

**AMERICAN BOARD OF EXAMINERS IN PSYCHODRAMA,  
SOCIOMETRY & GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Proposed Framework for Design of Distance Learning Curricula:  
**David A. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory  
(The Experiential Learning Cycle)**

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“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

**Introduction:** I was first introduced to David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) during my 20s, through my participation in “human potential” workshops for personal and professional development. Later, in a graduate program in Applied Behavioral Science during my 30s, I was reintroduced to Kolb's ELT and, especially, to his learning cycle. Kolb himself officially introduced his theory of experiential learning with the publication of *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Kolb, 1984, 2015).



According to Kolb (1999), ELT “provides a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop.”

ELT maintains that optimal adult learning occurs best when the learner goes through a complete *cycle of learning* that encompasses *four different ways of learning: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation*. Furthermore, Kolb explains that adult learners prefer to enter the learning cycle at different points in the process. Also, Kolb maintains that when learners' preferences on two core constructs in his theory (preferred way of perceiving information and preferred way of processing information) predicts a preferred adult *learning style*.

Since the early days of his work, Kolb's ideas have been disseminated widely. ELT has significantly influenced the way learning experiences for adults are designed and facilitated. Sensitivity to ELT enables teachers, trainers and facilitators to design learning events that address each of Kolb's *stages* and each of his *styles* of learning.

In the contemporary world of online/distance learning, ELT cycle can be helpful in designing online learning experiences that maintain the integrity of adult education. With creative planning and program design, online psychodrama trainers/educators can develop programs that take students through a complete cycle of learning. Drawing on Kolb's theory, online psychodrama trainers will be able to design distance/online classes, courses and workshops that engage students through their preferred style, while also encouraging students to stretch into less comfortable learning modes.

**If you are a TEP or PAT who is considering designing an online/distance learning event on psychodrama, please read on!**

**Overview of Kolb's Theory of Adult Learning:** Kolb proposed a holistic, four-stage cyclical theory of learning, combining experience, perception, cognition, and behavior (Greenaway, n.d.). Like Moreno, Kolb championed *integrative* learning experiences that engage the whole person. Both Kolb and Moreno understood what interpersonal neurobiology (Badenock, 20XX; Siegel, 2012; Ogden, Minton & Pain, (20XX) have validated: that learning occurs best under certain circumstances that can be intentionally cultivated.

- We learn best when our entire brain is engaged. In an optimal learning environment, we use both our linear reasoning and our intuitive, symbolic reasoning. We also connect with our body-based wisdom.
- We also do our best learning when our nervous system is sufficiently stimulated that we are alert and energized, and, at the same time, our arousal is regulated so we stay within the limits of our tolerance.

At its best, psychodramatic role-playing and sociodrama conducted live offer all of these helpful conditions for adult learning; and Moreno's methods line up well with Kolb's learning cycle. However, psychodrama trainers are keeping pace with trends in other clinical disciplines (psychology, social work, counseling) and with the proliferation of online courses now offered by colleges and universities, continuing education franchises, and many other venues.

Developed primarily for educators and trainers concerned with adult learning—in higher education, corporate and government training, community development and other non-clinical settings, Kolb's learning cycle can be a helpful meme for designing distance learning events for psychodrama students.

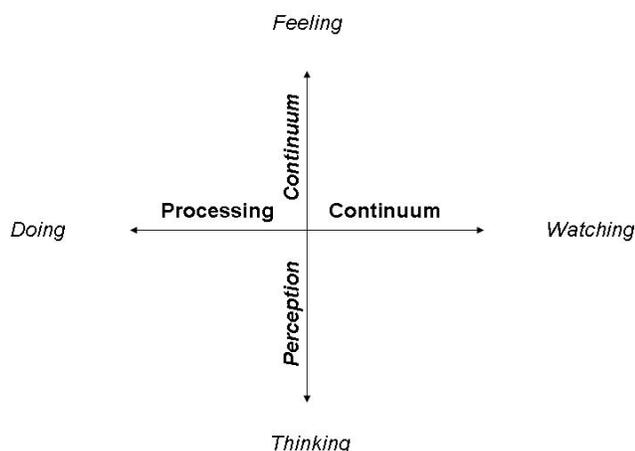
**The Nuts & Bolts of Kolb's Theory:** (Clark, XXXX) provides an excellent introduction to Kolb's theory. As Clark summarizes, Kolb believes there are two major differences in how we learn: how we *perceive* and how we *process* information.

### Perception

This is how we take in information in new situations. Some of us *feel* our way through, while others *think* things through.



**LEARNING CYCLE:** Taken together, the two continuums produce four points in a cycle of learning:



- **CONCRETE EXPERIENCE** (DO/FEEL/EXPERIENCE) - the learner experiences or reexperiences a situation.
- **REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION** (OBSERVE/REFLECT/NOTICE) - the learner consciously reflects on the experience.
- **ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION** (THINK/UNDERSTAND) - the learner attempts to conceptualize a theory or model of what is observed.
- **ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION** (PLAN/APPLY) - the learner plans how to test a model or theory or plan for a forthcoming experience and/or puts into action.

The process of learning that best encourages well rounded knowledge and skill development is one which moves through *all* the learning styles. From our own **experience**, we **observe and reflect** so that we can **formulate new concepts, principles and strategies** for action. Finally, we **experiment and practice** them in new situations.

This is Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Depending upon the situation or environment, the learners may enter the learning cycle at any point and will best learn the new task if they practice all four modes.

**Example 1: (Clark, XXXX) Learning to ride a bicycle:**

- **Reflective observation** - Thinking about riding and watching another person ride a bike.
- **Abstract conceptualization** - Understanding the theory and having a clear grasp of the biking concept.
- **Active experimentation** - Leaping on the bike and have a go at it.
- **Concrete experience** - Receiving practical tips and techniques from a biking expert.

**Example 2: Learning to double:**

- **Reflective observation** - Observing a demonstration of doubling by different psychodramatists or auxiliaries.

- **Abstract conceptualization** - Reading a book chapter or article to learn about the theory underlying the technique.
- **Active experimentation** – Practicing doubling using your own clinical skills, knowledge of the cultural conserve and personal style to achieve your own skill as a double.
- **Concrete experience** - Having a psychodrama trainer demonstrate doubling with you as the protagonist.

In the above example, it is obvious that the learning could enter the cycle at any stage. She might first have the concrete experience of being a protagonist who is doubled in a psychodrama. She may then reflect on the experience of what it was like to be doubled—for example by responding to thought-provoking questions with a partner or in a journal. The learning could then pursue understanding of Moreno’s theory of child development by reading a book or article. She might then experiment in a structured exercise where students double each other and are doubled.

Regardless of the point at which the learner enters the cycle, he is grounded in the context of moving between the modes of concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC), and reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE). The effectiveness of learning relies on the ability to balance these modes, which Kolb sees as opposite activities that best promote learning.

**FOUR LEARNING STYLES:** Kolb (1984) found that the four combinations of perceiving and processing determine four learning styles, as shown below:

	<b>Active Experimentation (Doing)</b>	<b>Reflective Observation (Watching)</b>
<b>Concrete Experience (Feeling)</b>	Accommodating (CA/AE)	Diverging (CE/RO)
<b>Abstract Conceptualization (Thinking)</b>	Converging (AC/AE)	Assimilating (AC/RO)

For example, a student who learns best through concrete experience (having an experience and having feelings about it) and reflective observation (taking time to reflect on what has been experienced and/or watching someone else perform an action) learns best through the learning style Kolb termed “Diverging.” Someone who prefers to observe an activity and then think and

theorize about it has an “Assimilating” style. A person who likes to learn new theories and then experiment with them in action has a “Converging” style. A learner who prefers most to learn through having an experience and then experimenting or trying their hand at it would be termed as having an “Accommodating” style. A fuller discussion of the four learning styles is beyond the scope of this article. For additional information, see diagram p. 8.

**THE LEARNING CYCLE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS:** Kolb's (1984) learning cycle can be used by teachers, trainers and educators to evaluate the way they typically provide learning to students and to develop more flexible, complete and learner-based learning opportunities.

Optimal education, including distance learning, should ensure that activities are designed and carried out in ways that offer each learner the chance to engage in the manner that suits them best. Individuals can also be helped to learn more effectively by strengthening their less preferred learning styles through the application of the experiential learning cycle.

Ideally, online/distance learning activities and materials should be developed in ways that draw on abilities from each stage of the experiential learning cycle and take the students through the whole process in sequence.

**LEARNING STYLE INVENTORY:** The Kolb Learning Style Inventory version 3.1 (KLSI 3.1) is a self-assessment based on experiential learning theory that is used to help learners understand their style of learning from experience (Kolb & Kolb 2005). The KLSI 3.1 is based on the Learning Style Inventory originally created in 1969 by David Kolb at MIT to help learners understand their own unique learning styles and the process of experiential learning. Since that time, the Learning Style Inventory has undergone 5 revisions to increase internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and to include new normative data that is based on a more diverse and larger sample (Kolb & Kolb 2005).

**CRITIQUES OF KOLB’S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY:** Greenaway (n.d.) reviews various critiques of Kolb's theory. He observes some theorists take issue with it. Greenaway explains that Rogers (1996) points out that "learning includes goals, purposes, intentions, choice and decision-making, and it is not at all clear where these elements fit into the learning cycle." Rogers has also proposed that there are at least three kinds of learning and that we have different learning styles for each (cited in Greenaway, n.d.)

Greenaway (n.d.) notes that Kolb himself points out the greatest limitation of the Learning Style Inventory, noting that “The results are based solely on the way learners rate themselves. It does not rate learning style preferences through standards or behavior, as some other personal style inventories do, and it only gives relative strengths within the individual learner, not in relation to others.”

Moreover, other critics Greenaway (n.d.) cites note that the research base of the theory and inventory do not take into account differences across cultures, genders, ages, socio-economic status, educational level, and so forth. The model has also been criticized for perpetuating an

individualistic paradigm where reflection results in learning and sidelines other more holistic and relational ways of knowing.

Despite these and other critiques, Greenaway believes that Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory is a useful and valuable framework for teachers, trainers and educators. He cites respected learning theorists (e.g., Brookfield, 1990; Jarvis, 1995; Kemp, 1996; Knowles, 1990, McKeachie, 1994, Peters, 1991) to support his ultimate conclusion that:

“... Kolb's contributions cannot be underestimated. Whatever their limitations, by presenting a model of experience in a scientific form, he has helped move educational thought from the locus of the instructor back to the learner. As many of the major contributors to the field have pointed out, experience has once again become a viable topic of discussion.”

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American Board of Examiners in Psychodrama,  
Sociometry & Group Psychotherapy  
Handout: David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory  
04/2018

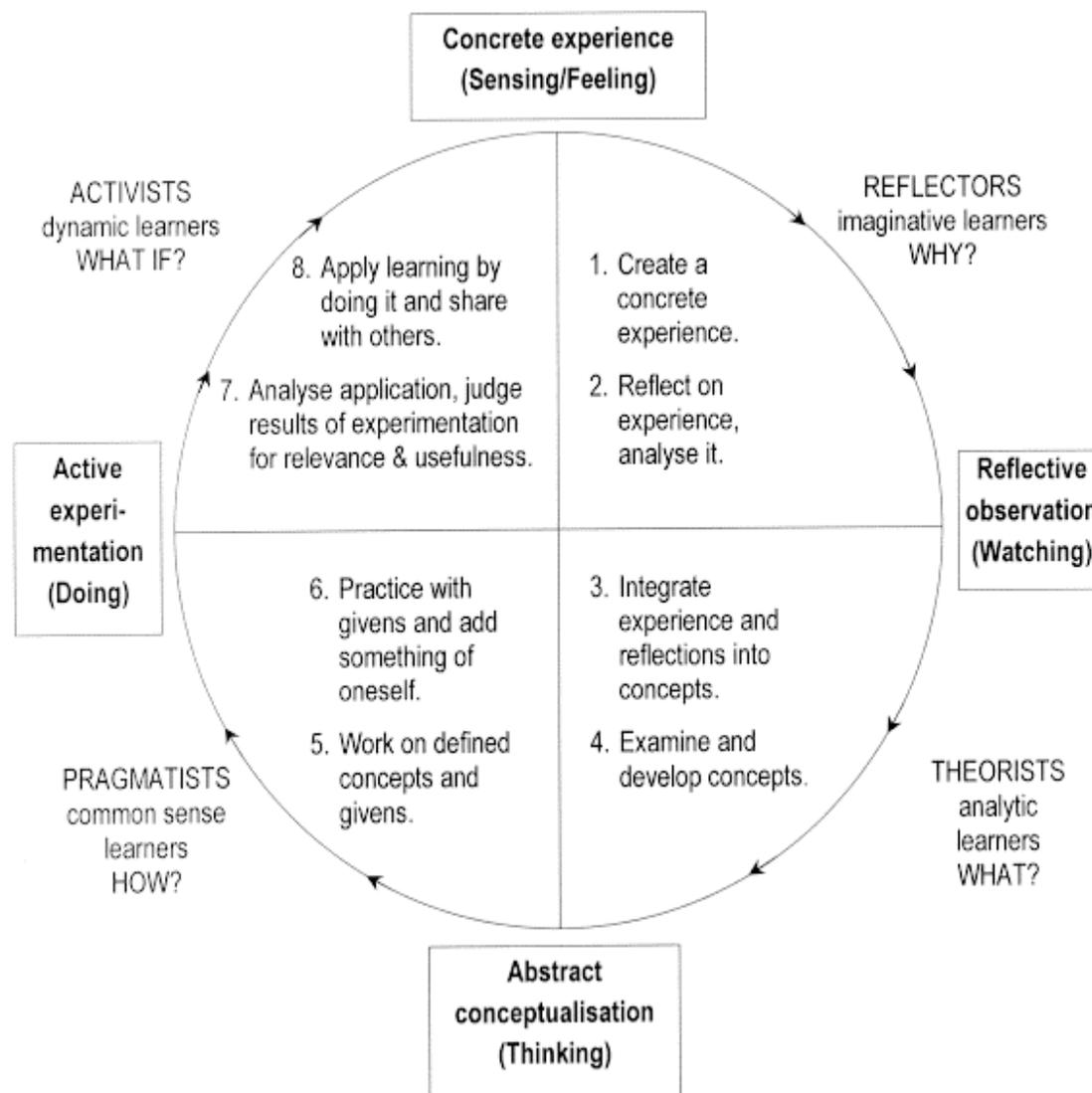
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### David A. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle & Learning Styles

(Kolb, 2004, 2015)