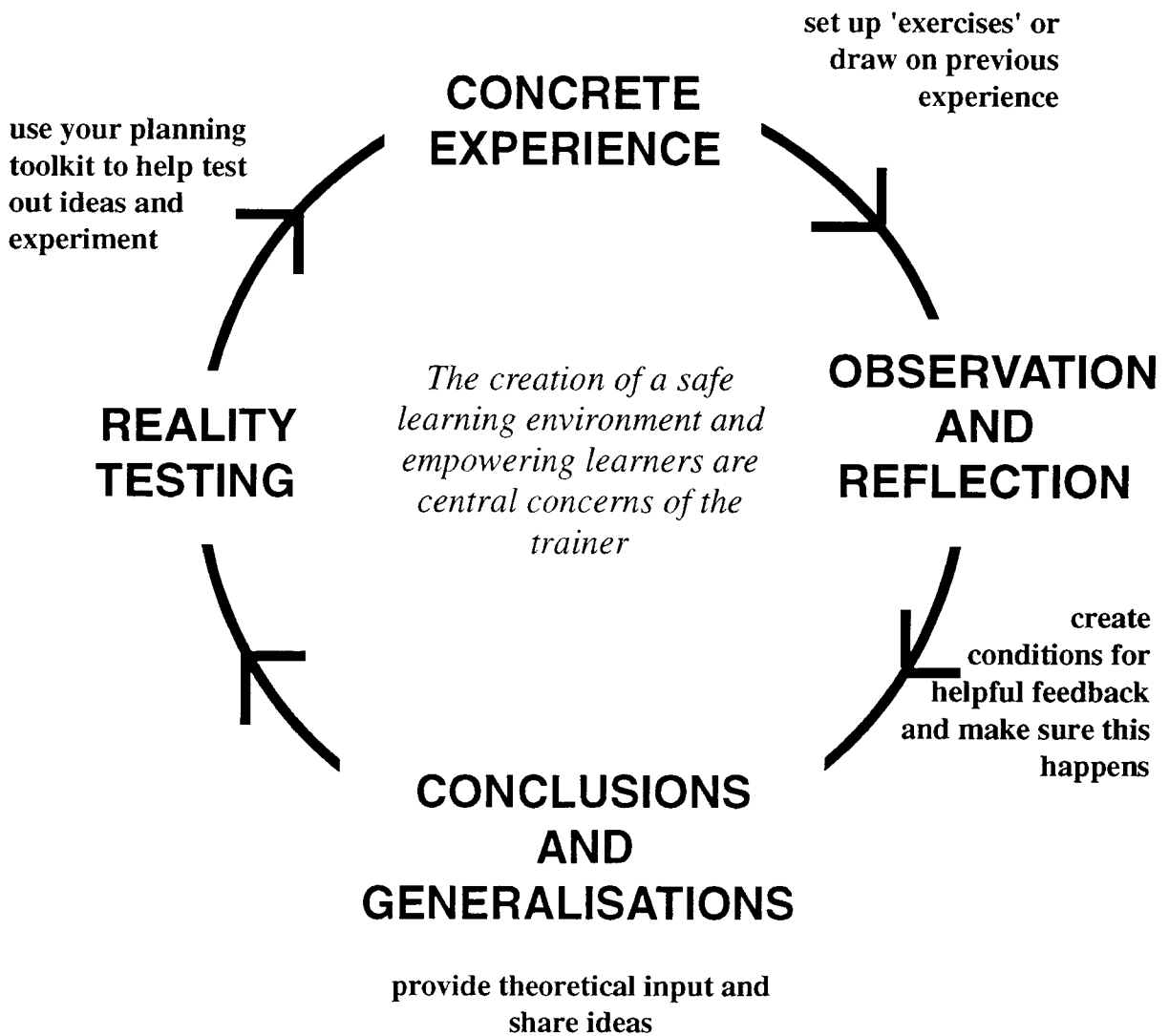
CHAPTER 2 :

3.3 Handout

Cycle of experiential learning

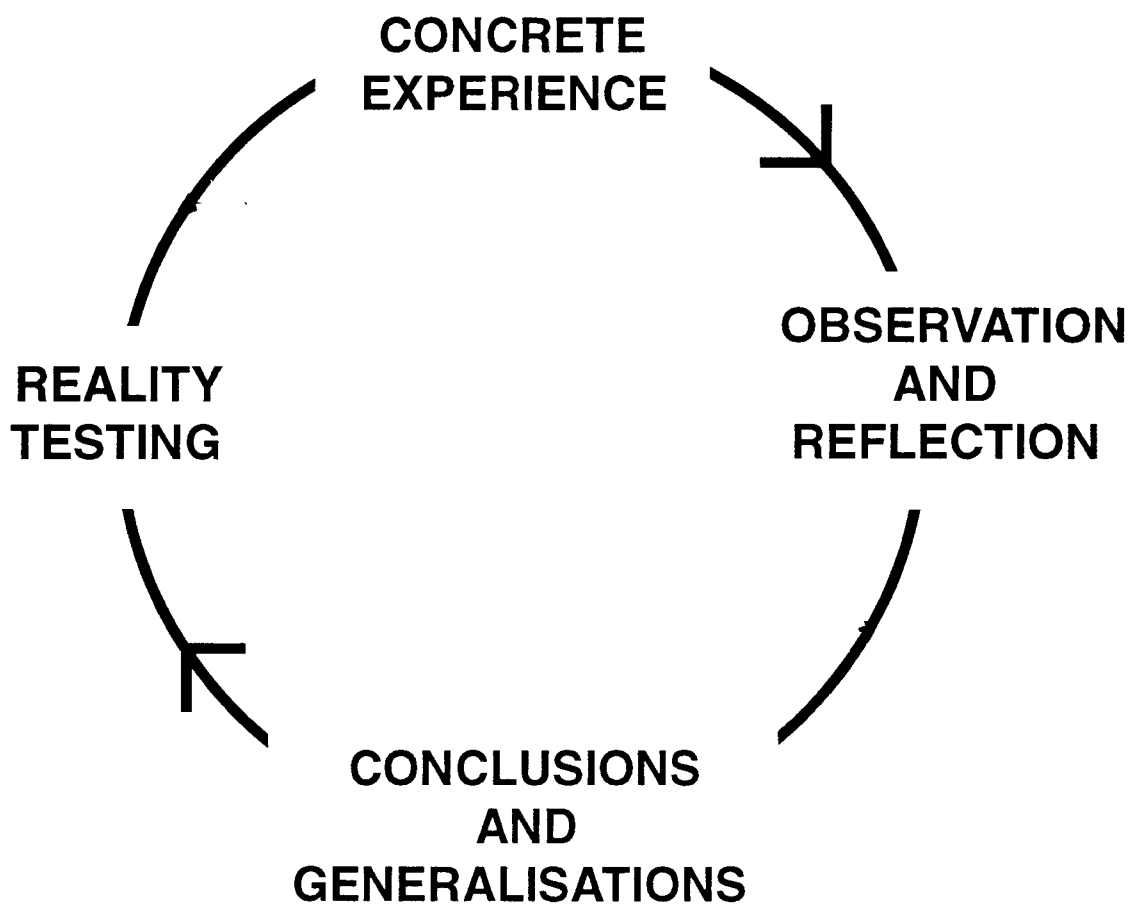
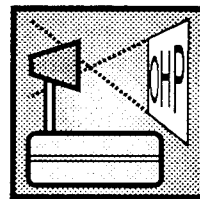


The Trainer's role

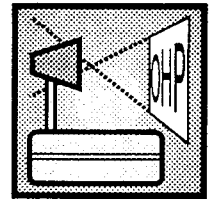


3.4 OHP Transparency

Cycle of experiential learning



3.5 OHP Transparency overlay



The Trainer's role

**use your planning
toolkit to help test
out ideas and
experiment**

**set up 'exercises' or
draw on previous
experience**

*The creation of a safe
learning environment and
empowering learners are
central concerns of the
trainer*

**create conditions for
helpful feedback and
make sure this happens**

**provide theoretical input and
share ideas**