

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE



Reference:

Pfeiffer, J. William and John E. Jones. (1983). *Reference Guide to Handbooks and Annuals (1983 Edition)* (4). San Diego: University Associates.

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Educational programming that gets people actively involved in their learning is referred to as **experiential**. Learning activities are **designed to recognize the knowledge and experience that participants** bring to the program. Rather than lecturing or telling, we set up actual experiences that enable participants to draw their own conclusions, to examine their own attitudes, to get excited about a new idea, to see a skill in action, to learn from other participants, and to practice new ways of behaving.

The experiential learning cycle consists of five important stages that pave the way to meaningful learning: 1) experiencing, 2) reporting, 3) processing, 4) generalizing and 5) applying.

Experiencing -- In this first stage group members participate in an activity in which they produce some information, perhaps about their values, about communicating in relationships, about HIV/AIDS, about reactions to employment dilemmas, and so on. The initial activity might be done individually, in small groups or in the large group. Sometimes the first experience is structured as a game or contest. Examples of possible learning experiences include:

- role playing
- problem solving or sharing information in small groups
- giving and receiving feedback in pairs
- brainstorming
- communicating nonverbally
- analyzing dilemmas or case studies
- completing a handout
- competing in fact/myth games

The goal this stage of the learning cycle is for participants to develop a common base of information or experience to use in the discussion that follows. Avoid the temptation to end a session prematurely before fully discussing (or processing) an activity. Sometimes the activity is so much fun that facilitators get caught up in the experience and forget what they are trying to accomplish. If the process stops at this stage, just after the experience, learning will be left to chance. The next four steps of the learning cycle are actually more important than this experiencing stage.

Publishing (Reporting) -- Sharing Reactions and Observations: In the first stage participants experience an activity. In the reporting stage, they share what they saw and/or how they felt during the event. The question here is "What happened?/How did it go?" Talking about what happened makes the experience of each individual available to all group members. When individuals report on their experience, they tell us what the activity was like for them. Each individual may have had a different

experience, even though they participated in the same activity. A number of methods can be used to report (or publish) the reactions and observations of individual participants:

- Record participants' responses on newsprint (especially in brainstorming activities).
- Go around the room asking volunteers to share what they experienced and how they felt about the activity.
- If participants have worked in small groups, have each small group report to the large group.

Processing -- Discussing Patterns and Dynamics: In this critical stage participants begin to systematically examine what they experienced and how they felt about it. The question here is "What kinds of things happened and why?" "Processing" is the "talking-through" stage in which participants begin to recognize patterns in the way people think, feel and react. The discussion might lead a participant to see that interrupting and judging seriously interferes with effective communication. Maybe this group member saw her or himself as a good communicator and now recognizes some personal destructive habits. Other times participants notice interesting similarities and differences among themselves. Techniques that can be used to facilitate processing are:

- Listening for recurring themes from the reports of individuals.
- Focusing attention on the particular roles that specific individuals played during the activity.
- Asking open-ended questions such as "What was that activity like for you?"

When you are preparing to conduct a session, plan carefully how to carry out the processing. Take the time to write down open-ended questions that you plan to ask the group. When we fail to spend enough time "processing," we can leave participants with "unfinished business" and unanswered questions. But don't over process -- take your cues from participants.

Generalizing -- Developing Real World Principles: In this stage we ask participants to make connections between the activity and everyday life. The key question here is "So what? What have we learned?" Encourage participants to focus on situations in their personal or work lives that might relate to the activity. Their task is to develop some life principles learned in the activity that could be applied "outside" in their own lives. This step is what makes experiential learning practical. When it is omitted or glossed over, the learning is likely to be superficial. Some strategies for generalizing from the processing stage are:

- Have each participant complete the sentence "The most important thing I learned today was"
- Ask participants to imagine realistic situations "back home" and determine how what they learned in the activity might be applicable.

Applying -- Planning Effective Use of Learning: The final stage of the experiential learning cycle is the purpose for which the whole activity is designed. The question here is "Now what? - How will you use what you have learned?" Help participants apply the life principles they just identified to real life situations. What are they going to DO as a result of their learning? These techniques can be helpful:

- Have participants in small groups help each other with back-home problem situations using the lessons learned in the activity.
- Have group members make concrete promises to one another about actions they plan to take and changes they will make. Individuals are more likely to carry out their planned actions if they share them with others.
- Practice new behaviors in role plays of back-home situations.

At the very least at the end of an activity, ask participants, "What's the most important thing you learned from this activity? How will you use what you learned in your own life?"

References:

- Jones, J.E. & Pfeiffer, J.W., eds. (1973). *The 1973 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitator*. San Diego: University Associates. (Adapted by Pamela M. Wilson)
- Pfeiffer, J.W. & Ballew, A.C., eds. (1988). *Using Structured Experiences in Human Resource Development*. San Diego: University Associates.

QUESTIONS TO USE WITH THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE

EXPERIENCING: Because participants are involved in an activity, there are usually few reasons to ask questions in this stage. If participants resist participating in the activity, these questions can help:

- What's going on?
- What do you need to know to get started?
- Could you offer a suggestion?
- What would you prefer?
- What is your objection?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?

PUBLISHING (REPORTING): Participants make their individual (or small group) experience available to the whole group. Ask questions such as:

- What was that activity like for you?
- Who would like to tell us about your experience?
- What happened? How did you feel about that?
- Who else had the same experience?
- Let's hear from someone who had a different reaction?
- What surprised you?
- What did you observe?

PROCESSING: Now that participants have the same base of information, ask questions to help them make sense of that information.

- Why do you think that happened?
- If you were in _____'s shoes, what would you do?
- What did you think about that?
- How was that significant?
- How was that good/bad?
- What struck you about that?
- How do those fit together?
- How might it have been different?
- What was going on there?
- What does that tell you about yourself/your group?
- What similarities came up in your group? What were the differences?

GENERALIZING: Participants move from specific knowledge they have gained about themselves and their group to creating general life principles that can be used in the future. Questions are directed toward promoting generalizations.

- What might we draw/pull from that?
- Why do you think we did this activity? What was the point?
- What did you learn/relearn?
- What does that suggest to you about _____ in general.
- What lessons can we learn from this?
- What principle/law do you see operating?
- Does that remind you of anything? What does that help explain?
- How does this relate to other experiences you've had?

APPLYING: Participants begin to plan ways to use what they have learned in the session in their real home or work situations. Questions ask participants to consider how they can utilize new information or skills in their personal and/or professional lives.

- How could you apply that to a situation in your own life?
- What would you like to do with that knowledge?
- How will you use what you've learned outside of this program?
- How could you repeat this experience again?
- What could you do to hold on to that feeling?
- What are the options for you when you get back?
- What would be the consequences of doing/not doing that?
- What could you imagine/fantasize about that?
- Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently the next time?
- What can you do to make sure this never happens to you?