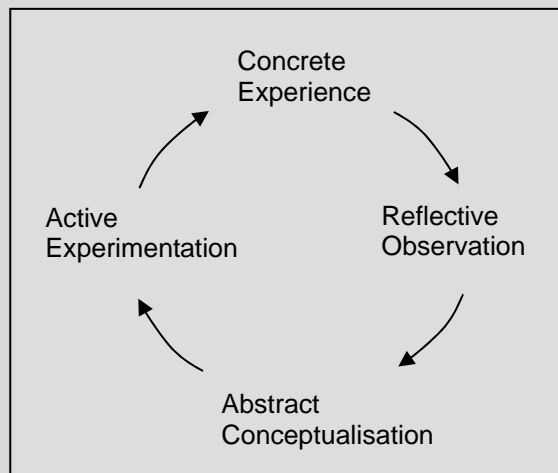


Experiential Learning

Description Theory (the thinking) and practice (the doing) are commonly taught separately.



Experiential learning is a method to help students build up links between the thinking and the doing so that they learn to apply theories into practice with a deeper understanding of the concepts. It can be seen as a learning cycle of 4 distinct stages: Abstract Conceptualisation (e.g., students study the theories); Active Experimentation (e.g., students prepare an action plan to test out or apply the theory); Concrete Experience (e.g., students engage in carrying out the plan, i.e., practice); and Reflective Observation (e.g., students reflect on what is observed in the activity, relating it to the theory which are learnt).



The two links (Active Experimentation and Reflective Observation) are important in the experiential learning model as they allow students to make action plans for their learning based on the key points of the principles and later internalise the knowledge by reflecting upon their experience.

The two examples below are adapted from Gibbs (1988). Try to identify which one is experiential learning and which is not.

- Example 1**
1. Theory about welding is introduced in a lecture which is followed by a practical class in which the tutor demonstrates the welding technique.
 2. Students attempt to practice the technique, under supervision.

- Example 2**
1. Theory about welding is introduced in a lecture which is followed by a practical class in which the tutor demonstrates the welding technique.
 2. The students discuss and devise criteria for assessing the quality of a finalised weld with reference to the theory presented in class.
 3. Students attempt to produce a weld and then to bend the weld and assess its quality using the criteria they devised in stage 2.
 4. Based on the self assessment of the quality of the weld, students make a conclusion about how to avoid the weakness in their weld next time.

It is obvious that Example 1 is a typical approach to teach theory and practice separately. There is no feedback between the two phases of learning. Thereby

students' conceptual understanding and practical skills cannot be enhanced in the process. On the other hand, in Example 2, which encompasses the essence of an experiential learning cycle, students are engaged in applying theory to evaluate their practice and, also, to make use of their practical experience to reinforce their understanding of the theory.

How Active? The four stages of the experiential learning cycle definitely represent highly active learning opportunities for the students. Vigorous and high-level thinking is involved when planning out the action and when reflecting over the practice. The inclusion of an application action ensures that the approach is task-based.

How Related to Real Life? By nature of an experiential approach, learning goes beyond understanding of the theory to planning for application which enhances the authenticity of the teaching and learning of the topic.

What Learning Outcomes? With this approach, students learn to apply theories and principles to practice and they have a deeper understanding of the concepts upon experience and reflection. Apart from conceptual knowledge, this approach is effective in enhancing student's critical thinking ability.