



## Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

...for AFS  
& Friends

**E**xperiential learning is a fundamental aspect of the type of education that takes place within the AFS network. Experiential learning is considered an on-going process grounded in reflection that is continuously modified by new experiences. The cycle begins when an individual engages in an activity, reflects on his or her experience, then derives meaning from the reflection, and finally, puts into action the newly gained insight through a change in behavior or attitude.

The work of researchers like David Kolb, Kurt Lewin and Carl Rogers confirm that people learn best when actively engaged in a reflective process based on a particular life experience. The very essence of an AFS immersion in another culture with the support of the AFS educational methodology and orientation framework is experiential learning.

Although much of experiential learning can occur naturally in daily life, it can also be set up or structured to guide learners through an experience, and maximize learning outcomes. The AFS exchange is inherently experiential in that participants are put into a new culture and are encouraged to regularly reflect on what happens to them abroad with the support of their host families, AFS volunteers and staff. The experiential learning that occurs within the AFS network varies in structure and formality. For example, pre-departure orientation is a highly structured experience with an agenda and outline of activities, while the in-country monthly participant check-ins tend to be more open and informal in nature.

Based on the principles of experiential learning, Kolb developed the experiential learning cycle, which is a theory to describe how we take in and process information, and ultimately, apply knowledge. Since AFS is an educational organization that facilitates experiential learning on a global scale, AFSers have a unique responsibility to understand the fundamental principles of this approach and how learning occurs through it.

“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”

- D. Kolb, 1984

## KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE

The experiential learning cycle has four stages and while they are presented in a specific order, the learning can actually begin during any stage in the cycle. To maximize the learning opportunity, though, it is ideal to complete all four stages.

This approach to education has numerous benefits to participants because it is a balance of affective (emotional), behavioral, and cognitive (knowledge-based) learning. In addition, the learning is inductive, meaning that participants arrive at their own conclusions about the experience and content, which makes it easier for them to directly apply their learning to real-world situations. The following four stages must be present in a workshop or training design in order to complete the learning cycle: **Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation.**

It is important to note that different types of learners may begin the learning cycle in different places; learning does not necessarily have to always begin with a concrete experience. Regardless of the stage in which the learning begins though, Kolb argues that the most comprehensive learning involves all four learning stages, which expands the participant's potential to fully engage in a learning process.

**Concrete Experience:**

*Learning by experiencing*

People learn by being involved in an activity or experience and remembering how it felt. This is the primary way we learn and can serve as the basis of all the other stages in the learning cycle.

**Reflective Observation:**

*Learning by processing*

Using a concrete experience as the basis, the learner reflects on the experience to get more information or deepen their understanding of the experience.

**Abstract Conceptualization:**

*Learning by generalizing*

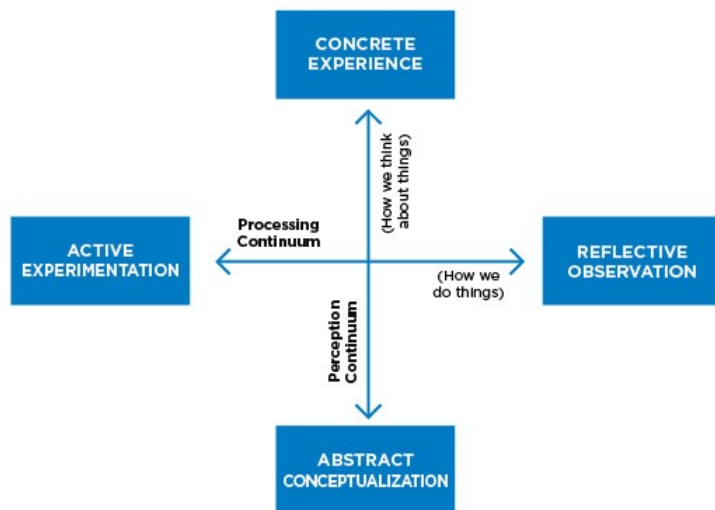
Based on the reflection of an experience, the learner either consciously or subconsciously theorizes, classifies, or generalizes their experience in an effort to generate new information. This “thinking” stage serves to organize knowledge, enabling learners to see the “big picture” and identify rules and patterns. This stage is critical for learners to be able to transfer their knowledge from one context to another.

**Active Experimentation:**

*Learning by doing*

The learner applies or tests out their newly-gained insight in the real world. The application of learning itself is a new experience from which the cycle begins again.

In each stage of the cycle, a specific type of learning occurs: **experiencing, reflecting, thinking, or doing**. The experiential learning cycle is often represented by two continuums that are used to either perceive or process information. On the y-axis, also known as the perception continuum, are the two possible ways of taking in an experience, either by “feeling” or “thinking,” **Concrete Experience (CE)** or **Abstract Conceptualization (AC)**. The perception continuum is basically our emotional response to learning, how we think and/or feel about it.



Located on the x-axis is the processing continuum which includes two different ways to handle or process an experience through “observing” or “doing,” **Reflective Observation (RO)** or **Active Experimentation (AE)**. The processing continuum is basically how we approach a specific task. Kolb argues that learners are not able to perform both actions on a single-axis at the same time (e.g. think and feel) and for that reason, we have a tendency to perceive and process learning in a particular way. This tendency to rely on certain ways of perceiving and processing information is what Kolb refers to as a learning preference or learning style, which can vary based on context and content.

There are four distinct learning styles based on the four-stage experiential learning cycle. Everyone has a unique learning style or preference, but to achieve a well-rounded learning experience, it is important that learners utilize all four styles of learning. Based on his extensive research, Kolb developed the Kolb Learning Styles Inventory (KLSI), which is an assessment tool designed to provide a summary of each person’s individual, unique learning style. The inventory allows learners

to gain a better understanding of themselves as learners and develop strategies to enhance their learning potential.

## WHY IT MATTERS FOR AFS

No matter if consciously or not, we never stop learning. The experiential learning cycle concludes with Active Experimentation, which is the application of new knowledge. This application generates a new experience causing the cycle to begin again in the care of AFS. This also ties to the Educational Goals our learners are working toward - particularly, but not only - in the case of making commitments to contributing to the world community.

Recent research in the field has confirmed that most individuals and even cultures have preferences when it comes to learning (Joy & Kolb, 2009). For that reason, the experiential learning cycle can serve as a framework to design and select activities for workshops, trainings and orientations that accommodate different styles and preferences. Kolb's findings can also inform the sequencing of activities within training sessions to ensure that learners from around the world progress through the entire learning cycle.

Whether trainers or support contacts, volunteers and staff working with AFS participants have a fundamental role in the learning process to help sojourners and host families make sense of their experiences. The experiential learning cycle is a valuable approach to do just that. To ensure the reflective piece necessary in experiential learning, debriefing must be included in the learning process. How we learn, in the context of AFS, to successfully communicate across and within different cultures, starts with understanding the basic theories of learning and processing information.



### The Experiential Learning Cycle...

- ✓ Creates a better understanding of the learning process in order to facilitate learning more effectively
- ✓ Is comprised of four different stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation
- ✓ Provides a framework for designing workshops, trainings, and orientations
- ✓ Gives facilitators (AFS trainers and volunteers) a central role in the implementation of the experiential learning cycle

### For more theoretical information:

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kolb, D.A., & Osland, J., Rubin, I. (1995). *Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach to Human Behavior in Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kolb, D. (1976). *Learning style inventory*. Boston: McBer and Company.

Joy, S., & Kolb, D.A. (2009). Are there cultural differences in learning style?. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 33 (1), 69-85.