

## **The Lifelong Learning Experience**

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### **Abstract**

Rooted on the theories of Experiential and Transformative Learning, the Lifelong Learning Experience complements the Experiential Learning Cycle, Transformative Learning and Accelerated Learning by combining their strengths and moving beyond life in the college classroom. The Lifelong Learning Experience explores the impact of classroom events on lifelong learning, an area rarely addressed within learning theories. An explanation of the Lifelong Learning Experience, the impact teachers have on future learning as well as the theoretical influences for the Experience are discussed.

*Keywords:* lifelong learning, experiential learning, transformative learning, accelerated learning

## Introduction

The Experiential Learning Cycle discussed by Kolb (1984) has been explored in length by several authors (Boud & Walker, 1992; Moon, 2004). However, the idea of lifelong learning as a continuous experience is rarely addressed as part of the learning process. The Lifelong Learning Experience goes beyond the learning cycle and speaks to a neglected process when we discuss learning. What is lifelong learning, really? What role does the teacher play in lifelong learning in the classroom?

When people think about their most memorable experience in college, most describe eventful encounters, not course content as memorable. With that in mind, looking at learning as an eventful encounter has the potential of making it memorable long after graduation, when lifelong learning is at its prime. The role of the teacher is to make learning extraordinary in a way that students are able to make connections between the memorable experiences of learning and the rest of their lives.

The Lifelong Learning Experience process explains the role of the teacher on the future of lifelong learning for students. The Experience focuses on the Transformative Learning concept of Reflection (Mezirow, 1990) as it prepares students to face the world beyond the safety of the classroom. The Lifelong Learning Experience is rooted in the Experiential Learning and Transformative Learning theories as it explores the influence of classroom events on lifelong learning after college.

## Theoretical Influences

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle has its foundation in Dewey, Lewis and Piaget's theories on learning. Kolb contented that experiential learning is the foundation for students' connections with the real world of work and lifelong learning (Kolb, 2015). The cycle included Concrete Experience (CE); Reflective Observation (RO); Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE). According to Kolb in Sternberg's and Zhang's Perspective on Thinking, Learning and Cognitive Styles (2001), the experiential model described two modes of seizing experience (CE and AC) and two modes of transforming experience (RO and AE). Kolb (2015) summarized the importance of these modes: "Lifelong learning is often conceived as a process of learning from direct experiences that is controlled by the individual (p. xix)". For Kolb (1984), learning was a process guided by experience that is viewed as continuous.

Kolb's model was explored in length and modified by authors such as Moon, and Boud and Walker. Boud and Walker (1992) took Kolb's experiential process into a series of stages that included not only Kolb's experimentation and reflection, but also the intention of a student to learn. A student must prepare for experimentation and reflection utilizing his or her own experiences (Boud & Walker, 1992). Jennifer Moon (2004) focused on internal and external experiences and their influence on learning. Moon (2004) discussed the nature of experience as individual but also social, since our external experiences are rooted in our social surroundings. Both authors agreed with Kolb's assertion that experience is at the center of the learning process.

The Experiential Learning Theory described in detail what types of experiences students use for learning that are directly related to their experiential learning styles: Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, and Accommodating (Kolb, 2015). Kolb (2015) suggested that

experiential learning provides a deeper form of learning, especially for non-traditional students, which offers a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Although the Experiential Learning Theory was detailed and well-supported as to its process in the classroom and potential for development of students beyond school, it skirted around the discussion of lifelong learning and the role of teaching in the development of these experiences after students leave the college classroom. The Lifelong Learning Experience fills this gap in the discussion of experiential learning.

In addition to experiential learning, a more recent discussion has been reignited around the concept of Transformative Learning. Jack Mezirow (1997) took a step beyond experiential learning to attach meaning to experience through each individual's frame of reference. The frame of reference added to the experiences of each individual's cognitive, conative and emotional components and how they transform the experience (Mezirow, 1997). Complementary to Mezirow's perspective and expanding on Moon's (2004) ideas, the social-emancipatory view, grounded in Paulo Freire's work, added to the frame of reference the concepts of context and social change (Taylor, 2008). Both Transformative Learning Theory and the social-emancipatory perspective inched closer to the concept of lifelong learning but did not really explore it. Taylor and Canton (2012) discussed the need for more forward-thinking ideas on transformative learning that encompass other areas beyond the transformative pedagogy explored in different settings. The Lifelong Learning Experience takes a step beyond the pedagogy and provides a look into how the experiences, reflection and frame of reference connect to what happens in life after college.

Experiential and Transformative Learning focused on the reflective and personal part of the learning process. The concept of Accelerated Learning focused on techniques to explore this process and reflections in the classroom. The concept provided a system to enhance the design of the classroom delivery, thus enhancing learning (Meier, 2000). The focus of Accelerated Learning was experimental learning. The designs suggested by the concept were rooted in experimentation, collaboration and the environment with seven guiding principles: 1) Learning involves the whole mind and body; 2) Learning is creation, not consumption; 3) Collaboration aids learning; 4) Learning takes place on many levels simultaneously; 5) Learning comes from doing the work itself (with feedback); 6) Positive emotions greatly improve learning; 7) The image brain absorbs information instantly and automatically (Meier, 2000). These principles asserted that learning is a hands-on process that involves the entire body and mind. It is not linear, and content is better absorbed through images.

The Lifelong Learning Experience combines experience, reflection and design exploring the influences they have on life beyond the college classroom.

### **The Lifelong Learning Experience**

Based on the concepts of experiential learning, reflection, and content delivery design the Lifelong Learning Experience complements the Experiential Learning Cycle, Transformative Learning and Accelerated Learning by combining their strengths and moving beyond life in the college classroom. The concept of reflection has been extensively examined and took different shapes for different authors. Kolb, Boyatzis and Mainemelis (1999) believed reflection creates abstract concepts that can later be used to guide new experiences. A deeper meaning was attached to reflection by Mezirow (1990), explaining reflection as a challenge to presuppositions on prior experiences. Meier (2000) included reflection in design by

alternating it with activity. The Lifelong Learning Experience looks at reflection as part of the entire process; however, the focus really lies on the individual efforts once the students leave the safety of a classroom into the next step in their lives. Reflection is the core tool for making connections of past experiences with present events and future decisions.

Additionally, emotions are a guiding force on the importance of experiences for each individual. They play a pivotal role on if, and how, students utilize reflection in the Lifelong Learning Experience. As expressed by Meier (2000), positive emotions greatly improve learning. Pekrun (2014) outlines four types of academic emotions experienced by students: 1) Achievement emotions; 2) Epistemic emotions; 3) Topic emotions; 4) Social emotions. The author contended that these emotions can be positive or negative and have a strong impact on learning. In a more scientific view, Christianson (2014) described emotions as a by-product of the pursuit of biological motives. The author agreed that emotional reactions can influence the outcome of one's goals.

Focusing on the importance of self-regulation in learning, the Lifelong Learning experience empowers students to develop self-generated thoughts, feelings and behaviors that lead to self-directed learning through life beyond school (Zimmerman, 2002). The Lifelong Learning Experience (Fig. 1) explores the process of learning in the classroom and ways in which it provides the necessary tools for students to endeavor in a meaningful and fulfilled life through lifelong learning. The process is not static or cyclical, but dynamic. Each class, opportunity and student group will determine the order in which the Experience occurs. The Experience in the classroom leads to enriched life experiences.



Figure 1: The Lifelong Learning Experience

The Information portion of the Experience is where students are exposed to concepts, ideas or topics for discussion. Here, students receive the basics needed to walk the Experience. To maximize this portion, the teacher should present information in small chunks and check for understanding often. The exposure to information should be interesting and engaging, with personal examples so students can connect to the topic. This portion may be combined with Awareness through inductive teaching and learning, where the information given is more specific than general. Through analyzing this information, preferably in a cooperative manner, students generate the need for more facts and concepts. At this time, they are either presented with what they need or led to discover it themselves (Prince & Felder, 2006).

Awareness is then the understanding of the information. Here students make sense of the information they received or discovered and are able to explain it to others. In this portion of the Experience, students should work cooperatively and be given activities that require them to explain what they have learned. Working cooperatively involves working in teams on projects or assignments based on criteria provided by the teacher (Feldner & Brent, 2009). Cooperation provides opportunities for manipulation of information and thus further understanding, which is the goal of the Awareness portion of the Experience. Reflection is also an important part of Awareness. Reflecting on concepts and their validity and purpose based on individual frame of reference contributes to the student's perception of the content, leading to the Attitude portion of the Experience. Reflection also prepares students for application, which takes place in Action.

The Attitude portion addresses the emotions connected to the content being explored. Students' feelings about the content learned are often related to engagement with the content. Engagement is frequently tied to relevance of the content for the student. Relevance is perceiving something as interesting and worth knowing (Roberson, 2013). This two-part definition gives teachers two angles to pursue in making content relevant and engaging: Interest and worthiness. If a student thinks something is uninteresting, it may still be worth knowing. The connection between Awareness and Awakening lies on these two pieces of relevance. According to Roberson (2013), merely creating games and action when delivering content does not make something interesting or worth knowing. Substantive content can create the perception of worth and interest, thus generating positive emotions towards it. Content that is viewed as relevant and/or worth knowing generally leads to a positive attitude.

Action is where application happens, thus it should take a considerable amount of time in relation to the other portions. Here is where students apply the concepts they have learned in many different approaches. In essence, Action Learning is being utilized here by having students work together to solve real problems (World Institute for Action Learning, 2018). Students experience the concepts in real life scenarios, reflecting on the meaning of the topic and what it does for themselves and others, how it can be utilized and its relevance. Working collaboratively in this portion to apply what was learned and reflect on its merits with others can lead to insights that students may not reach alone. This type of learning becomes self-sustained, giving students a sense of independence and the ability to develop interdependent relationships in the classroom (Yang, 2015). It is important, however, to remember that an activity in itself is not enough to promote deep learning. Interactive reflection must take place to enable a deeper understanding and connections with the content (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004).

Finally, Awakening. Awakening is composed of different areas on which, now former students, work simultaneously. Here is where all the efforts made by teachers and students culminate and the learning acquired through the Experience makes a difference in each of the

different areas. Awakening is the result of how well teachers were able to lead students through each part of the Experience and awaken in students the ability to reflect and make lifelong connections. Teachers may initiate this part of the Experience by providing opportunities for further reflection and service work to student, but it is up to the student to take it beyond the safety of the school. Some institutions support this effort by providing senior capstone projects in which students integrate learning across disciplines and reflect on how it can aid in life beyond college (Henscheid, 2008).

Awakening is a continuous process in which every choice will lead to new information, which then takes the person through the Lifelong Learning Experience again and again on their own. Herein lies the importance of walking the Experience with the students in a way that prepares them to be able to walk it on their own long after they graduate. Denson et al. (2017) found that college experiences have direct effects on post college abilities to discuss sensitive and difficult issues, which suggests that the engagement created in the Lifelong Learning Experience has lasting effects after college.

### **Dimensions of Awakening**

The personal dimension is where individuals utilize their experiences learned during the process in higher education to make decisions about their personal lives. The goal is to live a personally fulfilling and healthy life. The dimension of community allows individuals to make connections between what they have learned and their community. Making decisions on how and how much to contribute to the community of which they are a part. The social dimension is directly related to what students experienced in the Action part of the Experience. Here they make social connections and practice leadership as part of their social role, expanding to work and leisure. Finally, global dimension allows individuals to utilize the reflective skills they learned during the Experience they walked with the teacher in school to expand their interests globally.

### **Role of the Teacher**

The role of the teacher in the Lifelong Learning Experience is to be a facilitator of learning and to promote self-directed learning. Determining the appropriate instructional strategies to promote self-directed learning is imperative, so students can utilize what they have learned in the classroom to continue learning beyond the school (Merriam, 2001). That means staying away from transmissive teaching, which reduces student's independence and the ability to make connections, needed in Awakening (Yang, 2015). On the other hand, as facilitators of learning, teachers cannot underestimate the demands action learning imposes on students and remember that reflection and independence are accomplished overtime (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004).

It is important to utilize all parts of the Lifelong Learning Experience as scaffolding to Awakening. Lifelong learning is more than just continuing education and further training, it provides opportunities for application of knowledge and exploration of concepts in a number of different settings (Fischer, 2000). Castillo-Montoya (2018) explained academic rigor as how deeply students engage with their learning. Teachers should want to see rigor in their classes, as it is imperative for a fulfilling Lifelong Learning Experience. Knowing to connect deeply with the learning that occurs in the classroom is key to navigating Awakening. However, for this type of rigor to occur, it needs to be facilitated (Castillo-Montoya, 2018), which is part of the teacher's role in the Lifelong Learning Experience. Some suggestions to facilitate rigor are making space for students' knowledge to appear and notice them; value

and incorporate students' experiences in subject matter learning (Castillo-Montoya, 2018). Most importantly, rigor must not leave behind relevancy and engagement.

## **Conclusion**

In an era when higher education is facing so many challenges, such as maintaining excellence, accessibility and affordability (Pazzanese, 2016), learning is still at the heart of colleges and universities. As many have explored and offered ways to improve learning that happens in the classroom, learning that happens beyond the classroom is seldom explored. It is imperative to understand what happens when the classroom teacher and classmates are no longer there to help solve problems and create solutions. College teachers prepare students to the real world or work and life, and how they influence decision-making and creative solutions is most likely how students will lead their lives after college. The Lifelong Learning Experience provides a glimpse of how classroom encounters influence learning and connections later in life. Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, and Barefoot (2016) provided a great example of this as they discussed higher education organizations as learning organizations. This meant that not only students, but staff, faculty and administration are always striving to “question assumptions, inquire into the effectiveness of their work, partner with peers to solve problems, and make evidence-informed decisions” (p. 5). The tools to accomplish this are acquired in the classroom and built upon while one continues their Experience in Awakening. Felten et al.'s (2016) idea of the learning organization encompassed each member walking through their own Experiences to complete each task they must accomplish to continue learning.

As most college and university missions encompass preparation of students for work and life, it is surprising that how this preparation actually unfolds beyond the classroom is rarely explored. The Lifelong Learning Experience focuses on this forgotten area. As the Experience is further explored, more and more connections between the college classroom and life beyond it will be discovered and discussed. Acknowledging that this is an area worth exploring is the goal of this document.

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