

# How You Learn Is How You Live

Kay Peterson and David A. Kolb

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*“In times of change, learners will inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” Eric Hoffer*

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Peter Drucker once said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” How can leaders in healthcare create a more ideal future when they are managing the many inadequacies within the current reality of the fragmented system? They are attempting to address the national call to decrease errors, stop waste, support evidence-based practice, improve individualized care, advance individual and team competency and integrate across the continuum.<sup>i</sup> In order to manage the present *and* create the ideal future, leaders can frame the many needs in healthcare as challenges of learning.

Few people have considered what learning is or examined their own approach to it. Yet, understanding an ideal process of learning and your own approach to using it is the key to promoting the personal and professional growth required for visionary, mature, effective leaders. In this paper, we describe Experiential Learning, a holistic framework of learning and development, the associated learning cycle and learning styles. Furthermore, we explain how Experiential Learning bridges the gap from educating to *learning* and promotes relational practices in healthcare.

## Learning from Experience

Nearly 50 years ago, David A. Kolb integrated the ideas of eight foundational scholars into Experiential Learning Theory, a comprehensive theory of learning and development. He also introduced the concept of learning style to describe an individual’s unique preference for learning in different ways. In doing so, David Kolb provided a new lens of self-awareness, and a step-by-step process that can be applied to any learning situation.<sup>ii</sup>

Since 2000 research studies on the model have more than quadrupled. The current experiential learning theory bibliography includes over 4000 entries from 1971- 2016. In the field of management alone a 2013 review of management education research showed that 27% of the most cited articles in management education journals were about experiential learning and learning styles.<sup>iii</sup>

In over 45 years of research on the theory by scholars and practitioners all over the world, the principles and practices of experiential learning have been used to develop and deliver programs in K-12 education, undergraduate education and professional education. In the workplace, training and development activities and coaching are based on experiential learning concepts.

## The Learning Way as an Approach to Life

The learning way is an approach to life that places emphasis on learning and uses the principles of learning from experience. The learning way begins with the awareness that learning is present in every life experience, and is an invitation for us to be engaged in each one. In the learning way, the definition of learning expands from what happens in the classroom to what happens in life, and anywhere on the continuum of care. This applies to day-to-day work challenges, problem solving, decision-making, teamwork, building relationships, innovating or even running a meeting. We become aware *that* we are learning, *how* we are learning and, perhaps most importantly, *what* we are learning. It is also a means of understanding ourselves in every moment. By understanding ourselves, we will be in a much better place to understand and relate to others.

## The Ideal Process for Learning: The Experiential Learning Cycle

The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle is the central process to the learning way. It is initiated by a *Concrete Experience*, which demands *Reflective Observation* about the experience in a search for meaning that engages *Abstract Thinking*, leading to a decision to engage in *Active Experimentation*.<sup>iv</sup> This four step process of *Experiencing, Reflecting, Thinking and Acting* is so simple and natural that people engage in it without being aware that they are learning. It goes on almost effortlessly all the time, and is constantly transforming our lives but we can learn to employ this process actively and take control of our own development and effectiveness.

Since learning the principles of the learning cycle, Sarah, a Nurse Practitioner in Orthopedic Surgery, focused on mastering the process to drive her own success and achievement. Sarah applied this process in situations that required performance improvement, learning new skills and content, and also to her own personal and professional development. She even found it useful when making her morning rounds.

Sarah began with *experiencing* when she engaged with patients, asking them about their feelings and opinions. She monitored her own feelings and intuition here, too. She tried to remain present, connecting with each patient. Even when she did not have much time, she sat down at their eye level and gave each her full attention even for a minute. Next, Sarah took time *reflecting* to look back on the experience by testing assumptions and observing it from many perspectives. She watched and listened to her patients and others on the unit to make sense of her experiences and the objective information available. Did she have all the information she needed? Next, Sarah used *abstract thinking* to distance herself from the experience in order to generalize and account for biases and automatic responses. Here, Sarah was objective, using rational analysis to focus on a single goal. What were the numbers revealing? What test results had been added to the medical record and how did they compare to the standards? Finally, Sarah moved beyond these internal processes to *acting* where she tested her ideas in the external world where actions are visible to others. She took action to accomplish her goal.

This might mean performing a treatment on a patient, initiating a discussion with a resident, writing a new order or coaching a colleague. She wanted to make sure that everyone moved to goal directed action to influence the best outcomes for patients and other staff.

What if Sarah had missed a portion of the learning cycle? Without experiencing, she would have had access to numbers on a chart but no qualitative information or healing relationship. Had she only watched passively through reflection, she might have missed the opportunity to implement a healing treatment to advance patient care. If Sarah had omitted thinking, she might have acted only on gut instinct rather than taking into account the hard data. Finally, if Sarah had acted without reflection, she might have lacked purpose or taken the wrong action.

The iterative process of learning begins and ends with experiencing, the gateway to learning. It is not *experience*, but *experiencing* that is the source of learning. Because of our habits and stereotypes, we live through many experiences without actually experiencing them. John Dewey believed that to initiate reflection and learning our habitual experience must be interrupted by deep experiencing, such as when we are stuck with a problem or difficulty or struck by the strangeness of something outside of our usual experience.<sup>v1</sup> But we can also strip our biases from our experiences in more deliberate ways such as practices in mindfulness that overcome habitual thinking.

As Sarah recognized, this process can help you improve your performance with a new or existing skill like working with technology or managing your time. It can also help you to learn something new like how to work with others, manage conflict or have a difficult conversation. The learning cycle can guide high performance diverse teams to effectiveness by including affective, perceptual, cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Most importantly, understanding the learning process and your own approach to learning is the key to self-transformation and growth. By observing the way you approach learning and life, you will have the key to expanding your effectiveness in every situation. It can be the differentiator between remaining stuck in today's challenges and creating an ideal future.

## Learning Styles

Sarah noticed that she was more comfortable using certain parts of the cycle than others. Her “sweet spot” was clearly the Thinking and Acting parts of the process. She realized that she probably reinforced this comfort zone by choosing situations that required that approach whenever she could. For instance, since Sarah believed she could be more efficient working alone, she did not intentionally seek situations that allowed her to work on teams.

Your learning style is your dynamic way of navigating the learning cycle, a way that emphasizes some parts of the learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting over others. It also describes the way you approach life in general. Do you prefer to immediately rely on your feelings or stand back to think? Do you tend to watch and listen to others or immediately move to action? Since the cycle contains pairs of opposites—experiencing and thinking, reflecting and

acting—few people find that they are automatically able to manage all these ways of learning with equal ease and flexibility. After all, how can you think and feel at the same time? How can you watch and act simultaneously? The way you navigate the learning cycle— where you enter and where you prefer to dwell—determines your learning style.

You can identify your learning style, not as a pigeonhole but a preference that can be expanded and used to connect with others. Your learning style is not a fixed personality trait; it's more like a steady state. The Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0 (KLSI 4.0) defines the nine learning styles.<sup>vi</sup> The KLSI 4.0 is the latest of six versions originally developed by David A. Kolb as a self-assessment and a tool for validating experiential learning theory. The KLSI has been continuously refined over forty years and is the basis for the nine learning styles illustrated in Figure 1.1 and described below.

Figure 1.1 The Nine Learning Styles



Source: Adapted from David A. Kolb PhD and Alice Kolb, PhD. The Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0. Experience Based Learning Systems, Inc. 2016.

**Experiencing style.** In the Experiencing style, individuals emphasize primarily the feeling capabilities of the learning cycle while balancing acting and reflecting. They pay the least attention to the thinking style. Their greatest strengths are in their ability to deeply involve themselves in concrete experiences while being equally comfortable in the outer world of action and the inner world of reflection. They are particularly adept in building and being in relationships.

**Imagining style.** In the Imagining style, people contemplate experiences and consider a range of possible solutions to create meaning from them. They take in information through experiencing and process it by reflecting, paying the least attention to deciding. Their general approach to situations is to observe rather than take action. They are adept at demonstrating empathy and enjoy situations that call for generating a wide range of feelings and ideas, such as brainstorming sessions.

**Reflecting style.** People who prefer the Reflecting style take in information either by experiencing or thinking and process it by reflecting. They postpone acting until they are sure of success. People who prefer reflecting dive into feelings and concepts, equally comfortable in reflection on experiencing (feelings) and thinking (concepts). They learn by combining the abilities of creative idea generation and putting ideas into concise, logical form. As a result, they have a rich and intuitive understanding of matters of importance to them.

**Analyzing style.** In the Analyzing style individuals organize and systematize abundant information into a meaningful whole. They learn primarily through a combination of thinking and reflecting, paying the least attention to initiating. They carefully examine all the details and plan in order to minimize mistakes. Generally they find it more important that a theory have elegance and logical soundness than practical value.

**Thinking style.** Individuals who prefer the Thinking style prefer logical analysis and abstract reasoning. They balance reflecting and acting, avoiding experiencing. They are deep thinkers who are able to develop a particular concept or idea and deductively evaluate its validity and practicality by testing it in the real world. They can draw on both the rich inner world of reflection and abstraction and the outer world of action. They thrive on creating conceptual models that can be applied or generalized to other situations.

**Deciding style.** In the Deciding style, people choose a single course of action to solve problems and achieve practical results. They emphasize thinking and acting in learning situations, paying the least attention to imagining. They like to solve problems and make decisions based on finding logical solutions to issues, theories, or problems. In this style, individuals prefer dealing with technical tasks and problems than with social and interpersonal issues.

**Acting style.** In the Acting style individuals take assertive, goal-directed action to get things done. They balance experiencing and thinking, while spending the least amount of time on reflecting. They are equally comfortable in a practical world that can make use of their feelings and actions as well as in situations that require their thinking abilities. As a result, they excel in identifying and integrating task and people needs to get things done.

**Initiating style.** Those who use the Initiating style strive to complete projects and then seek new opportunities. They learn primarily through acting and experiencing (feeling), paying the least attention to analyzing. They enjoy achieving goals and involving themselves in new and challenging experiences. Their tendency may be to act on intuitive “gut” feelings rather than on logical analysis.

**Balancing style.** The Balancing style manages to stay away from the extremes of acting, reflecting, experiencing, or thinking by finding a middle ground between them. Taking this central position allows them to see many different perspectives on issues and bridge differences between people with different styles. They are often creative but may experience difficulty in making decisions.

### **Practical Implications of Learning Styles**

What are the implications of learning styles? Each of the learning styles brings its own joys and satisfactions, presents its own challenges, and leads to a different place. You will probably find that one of these ways of learning feels familiar to you, while others will remind you of people you know. Understanding your learning style can help you assess your strengths and weaknesses and understand your preferences. Learning styles show up in all aspects of life. Recognizing the various learning styles can illuminate the communication problems that arise when someone you know is “coming from a different place.” Appreciating the differences between learning styles can strengthen and balance your relationships within organizations, teams, and families as you discover how your weaknesses are covered by another’s strengths and vice versa. You can also embrace learning styles different from your own and expand your capabilities. Together, the nine learning styles present a complete portrait of your total potential. Just as each step in the learning cycle represents partial capabilities of the whole process, the nine learning styles also represent parts of a whole person. In total, the nine learning styles give us access to capabilities that are broad enough to successfully manage any situation and to learn from it.

Sarah, who preferred the Deciding style, was most skilled at finding practical solutions to existing problems. She was quick to set a goal and measure success. She brought this skill to teamwork; however, it sometimes left her short when it came to being open to new ideas or showing empathy to others who saw things differently. Learning styles provide a foundation for team members to understand their preferences when working individually and together. As members create a map of their learning style preferences, teams can see which of the portions of the learning cycle they have covered and which portions they might be prone to skip. They can also monitor the communication preferences of colleagues and patients with different styles.

As head of a team of intensive care unit nurses, Pierre, true to his Initiating style, could not wait to introduce the learning styles model to each member of the unit’s nursing staff. After mapping their learning style preferences, the staff realized that they largely favored Deciding, Acting and Initiating styles. By exploring their learning styles and the learning cycle, the staff members recognized that their styles supported their quickly moving to action to achieve exceptional results in urgent situations. However, they also acknowledged that when they were on automatic pilot, they could overlook how they related to patients, their families, and each other and ignore the opinions of others, or discount the importance of the processes they used.

Pierre's own style preference of Initiating supported him as a leader who could institute a team learning approach, yet he recognized that he often skipped over other steps in the learning cycle. To include these missing steps in the team process Pierre planned time for Experiencing to build relationships and trust. He used Imagining by making sure to include the opinions of all team members and allowing time to consider new possibilities rather than deciding on outcomes too early. To encourage Reflecting, Pierre and the team took time to discuss their process and check their assumptions at regular intervals. During one of these meetings, David, who was a notable exception with his Analyzing style preference, felt comfortable enough to share his idea for a new approach to a quality control issue. This information was pivotal to the team's success in solving the problem and inspiring innovation for the entire unit. David then led the team during Reflecting and Analyzing: he made sense of the information from many perspectives, synthesized information, and created a plan. In addition, David experienced an entirely new level of engagement and loyalty after having a direct impact on the team's outcome. He even led the group's effort to publish their findings.

### Learning Flexibility

As you come to understand yourself as a learner, you can be aware of how your style preference impacts your own success. You can become so deeply attached to doing what you do best that you unconsciously screen out opportunities to practice different styles, limiting the prospects for growth that exist outside your comfort zone. Everyone has a dynamic way of navigating the ideal learning cycle; few people find that they are automatically able to manage all of the modes with equal ease. Together the nine learning styles present a complete portrait of one's total potential. Just as each step in the learning cycle represents partial capabilities of the whole process, the nine learning styles also represent parts of a whole person, including affective, perceptual, cognitive and behavioral dimensions.

Entrenchment occurs when you habitually cling to your preferred learning style. Sharma and Kolb found that people who prefer the abstract styles of reflecting, analyzing, and thinking and work in professions that require science and math competence (engineering, medicine, and law, for instance) seem to have more difficulty building flexibility than those people with styles of initiating, experiencing and imagining.<sup>vii</sup> Due to situational demands and learning style preference, individuals with abstract learning styles become entrenched in the scientific problem-solving mentality and find it difficult to build the concrete, feeling-oriented, and active skills associated with concrete learning styles.

Kolb and Wolf found engineers often experienced difficulty moving from the role of individual contributors which allows them to focus on the strengths of their learning styles, to the role of manager or leader which requires them to flex to other styles. Many engineers reported feeling under qualified for their managerial role.<sup>viii</sup>

Specialization, the use of one or two learning styles, may make individuals more successful in

their defined specialty, but it leaves them with less flexibility to use other learning styles. What makes the specialist successful in his or her chosen career may contribute to less overall flexibility in life. Building learning flexibility, the next step in the learning way, is the antidote.

Learning flexibility, the ability to use all nine learning styles to match context, allows one to meet any situation effectively. This flexibility is linked to many other benefits as well: greater overall flexibility in life, seeing more possibilities in any given moment, experiencing less conflict and stress, and managing complexity. Flexible people also are more self-directed, so they are more likely to make changes that help them adapt to unexpected situations. Last but not least, they are happier.<sup>ix</sup>

The learning way is an approach that can be applied to improve relational practices in healthcare at the individual, team, organization and community level. Above all, the learning way is an approach of wholeness and integration. It is an approach to living that requires deep trust in your own experience and a healthy skepticism about information. It demands both the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. As we understand ourselves through this unique lens and process, we are better able to learn to build relationships with others.

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[Kay Peterson](#) is a founder of the Institute for Experiential Learning and the Co-CEO of Harlan Peterson Partners, an organization development and executive coaching firm where Kay applies Experiential Learning to develop leaders, drive team effectiveness and promote learning organizations. She inspires professionals across industries to transform themselves at all stages in their careers so they can achieve their highest potential. Together with David A. Kolb, Kay is developing a Learning Skills Profile 360° Assessment that promotes personal and professional development through by measuring skills associated with the Learning Styles of the Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0.

Kay Peterson earned a BS from Vanderbilt University, a MS-POD and MBA from Case Western Reserve University. In addition, she holds a MN from Emory University. Kay has completed post-graduate training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in Gestalt Coaching, Training and Somatic Studies. Her work in Experiential Learning has been published in HBR Guides, OD Practitioner and the Journal of Experiential Learning. She has co-authored a book with David A. Kolb to be released by Berrett-Koehler in 2017 entitled *How You Learn is How You Live*. Kay can be reached at [Peterson@harlanpeterson.com](mailto:Peterson@harlanpeterson.com). For more information about Kay's work see [harlanpeterson.com](http://harlanpeterson.com) and [experientiallearninginstitute.org](http://experientiallearninginstitute.org).

[David A. Kolb](#) is the chairman of Experience Based Learning Systems (EBLS), an organization that he founded in 1980 to advance research and practice on experiential learning. EBLS has developed many experiential exercises and self-assessment instruments, including the latest Kolb

Learning Style Inventory 4.0 and the Kolb Educator Role Profile, an inventory designed to help educators apply experiential learning principles in their work.

David Kolb received his BA in psychology, philosophy, and religion at Knox College and his PhD in social psychology from Harvard University. He was a professor of organizational behavior and management at the MIT Sloan School of Management and at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University where he is currently Emeritus Professor of Organizational Behavior.

He is best known for his research on experiential learning and learning styles described in the new Second Edition of *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Other books include *How You Learn Is How You Live*, *Conversational Learning: An Experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation*, *Innovation in Professional Education: Steps on a Journey from Teaching to Learning*, and *Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach*. In addition he has authored many journal articles and book chapters on experiential learning. David has received several research awards and four honorary degrees recognizing his contributions to experiential learning in higher education. For more information about his work, see [www.learningfromexperience.com](http://www.learningfromexperience.com).

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