

Teaching Strategies — Experiential Learning*

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Abstract: The experiential learning model focuses on experience and emphasizes its paramount importance in the learning process. It places great emphasis on the relationship between teaching, -which takes place in the classroom-, and the society and everyday life of the students. Dewey, a pioneer in experiential learning, refers to education and stresses that it is “of, by, and for experience”. Next, it was the turn of Piaget who believes that learning is a process by which the person interacts with the environment and Lewin who emphasizes the importance of individual experience in learning and highlights the inextricable relationship between theory and practice. All three of them, with their works which concentrate on experience, founded the theory of experiential learning which is opposed to the cognitive theories of learning that do not take into account the awareness and experiences of the individual.

Subsequently, David A. Kolb, based on the work of Dewey, describes the four stages of the cycle of experiential learning, namely concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. This model requires the active involvement in the learning process of the trainees, who through practice and exercise attain immediate results. In contrast to traditional models, students focus on a specific experience, think critically and work out possible scenarios that can differentiate it.

The participation and the role of a teacher who has organizational skills that allow him/her to support appropriate activities, is also very important. For the purposes of the teaching procedure, various experiential learning activities, such as activities of direct experience and creative thinking, role plays, interviews, conflict brainstorming, simulation, educational visits to archaeological sites and generally to places of cultural interest, theatrical performances, etc. are planned, organized and applied. The methods and techniques used by teachers for the most appropriate experiential learning experience are many. The three main educational methods applied are: educational techniques that are implemented inside the classroom, those that take place outside it and educational exercises.

Key words: experiential learning, forms of teaching, teaching techniques, experiential activities

1. Introduction

Experiential learning as a concept is an alternative way of learning through which students are in direct

*Originally published in Greek under the title “Διδακτικές στρατηγικές-Η βιωματική μάθηση”, in: *Πρακτικά 5^ο Πανελληνίου Συνεδρίου του Μουσείου Σχολικής Ζωής και Εκπαίδευσης του ΕΚΕΔΙΣΥ, της Παιδαγωγικής Εταιρείας Ελλάδος και των Αρσάκειων-Τοστίσεων Σχολείων: «Εκπαίδευση στον 21ο αιώνα: Ανάπτυξη της κριτικής σκέψης, της δημιουργικότητας και της καινοτομίας»*, Τόμος Δ, Αθήνα 2021, available online at: <http://ekedisy.gr/?p=13607>.

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contact with the subject. It seeks the search for meaning and mobilizes the learners emotionally and mentally. In addition, it connects teaching, which takes place in the classroom, with everyday life and the society. The model of experiential learning focuses on the important role that experience plays on the learning process and utilizes it appropriately. The trainees first live an experience and then are encouraged to reflect on it and develop new knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours (Phillips, 2004, p. 4).

Dewey, a pioneer in experiential learning, refers to education and stresses that it is “of, by, and for experience”. Piaget believes that learning is a process by which the person interacts with the environment, while Lewin emphasizes the importance of individual experience in learning and highlights the inextricable relationship between theory and practice. David A. Kolb, who follows, states that experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. Above all, however, it should be emphasized that experiential learning is the result of experiences that come from educational activities and the reflection that follows them. It differs from traditional learning at key points concerning the approach and acquisition of knowledge, the role of teachers, but also the role of students in the learning process.

Regarding knowledge, its approach is holistic and interdisciplinary. Its acquisition is not achieved through memorization of textbooks and predetermined material, but through direct contact of the trainee with the subject. It is a result of observation, reflection and action.

Regarding the role of teachers, teachers are not the only source of knowledge, but they work along with learners, while discovery of their main concern is to create a suitable environment for experiential learning and knowledge. In addition, they have an obligation to contribute to creating a climate of common interest.

Regarding the role of students, it is essential for students to engage in the learning process, to deepen and understand the taught subject, to be able to apply in their everyday life the knowledge that they themselves discover. They learn how to learn.

2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

David A. Kolb based on the models of Dewey, Piaget and Lewin –that refer to the process of learning through experiential situations, to the kinds of such experiences and to their way of use - creates his own new model.

As Kolb (1984, pp. 21–24) states:

“...Lewin argues that learning, change, and growth are seen to be facilitated best by an integrated process that begins with here-and-now experience followed by collection of data and observations about that experience. The data are then analyzed and the conclusions of this analysis are fed back to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behavior and choice of new experiences. In this model, concrete experience plays an important role in order for the final conclusions to be tested and finalized while the feedback process is also considered important....

John Dewey's model of the learning process is remarkably similar to the Lewinian model. He believes and describes how learning transforms the impulses, feelings, and desires of concrete experience into purposeful action... The formation of purposes involves: 1) observation of surrounding conditions; 2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, and 3) judgment, which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify [...]

Piaget maintains that [...] the learning process whereby this development takes place is a cycle of interaction

between the individual and the environment that is similar to the teaming models of Dewey and Lewin [...] He stresses out that “the key to learning lies in the mutual interaction of the process of accommodation of concepts to experience in the world and the process of assimilation of experiences from the world into existing concepts....” Experiences, ideas, reflection and action are the key factors that affect the development of thought.

Based on the three above models, David A. Kolb (1984, pp. 40–42), creates a model of his own, which describes the cycle of experiential learning through four stages: a) concrete experience, b) reflective observation, c) abstract conceptualization and d) active experimentation. This learning, and therefore knowledge model requires understanding, acceptance and transformation of experience into some kind of knowledge and in addition the involvement in the learning process of learners, who, through practice achieve immediate results. It is a circular process under which learners: First, they live a specific experience. Next, they reflect on it. Then they draw conclusions and finally they formulate theoretical principles and generalizations. In the end, they experiment, putting into practice what they have learned. The result of this cycle of experiential learning is a new experience, the completion of the first cycle of experiential learning and the incentive for a new cycle of experiential learning. However, great attention must be paid to the correct implementation of each phase of this cycle, since otherwise there is a risk that the learning process will be negatively affected by experience, as each of these phases is inextricably linked to the previous and to the next one.

Additionally, Merriam S., Caffarella R., (1999, p. 224) refer to four skill types which are necessary for learning through experience: a) the individual must be susceptible and must wish to engage on new experiences, b) the individual must be observant and responsive in order to examine experiences from different angles, c) the individual must have the ability to analyze observations in order to draw conclusions and d) the individual must be able to solve problems and make decisions in order to apply in practice the new ideas that arise.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that several others, too, attempted to complete Kolb’s model describing the circle of experiential learning. One of these is Barnett, who added -between the third stage of abstract conceptualization and fourth stage of active experimentation-, a fifth stage. This stage concerns the development of an action plan which finds its implementation in the phase of active experimentation.

3. Planning Teaching With the Experiential Method

Planning teaching with the experiential method includes the four phases set forth below, the three types — categories of education techniques, commonly used in the educational process, the selection of the subject of experiential activities during the learning process, and finally the role that the teacher should play in experiential learning.

3.1 Teaching Phases — Planning and Course of Teaching

During the planning and the course of the teaching, there are four phases at the end which an assessment is carried out.

Concrete experience is the first phase. Experiences are recalled, through activities planned by the teacher. Information comes from the experiences of the trainees through their active participation in the said activities.

Observation and Reflection are the second phase. Connection of the experiences with the object to be investigated is attempted and through group discussions experiences are compared.

Abstract conceptualization is the third phase. After interpreting the emotions and experiences created by the educational experience, we move to formulate theoretical principles.

Active experimentation is the fourth phase. All learners test and verify the new knowledge acquired and generalize the conclusions into principles.

At the end comes the Assessment phase. Activities are carried out that assess the metacognitive and social skills of the trainees.

3.2 Educational Techniques

Use of appropriate educational techniques which actively involve all participants in the learning process and lead them to practice and then to reflect on the experiences, is the main tool of teachers in the context of experiential learning. There are three types of such techniques: educational techniques that take place inside the classroom, techniques that take place outside the classroom, and educational exercises.

Inside the classroom: Learners apply experiences and knowledge in problem solving within a specific educational context. They seek information through sources; they develop their critical ability and work out solutions. The main feature of the whole process is that they are led to learning through practice. The use of school laboratory equipment for laboratory practices is encouraged. Brainstorming, simulations, group work, role play, group discussions and case studies are the main techniques applied in the learning process are. The above techniques strengthen the active participation of those involved in the process, as many new experiences and knowledge which the team shares to solve problems, emerge.

Outside the classroom: There is strengthening of the teamwork of learners in their effort to solve complex problems, manage changes and make decisions. In addition, interaction of the participants and more effective communication are ensured. More specifically, the trainer creates learning processes and through properly designed activities and games leads the learners to experience strong emotional situations. The benefit is the change that takes place both in the overall picture of the team and in the way it operates as a whole.

Educational exercises: These are activities related to educational games and are divided into three main categories, namely role-playing games, simulation games and computer simulation games.

In role plays, the trainees play a role in a particular situation. One such activity would be to ask two students to play the roles of an Athenian and a Spartan teenager, respectively, who would argue about the importance of their city. In addition, the reversal technique, which is one of the most active techniques, gives the best result in the transformation of attitudes and is considered suitable for all levels of students, is encouraged (Tsimpoukli, & Phillips, 2008, p. 209).

In simulations there is an attempt of recovery and imitation of situations and events of real life aiming to drawing conclusions about the way the students act according to the role played by each one of them. The knowledge and experiences of the trainees are used for reflection, assessment and redesign of their behaviour in future situations. One such activity would be to attempt a representation of an assembly in the Ekklesia of ancient Athens.

For the performance and effectiveness of the above two activities deep knowledge of the subject and the division of roles according to the wishes of students is required. At the end of the activities, reflection takes place.

In computer simulation games we reach the solution of complex problems in situations the existence of which inside or outside the classroom is not possible.

3.3 Subject Selection

The following must be taken into account when choosing a subject:

Regarding adult learners, we take into consideration their work context, the subjects in which they are active,

as well as their interests and needs in their workplace.

Regarding the school context, we take into consideration the problems that concern the community, social awareness of the participants, their interests, scientific researches, the needs of the teacher and the students as well as the subjects contained in the curriculum.

3.4 The Role of the Teacher

The teacher must have organizational skills and experience in participating in experiential learning activities. He/ she must encourage and support students in finding information, develop critical thinking, cooperating with others in facing important problems and decision making. He/she must “see” through their eyes and direct them according to their experiences. He/she must feel the “pulse” of the class, participate with the student in the educational game, reflect and work on new ideas and practices.

By using the participatory techniques mentioned above, teachers engage students in the learning process in various ways, provide them the opportunity to use pre-existing knowledge and experiences and through their participation in groups, they work together to solve problems.

Teachers’ choosing the appropriate technique and the required material for each case and their ensuring an appropriate environment of interaction and the cooperation of those involved, is a prerequisite for the effectiveness and success of the learning process.

4. Conclusions

The process of experiential learning is carried out daily by all of us and is something done automatically. Every individual uses the experiences acquired daily in order to develop and promote as far as possible his/ her skills, as well as to assess his actions and way of behaviour. We have already made reference to the systematic and organized form of experiential learning with the help of demanding, participatory, educational techniques and goal setting. The activities that take place during the educational process require special care in their planning. Their effectiveness depends directly on the experience designed by the instructor, the goal setting, the subject, their application in the everyday life of the trainees and the interaction between those involved. Regardless of the type of teaching technique that will be applied, it is imperative that the teacher should clarify, support and provide assistance to his/her students, until the completion of the activities. Finally, it is necessary to have a discussion as well as to reflect on the experiential learning activity. In addition, it is desirable that the students themselves create an action plan in order to put into practice what they have learned.

It is obvious that this is a complex and multifaceted educational process whose planning has special requirements. According to Kolb (1984, p. 18) “... it is important to recognize that experiential learning is not a series of techniques to be applied in current practice but a program for profoundly re-creating our personal lives and social systems...” For this reason, it is required that every activity that is implemented in the context of experiential learning, be applied in the appropriate way and according to the necessary specifications, so that there is effective experiential education that offers benefits to each individual separately, but also to the society itself. With the application of educational techniques, critical thinking and in-depth learning, and therefore, excellent learning outcomes are achieved. They also help to strengthen self-esteem and the relationships of those involved in the learning process.

Especially at school and at all levels of education, the use of these techniques is a key factor in effective teaching, facilitating the achievement of educational goals, while contributing greatly to creating a positive school

environment. In addition, the student is at the centre of the learning process, utilizing his previous and new experience, actively participating in the problem-solving process, better understanding the world around him/her and being given the opportunity to reflect and act. The above techniques actively involve participants in new learning experiences and enhance the educational process as a whole, producing results (Noyé & Piveteau, 1999, p. 46).

Experiential learning is necessary in the educational process, since, in our days, due to the rapid development of technology we experience an ever-changing environment which requires from individuals new skills and therefore their ongoing training, as people do things based on their experiences. It is certain that he/ she, who experiences a situation or an examined phenomenon, understands better the concepts related to it.

Thus, through experiential learning, individuals enrich their experiences and knowledge and — what is most important — understand the difference between theory and practice and become able to solve the problems encountered both in their social activities and in their work environment.

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