

Experiential Learning and the Reflection Process

In the context of higher education, experiential learning offers a chance for students to link what they are learning in the course of their studies to an experience out in the world or specifically in a workplace setting. As students reflect on the linkage between higher education training and their worldly realities, reflection becomes a source for their own personal development (Kolb, 2014).

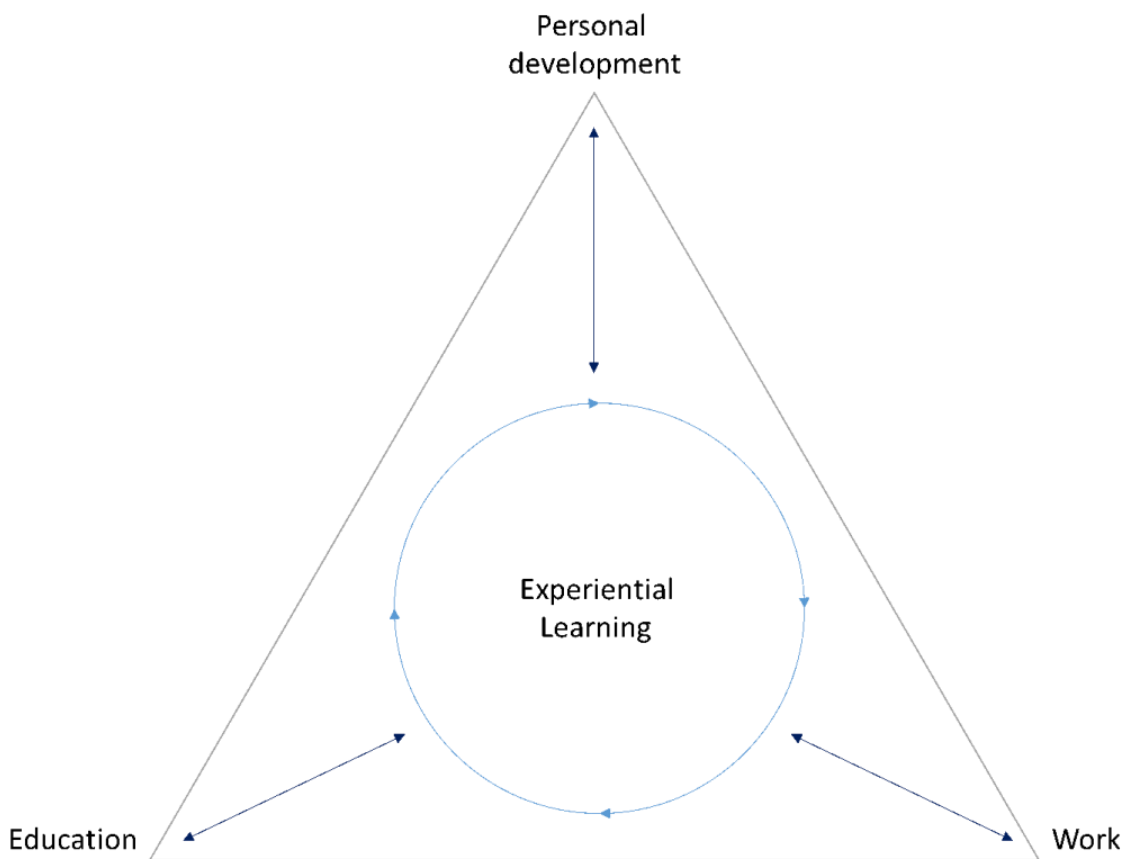


Figure 1 Experiential Learning in the context of Higher Education (Kolb, 2014)

Kolb's Learning Cycle is a useful lens for explaining how reflection may unfold. Individuals start by having a concrete experience in the world (sometimes through a work opportunity). They then move to reflective observation, in which they reflect on their experience. This can be done through reflective writing exercises or a presentation. The next move is to abstract conceptualization, at which point they consider what the experience means to them and to their understanding of the world, and may lead them to consider more critical questions about their experience. At this time an individual may begin to seek more information or change his/her ways of knowing based on the experience. This re-framing should also come in the form of externalized reflection. Having changed their perspective on the world, these individuals enter the active experimentation phase where they begin testing their new ways of thinking out in the world.

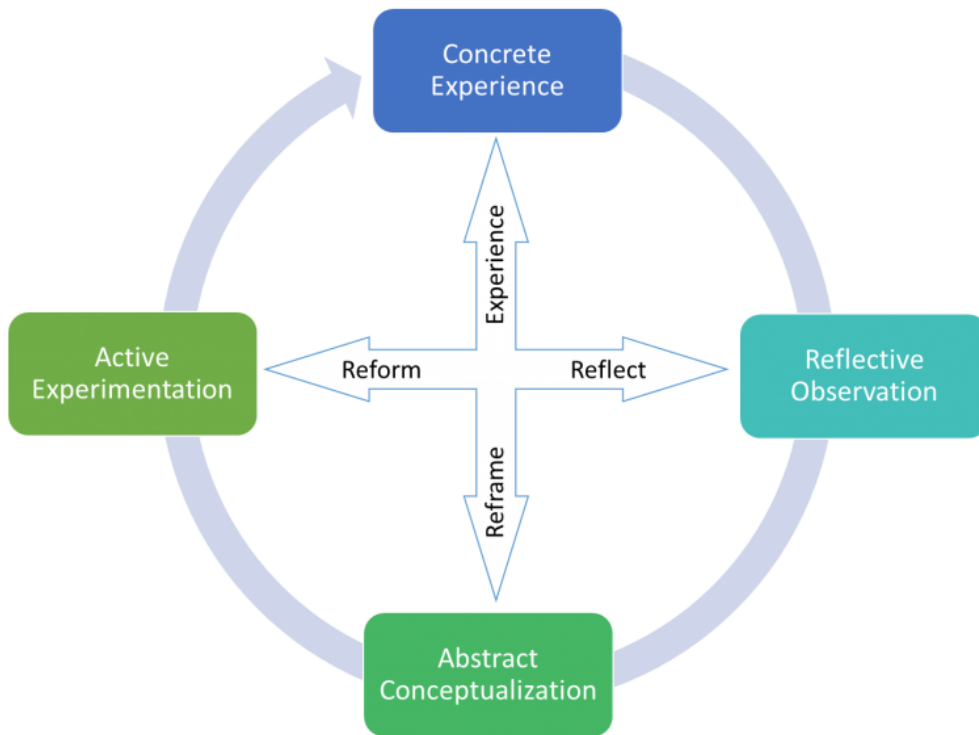


Figure 2 Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2014)

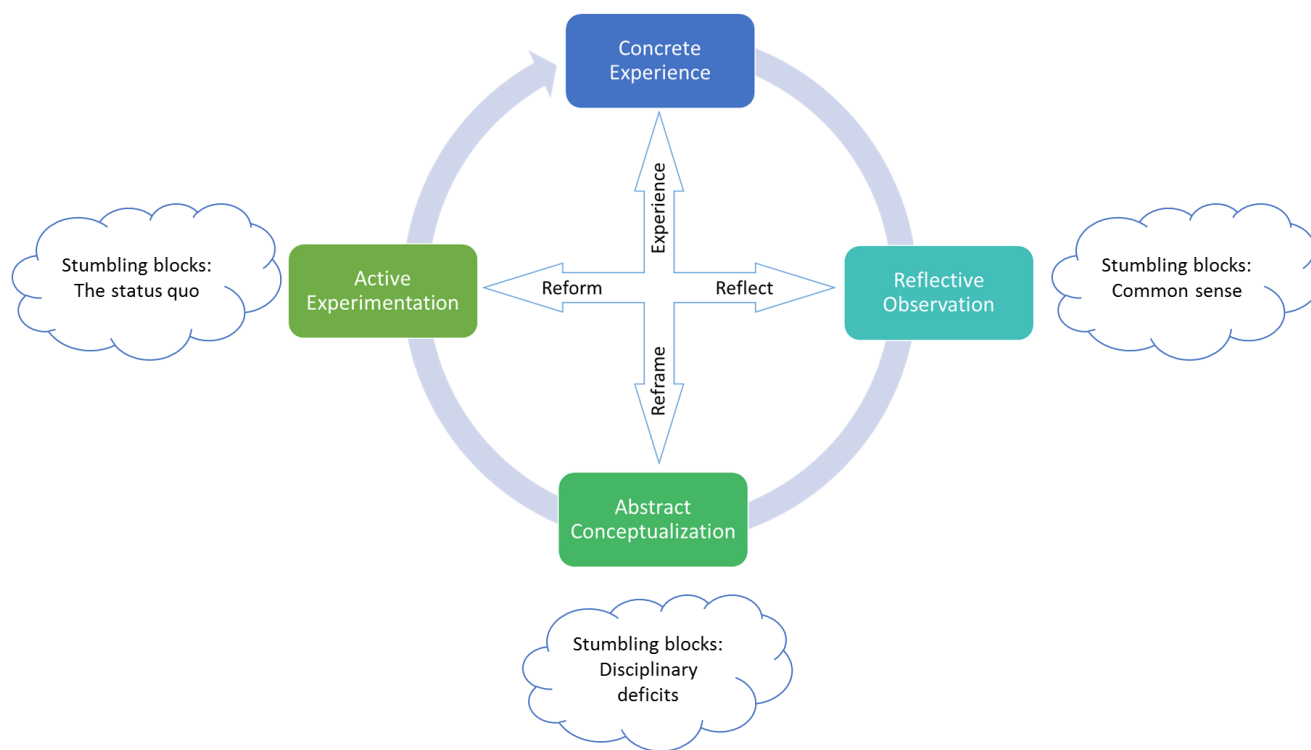
Getting at meaningful reflections

Reflection can be defined as “the activity which takes place in our own minds when we stand back from the first-order phenomena in everyday life and process these raw experiences from a distance, inviting second-order processes to come into play” (Humphrey, 2009, p. 381). Reflection is a highly personal and subjective activity, as such, students may interpret the form of their reflection in many different ways. It is thus helpful to have a well described process for what is required in a reflection. The ‘what, so what, now what’ model may be a good starting point for designing a reflective activity.

Reflections may be articulated in journals, interviews presentations, or reflective writing exercises, all of these may be made available in face-to-face or online modalities.

Considering what types of questions we could use to prompt an individuals’ movement through the reflective learning cycle, several ideas have emerged. Humphrey (2009) proposed a model which suggests reflection upon, reframing and reforming based on the experience. This is quite similar to the ‘what, so what, now what’ model. (The Liberating Structures site below provides some guidance¹).

¹ <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/9-what-so-what-now-what-w/>



Humphrey (2009) has thoughtfully articulated some of the challenges students may encounter when moving through the critical reflection, reframing and reforming stages or reflection following an experiential learning episode. What to reflect on can be a challenge due to common sense; critical reflection and reframing can be a challenge due to disciplinary deficits; and reforming can be a challenge due to pressure to maintain the status quo.

Reflecting on one's experience (the 'what')

Questions to consider when reflecting on 'what' happened during an experience include: What happened during this experience? What did you notice most? What facts or observations stood out? How does this differ from your training and experience in class? What aspects of your training were most relevant to the experience on site?

A common stumbling block when reflecting is our own common sense. What we term 'common sense' seems to require no further thought. Common sense presents a stumbling block to determining the object of reflection for students, as they may not initially be able to identify a significant episode during their experience to focus their reflection. Students may require prompts at first to help identify the object of their reflection, be it a specific scenario, interaction with a colleague, or time period. "Reflection requires space and time for careful and conscious inquiry and is therefore the antithesis of the common sense which pervades many of our everyday life-worlds and the busyness which characterises most urban lifestyles" (Humphrey, 2009, p. 381). Reflection may feel puzzling and confusing because it requires us to look at things in creative and interdisciplinary ways—it exposes a diversity of ways of knowing and understanding, and it is intellectually difficult.

Reframe the experience through critical reflection (the 'so what')

Questions to consider when reflecting the 'so what' of an experience include: Ask, so what? Why is that important? What patterns or conclusions are emerging? What hypotheses can you make about why this happened? What else could have happened?

Critical reflection can be articulated as "the capacity to adopt an alternative standpoint from which a phenomenon can be critiqued in a coherent and communicable manner for the purpose of envisioning constructive change" (Humphrey, 2009). This requires students to take on new perspectives to view their experience from multiple lenses. The social and cultural norms and values engrained in the setting in which students live their experience may facilitate or hinder critical reflection.

Disciplinary deficits, or the new (to them) process of taking on alternative perspectives, may be stumbling blocks for students as they engage in reflection. Prompts may be required for students to consider their experience from different angles and approaches. Collective reflection and carefully facilitated discussion can help raise alternative perspectives, as each student brings his or her own social and cultural lens to the discussion.

Reform based on your reflection (the 'now what')

Questions to consider when reflecting 'now what' following an experience include: Ask, now what? What actions or changes to your approach might make most sense now? What do I need to better prepare myself for an experience like this going forward?

At this stage, students are able to engage in "meta-reflection". They go beyond simply thinking about the experience itself, and begin to think about who they were before the experience and how they have changed as a result of it. They are conscious of, and can describe their own development and learning trajectory: they grasp exactly how their own thinking about the world has changed over the course of their experience. This sets the stage for being able to step into the future, and plan for reform of self and reform of the world they are stepping into.

Humphrey (2009) suggests that reform constitutes the ultimate self-realisation of critical reflection. Having reflected on one's experience, taken on alternative lenses and viewpoints, and made a decision to reform constitutes personal change and growth as a learner.

Two factors which can limit reform are perceived subordinate status and the status quo. Students may feel unready or unconfident to enact a change even when presented with an opportunity for reforming their behavior in the world or workplace setting. There is often perceived pressure to maintain the status quo within our social and organizational worlds, and to obey or bend to 'higher levels' of authority. Students should be encouraged to advocate for the change and reform they believe in. Having articulated their reflection and reframed it from multiple perspectives, students should have the ability to support their motivation for reform and advocate for change. In most cases there may be no need to mount a vocal challenge to the status quo, but it is essential that students are able to be critical of the examples of status quo they find in the world (Humphrey, 2009).

Recognize that reflection can be challenging

Critical reflection on experiential learning experiences can be a challenge for students to do and a challenge for faculty to describe effectively. The intent of reflection based on experiential learning opportunities is to offer opportunities for learners to consider their experience and convert it into transferrable learning which can be applied in new contexts. The reflection component of experiential learning has been deemed pivotal to professional development (Schön, 1987). So it is essential when designing experiential learning activities, to consider how articulate the reflection component, and to recognize the potential stumbling blocks at each phase.

References

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What, So What, Now What? W³. *Liberating Structures: Including and Unleashing Everyone*. Retrieved from <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/9-what-so-what-now-what-w/>