

EDUCATION ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Best Practices Review Program Development

Topic: Experiential programs

Best Practice: Effective programs are experiential.

“Teaching by pouring in” refers to a medieval belief that we could teach people by drilling holes in the human head and, with a funnel, pour information into the brain. We laugh at this idea, yet we still see educators and interpreters use passive instruction to “fill up” the brains of their audiences. Think back on how you learned to ride a bicycle. You took an action, saw the consequences of that action, and chose either to continue or to take a new and different action. What allowed you to master the new skill of riding a bicycle was your active participation in the event and your reflection on what you attained. Experience and reflection taught more than any manual or lecture ever could.

This is the basis of all experiential learning. Many educators believe that without an experience, there can be no true learning or real understanding of a concept or situation. However, experience alone does not necessarily mean that learning will take place. To accomplish this, there needs to be a sequence of three discrete components: 1) A “concrete **experience**” (Enfield, 2001, Kolb, 1984), where the learner is involved in an exploration, actually doing or performing an activity of some kind; 2) a **reflection** stage (Enfield, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Pfeiffer & Jones, 1981), where the learner shares reactions and observations publicly and processes the experience by discussing and analyzing; and 3) the “**application**” phase that helps the learner deepen and broaden understanding of the concept or situation by cementing the experience through generalizations and applications (Carlson & Maxa, 1998).

Activities, simulations, role plays, stories and “quiz shows” can all be part of an experiential program. The point is that knowledge should not be something that is transferred from an instructor. It is an active process, something that is transacted within life or life-like situations. We become experience providers and not just transmitters of the spoken word. Participants become knowledge creators (for themselves) as well as knowledge gatherers. This transmission is a deliberate process; we cannot expect it to always happen simply through exposure to an outdoor setting.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

The website hosted by the University of California’s Experiential Learning Project Group (ELPG) provides a number of resources (<http://www.experientiallearning.ucdavis.edu/default.shtml>) including an overview of the pedagogy that forms the basis for experiential education, resource toolbox, and training modules.

The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) is a nonprofit, professional membership association dedicated to experiential education and the students, educators and practitioners who utilize its philosophy. It strives to increase recognition of experiential education and publish and provide access to relevant research, publications, and resources.

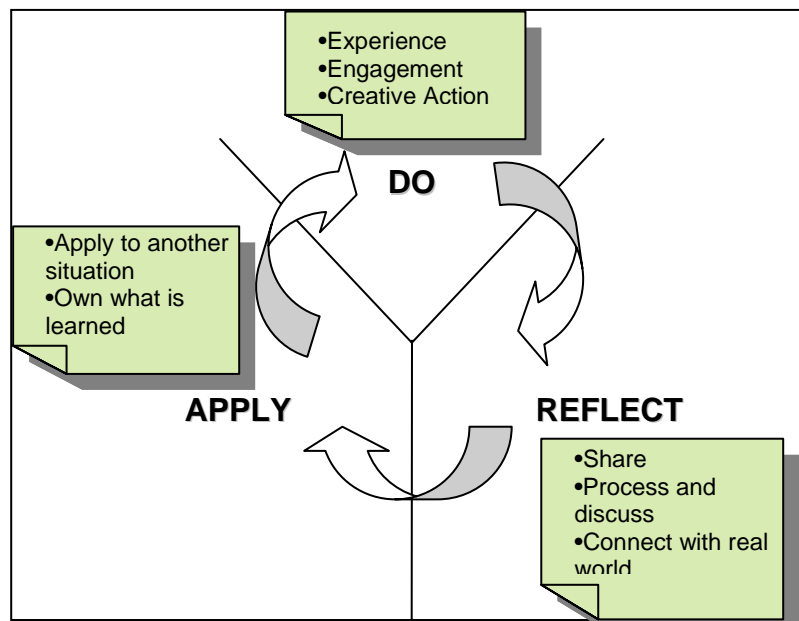
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Changing Emphases – Best Practices in Education about the Environment includes implementing experiential learning activities at least some of the time. This means:

Less Emphasis On . . .	More Emphasis On . . .
Knowing facts and information	Understanding concepts and developing thinking skills
Covering many topics	Learning a few fundamental concepts
Activities that demonstrate concepts	Activities that allow students to discover ideas, concepts, connections
Close-ended questions; questions that ask "what"	Open-ended questions; questions that ask "how" or "why"
Instructor drives learning process	Students drive learning process
Emphasis on individual process skills, such as observation or inference	Use multiple process skills – manipulation, cognitive, procedural
Instructors setting the knowledge to be learnt and hoping participants subsequently find ways to apply the knowledge	Participants engaging in action, with time to reflect, and opportunities to apply knowledge
Assessing to learn what students do not know	Assessing to learn what students do understand