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Learner Flexibility in Preparation for Experiential Learning

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Learners have preferences for learning that may be implicit. Learners find a comfortable approach to learning that places emphasis on certain parts of the learning process and underutilizes or avoids others (Peterson & Kolb, 2017). Educators can recognize learner preferences and meet learners where they are most comfortable. In addition, educators empower learners to be most successful when they guide learners around the full learning cycle process, acknowledging tension and resistance. Educators can design four approaches to address four learning stages and leverage each stage with technology. By this form of scaffolding, educators encourage learner flexibility and empower learners to adopt this full cycle learning process.

Experiential Learning

Kolb (2015) synthesized the work of nine foundational scholars from education, psychology and philosophy to develop an ideal process of learning and developing from experience (e.g., the learning cycle) and described preferences for using it. Experiential Learning is based on several unique perspectives on learning and development beginning with the awareness that learning is present in every life experience and there exists an invitation to be engaged in each experience. As opposed to a linear information transfer that measures outcomes, experiential learning is viewed as a recursive cyclical process that involves all aspects of a whole person (e.g., affective, perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral) and can be applied to any life situation. This ideal process of learning includes four steps or modes: *experiencing*, *reflecting*, *thinking*, and *acting*.

In practice, the cycle is more dynamic and less prescribed, yet deep learning requires the use of all four modes regardless of the order. By doing this, people are able to experience an effective, well-balanced learning and living process that keeps their subjective experience at the center of learning, improves retention, and increases effectiveness. To be effective, the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes that motivate learning. The north-south axis of experiencing and thinking are two interdependent and opposite ways of grasping information to understand the world. *Experiencing* (learner focused) is direct and subjective, while *thinking* (content focused) is an interpretation that is generalized and objective. *Reflecting* (meaning focused) and *acting* (action focused) are two inter-

dependent and opposite means of transforming or processing our experiences and thoughts. Learners connect direct experience to general knowledge by reflecting about the meaning and implication of our experience. They transform our abstract thinking and feelings into behavior by acting (Kolb et al., 2014).

Learner Preference and Full Cycle Learning

Most learners find that they use certain learning stages and avoid or underutilize others (Kolb, 2015). These preferences lead to basic orientations as learners: diverging, conceptualizing, evaluating, and doing. Educators can identify learner preferences, then lead learners around the entire cycle by adopting four different approaches and employing design and technology techniques that drive learners to move out of their comfort zones (Kolb et al., 2014).

Diverging learners prefer experiencing and reflecting connecting, learner and meaning (Kolb et al., 2014). They prefer warm, affirming interactions and conversations with educators who assume a facilitator role. Educators can guide learners with diverging by helping them to find personal relevance in a topic with facilitated discussions, breakout rooms, and chats. By providing scaffolded reflections, discussion prompts and journal assignments, educators encourage learners to connect to feelings, values, and beliefs. Educators can also leverage technology to support diverging by breaking up reflective question prompts with text boxes that have a character minimum so that students must address each question, imagine different possibilities, and answer all aspects of the reflective questions rather than zoning in immediately on one portion of the reflection. Educators may allow for different forms of communication by including asynchronous team chat or cohort discussions that are based on messages delivered with video.

Conceptualizing learners (reflecting and thinking, connecting meaning with content) prefer authoritative, specialized content delivery with educators who assume an expert role (Kolb et al., 2014). Educators can guide learners here by helping them find and understand expert knowledge and theory from reading assignments, videos, podcasts, and lectures in order to think like an expert in the field. With content now available from a myriad of sources, educators may now become curators of exceptional content that encourages learner analysis instead of developing and delivering their own. Technology can leverage this reflecting-thinking stage of learning in virtual classes through a flipped classroom design, and online talks and podcasts to engage learners (especially for learners who may underutilize this stage).

Educators can scaffold this learning challenge by putting theoretical content in context to make it meaningful, pointing out explicitly how theory transfers from the classroom to real world and ways in which it will support their learning submission. Educators may consider choosing technology that provides locking and hiding features that insist on content completion before ensuing assignments are revealed or submitted. To incentivize learners to analyze theoretical concepts that form conclusions prior to completing assignments, educators can also try using badges and extra credit in the course to reward this approach.

Evaluating learners (thinking and acting connecting subject with action) like objective, result oriented feedback in structured evaluation from educators who assume an evaluator, standard setter role (Kolb et al, 2014). Educators can provide structured feedback through graded assignments or demonstration of learning that allows the learner to evaluate his or her own progress and continue to improve. Graded assignments, moderated feedback and expert evaluation of performance are means of guiding learners through this part of the cycle. Technology leverages the evaluating stage in learning by allowing educators both to insert more frequent feedback and to distribute feedback requests to more parties (such as peers and industry experts, in addition to the educator). This feedback is a catalyst for students to make changes and improvements. Students who prefer this stage will be reinforced and engaged; students who avoid this stage from performance pressure will experience how feedback ignites learning and prepares them for the real world.

"With content now available from a myriad of sources, educators may now become curators of exceptional content that encourages learner analysis instead of developing and delivering their own."

Educators can consider choosing technology that can provide 360° review capability to distribute feedback frequently throughout a program rather than simply evaluating once at the end of the program when the learner may not iterate to practice new behaviors. These frequent developmental assessments allow a learner to adjust behavior, improve skills, and learn to give and receive feedback; learners are able to practice making changes: the essence of learning from experience. This evaluation can include not only what students are doing, but how they are doing it; therefore, learners get the added benefit of learning to work productively together as a team. Educators can use the automation of technology platforms to invite industry partners to provide the enhanced perspective of real-world feedback, especially since the virtual environment facilitates ease of their participation.

Doing learners (acting and experiencing, connecting action with learner) like applied, collaborative situations that allow for contextual, hands-on learning from educators who assume a coaching role (Kolb et al., 2014). Educators can provide time and space for trial and error experiments that allow learners to practice applying what they have learned. Educators can design skill labs, teamwork, and interactive experiences to allow learners to do things. In this stage of learning, often the most neglected due to limitations in time and resources, technology offers a great potential to open access to more experiential learning opportunities for more learners (James et al., 2020).

Through technology-enabled programs, educators can scale experiential learning programs to reach more students in more defined, scaffolded experiences that uncouple complex competencies, such as teamwork, one capability at a time (James et al., 2018). For instance, working with a team involves having awareness of self and others, sharing a mental model of a teamwork process, communicating with others, giving and receiving feedback, managing time and

resources, and being accountable to get things done. In the current virtual context, it also involves working remotely and managing collaboration tools. These many complex competencies must come together for a learner to be successful with a complex, holistic one-time experience. With technology, educators can scaffold learning experiences over time in a stepwise, graduated manner to build one competency at a time, allowing students to uncouple various skills to make the practice more focused.

To accomplish this design and execution, educators will benefit from recognizing their own preferences for learning and educating. In doing so, they become aware of the results from using their preferred approach and finding ways to supplement it through design, technology, and learning from experience. ■

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