



Experiential Learning articles and [critiques of David Kolb's theory](#)



"This is the most comprehensive review and list of experiential learning articles I have found.

A masterful piece from Mr. Greenaway!" [Conner, M.L.](#)
["Learning from Experience."](#)

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Experiential Learning ... on the Web

by Tim Pickles [with links updated by
Roger Greenaway]

This article explores the development of experiential learning from its original proposal into some of its current refinements and applications.

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Many of us engaged in professional learning have a broad understanding of the work of David Kolb. His highly influential book entitled 'Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development' was first published in 1984 since when his ideas have had a dramatic impact on the design and development of lifelong learning models. Of course, David Kolb's work can be traced back to that famous dictum of Confucius around 450 BC:

"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand."

This article aims to help you explore the development of experiential learning from its original proposal into some of its current refinements and applications today, using the World Wide Web (the Internet) as a vast reference library...

A useful place to start this online exploration is David Kolb's own website. Here you need to be careful. There is another and different David Kolb, a professor of philosophy at Bates College, who is a prolific author. The man we seek is the professor of organisational behaviour at Weatherhead School of Management. David A Kolb describes himself as a "contemporary advocate of Experiential Learning". His own professional webpage [now at <http://reviewing.co.uk/research/experiential.learning.htm#26>] where you can find information about his background, current work and most well known publications - including references to his most well-known subject - experiential learning and learning styles.

The concept of experiential learning explores the cyclical pattern of all learning from Experience through Reflection and Conceptualising to Action and on to further Experience. One of the sites which explores the model and its practical application is <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>. This is a very well-known model which now forms the heart of many training and learning events. It also describes the process for recording continuous professional development, through taking time to capture, record and implement learning in our daily work. There are many adaptations and uses of the model. A fascinating one is provided on the Natural Learning website where analogy between this model of learning and organic growth in the plant and gardening worlds is well made: <http://www.humanoptions.com/learning.html>.

David Kolb has extended his original work to explore the different ways in which we all learn. Honey and Mumford defined four styles, based loosely around the four stages of David Kolb's learning cycle: Activists, Reflectors, Theorists and Pragmatists. Perhaps the best exposition of these learning styles, together with a range of fascinating illustrations

is to be found at the University of New South Wales, and I would strongly recommend this page: [archived at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20001120004600/http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/Learning/instructionaldesign/styles.htm>] The work on learning styles has been used and developed by many groups and institutions. A Polytechnic in Hong Kong adapted the work to provide a Learning to Learn guide for its students: [archived at: http://web.archive.org/web/20020615204514/http://www.ic.polyu.edu.hk/posh97/student/Learn/Learning_to_learn.htm]. Meanwhile, staff members at Mason College have done a very creditable job of creating a directory of all the main learning style instruments including a summary of their main benefits and features: <http://mason.gmu.edu/~bgiven/models1.html>.

In Britain, the most accessible resource is the best-selling Manual of Learning Styles created by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford which includes a self-assessment instrument and advice on how to diversify your learning. The Manual is available online at <http://www.peterhoney.co.uk/>. If you want to track down the original publications by David Kolb, or to find other books on experiential education, have a look through the 'experiential' section of the [Active Learning Bookshop](#).

David Kolb's work has influenced the work of many in the learning, development and education fields. The National Society for Experiential Education is a membership association and networking resource promoting experience-based approaches to teaching and learning (<http://www.nsee.org/>). Their site has an extensive library of further resources. The Association for Experiential Education aims to "contribute to making a more just and compassionate world by transforming education" (<http://www.aee.org/>). The South African-based International Consortium for Experiential Education organises its networking activities within four 'villages', two of which are concerned with community action and social change, and with personal growth, self awareness and group effectiveness (<http://www.el.uct.ac.za/>)

A further development of these ideas has led to the notion of groups and companies transforming themselves into Learning Organisations. An impressive and highly active network of people are busy exploring all aspects of this field through the email discussion groups to be found at <http://www.learning-org.com/>. TrainingZone has itself, in collaboration with the European Consortium for the Learning Organisation [see <http://www.eclo.org/>] provided an open conference about learning organisation matters.

We can explore and develop our own learning in an experiential way. The Internet offers a virtually limitless resource for extending our own knowledge as this article seeks to demonstrate. To explore some of these ideas further, look up any of the links from this article, and register for further updates with [TrainingZone](#).

Acknowledgement

The above article "Experiential Learning ... on the Web" by Tim Pickles is reproduced with permission from LearningWire, a free digest to accompany [TrainingZone](#) Updates are added [in brackets] by Roger Greenaway as web addresses move or disappear.

Everything below this line is authored or collated by Roger Greenaway.

Critiques of David Kolb's theory of experiential learning

These critiques should discourage unquestioning acceptance or misapplication of David Kolb's widely quoted model. I have attempted to gather together the strands of a discussion about experiential learning theory. If you know of any more voices in this discussion - or venues (web, journals, conferences) where it is taking place please write to me at [mailto:roger@reviewing.co.uk?subject=experiential learning theory - voices + venues](mailto:roger@reviewing.co.uk?subject=experiential%20learning%20theory%20-%20voices%20+%20venues) and I will add the information to this page.

- [David Kolb - from an informal education perspective](#)
- [David Kolb - from an adult education and ESL perspective](#)
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- [David Kolb - from an experiential education perspective](#)
- [David Kolb - from a lifelong education perspective](#)
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- [David Kolb - from a human potential perspective](#)
- [David Kolb - from a learning theory perspective](#)
- [David Kolb \(and others\) - from a feminist perspective](#)
- Tara Fenwick's [Learning Through Experience: Troubling Orthodoxies and Intersecting Questions](#)
- **NEW** Prof. Knud Illeris's [The Three Dimensions of Learning](#)
- [David Kolb - review of 'Experiential Learning' by Roger Greenaway](#)
- A summary of Miettinen's critique of Kolb appears in the International Journal of Lifelong Education (2002)
- [David A. Kolb answers questions](#) about the learning style aspects of ELT (experiential learning theory).
- [David A. Kolb's Big Bibliography](#) will help you locate more articles and books about experiential learning theory across many different fields.

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from an informal education perspective

On the <http://www.infed.org/> site you will find some fundamental criticisms of David Kolb's theory ... e.g. "In reality, these things may be happening all at once." (Jeffs and Smith, 1999) at <http://www.infed.org/foundations/f-expln.htm>

Here's a summary of the main criticisms as presented by Mark K. Smith (interestingly including an anachronistic one from Dewey!)

"A number of criticisms can be made of the Kolb model. It pays insufficient attention to the process of reflection (see Boud et al 1983); the claims made for the four different learning styles are extravagant (Jarvis 1987; Tennant 1997); the model takes very little account of different cultural experiences/conditions; the idea of stages or steps does not sit well with the reality of thinking (Dewey 1933); and the empirical support for the model is weak (Jarvis 1987; Tennant 1997)."

For more detail supporting these points see: [Experiential Learning](#)

Prepared by Mark K. Smith
© the informal education homepage
<http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-expln.htm>

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from an adult education and ESL perspective

[David Kolb, The Theory of Experiential Learning and ESL](#)
by Curtis Kelly, Heian Jogakuin College (Osaka, Japan)

Limitations of David Kolb's Theory and Inventory

"Not all writers agree with Kolb's theory. Rogers, for example 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, 1996, p. 108) Habermas has also proposed that there are at least three kinds of learning and that we have different learning styles for each. (Rogers, 1996, p. 110)

"As for the Inventory, Kolb, himself, points out its greatest limitation. 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. In my own case, I found the results dubious. The wording in the questions seemed vague and the results did not jive with my own view of my preferred learning style.

"Nonetheless, 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. (Brookfield, 1990; Cross, 1981; Jarvis, 1995; Kemp, 1996; Knowles, 1990, McKeachie, 1994, Peters, 1991)"

[The full article](#) (plus references*) provides a useful historical overview (placing Kolb in context) with some interesting insights. But I can't quite believe that the role of experience in learning was so completely overlooked until the 1980's. Why, for example, are the writings of Dewey, Kelley and Lewin not referred to in this article?

* n.b. The reference to 'Rogers 1996' is Alan not Carl ...

Rogers, A. (1996). Teaching Adults (2nd ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press.

For another adult education perspective on Kolb's theory see [Prof. Knud Illeris's The Three Dimensions of Learning](#) (below)

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from a psychological and philosophical perspective

Feelings and Personhood: Psychology in Another Key (1992) by John Heron (founder of the Human Potential Resources Group at the University of Surrey), includes a four page critique of David Kolb's theory of experiential learning. His points include:

- it is too narrow and underdeveloped
- its phenomenal base in psychological modes is too restricted
- its philosophical justification is invalid
- it's all arranged to support Kolb's preferred paradigm of scientific enquiry
- "...the prehension-transformation distinction, as Kolb uses it, is fundamentally incoherent, and cannot be used to support his learning model" (p.197)
- "He ... has to tack on other modes such as intuition and imagination in an unsatisfactory way, onto this structure to make up for its limitations." (p.197)

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from an experiential education perspective

Extracts from [the archives of the outdoor research discussion group](#)

Chris Loynes (Sept 2000) writes:

Kolb's theory is based on research measuring the non-conscious development of psycho-motor skills. The evidence that other kinds of learning follow this pattern is weak.

The application of Kolb's theory, which models an innate process, to the pedagogy of a deliberate educational event has never been shown convincingly. Neither has the transfer of learning from one context to another been demonstrated.

It remains a powerful planning and thinking tool for facilitators. I wonder if there is evidence of the application of the model stimulating better designed and led classes/sessions resulting in better outcomes?

Tracey Dickson (Sept 2000) writes:

- the research basis of the model particularly with reference to lack of research with people from different backgrounds (eg: cultures, gender, ages, socio-economic, education etc..)
- the seemingly simplistic linear nature of the model (many people I know do not learn in this nice linear way, they are much more random, may "regress" through Kolb's stages, work in different orders)
- the circular model may also give the impression that the stages are equal in time, emphasis etc..

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from a lifelong education perspective

"Kolb's learning cycle does not illustrate the fact that empirical (i.e. experiential) thinking based on action has limitations:

- It may result in false conclusions.
- It may not help us understand and explain change and new experiences.
- It may cause mental laziness and dogmatic thinking.

Miettinen also suggest that Kolb's experience and reflection occur in isolation and that there is the necessity for the individual to interact with other humans and the environment in order to enhance the reasoning and conclusions drawn."

quoted from [Beard and Wilson \(2002: 37\)](#) reporting on: Miettinen, Reijo (2000) The concept of experiential learning and John Dewey's theory of reflective thought and action, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19 (1), January-February, pp 54-72

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from a management education perspective

[Beard and Wilson \(2002: 37\)](#) report that in management education Kolb's theory is "extremely influential" and "is rarely seen as problematic". But they do describe a number of issues raised by others which I have summarised here:

1. Kolb's theory locates itself in the cognitive psychology tradition, and overlooks or mechanically explains and thus divorces people from the social, historical and cultural aspects of self, thinking and action.
2. The idea of a manager reflecting like a scientist in isolation on events is like an 'intellectual Robinson Crusoe'. The social interactions of a person are very important to the development of self, thought and learning.
3. Progressing sequentially through the cycle is questioned: "Learning can be considered as a process of argumentation in which thinking, reflecting, experiencing and action are different aspects of the same process. It is practical argumentation with oneself and in collaboration

with others that actually forms the basis for learning."

Original sources:

- Reynolds, M (1997) Learning styles: a critique, *Management Learning*, 28 (2) pp 115-33, Sage, London [part of the source for point 1 above]
- Holman, D, Pavlica, K and Thorpe, R (1997) Rethinking Kolb's theory of experiential learning in management education, *Management Learning*, Sage, London [source for all 3 points above]

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from a pedagogical perspective

James Atherton's 'Learning and Teaching' is a superb online presentation, digest and discussion of a wide range of learning and teaching theories. It includes many clear and colourful diagrams illustrating the theories under discussion. Atherton maintains a critical edge throughout his presentation. His section on 'The Experiential Learning Cycle' is certainly no exception. It is mostly about Kolb's theory. He makes several criticisms, but each criticism is accompanied by a proposal for improving the model. The cumulative effect of adopting all of Atherton's constructive proposals would result in a model very different from the original. It is not clear whether Atherton is tidying up Kolb's theory or making fundamental criticisms of it.

Some examples:

On the plus side:

"Kolb (1984) provides one of the most useful descriptive models of the adult learning process available."

"The most direct application of the model is to use it to ensure that teaching and tutoring activities give full value to each stage of the process."

On the other hand:

"This distinction [between 'intention' and 'intension'] is not easily identified by many people, and is one example of where Kolb may go over the top: he does have a tendency to elevate his model to a theory of Life, the Universe and Everything."

Atherton does not consider that Kolb's integration of Piaget's concepts of 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' is very successful.

He also considers that Kolb overlooked the importance of the contrast between the private and public parts of his model.

ATHERTON J S (2002) Learning and Teaching: Learning from experience [On-line]: UK: Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm> Accessed: 31 June 2004

Critiques of David Kolb's theory from a human potential perspective

[These extracts from the Human Potential Research Group Dictionary criticise the stereotypical application of David Kolb's model and question how well the model matches the reality of how people actually learn through experience.]

This experiential learning cycle has been very influential in, for example, education and management development, although it used typically in a much simplified and even stereotypical form that neglects the depth and variation to be found in Kolb (1984). For example (following Lewin and others) Kolb saw the opposite 'poles' of the learning cycle as important dialectical tensions (e.g. that between concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation). The ways in which these dialectics are resolved or handled greatly influences the type and level of learning that ensues.

The model has been criticised for being stronger conceptually than as an accurate representation of the way people actually learn through experience.

Human Potential Research Group Dictionary was at: <http://www.hprg.org/dictef.htm>
but now appears to have evolved into the book: [Dictionary of Personal Development](#) by Paul Tosey and Josie Gregory
[Human Potential Research Group](#)

A critique of Experiential Learning Theory and its hypothesized construct validity

ABSTRACT from Miriam W. Webb's 'A DEFINITIVE CRITIQUE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY'

The paper is a critique of Experiential Learning Theory and its hypothesized construct validity. A thorough examination of the intellectual and scientific roots of Experiential Learning Theory, its assumptions, and foundational references were analyzed to address three substantive questions fundamental to the theory.

1. What is learning?
 2. Are the Experiential Learning Model modes separate and distinct in their functions so as to necessitate a four-stage cycle for learning to take place?
 3. Is dialectic tension the mechanism that mediates the relationship between the modes and between the person and the environment?
-
1. First, the research addresses learning, and the definition derived by Experiential Learning Theory. This section concludes that Experiential Learning Theory's definition is a dramatic distortion of the very epistemological fundamentals it references. The author proposes a different definition more consistent with those fundamentals.
 2. Second, the research addresses Experiential Learning Model's foundational propositions, experiential learning modes, their constitutive natures, and their place in relation to learning theory. It concludes that all four modes are not required for learning to take place, and demonstrates that this component of the theory is rife with inherent contradiction and inconsistency. The author suggests ways in which these contradictions could be resolved.
 3. Finally, the research addresses the use of dialectic tension as the mediating function of learning, by tracing the meaning of dialectic from its inception with Socrates through Karl Marx and up to its place in Experiential Learning Theory. The research concludes that dialectic tension is not a viable mechanism for mediating modes of learning. The research further substantiates that the proposition that learning, by its very nature, is a tension and conflict-filled process is a misapplication of dialectic tension. The author recommends a complete re-examination of the mechanisms which mediate between learning modes.

The paper concludes that the infrastructure of Experiential Learning Theory, its Model, and the Learning Style Inventory is faulty at the core, and recommends that the operational evolution of learning styles as a combination of contiguous modes of learning be re-evaluated.

The full abstract and a summary of key points are presented (with the author's permission) on this site at <http://reviewing.co.uk/research/experiential.learning.theory.critique.htm>

The full critique (including the full abstract) is available in a PDF file at <http://cc.ysu.edu/~mnwebb/>

Critique of reflective constructivist learning theory from a feminist perspective

This is part of a wider critique, not just of David Kolb's theory but of all experiential learning theory that upholds the reflective constructivist view. It is quoted from Tara Fenwick's [Classifying Alternate Perspectives in Experiential Learning](#) (1999 AERC Proceedings)

"From a feminist perspective, Michelson (1996) observes that emphasis on (critical) reflection depersonalizes the learner as an autonomous rational knowledge-making self, disembodied, rising above the dynamics and contingency of experience. The learning process of "reflection" presumes that knowledge is extracted and abstracted from experience by the processing mind. This ignores the possibility that all knowledge is constructed within power-laden social processes, that experience and knowledge are mutually determined, and that experience itself is knowledge-driven and cannot be

known outside socially available meanings. Further, argues Michelson (1996), the reflective or constructivist view of development denigrates bodily and intuitive experience, advocating retreat into the loftier domains of rational thought from which 'raw' experience can be disciplined and controlled."

Michelson, E. (1996). Usual suspects: experience, reflection, and the (en)gendering of knowledge. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15 (6), 438-454.

Learning Through Experience: Troubling Orthodoxies and Intersecting Questions

by Tara J. Fenwick

Publisher: Krieger Publishing Company (2003) [view at amazon.co.uk](http://view.at.amazon.co.uk) or at amazon.com

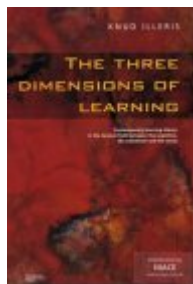
No synopsis available but you can view earlier publications by Tara Fenwick:

- [Experiential Learning: A Theoretical Critique Explored Through Five Perspectives](#)
- [Experiential Learning in Adult Education: A Comparative Framework](#)

The Three Dimensions of Learning: Contemporary Learning Theory in the Tension Field between the Cognitive, the Emotional and the Social

by Knud Illeris

Publisher: Copenhagen: Roskilde University Press (2004)



Book Description (at amazon.com): The Three Dimensions of Learning is an extraordinary book offering an overview and critical examination of the most significant American and European learning theories. From them it develops a coherent overall theory covering the cognitive, the emotional and the social and societal dimensions of learning, thus addressing the current issue of competence development. One chapter discusses non-learning, learning defense, and learning resistance. With its construction of a comprehensive and contemporary theory of learning, this book has sold over 25,000 copies in Danish, Swedish,

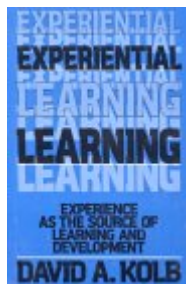
and English. Now available in North America, it will be useful to adult educators dealing with human and organizational learning and development. (amazon.com)

Professor Knud Illeris's comprehensive theory of learning includes a substantial critique of Kolb's theory of experiential learning. [Details to follow when I have read it! RG]

[view at amazon.co.uk](http://view.at.amazon.co.uk) or at amazon.com

'Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development'

by David A. Kolb, reviewed by Roger Greenaway



David Kolb's learning cycle has spawned many unauthorised imitations that misrepresent his theories. As you might guess from the title he has a theory of experiential development as well as a theory of experiential learning. Not bed time reading, but essential for anyone doing serious research in this area. Most readers will probably be surprised to find that there is very little about cyclical movement, even though his well known 'circle' is the central focus of his discussion of the various dynamics of his model of experiential learning. There is an important 4 page critique of David Kolb's theory in John Heron's *Feelings and Personhood*, in which Kolb's model is said to downplay the importance of feelings

and intuition in experiential learning. Despite the range of Kolb's theorising, this generally positivistic book does not provide an adequate grounding for more holistic approaches to learning. (reviewed by Roger Greenaway)

More reviews of books about [experiential learning](#) and [learning to learn](#)

David Kolb's Big Bibliography

Alice and David Kolb maintain an extensive bibliography of books and articles about experiential learning theory since 1971 (over 1,500 entries). It is updated twice a year. The latest bibliography is available from <http://www.learningfromexperience.com/>

[Index to some critiques of David Kolb's experiential learning theory.](#)

More about Experiential Learning on this site

You will find several more experiential learning pages here at reviewing.co.uk including:

- [Critiques of David Kolb's theory of experiential learning](#) (above)
- [Experiential Learning Cycles](#) (about Kolb and others)
- [The Active Reviewing Cycle](#) (e-learning tutorial)
- [In Search of Respectable Adventure](#) (article)
- [Reviewing Adventures: Why and How?](#) (monograph)
- [Reviews of books about experiential learning](#)

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You will find many more pages by looking up 'experiential' in the search box on the [home page](#).

More about Experiential Learning on other sites

- [What is Experiential Learning?](#) is a FAQ-style article at www.teamskillstraining.co.uk that approaches 'experiential learning from many different angles: Is experiential learning team building? | The experiential learning process | Owning the experiential learning process | The experiential learning cycle for continuous improvement | The experiential learning laboratory | Is experiential learning self-rewarding? | Using experiential learning to reinforce the comfort zone concept | Principles of experiential learning | Applications of experiential learning to business | The experiential learning environment | The structure of an experiential learning programme
- [Why Experiential Learning is so Effective](#) A list of 12 points presented by Sabre Corporate Development and based on research by Dr John Luckner and Reldan Nadler whose book '[Processing the Experience](#)' is in the [Active Learning Bookshop](#) on this site.

Online Experiential Learning

- [Design of Net-Learning Systems based on Experiential Learning](#) Juan R. Pimentel in JALN Volume 3, Issue 2 - November 1999.
- [Hypermedia As An Experiential Learning Tool: A Theoretical Model](#) Josi Miguel Baptista Nunes and Susan P. Fowell
- [e-learning sites and directories](#)

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