

## Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle for *Collaborative Innovation*

### **Abstract**

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (KELC) can be a profound process resulting in the development of collaborative innovation. I have been using the KELC as a simple heuristic for over 30 years in the classroom and find it particularly helpful in developing a pragmatic understanding of the student's experience and can serve as a reference skill for them in business practice. By developing the KELC as a social method, the students can inquire into their collective experiences and develop a collaboratively innovative theory of the situation which is demonstrable and testable. The social KELC is useful and interesting.

Keywords: social, learning, pragmatic

## Introduction

I have been using David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) as the primary educational theory and method in my classroom for well over 30 years. This 30-60 minute activity is an opportunity to reflect on my experience of 'going around that cycle' innumerable times since I taught under David Kolb at Case Western Reserve University. I have found the process to be particularly useful to "think together" about our experience for grounded *collaborative innovation*.

I have primarily used the KELC as a method for fully employed MBA students to bring their 'real world' experience into the classroom. Our first use of the cycle is for each individual to reflect on an experience they had in their workplace, and this is then followed by developing group projects in which the team of three students would conduct further organizational research via ethnographic interviews and online research for how other organizations have dealt with similar issues.

This activity will build on my 2015 MOBTC presentation "The Social Art of the Vignette: bringing experience into the classroom" in which we examined the student experience in the workplace as living cases of "Concrete Experience." Concrete Experience is the first stage of the 4 stage KELC. In this proposal I would like to examine the entire cycle learning cycle, and see how we start with experience but view and reflect on it from various stakeholder perspectives and 'theories' to collaborate on an agreed theory of the situation. Out of this simplified theory, we can then generate active experiments to test our theory and accomplish our goals for the organization.

This session could apply not only to the live case studies of working students, but could also be applied to case studies by non-working undergraduate students. This year I have finally

had the opportunity for teaching OB with undergraduate students, which has brought a fresh perspective to my own teaching.

### **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle follows a 4-stage process of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. This process can be used to understand either an individual's learning process, but in reality it is an inherently social process. The KELC starts with *Concrete Experience* in which we sense our environment and that something is happened, which we seek to understand. We then reflect on these things that happen to us and around us by examining the various stakeholder perspectives (ourselves included) and the concepts they/we use to understand what is happening through *Reflective Observation*. After exhausting the primary perspectives of the stakeholders and their concepts, we then seek a synthetic perspective to generate a fundamental *Abstract Conceptualization*. This would be a fundamental theory of the situation. If we have a very clear understanding of why and how this phenomenon 'happens', we can then develop greater utility and gain control of the situation and direct the process toward our mutually desired outcomes through *Active Experimentation*. Through this experimentation and engagement we will generate more social phenomena, thus beginning a new KELC.

The KELC is based in large part on the educational theory of John Dewey, a pragmatic philosopher. The 'industrial education model' most common in American and (and perhaps most formal education around the globe) starts with the ingestion of a text, starting with concepts and ideas often found in great books. In contrast, Dewey adopts a method grounded in experience and uses ideas as tools to understand that experience. Kolb uses of John Dewey's distinction between "apprehension" and "comprehension" as a core part of his model. When we

‘Apprehend’ a situation, it ‘grasps’ us. Life happens to us and grabs us. We are aware that something is happening but we may not have words for it nor an understanding of how to manage this phenomenon. Through collaborative reflection we explore the phenomena from many different perspectives and lens. Through this analysis we hopefully can synthesize a theory, a ***Collaborative Innovation***, which aligns our perspectives, interests, expectations and activities to test in our collective environment. In Dewey’s terms we then *comprehend* what is happening.

This is a primary method for Action Research, which is used explicitly in the fields of business and education, as well as in most applied professions and vocational training. However, business schools (particularly UG programs) seem particularly resistant to pragmatic philosophy and methods, insisting on the industrial model which starts with concepts and seeks to fashion a world. The primary objectives of the industrial model is to replicate what already exists and trains people to follow established concepts and principles. The primary objectives of the pragmatic model is to provide a process framework for grounded & collaborative innovation.

### **Learning Objectives**

The purpose of the exercise and method is to present a method for students to think together based on their common experience. By reflecting on a common experience of a live case study or reading of a case study from literature, the students can explore their differing perspectives of that experience and highlight their varying and common assumptions. As part of this they can explore the assumptions not only of their experience but of common words, concepts and theories which are quite often ambiguous. This is often a ‘messy and complicated’ experience as they collaboratively explore not only their sensory input but also their concepts.

The objectives of this exercise is: *first* to train students to become aware of their experience and the phenomena around them. To do this we train the students in the art of writing vignettes based on ethnographic methods. This often culminates in the formulation of a research question that can guide further inquiry. The *second* objective is to develop skills in collaborative reflection and analysis. We train the students to examine the phenomena from the various stakeholder perspectives and solve the research question from their ‘eyes’. This inherently calls for the development of a tolerance for ambiguity and a practical philosophical interest in defining terms as used in the world.

The third objective is for each student to learn to theorize, synthesizing the various reflections into a central clear and powerful theory of the situation. This theory of the situation should be concise, succinct, and operational. In formal terms it would be parsimonious, or an elegant solution to the research problem posed in the description of the experience. And the fourth objective is to translate this theory of the situation to a test in the collective environment. If the theory is powerful, we would expect that it would assist alignment, motivation, and expectation of the group of students to see if their thinking corresponds to the situation. This is the central goal of reflective practice as described by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, with a high correspondence between espoused theory and theory in use. We seek alignment between what we say and what we do. Thus, the objective of the KELC in this social application is *collaborative innovation*.

### **Exercise Overview**

I have had a lot of fun in my current UG leadership course examining the nature of President Trump’s leadership traits, skills, process, etc. The students are not entirely comfortable doing this as religion and politics can be difficult areas of discussion, and difficult to

pursue a professional treatment of the subject/experience. The process I have used with live personal cases for MBA students is carried on over the whole semester course, but can be demonstrated with a social phenomenon that is available to the MOBTC participants. What is fascinating about the phenomena that is Donald Trump is that it is not readily explainable with traditional leadership models of traits and skills as his presence is pretty unique and emergent. It has caught everyone by surprise. I will have several very short videos prepared in advance on other phenomena as well, but this was a pretty interesting process in class last week.

### **Session Description**

Ideally, I would have 60 minutes for this presentation (\*but could adapt it for either 30 or 90 minutes depending of time slot availability).

- 1) I would start with a short video of President Trump (10 minutes), just as David McClelland used to start with a video of President Kennedy.
- 2) I would ask the participants to see what they saw regarding the leadership qualities of President Trump. What would explain the phenomenon he is for us? (10 minutes)
- 3) We might entertain a trait model of leadership and ask how it fits or does not fit our observations, along with our assumptions of what the concept means. For instance, honesty is often seen as a trait in both leadership studies and by supporters of Donald Trump, however what we mean by that term is diametrically different in each use. This explicitly happened to me in class last week, as well as with most leadership traits and skills. (10 minutes)
- 4) We might conclude with an identification of the primary traits of Trump where there is agreement on the definition of the applied term. (10 minutes)

- 5) We would then brainstorm what we might see in the future in attempting to predict the further unfoldment of the President's leadership behavior. We could 'place our bets' on what we might see in a number of arenas, but particularly in how he relates to his constituency base. (10)
- 6) We would wrap up the session by processing what happened in our exercise. How happened and why? We might anticipate other ways of using this pragmatic educational process. (10 minutes)

\*the same basic format could be lengthened or shortened depending on the available time. Sixty minutes is a very comfortable time period.