

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty No. 24

The Top 10...

Components of a Complete Learning Experience

A complete learning experience must involve experience, reflection, ideas, and application. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle gives us a structure that guides students through stages in which they both experience and then make sense of what they are learning. By planning lessons with the Learning Cycle in mind, we can help students experience, reflect on, understand, and apply what they learn.

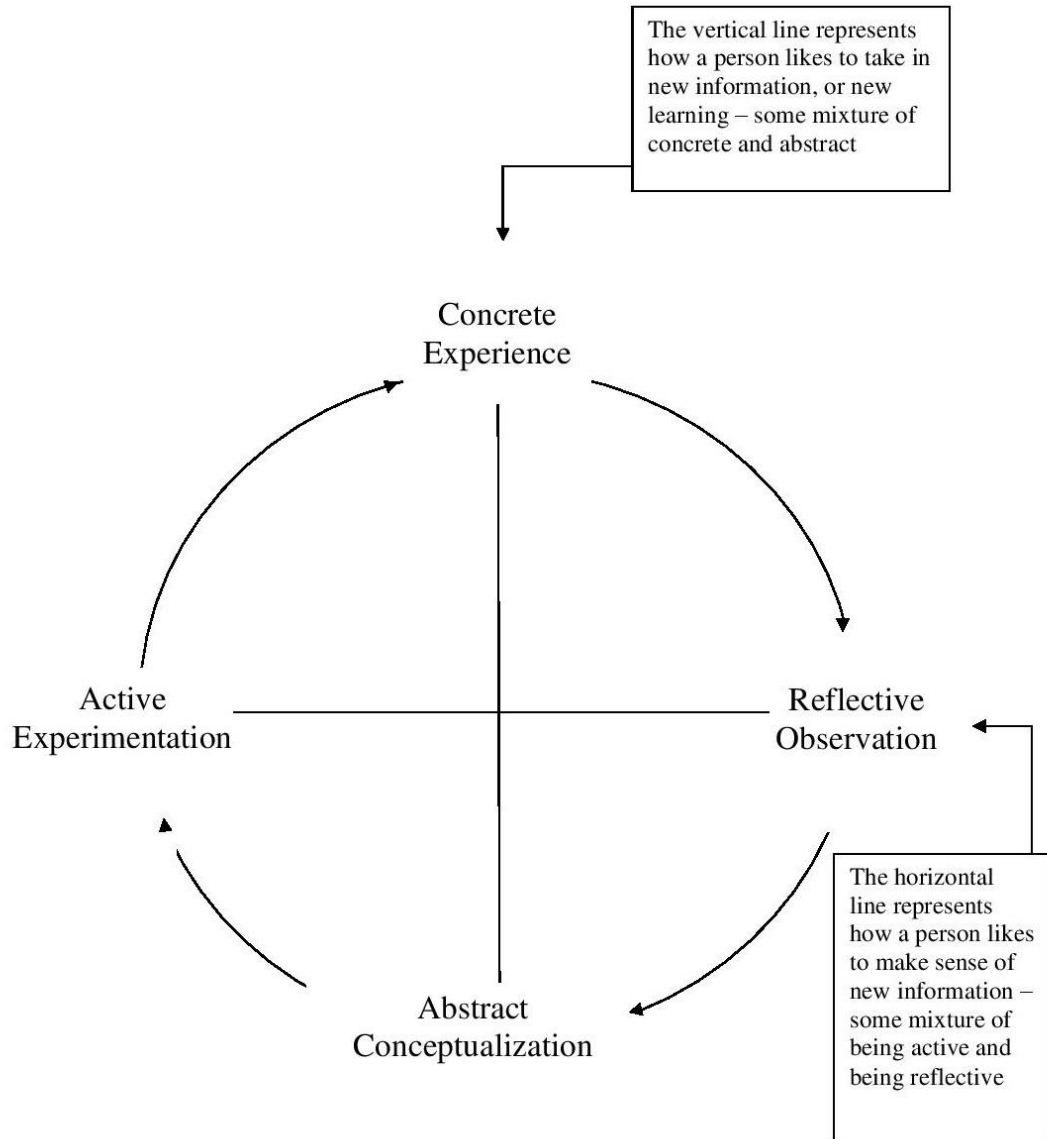
- ✓ **Concrete Experience.** Many community college students are most engaged by and thus begin learning best through concrete experience. Create an *experience* for your students that immerses them in the lesson's focus and/or connects explicitly to their lives or the real world. Concrete experience invests students in what they are learning and gives them a sense of why they are learning it.
- ✓ If you tend to begin lessons by teaching or lecturing, try flipping things around. Have students experience an activity first and *then* learn the ideas that will help them understand it. Discussion in small groups can be a concrete experience, but make sure that the topic of discussion is concrete, real-world experience, not a concept or idea.
- ✓ **Reflective Observation.** Once students have a learning experience, they must have the opportunity to reflect on it. Reflection is not just a qualitative activity; it's the way that many students process or make sense of experiences and new information.
- ✓ Reflective Observation can take the form of a full-class discussion after an activity or it can be done with a short, informal writing assignment (*Top 10* #10). Discussions help students learn from others and bond as a learning group, while reflection through writing is more personal and self-exploring. Either way, the focus should be *reflection*: What did you notice? How did you feel? Did anything surprise or confuse you? What would you do differently? What did I learn? What difference does it make?

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- ✓ You can combine a Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation by asking four or five volunteer students to discuss or debate a concrete issue in a circle while the rest of the class observes from the outside. Following the discussion, the observers share what they observed (use questions like the ones listed above). After a few minutes, the members of the volunteer group can share their observations as well. Be mindful that most of the class will only have Reflected/Observed, not had a Concrete Experience.
- ✓ **Abstract Conceptualization.** Give your students a context for understanding abstract concepts before explaining new ideas and theories. We love our disciplines and want our students to, so give them an experiential context for new material first, then ask them to grapple with the more abstract concepts.
- ✓ Many college faculty mistakenly think that students have a context with which to understand abstract concepts, ideas, and theories. Unless clearly defined as specific thinking tasks, “analysis” itself is an abstract concept for most students. Think of it this way: most college faculty want to see the world using ideas; most college students want to see ideas using the world.
- ✓ **Active Experimentation.** Active experimentation is the trying out stage of the learning cycle. What can/should students do with what they’ve learned in order to deepen their understanding? Don’t deny your students the chance to actively experiment; it’s a cornerstone of *active* learning! This should be the fun part of learning. Ask students to apply what they’ve learned to their intended careers, personal life, a case study, a reading, other course material, or a new Concrete Experience!
- ✓ Though the Learning Cycle has four “stages” (Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation), there is no “right order” for a learning experience. Try starting with an experience and at other times with an explanation of a theory. Move from either of these to giving students reflective exercises and other times asking them to apply or experiment with the material.
- ✓ This introduction to the Learning Cycle is based on the work of David Kolb, who developed theories focusing both on learning styles and a learning cycle that moves students through various stages of thinking, feeling, doing, and watching. For more information, visit <http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

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