

# IMPACT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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## **Abstract**

*Workplaces are forever changing and evolving making it very difficult for educators to deliver relevant, useful and applicable learning experiences. Traditional theory-based education relies heavily on rote-learning facts and concepts, with very little hands on learning. This is everything that is wrong with education today and it is the biggest reason behind the inability of graduates to apply the theory that they have spent years learning. Contrary to conventional teaching methods the Experiential Learning Theory describes a practical type of education that allows students to apply their theoretical understanding to real-world situations. This type of learning is now being introduced into Vocational Education Training (VET) programs. Both ELT and VET focus on the development of practical and skill based knowledge that is directly relevant to the workplace. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is relatively new but it is gaining popularity because it generates job-ready graduates. ELT is bridging the gap between theoretically over-filled minds and the lack of practical understanding and skills. This paper looks further into the impact of ELT on VET programs and the overall job readiness of students once they have completed their course.*

## **Introduction**

Formal education has long been viewed as an unavoidable chore, which is to be obtained forcefully with very little sense of real life applicability. Therefore there is an ever-growing gap between conceptual knowledge that is delivered to learners in schools and colleges via conventional methods, and the practical skills that are actually required in real life. In fact, despite many years of conventional education learners are often left unable to apply their theoretical knowledge in the practical world. As a consequence of this gap where education is not linked to practical world

needs, there is an emergent sense of worthlessness and a lack of motivation to obtain new knowledge among educated individuals.

Now it is time we addressed this matter to reduce this gap. Experiential Learning Theory is one way that we might be able to fill this void in practical life skills and potentially counter the growing sense of inadequacy among graduates. Experiential Learning Theory or ELT is a type of training that involves learning through practical experience. Therefore it has the potential to address this knowledge gap by connecting learned theory and concepts to real-world situations in the workplace. By exposing a learner to real workplace tasks and providing training in real life situations ELT has the power to connect and motivate learners to obtain new knowledge and become productive in their field.

ELT like all facets of education is a procedure that involves a transaction of knowledge between educationalists and learners (Itin, 1999). However, unlike other teaching methods, ELT involves learning procedures where knowledge is gained through the exchange of practical experiences (Kolb & Kolb, *Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development*, 2012). In line with this the model mentioned by Peter Toth and structured by Kolb. In this model the most lucrative method of learning for students is the one enriched with experience, practical knowledge, and practical application of the learned subject and information. (Toth, 2012).

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is another well-known and widely used type of formal education that provides skill-based training to learners who work in a trade. The Experiential Learning Approach and the VET are interconnected in the sense that they are the most common modes of learning for trade jobs and other more creative job areas. In this paper we will home in on the benefits of ELT and the impact that it is having on trainer pedagogy in VET.

### **The Concept of Experiential Learning**

ELT has its origins in the experiential works by Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. ELT proposes a process of learning that is fundamentally different from the traditional processes of behavioral learning, which is based on the pragmatic epistemology (Kolb D. A., 2015). With the invention of ELT some very inimitable recommendations for the accomplishment of education take place. These recommendations include a positive relationship with learning, practical hands on application across a variety of activities and the creation of innovative knowledge. For more than a century, psychologists have found that many different parental activities or behaviors have a huge impact on the behavior, imagination, thought processes of children (McCarthy, 2010). In contrast to theory-based learning, which is usually purely cognitive without any practical basis; practical knowledge

acquisition and experience play a significant role in the ELT technique (McCarthy, 2010).

The figure above shows a four stage learning model, which portrays two polar opposite dimensions of concrete experience, namely concrete experience or CE and abstract conceptualization or AC, and two polar opposite dimensions of transforming experience –reflective observation or RO and active experimentation or AE. For teaching procedures to be successful the learner must go through this entire cycle, facilitating a transformation toward the ELT model of learning.

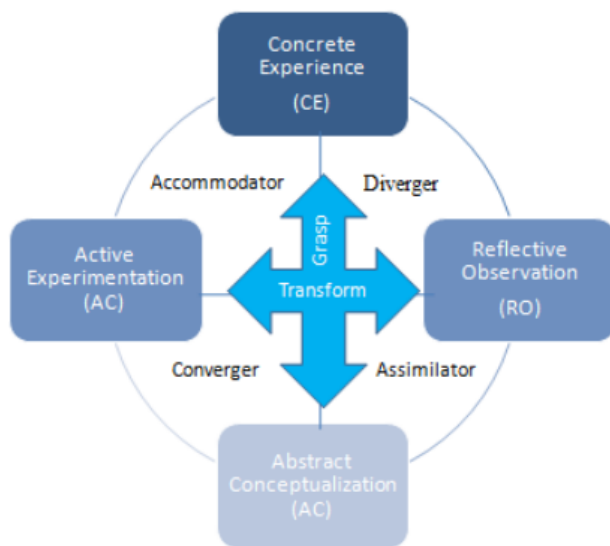


Figure 1. The Cycle of Experiential Learning and the Basic Learning Style

Source - (McCarthy, 2010)

The most important recipients and beneficiaries of ELT are the students. Research into the benefits of ELT revealed that specific groups of students gain more than others from

this teaching method. These students originated from minority groups who typically could not participate in internship programs and workshops for whatever reason, as well as those students who wanted to choose a creative or untraditional area as their occupation (Ryerson University, 2013). For example, ELT has long been an introductory model of teaching and learning in the field of agricultural education. It is also employed in other fields of career and technological learning, including, automotive technology, manufacturing technology and construction technology.

### **The Concept of Vocational Education and Training**

Contrary to general education procedures concerned with the analytical skill, critical thinking and also knowledge, Vocational Education and Training (VET) is concerned with practical experiences, craftsmanship and other practical experience-based learning. Though this simple distinction does not hold up to inspection, critical thinking and analytical skills are still required in the case of a good plumber or

electrician who must routinely make judgments to solve problems. Similarly, a good surgeon needs a large set of practical skills to master fully operate on a patient (Education International, 2009).

The importance of VET has its roots in traditional teaching methods and education systems across the globe. However, traditional method shave led to a situation where colleges and universities produce numerous graduates, and postgraduates every year that often remain unemployed or unsuitable for the jobs available. This is where VET is gaining relevance, because it allows for the delivery of job-oriented training to the students. VET typically trains a person to become eligible to work in a specific job field. Those persons who want to be established in an untraditional area of work or those who want to set up a small establishment of their own can become the major beneficiaries of VET by gaining work specific knowledge at relatively lower age compared with University students.(Education for Everyone, 2015).

### **Learning Style in Vocational Education**

In order to discuss the style of learning in VET, we must look at how it differs from traditional learning methods. In contrast to the conventional learning model where the learning procedure is referred to as the one with behavioral, cognitive etc. whereas in the vocational education and training, is more hands on learning the external rather practical experiences are taken into consideration (Toth, 2012).

The Vocational Education and Training refer to the learning process that involves practical experience and in this regard the experiential learning is significant to be implemented in VET. The connection between experiential learning and VET comes with respect to the point of benefits that the students who want to become established in any of the non-traditional fields then the person can be benefitted from both the experiential method of learning and the vocational education and training.

The Experiential Learning Approach is frequently depicted as strident, which is contrary to the traditional technique of teaching where the teacher is a subject matter expert who conveys information and knowledge to the student. In addition to this, conventional learning methods frequently have an approach termed as *outside in*, whereas the Experimental Learning follows an alternative approach which is termed as *inside-in*. *The inside in* approach persuades the students to obtain knowledge according to their own interests and enthusiasm. In fact the function or responsibility of an educator in ELT is to aid in the process of inspiring learners to receive knowledge driven by their own interest. Therefore, providing instruction, orders and answers to questions are not a part of this approach.(Kolb & Kolb, On Becoming an Experiential Educator: The Education Role Profile, 2014)

### **The role profile of an experiential educator**

Learner centered education methods like experiential learning have gained global acceptance into the twenty first century. With this acceptance, more educators have experimented with the experiential learning processes. These processes include, problem solving based learning, learning with practical aspects, service based learning techniques, excursion or adventure based learning, as well as other processes adopted to expand experiential learning techniques and trainer pedagogy. The philosophy and concepts of ELT have even been taken into consideration to extend, develop and cater the programs in K-12 education, undergraduate education as well as some professional education courses (Kolb & Kolb, On Becoming an Experiential Educator: The Education Role Profile, 2014).

### **The Experiential Educator is a Facilitator**

The reform of educational processes with the invention of ELT has called for procedures to shift the role of trainer from the traditional one as an imparter of knowledge to the more modern one who acts to facilitate ;'knowledge (Clark, Threeton, & Ewing, 2010).

However, those who wish to change their role as an educational instructor from the traditional one to the experiential one receive disingenuous, perplexing and conflicting directions from the educational literature. In order to simplify things the critics together with the advocates have augmented two well-known characteristics of the ELT. These are as follows:

- ❖ ELT requires the trainer to adopt a teaching style that is non-directive to help the learners understand and learn from practical and direct experiences. In this way educators become facilitators of learning rather than instructors.
- ❖ The second requirement of ELT is that the teaching style should be matched with the learning style.

## Matching teaching with the learning styles

For the trainer, who wants to become competent in experiential learning, it is important to achieve similarities rather than exact matching between learning and teaching styles. On the other hand, to become a learner centered technique of education; methods must be modified to meet the exclusive requirements of the learners. Therefore more research into the best ways to go about matching up teaching and learning styles is essential as it will help to better align teachers and students in ELT courses (Kolb & Kolb, On Becoming an Experiential Educator: The Education Role Profile, 2014).

Source - (Kolb & Kolb, On Becoming an Experiential Educator: The Education Role Profile, 2014).

The figure illustrates that the facilitator in the Experiential Learning is not an instructor or subject matter expert who delivers the instruction to the pupils.

## Experiential Learning and the Style of Intelligence

With an aim to improve the probability of increased student achievement through the pedagogical practices rather the more focused pedagogical practices, the educational researchers have investigated for

the techniques and approaches to improve the educational experience of the students in terms of both the formal and informal environments of education.

The strategies are with the implications for the implementation of Experiential Learning Theory into the system of education. This method of experiential learning involves the teaching strategy namely adopting and adapting in order to support the learning style or the level of intelligence of the student. This technique originally stems from the idea that there is no approach like one fit for all for teaching and learning. From this idea the significance of experiential learning felt to be implemented in the education system (Threeton, Walter, Claerk, & Ewing, 2011). This technique has identified that the teaching style that is catered by the teacher to teach the students which is mostly determined by the style of teaching that





the teacher had received in his or her learning time rather than the learning style of the students

### **The Experiential Learning and Vocational Training**

According to Scott and Sarkees-Wircenski, most career and technical education programs are real-life and experience-based, indicating that they are predominantly experiential programs. In these programs students are often asked to write about what they learned during their experience, how they applied their knowledge of theory, and the ways they can become an eligible employee (Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008). The ELT proposed by Kolb is also in favor of practical and real life, experience-based learning. Kolb believes that ELT must be mutually empathetic with both the Career and Technical Education. According to the Kolb theory of Experiential Learning, the Career and Technical Education that is provided to students through VET courses and the insertion and implication of the ELT in this training process should together provide the learner with a significant career advantages. (Clark, Threton, & Ewing, 2010).

### **Implementation of Experiential Learning into Vocational Education and Training**

The thing that is directly related or linked to the experiential learning is the problem based learning that helps a learner to learn the subject properly. Vocational education in Agricultural Education and Training, the educators experienced that problem based learning facilitates the experience of learning (Robaert, Threton, & Ewing, 2011). In this regard, the attainment and retention of knowledge by the students on the basis of problem solving or problem based approach was examined in terms of how good it is to deliver the knowledge and that too with the achievement of gaining practical knowledge of that subject for the students was examined by Boon in the year of 1990. In this experiment, it was witnessed by Boon that the students who learned from the problem based approach performed better than those who had learnt from the subject matter expert based approaches.

In the year of 1996, the problem base approach and the subject matter approach had been compared by Dyer and Osborne in order to determine the efficiency of each of the approach based on the learning style of the students. The test for the measurement of the effectiveness of the approaches was based on the Group Embedded Figure Test or GEFT, and it was found that regardless of the learning style of students, the problem based approach was far better for the agriculture education student and they were able to solve problems more effectively and efficiently with the problem based approach. In other words, the researchers, Dyer and Osborne have found that the problem of teaching with the problem based approach or problem solving pedagogy

capitulates substantial benefits in the learning of students (Robaert, Threton, & Ewing, 2011).

In the year of 2000, the experiment by Trade and Whitaker on examining the educational requirements of the beginner in farmer education has resulted in the more convenience of the students in learning from the problem based approach rather than the subject matter approach (Robaert, Threton, & Ewing, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Theory rich educational programs with little or no practical learning experiences are insufficient in this day and age. Students drowning in theory and having no practical knowledge of how to perform in their field are essentially useless and they are often overcome by a sense of inadequacy. This is why programs like VET have become increasingly popular across a wide range of subject areas. Recently, VET program organisers have started to explore ELT as a major learning model. VET involves skill-based training and ELT is based on the belief that learning occurs through practical experiences, thus they are mutually complementary. The model of experiential learning that involves the role of the trainer as a facilitator of knowledge instead of the role as an instructor or dictator of knowledge is also relevant in connection with the VET.

Experiential learning augments the desire of the student to obtain knowledge without any external forces. This type of learning involves a process where the trainer or the educational guide neither instructs nor orders nor do they provide the answers. Rather they guide the students through practical experiences in order to help them obtain knowledge that is directly applicable and relevant to the professional world. In many ways this method is much more successful than others, particularly because students are more likely to retain knowledge gained from a hands on experience that they are interested in, than that knowledge relayed to them using slides and images displayed in a lecture theatre.

One of the many examples that prove the efficacy of VET supported by ELT can be seen in the field of healthcare and nursing in the United Kingdom (Getting Evidence into Practice: the Role and Function of Facilitation, 2000). Impressively, students obtained more practical experience-based learning which helped them understand the subject as well as gain the required skills for more successful recruitment into the industry.



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