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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY AS ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF ADULT LEARNING PRACTICE WORLDWIDE

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the analysis of existing theory, assumptions, and models of adult experiential learning.

The experiential learning is a learning based on a learning cycle guided by the dual dialectics of action-reflection and experience-abstraction. It defines learning as a process of knowledge creation through experience transformation, so knowledge becomes the result of experience understanding and transformation. Experience understanding is information taking, and experience transformation is information and action based on this information interpreting. The experiential learning is a cycle and requires a learner's focus, his reflection on the experience, generalizations development, and generalizations verification.

In the center of experiential learning models is a learning process, but the subject matter is also important. So educators characterize experiential learning from two aspects. The first group of researchers focuses on the process of learning from experience; the second one focuses on the context of the experiential learning. This learning is designed to engage students in direct experiences tied to real-world problems and situations. In this learning the instructor facilitates and does not direct student progress. Another benefit of experiential learning is a strong motivation to learn, which is provided with students engagement in learning experiences and feedback. The experiential learning makes possible for students to face unknown situations and problems in a real-world context. To make the decision, students need to analyze what they know, what they do not know, and how to learn it. This motivates students to reflect on their existing knowledge and make it deeper through reflection; transfer their prior learning experience to new context; acquire new ideas, principles, and skills; improve communication skills since they help students to become self-directed life-long learners.

Key words: *action, adult learning, experience, experiential learning, experiential learning model, facilitation, learning cycle, reflection.*

INTRODUCTION

In modern society with constant changes the adult learning requires shifting the emphasis from teaching to learning that is from transferring the information to facilitating the experience accumulation, taking into account the following features of adult learning:

- needs, motivations and professional problems of adult learners play the leading role;
- adult learners need to be autonomous and self-directed;
- adult experience can be used both during its own learning and in teaching colleagues;
- the learning process does not focus on the acquisition of knowledge in general, but solving significant problems for adults: assist in achieving specific goals;
- learning outcomes should be immediately used in practice;
- the learning occurs within significant constraints (social, time, financial, professional, etc.);

- the learning is designed as a cooperative activity of teachers and learners, their relationships are in the partnership level;
- the previous experience of adult learners should be taken into account, it usually forms series of psychological barriers affecting learning outcomes (stereotypes, attitudes, fear, etc.) (Lukyanova, 2009).

It should be noted that Ukrainian scientists have studied various aspects of adult learning: theory is discussed by T. Desyatov, S. Goncharenko, L. Lukyanova, N. Nychkalo, I. Zyazyun and others; historical issues are studied by N. Pobirchenko, L. Sigayeva, B. Stuparyk, L. Vovk and others; features of the adult learning are studied by O. Anischenko, N. Bidyuk, L. Lukyanova, O. Ogiyenko, N. Pazyura, N. Protasova and others.

The analysis of research papers of Ukrainian scientists on adult learning shows that the experiential learning has not been studied enough. But at the same time the experiential learning is widely discussed and implemented in adult learning in the European Union, Australia, USA and other countries (D. Baud, P. Bernard, G. Dean, L. Joplin, D. Kolb, D. Walker and others).

First experiential learning became popular in adult education to recognize person's experience in the knowledge development. It was one way of recognizing the learning process as a result in terms of the development of new skills and concepts. Adult educators were motivated by a sincere desire to oppose a general lack of experience recognition in the workplace and in higher education. The theory of experiential learning has become a challenge to well-shaped ways of thinking about education as a program, a teacher as an expert, and knowledge as a theory.

We believe that the study of the experiential learning is of great importance for the development of the theory and practice of adult learning in Ukraine.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of our study is to analyze the foreign research papers on adult experiential learning, determine its characteristics and principles to understand how adults learn from experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

The adult experiential learning theory was entirely logical development of works of outstanding scientists in the twentieth century, who assigned a central part to the experience in their theories of learning and human development, including J. Dewey, P. Freire, W. James, C. Jung, K. Lewin, J. Piaget, C. Rogers, L. Vygotsky and others.

J. Dewey is considered to be the father of experiential learning. A key principle of his educational philosophy was "... amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1938). Really J. Dewey's works have made significant contribution to the experiential learning theory. Another earlier theorist of experiential learning C. Rogers stated that learning occurs in a continuum from meaningless to significant. He believed that the significant learning includes a personal engagement at the affective and cognitive levels. The learning should be self-initiated and pervasive to make possible for the learners to change attitudes, behavior, and in some cases, even the personality. Learning needs to be evaluated by the learner and take on meaning as part of the overall experience.

To meet the paper's aim, we have carried out the theoretical analysis of the literature on experiential learning for adult learners to understand how adults learn from experience.

RESULTS

The British scientist P. Bernard identifies several key attributes describing experiential learning, including:

1. Action: the student is not passive, but active; he is involved in a physical movement, not just seating.

2. Reflection: learning happens after a reaction to action only.

3. The phenomenological attribute: objects or situations are described without values or interpretations; the student must identify himself what is happening; teacher's point of view should not be automatically imposed.

4. The subjective human experience: look at the world as a student, not a teacher.

5. The human experience is a source of learning: experiential learning is an effort to use human experience within the educational process (Burnard, 1989).

According to the works of D. Kolb the experiential learning has the following characteristics:

1. Learning is seen as a process, not a result. Learning occurs through interconnected experience in which knowledge is modified and reformed. Due to J. Dewey, learning is a continuous rearrangement of experience, and the learning process and outcomes are considered the same ideas.

2. All the learning is a re-learning. Learning happens through a process highlighting the adults' beliefs and attitudes on the topic. So they can be examined, verified and integrated with new ideas. J. Piaget called this proposal as constructivism, where the individual constructs his knowledge relying on his own experience.

3. Learning requires the conflicts settlement between dialectically opposite forms of adaptation to the world. So, driving forces of the educational process are conflicts and differences.

4. Learning is an integral process of adaptation. Learning is not the result of knowledge only, but the integrative person's activity – thinking, feelings, perceptions, and behavior. It includes other adaptation models.

5. Learning is a result of synergetic interaction between a human and environment. Due to J. Piaget, learning appears with balancing new experiences and existing concepts, as well as existing concepts and new experiences. The theory of experiential learning argues that learning depends on student's characteristics and learning environment. According to K. Lewin, human behavior is an interaction of a human and environment.

6. Learning is a process of knowledge creation. In experiential learning, knowledge is the interaction between two forms of knowledge: social knowledge constructed in the social and historical context, and personal knowledge constructed as student's subjective experience. This idea of knowledge is different from the educational model of knowledge transfer in which standard assumptions are transmitted to the learner (Kolb, 1984).

D. Kolb considers the experiential learning cycle as a key principle of his theory, and the direct or actual experience is the core for reflection and thinking. Reflection and thinking are implemented and transformed into abstract concepts, providing new meaning to actions which can be actively experimented. They lead to new experience. D. Kolb presents the process of experiential learning as a cycle or helix where the student passes all stages: experiencing, reflection, thinking and action.

D. Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning presents two dialectically related processes of experience mastering: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization; and two related modes of experience transformation, reflective observation, and active experimentation. This process includes integration of:

- knowledge that is concepts, facts and information obtained in formal education and prior experience;
- activities or knowledge using in the real world;
- reflection that is analysis and synthesis of knowledge and activities on creating new knowledge (Indiana University, 2006).

L. Joplin has developed her Five Stages Model of experiential learning. The first stage (Focus) sets the tasks to be performed and directs students' attention to these problems. In the second stage (Action) students should be involved in the activities on the physical, mental or emotional level. The third and fourth stages (Support and Feedback) appear during all the learning process. In the fifth and last phase (Debrief) students and teacher receive information and reflect it. L. Joplin notes that experience itself cannot be called an experiential learning because a reflection transforms the experience into experiential learning (Joplin, 1981).

D. Baud and D. Walker state that the experiential learning has some levels of learning in action-reflection model. The reflection and action occur as the participants-activities interaction (Boud, 1992). Students explore the idea even during a lecture and reflect that is the reflection during the action. So practice is the action and reflection taking place during the activity and the activity is a series of personal experience and reflection.

D. Baud expresses two assumptions on experiential learning. The first assumption suggests that learning is always based on prior experience and any effort to activate new learning should take into account the prior experience. This means that the existing perceptions and understanding that adult students have developed before affect the learning significantly. So the links should be created between new and existing experience to help students analyze and understand the new experience (Boud, 1994).

The second assumption indicates that learning from experience is always active, which attracts students to interact and be engaged in events. D. Baud refers interaction and engagement to learning environment which is social, psychological and material (Boud, 1994).

Baud D. and D. Walker consider experiential learning as a sequence of following stages: the first is preparation before learning activities, then the experience and student's reflection surveys. This approach includes two key aspects of D. Kolb's model, they are experience and reflection. The researchers added a third stage: preparation before experience which is significant for the learning to occur (Boud, 1992).

The analysis of the experiential learning theory shows that the basic principles of experiential learning are following:

- experiential learning occurs when practical experience is carefully selected, and it is supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis;
- experience is the basis and stimulus for learning. Experience is structured to force the student for taking the initiative, making decisions and taking responsibility for results;
- students actively construct their own experience and actively participate in the formulation of questions, research, experiment, problem solving etc;
- students are involved intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically that makes the learning task authentic;
- learning outcomes are personal and form the foundations for future learning and experience;
- learning develops the relationships such as the student's relation to himself, to other students and to the world in whole;
- teachers and students can face success or failure, adventure or risk because they cannot predict the results of the experiment;
- there are opportunities for students and teachers to investigate and define their own assumptions and values;
- the main functions of the teacher include the relevant experience selection, problems statement, boundaries setting, students support, and students' physical and emotional safety, learning facilitation;
- the teacher recognizes and encourages incidental learning;

- teachers want to know how they affect the student's assumptions, opinions, and concept;
- the learning experience development includes the ability to study from the real causes, errors and achievements (Boud, 1993).

J. Pfeiffer and J. Jones have developed five-step ordered cycle adapted from the works of D. Kolb:

1. Experience / Implementation of practical tasks. Students perform practical tasks with little help or without the help of a teacher. The core point of learning is student learning from the experience, not from its quantity or quality.

2. Exchange / Reflection. Students share their results, reactions and comments with others and participate in the discussion on the experiences of other students. Experience exchanging is equivalent to reflection on the result and past experience, which can be used in the future.

3. Processing / Analysis. Students discuss, analyze and reflect the experience. Description and analysis of experience allow students to link it with next learning experience. Students also discuss practical work design, topics, problems and issues arising from the work.

4. Synthesis. The students associate practical work with real examples, determine general trends, principles of truth and real life.

5. Application. Students use the results of current experience and practice of past years in the same or other situations. In addition, students discuss the acquired knowledge application in other situations that can be useful in future situations (Pfeiffer, 1969-1985).

G. Dean's process model of experiential learning is worth our attention too. It presents the following stages of the experiential learning development and implementation:

1. Planning – preparation for the start. The teacher evaluates students' readiness to participate in experiential learning and determines the desired results and appropriate methods. The teacher prepares materials and conditions for the activity.

2. Engagement – start. The teacher helps join the participation by specifying the relevance content, process and expected results. The teacher initiates activities and determines clear trends of students' activity. Participants start learning activities.

3. Internalization – learning through experience. Students are actively engaged in learning at this stage. The teacher pays attention to learning management and students' participation facilitation.

4. Reflection – making meaning. The teacher facilitates and helps the learning process by support and discussion encouragement.

5. Generalization – making relations. The teacher helps students make connections (through brainstorming or illustrations) between the learning activities and their job. Students work independently or in small groups to make connections.

6. Application – learning transfer. The teacher provides students with the rules and structures for the use of learning outcomes in real situations, discussions or logging. Students use connections made in the previous stage and apply knowledge in the workplace and in their organizations.

7. Follow-up – assessment and planning. The teacher can use formal and informal assessment tools (tests, evaluation of the effectiveness or observations, criticism, and discussion). The teacher assesses the student's ability to apply their new knowledge. This stage is the basis for future activities and the subsequent changes (in the organization or community) (Dean, 1993). Like D. Boud and D. Walker, G. Dean considers the experiential learning as a process where the facilitator develops the students' learning experience.

CONCLUSIONS

So, we can say that educators characterize experiential learning from two aspects: experience (D. Boud, G. Dean, J. Jones, D. Kolb, J. Pfeiffer, D. Walker) and experiential learning context (L. Joplin).

A key element of experiential learning is an adult's experience. Learning in the experiential learning theory is defined as a process of knowledge creation with experience transformation, and the result of experience understanding and transformation is knowledge. In its turn, experience understanding is information reception, and experience transformation is information and following action interpreting.

The experiential learning is a cycle and requires a learner's focus, his reflection on the experience, generalization, and verification.

As a result firstly, the experiential learning provides students engagement into direct experiences closed to real-world problems and situations. To make the decision, students need to analyze what they know, what they do not know, and how to learn it. Secondly, the instructor facilitates, not directs students' progress. Thirdly, experiential learning ensures strong motivation to learn. It motivates students to reflect on their existing knowledge and make it deeper through reflection; transfer their prior learning experience to new context; acquire new ideas, principles, and skills. Eventually, these skills help students to become self-directed life-long learners.

The perspective of our research in experiential learning is the concept of experience as a source of adult learners learning.

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