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# Facilitating Powerful Learning Experiences: Experiential Learning, the Experiential Learning Cycle, and "how tos" for facilitators

*by Nadine Ryan Bannerman*
*nadine@ryanbannerman.com*

## Introduction

Many of today's workplace learning courses and workshops are based on contemporary principles of adult learning. One of the cornerstones of adult learning is the idea that adults learn best through experience. While it may be relatively simple to accept this principle, implementing it in a classroom full of adults is a much more complex undertaking. Understanding and facilitating experiential learning -- learning from structured experiences in the classroom setting -- is explored here, and the implications for facilitators are outlined.

## Why Learn Experientially?

Experiential learning means that to learn something, we have to actually try it out and experience it. In adult learning theory "knowledge", or knowing about something, is only the first step. To say you have learned something you have to be able to actually apply that skill or knowledge. For example, learners may have read about and "know" principles of good customer service, but it is a much more powerful experience to actually practice handling a difficult customer and receive feedback on how well you can apply those principles of customer service.

Learning from experience is nothing new. It is part of the common store of wisdom that experience is the most powerful way to learn. Research backs up this traditional wisdom. A study conducted by IBM found the following results:

**Table 1: Learning through Experience**

| | Told | Told & Shown | Told, Shown & Experienced |
|---|---|---|---|
| Recall after 3 weeks | 70% | 72% | 85% |
| Recall after 3 months | 10% | 32% | 65% |

Source: Whitmore, John Coaching for Performance, Pfeiffer & Company, 1994.

As Table 1 shows, people who have learned experientially will have significantly greater recall of the learning over time. Especially striking is the difference between recall after 3 months using the lecture method - 10% - and the experiential method at 65%.

## Experiential Learning Cycle

Research in the field of adult education has found that experiential learning has a process and cycle that works best for learners. (Source: Pfeiffer & Ballew, 1988.)

Learning activities in the cycle start with

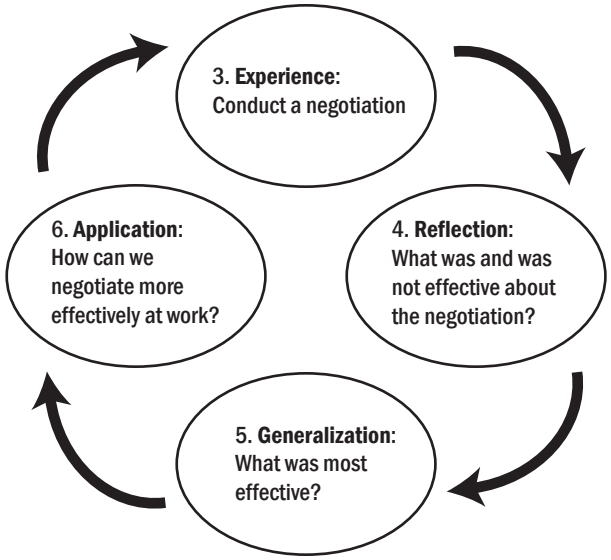
Orientation, or helping learners understand what is to be learned in the session. The next stage, Clarification, is used to answer any questions or clarify participant assumptions. It is critical to spend some time on this in the first few minutes, since there may be specific things participants are expecting from the course or the facilitator. Learning objectives, the agenda, and the process for how the learning activities will be conducted should be discussed with learners either during Orientation or during Clarification. (Sometimes this needs to be explained more than once, depending on the circumstances.) After these two steps, facilitators start the learning experience. The learning experience is then followed by opportunities for reflection, generalization, and application. The last parts of the cycle can occur in a discussion and are critical to integrating and reinforcing learning.

Here is an example of a how a learning activity might unfold:

1. **Orientation**: Clearly signal to participants that a new learning activity is starting, e.g., "We're going to work on a problem in small groups now."
2. **Clarification**: Learning Objectives, Expectations, Agenda for the activity (if needed), Instructions for how to do the activity, e.g., "Please read the problem first, choose a spokesperson for your group, agree on a solution, then present your solution to the large group."
3. **Experience**: Solve a problem in small groups.
4. **Reflection**: What processes did you use to solve the problem?
5. **Generalization**: What were the most efficient processes?
6. **Application**: How can we use this learning at work?

The experiential learning cycle can be repeated as illustrated below.

1. **Orientation**: Clearly signal to participants that a new learning activity is starting.
2. **Clarification**: Learning Objectives, Expectations, Agenda, Instructions.




## Impact of Different Types of Experiences on Learning

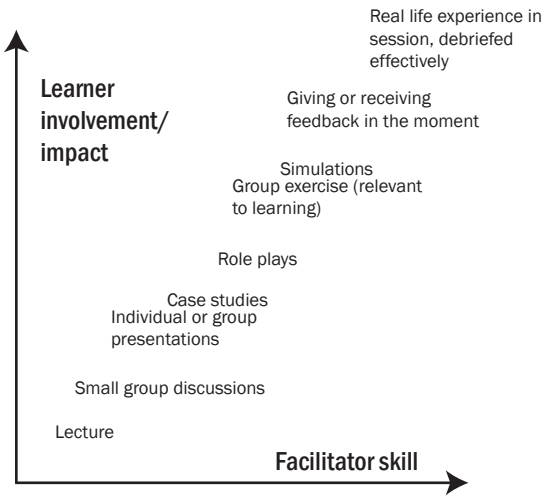
There are different types of experiences you may have in a workshop – some will be better vehicles for learning than others and in consequence will require more preparation and facilitator skill. The chart in Figure 2 illustrates that experiential learning activities vary in complexity, learner involvement and learning impact. As a rule of thumb, the more powerful the activity, the more facilitator skill

is needed to complete the experiential learning cycle and help integrate the learning for participants.

### Lecture

Some course planners and designers consider that a lecture is a learning experience. While a lecture is a great way to deliver information quickly, it is also one of the least powerful learning experiences. A lecture requires the learner to listen passively, saving all their questions to the end. (Saving questions to the end means that learners are concentrating on remembering their question, not on what the lecturer is saying.) If you disagree with something the lecturer says, everything that follows the point where you disagree loses credibility.

**Figure 2: Experiential Learning Activities, Learning Impact and Facilitator Skill**




Choosing more powerful activities to use in the classroom can help participants get more value out of their time.

### Small Group Discussion

For example, a small group discussion is more powerful than a lecture. In a small group, participants are at least required to think a little more actively. They have to come to the table with their own thoughts, process a question and discuss something.

### Role Play

A more involving experience than a small group discussion is a role play. In a role play, participants are required to think through a problem, a role, and a response to the problem. In doing so, participants learn about approaches different from their own, and they are actively involved.

### Exercises and Simulations

Even more powerful are exercises and simulations, where a group is required to perform a task or solve a problem in real time. Good “true to life” exercises and simulations require design expertise and are labour-intensive to perfect, but they can have a life-changing impact on participants.

### Learning in the Moment

The most powerful learning experiences of all are those that happen when something occurs in the session that is directly relevant to the learning. Often, but not always, this occurs when something has gone wrong in a session; for example, there may be a very negative participant, a planned exercise can fail, or a facilitator who espouses asking questions for learning has reacted defensively to a question. These instances can in some cases provide facilitators and participants with an opportunity to use the very skills participants may be trying to learn: con-

flict resolution, negotiation, customer service communication, and so on.

## Active Involvement increases Learning Value

The activities that have more impact also have more learner involvement. If you put yourself in the place of the learner experiencing these activities, you can see why. Imagine yourself listening to a lecture. Even if the content of the lecture is interesting to you, and the presenter does a reasonable job, you may find your mind wandering. This is because the learning process, which for a lecture is essentially one-way from the instructor as information provider to you as recipient, does not require your active involvement to proceed. Compare this with a simulation, perhaps one where you have been given a role as a decision-maker. Things are happening; people are coming to you for a decision. You have to process information, rely on past experience, negotiate with the people in your group, come up with a decision, and perhaps explain that decision in a presentation to the large group – who may give you some feedback on the quality of that decision. In this scenario, you are not sitting passively in a darkened lecture theatre. You are interacting with people, consulting your notes, consulting with the facilitator, trying different strategies and so on. When you next find yourself in an environment that presents a challenge like the challenge presented in the simulation, you will more readily recall that experience and the things that you learned from it.

The role of the facilitator in the more high impact activities requires not just a technical knowledge of the subject matter but also communication, questioning, conflict resolution and other adult learning skills. To be able to use these in an environment where multiple events are taking place at once with somewhere between 10-35 people requires a level of skill development and application far beyond preparing a lecture with Q&A at the end. The more opportunities that facilitators have to deal with high impact activities, the more the skills for dealing with them become easier to access when needed...usually at the height of an activity or possibly at "breakdown to breakthrough" – when something goes wrong but it provides an unparalleled opportunity for learning.

## Reflection, Generalization and Application complete the Learning Cycle

Reflecting, generalizing from, and trying to apply the learning from an experiential activity can be extremely powerful. In reflection, participants are asked to reflect on what just occurred in their activity. What's important about this step is that the activity is one that the group has in common. Exploring the different perspectives on this same activity can in itself be eye-opening. For example, two perspectives on a negotiating activity might be: "I thought I did a pretty good job of being a negotiator" vs. "I thought you made an "ok" agreement but you lost the opportunity to build a good business relationship." Reflecting on what just happened in the classroom increases learning and learning retention.

From reflection, participants can be asked to generalize, or to infer from their learning in the session general principles that can be applied outside the session. In the negotiating example, the facilitator might ask, "Can we draw some guidelines from what we've observed in this activity to negotiating in general?" Participants may point out similarities, differences, patterns and contradictions. There is

no one right answer to this question, but it causes participants to think on a "big picture" level.

From generalizing, participants can be asked to then focus specifically on how they might apply what has been learned at the session in their particular contexts. A good question to start this discussion could be "What might you do differently in your workplace as a result of what we have learned here today?" Ideally, this application question could then be explored at the beginning of the next session, as in "Is there anything that you learned from the last session that you tried out at work? What happened?"

All of these steps in the experiential learning cycle help participants to process the learning that they have gained in several different ways. Re-thinking the same learning several times also helps in learning retention.

## Choosing Experiential Activities

In many cases, experiential activities are pre-designed by someone else. Often these activities work very well to support the learning objectives. But occasionally, facilitator experience and judgement will signal that an activity should be modified or replaced. This can happen when a facilitator has tried an activity before, and has found the effort and time the activity takes not to be worth the learning that can be drawn from it.

A caveat on choosing activities: facilitators would often like suggestions on new and interesting experiential activities, partly to avoid participant (or facilitator) boredom with the same old, same old. What's important, however, is that any activity support the learning objectives. For example, a case study on an organization that is undergoing change, that has realistic details and sufficiently challenging problems will help participants' learning more than a fun group exercise that is not directly tied to the learning objectives. Some tried and true experiential activities continue to have a powerful learning impact because they are relevant and well designed.

This is not to say that there should not be any "fun" activities in sessions. If possible, fun should be combined with other purposes, like breaking the ice, or making a learning point. Participants are generally concerned with getting learning value out of the program. They usually do not appreciate spending an hour on something that causes them to remark "Well, that was fun, but why did we do it?"

## Getting Prepared to Conduct Experiential Activities

The amount and type of preparation needed to conduct an experiential activity can vary substantially, from several hours to several days, depending on the facilitator's experience with the activity, the complexity of the activity and other factors. People not familiar with facilitating experiential learning activities are often surprised at how much work and time it takes to ensure the best learning outcomes.

### Practice

For a new activity, particularly if it is one that you are custom designing, a great way to prepare is to try out the activity on a group of volunteers (colleagues, if possible.) Often the beginning of the activity is critical to its success. A test group can tell you whether your instructions are clear, whether participants understand the learning objectives, and whether they have any questions.

### Logistics

Another important to step is to carefully think through the logistics, including what supplies, props or equipment might be needed. There is no worse fate for a facilitator than to get to the second stage of a role play and find out that the handouts needed to proceed are not included with the rest of the materials. Several days before a session, walking through every activity step by step and making a checklist of supplies etc. is very helpful in avoiding this kind of problem.

### Timing

Timing is another important aspect of experiential activities. Twenty minutes may be allocated for a small group task when in fact 10 minutes might be sufficient. Frequently not enough time is allocated for reflection on what happened in the activity, so learners are left wondering "What did we learn?" and "I learned some things from that, I wonder what the rest of the group took away."

Again, walking through the agenda and imagining how it might unfold can be very helpful. One technique is to imagine yourself as the participant with regard to timing: will you feel rushed? Bored? Wanting more time for discussion? Talking this over ahead of time with a colleague can help you in adjusting the timing appropriately.

## What to do if an activity is not Succeeding

Facilitators may get feedback that an activity is not going well. It may be subtle feedback (eye rolling and sighing) or more direct feedback, as in "What was it we were supposed to be doing?" Sometimes a facilitator may just have a hunch that an activity is not going well. In these cases, there are several things that can be done.

The first step is to identify what you think is not going well. Is it that groups have finished the task and are now just chatting? Is it that loud arguments are breaking out? Is it that the task is very complicated but the learning that results will be something less than an "aha"? (For example, 45 minutes has been spent on juggling balls or building Lego towers, and the learning point is "the task works better when we cooperate.") Is it that the task is so complicated that groups are still sorting out the instructions 30 minutes into a 40-minute activity? Once you have identified what you think is not working, you may still have some options:

- Clarifying instructions with each small group can help. For some learners repeating the learning objective for an activity helps them understand why they are being asked to participate in an activity
- Modifying the time allowed for each segment can tighten up activities where time is being wasted. It is a little harder if the activity requires more time than you have allocated. In this case, you have to assess whether the learning from the activity will still result if the activity is truncated. Alternatively, if you allow more time for it, you need to judge if other learning objectives in a session will be compromised.
- The case of a total breakdown of an activity, for example, an exercise that causes an angry reaction on the part of most of the group or – even worse – an exercise that seems trite to the group, can provide a rich opportunity for learning. In this case the facilitator can debrief the activity with questions like "What suggestions do you have for how this activity can be improved?" and "Have you ever had the same feeling from a

situation at work?" and "What can we learn NOT to do from this activity?" Another great question is "Many of you were confused (anxious, bored) throughout this activity. Any idea why no one said anything until now? Have you ever seen this happen at work?" The best learning for participants may come from a facilitator willing to receive and genuinely work with negative feedback. Note that this is a lot easier to write about than to actually do in the moment! Having some "stock questions" like the examples above prepared for the times when you sense there is a problem in the session can help greatly.

If things in the session have happened so quickly that the reasons for the failure of an activity are not clear until later, the best the facilitator can do is reflect on the activity for further learning. If there is an opportunity to work with the same group again and there is time, the facilitator may be able to debrief their learning with the group then.

## The Reflective Facilitator

Because experiential activities are so interactive and dynamic, there are any number of ways learning activities can turn out. Even facilitators with 30 years of experience will still be amazed at the things that can happen around an experiential activity. The best way to learn how to moderate experiential activities is to observe others facilitating, practice, receive and give feedback, and reflect on what occurred and what you might like to differently next time. Nothing can compare to the learning that a facilitator gains from reflecting on the session with co-facilitators and/or an evaluator. In fact, facilitators themselves are going through an experiential learning cycle each time they facilitate an activity and debrief it with their colleagues. Some facilitators are not comfortable with an activity or a workshop design until they have had the opportunity to work with it at least three times, each time reflecting and incorporating feedback.

Experiential learning, in theory and in practice, offers rich opportunities for learning for participants and facilitators. Choosing powerful activities that increase learner involvement, following the experiential learning cycle in reflecting, generalizing, and applying learning, giving and receiving valuable feedback in the moment, and facilitators reflecting on their own practice greatly increase learning retention and the quality of learning for participants.

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