Experiences with Experiential Learning: Learning from our own Experiential and Conceptual Insights

Tiffany Kriz[a], Linda Mack[b]
[a]Department of Management and Organizations; [b]Faculty of Arts and Science
MacEwan University

Abstract

Universities have been moving for decades toward experiential learning, evidenced by the rise of co-operative education programs, study abroad, and the integration of community partners into university course projects. Yet, experiential learning can also be enacted by faculty and students on a smaller scale. Immersing students into new experiences is an excellent base for learning, but it must be supported by other learning elements as well (e.g., critical reflection, integration with abstract concepts, application of new insights). According to experiential learning theory, it is the process of navigating dialectical tensions in connecting and transforming insights from both experience (feeling) and thinking (abstract concepts) that lies at the heart of learning. The experiencing and applying aspects of the learning cycle can be accomplished in many different ways, as can the reflection and thinking aspects of the cycle, and the process of moving through all four modes can be supported by faculty who can flexibly adapt and join students in a learning journey. In this SOTL conversation, we, a mature student with rich life experiences and diverse educational experiences (Linda) and a faculty member educated in experiential learning theory (Tiffany), explore some of our own experiences enacting experiential learning and reflect on what we've found contributes to an integrative learning experience. Along the way, we discuss our views on how emotional and social intelligence competencies can support the learning process.

Keywords: experiential learning theory; Kolb; emotional intelligence; learning; post-secondary

Introduction

According to Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). Drawing on and integrating the foundational work of scholars such as John Dewey, William James, Jean Piaget, Kurt Lewin,

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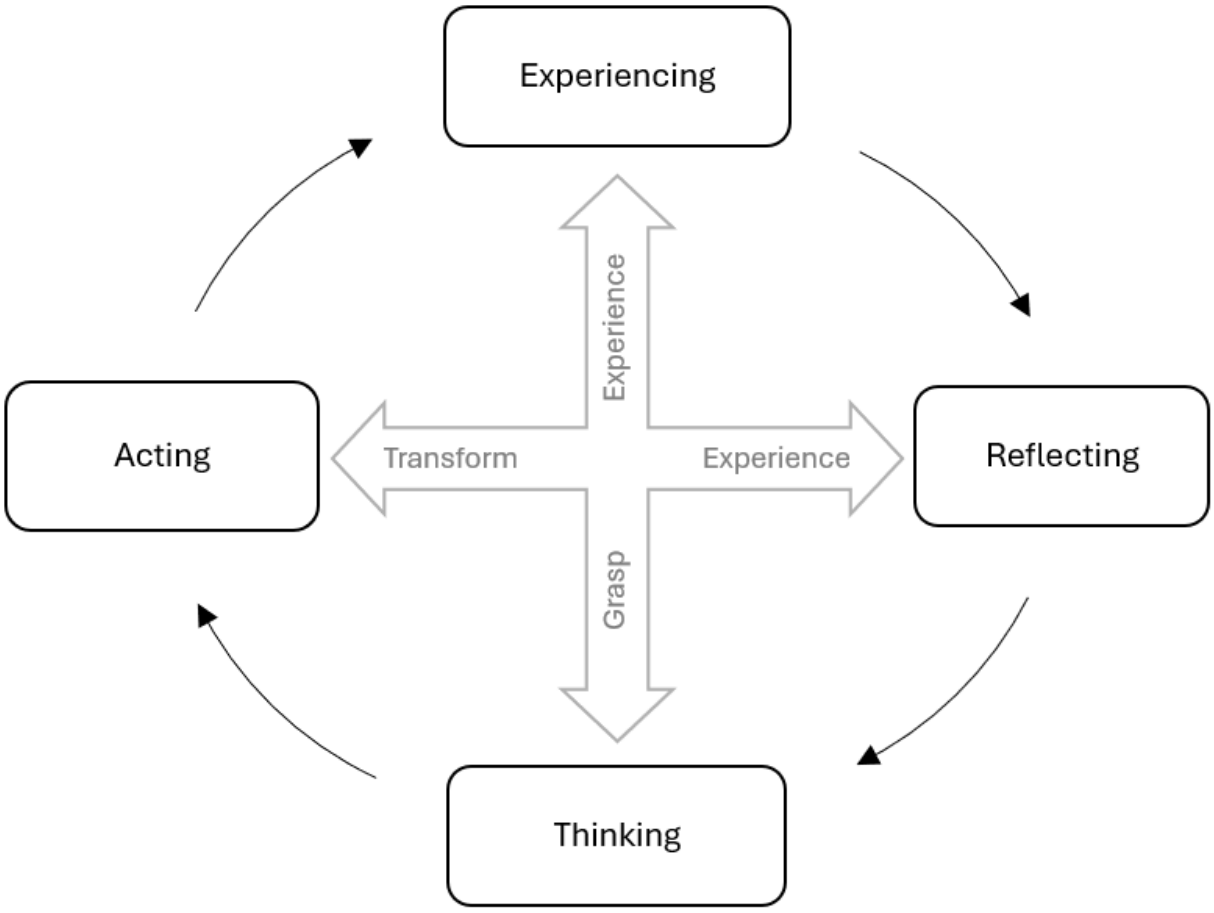
Lev Vygotsky, Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire, Carl Jung, and Mary Parker Follett (Kolb & Kolb, 2022), the transformation of experience is part of a larger learning cycle in which experiencing is dialectically opposite and must be reconciled with thinking. These two modes of information intake are then processed through the dialectically opposed ways of transforming information: via and both reflecting and acting. Learning requires integration of these opposing ways of taking in and transforming information, such that learning involves cycling recursively through all four modes (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle



Integration between the learning modes is key, such that learners must go through the work of assimilating their rich concrete sensory experiences gained through experiencing (a localized and often tacit individual experience, per Kayes, 2002) into a more conceptual understanding of those experiences that can be shared with others (thinking). Likewise, learners must resolve tensions between the opposing modes of reflection and action. Specifically, reflecting invites learners to step back from the experience, mindfully and critically observing that experience to gain insights from it, whereas acting invites learners to test ideas by enacting them—similar to how a scientist devises and conducts an experiment to test a theory. Learning

in this way is not just a cognitive experience but an emotional one as well—one that may benefit from instructors who have not just content knowledge but also emotional and social competencies. In what follows, we, a post-secondary student with significant experience and a university educator, engage in a discussion about how we have observed and applied the principles of experiential learning, and we contemplate how faculty emotional and social intelligence can support high-quality learning experiences.

Tiffany: Linda, you've told me about some of your own learning experiences, starting with your schooling in Singapore and the difficult adjustment in moving to Canada. Kolb (2015) suggested that a core piece of experiential learning involves drawing on prior knowledge as the starting place for developing new knowledge, which Zull (2002) argued is supported from a neurobiological perspective. Perhaps you'd like to share how your early learning experience drastically changed once your Canadian teacher realized they needed to account for your prior learning?

Linda: I was young enough when we moved to Singapore that I was able to attend a Chinese school. I learned how to read and write and double-digit addition in two languages before I was five years old. When we returned to Canada, the teachers would have us sit on the carpet in a big circle and teach us words like hat and cat. I had learned these words in two languages, so I slept through most of my lessons. The teachers thought I was mentally delayed and expressed their concern to my parents. My father told them to give me more challenging work. They gave me a final exam for a grade 1 student, which I passed with flying colours. I was now gifted and brilliant. To this day, my parents laugh at how my teachers reacted. The teachers started to give me more challenging work.

Tiffany: You had already built the synapses and neural pathways the teacher was working on developing in the other students, so you needed some new stimulation to add to that neural network. Now you're now taking your second degree after working in HR and raising children following your first degree. Can you talk a little bit about your educational journey and how you've adapted along the way?

Linda: As I've matured, I've discovered the importance of taking charge and persevering in my educational goals, even with personal challenges. I have been taking post-secondary education off and on for almost 30 years. I started my academic career in sciences, moving to management, and now psychology. I have attended five post-secondary institutions, including online, in-person, and hybrid methodologies, hybrid being my favourite. This educational experience has given me a breadth most students never experience. By applying my various educational experiences, I can make connections, apply insights, and ask engaging questions that help explore new learning experiences. I have learned that a professor's teaching ability can contribute to or hinder a student's learning journey. As I was studying this semester, my psychology and organizational behaviour classes had topics that linked to a similar topic. The link between the two classes led me to ask how the emotional intelligence of a professor influenced students' academic success and satisfaction.

I'm using the conceptualization of emotional and social intelligence (EI/SI) as a competency model in which an emotional intelligence competency is:

> an ability to recognize, understand, and use emotional information about oneself that leads to or causes effective or superior performance; a social intelligence competency is the ability to recognize, understand and use emotional information about others that leads to or causes effective or superior performance. (Boyatzis, 2009, p. 757)

This framework involves four main categories: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management. Self-awareness is understanding our personal emotional self-awareness and an accurate self-assessment. A realistic understanding of who we are and our impact on others. Self-management is about achievement orientation, adaptability, emotional self-control, and a positive outlook. These competencies help us get clarity and focus on the positive when disruptive emotions come. Social awareness focuses on empathy and organizational awareness. This SI aspect helps us understand various social circumstances and be socially effective. The final category of SI is relationship management, which includes the competencies of conflict management, coaching and mentoring, influence, inspirational leadership, and teamwork. Relationship management helps us build rapport and mobilize toward a shared vision (Boyatzis, 2009).

I believe instructors with higher EI/SI have enhanced my educational experience. I found that a teacher with higher EI/SI helped me be more engaged, and their passion for the subject was inspiring—it was a learning journey, not just a lecture. I felt that if I had a problem, there would be empathy and support. Having such a wide range of classes over the years, I personally think psychology professors appear to have the highest EI/SI. This is likely because many are therapists and have had to learn these EI/SI competencies for their practices. I don't have an answer to that assumption; it is just a thought. I know psychology is a competitive major. Do you think the higher EI/SI of the professors makes a difference? I never thought about that question till I started this research.

Tiffany: What you just shared is a great example of how adults often start the learning process, per Kolb (2015). They reflect on their experiences and find some problems they weren't able to solve based on their existing knowledge, or something they are curious about. Some can get stuck here in reflection mode or give up prematurely in trying to understand and learn from their experience, given the complexity and perceptual richness inherent in our experiences. However, if they are able to integrate that experience with thinking (e.g., searching for theories or concepts that can help them organize and make sense of their experience), they can get a better grasp on that experience, while simultaneously enriching their understanding of the abstract concepts (Peterson & Kolb, 2017). Then, they can test and apply their emerging insights to new experiences and continue the cycle from there. As such, it behooves educators to start by meeting students where they are and help them reflect on their experiences. Going back to your question, therapists are professionally socialized to spend a lot of time reflecting on experiences and the emotions that come along with them. So, to the extent that psychology faculty are practiced in this, I imagine they could more readily express their own passion for a topic and see ways to help students find that passion by connecting to their own related

experiences. Yet this is only part of the learning cycle, so the learning process requires taking that passion and making use of it by going through the rest of the cycle.

Experiential educators facilitate the process by guiding the learner through the full cycle recursively, alternating between a learner focus (experiencing), meaning focus (reflecting), subject focus (thinking), and action focus (acting), taking on the roles of facilitator, subject expert, standard setter/evaluator, and coach (Kolb et al., 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Passarelli and Kolb (2012) suggest these educators are most effective when they approach education as (1) a relationship in which students are honoured as complex relational beings with their autonomy drives, feelings, perspectives, (2) a holistic process focused on educating the whole person, including not just cognition but also social and emotional maturity, (3) learning-oriented vs. performance-oriented, and (4) learner-centred in terms of understanding their starting point and supporting their capacity to develop from there. They emphasize that this requires educators to be flexible, empathetic, and skilled in using mechanisms to create smooth and predictable transitions between these different modes. Indeed, these experiential educator qualities align well with aspects of EI/SI such as empathy, positive orientation, and adaptability, and yet balancing and integrating those appropriately with an analytical and task-oriented approach takes work and activation of different regions of the brain (Boyatzis & Jack, 2018).

Linda: Students generally want to perform well in their educational endeavours as this can help them with their future careers. When they have a good experience, the likelihood of staying in school is higher. As a mature student, when I tell friends I am back in school, they inevitably share their academic experiences. Many people talk about the one professor who influenced them. Everyone has a story about the professors standing in front of the lecture hall and reading their notes. By creating an environment where students are satisfied with their classes and performance, they will portray the school positively. My worst experience was in a calculus class where the teacher did not communicate effectively, with little to no engagement; we simply received our assignments and exams. I thought things might have changed after more than 25 years, but I was talking to my neighbour's son, and he had similar experiences and changed his major as a result. I thought the "old school" way of lecturing was over because none of my current professors were like that.

Tiffany: I don't think we have many professors like that at MacEwan University. While we all vary in our approaches, I think we all take teaching seriously. As a mature student returning to university after working in HR for a decade and raising your children, has your desire for experience-based learning changed over time? Do you find yourself ready to apply the concepts faster than you would have when you went to university the first time?

Linda: Both those experiences were not at MacEwan. MacEwan's focus on teaching is part of why I chose to finish my second degree here. My appreciation for experience-based learning has increased as a mature student, though I have always preferred the experience-based approach to learning. In HR, when I would facilitate, I would incorporate experiential learning because I knew participants would get more out of the session, and the feedback agreed with my conclusion. I even used experienced-based learning in a session I facilitated this last November. I find applying my university knowledge is vital to my understanding. For

example, my eldest son is autistic, and I have had to deal with many challenges over the years, resulting in me leaving my career and eventually returning to school. My psychology classes have helped me learn how to help my family, but the most useful information so far has been from my Psychology: Applied Behaviour Analysis (PABA) courses because I could apply what I learned in the PABA classes to my life. For example, during COVID, my son developed a picking habit; not only was it socially inappropriate, but it was going to cause a health issue in the long term. I applied what I learned from class, and the picking was gone within a month. This series of classes improved my parenting and our family dynamics. Experience has taught me how to apply the information without someone guiding me through the process, although it is easier if someone is there to help.

Tiffany: Again, this is an excellent example of experiential learning theory in action, as well as a demonstration of your own orientation toward learning and the role that faculty can take in supporting your self-directed learning process. It sounds like your curiosity and easy connection to a real-world challenge you observed offered a fertile ground for your learning in that class. The connection to your own experience was readily apparent in this situation, but sometimes it takes creativity and a knowledge of the learning process for faculty to support students in creating such connections.

Linda: Instructors in post-secondary institutions are well educated; most have doctorates and other postgraduate degrees and are research leaders in their respective fields. The knowledge of professors is vast, and for this reason, generations have valued a university education. The challenge for many professors is that they have knowledge and skills, but they have most likely never taken a class on teaching. They learned how to research and write academic papers but not how to teach a classroom of students, which often comes with a position at a post-secondary institution.

Tiffany: This is certainly true. I've heard of many faculty who teach their first course only once they've already earned their PhD and have been hired by a university. My PhD program at Case Western Reserve University was unique in that it wasn't an education program, yet I had a chance to take seminars with leading learning theorists David and Alice Kolb. I also had a chance to teach undergraduate and graduate courses while I was still a graduate student.

In taking classes with the Kolbs, I began to think much more critically about my own learning process, and, through simultaneous training to become certified in using the emotional and social competency inventory for coaching, I was also paying much more attention than I had previously to my own emotions and experiences. I was starting to understand that the process of learning was not as cognitive as I had initially thought—rather, emotions and sensory experiences played an equally important role. I became more intentional in guiding myself through a learning process cyclically involving all four learning modes, and more thoughtful about structuring my courses and each class session to support my students in doing the same.

Linda: We can assume that instructors at post-secondary educational institutions are knowledgeable about their respective fields. However, it seems the best instructors have more than knowledge—they also have EI/SI.

Tiffany: Conveying expert knowledge can be difficult. Experts can struggle with seeing things as a novice does, and they can also struggle to articulate their tacit knowledge (Chi, 2006). Work grounded in experiential learning theory suggests that sharing knowledge is just one of four roles (in this case, the expert role) an educator must take on to facilitate learning (Kolb et al., 2014). Kayes (2002) expanded on Kolb's model to emphasize that experience is structured like a language, such that vocabulary is needed to transform tacit personal experiences into explicit knowledge that can be shared and enacted with others. Given that learning requires connecting the personal experiences with the social world, the EI/SI qualities of having a stronger understanding of one's own emotional states and experiences, being able to take a positive orientation toward those experiences, and being able to understand the emotional states and experiences of others should indeed help professors find the language to connect with students' experiences and help students then put language to their own experiences.

Linda: Emotional intelligence could be the bridge between a professor's knowledge and the effective teaching of students. EI/SI helps professors communicate their knowledge and skills. Teachers with high EI/SI create an environment of inspiration for the professor's passion and help inspire students. Emotional intelligence raises educators' overall effectiveness; it could improve skills, knowledge, attitude, self-reflection, and self-management (Khassawneh et al., 2022). Teaching in higher educational institutions requires more than just knowledge but also a passion for the subject. Two years ago, I took a psychology class about human memory. The professor had such a passion for the subject, and not only did it make the class enjoyable, but I also wanted to learn more. I still enjoy reading about false memories, eyewitness testimony, or calling out movies that falsely portray amnesia. I love the subject because my professor inspired me by sharing her passion. This professor's knowledge was one thing, but how she communicated and inspired the class demonstrated her emotional intelligence.

Tiffany: When aiming for learning and growth, positive emotions support intrinsic motivation and openness to new ways of seeing, all of which support learning (Kolb, 2015; Zull, 2002; Boyatzis & Jack, 2018). Your instructor's excitement for human memory was contagious while also capturing your attention. In contrast, if she had focused more on the analytical side of things upfront or prompted anxiety and defensiveness that can come along with having one's existing understanding of a topic (in this case, memory) threatened, that could have instead discouraged your learning process. This goes back to your point about EI/SI and the ability to inspire by connecting with students where they are and with what they've experienced, which takes empathy and an ability to adapt, all while helping to support a positive overall orientation toward the subject matter by appropriately displaying one's own positive emotions.

Linda: The pandemic forced adaptability on both students and instructors. I had completed several courses online by then, but taking school online with no prep time for instructors was difficult for everyone. I saw many students give up on school. One friend's son was an excellent student in high school, but after starting university in the Fall of 2020, he gave up on his dream of being a doctor due to the challenges of learning in this setting. Studying in the same space as my children was interesting, as I was able to see the struggles and successes of several teachers. I found some research suggesting that instructors with higher

EI/SI better adapted to the new environment (Ali et al., 2017; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2021), and I had a better learning experience with higher-EI/SI professors during the pandemic, too.

Tiffany: Like many other experiential educators, I find ways to co-explore concepts with students in fun, engaging, and experientially rich ways, and it wasn't always feasible to do these things in the suddenly virtual environment. Specifically, I often use approaches such as role plays, activities relating to our course content, or listening to students' own experiences of encountering content-related problems in their own lives. I have experimented with course gamification, I have used a flipped-class approach, and I have offered choices where possible so that students can customize their learning process to focus on the topics most relevant to them. But most fundamentally, I have tried to create a discussion-based and often group-based learning environment in which students get to know one another and themselves as we engage in collective activities and discussions. Some of the discussions focus on eliciting students' prior life experiences in other contexts, allowing us to collectively see how those experiences (generally relatable to other students) can relate to course concepts, create new questions, and motivate further learning. Activities provide shared experiences we can reflect on, connect to course concepts and theories, and learn from as we move toward refined practice. This interactive approach can be challenging for students to accept at times under normal circumstances, as it can be easier and feel safer to take a more passive approach.

Undoubtedly, this was all harder to do in an online environment, particularly when trying to facilitate live synchronous sessions where students weren't engaging at the levels they did in the in-person classes and weren't getting to know and feel comfortable with their classmates in a void where most kept their cameras off. Even when we came back to campus, many students were nervous about engaging in class. They seemed out of practice with socialization, while bringing with them a new layer of anxiety. I found I had to work harder to get students out of the passive mode of learning—thinking more carefully about the questions I asked to get them reflecting on their own experiences and giving more thought to group dynamics and how I might get them comfortable sharing and engaging in a collective learning experience. In one class where I gave lots of icebreakers and personal reflection prompts, I had an easier time uncovering students' relevant prior knowledge and experiences, leading to a rich discussion. In another class where I had quieter students and didn't include those elements to the same degree, it was more difficult to uncover students' prior knowledge and I think our learning dynamic was less effective as a result. Again, I think this speaks to the emotionality and social components of learning, and the fact that it requires courage and willingness from both the instructor and the students to actively engage while finding a way past those anxieties.

Linda: While I was working as a teaching assistant this semester, I observed first-year students struggling. Even after 30 years, I still remember that it was my most difficult school year. I think first-year students struggle the most, but I have noticed an overall increase in students' stress since COVID. When students have higher EI/SI, they are more prepared to deal with the stress and anxiety of post-secondary school. The relationship between EI and teacher efficacy may be foundational for a positive impact within the school environment by building resilience and efficacy in coping with student stress (Vesely et al., 2014). When teachers with high EI/SI are in the classroom helping students, whether it is empathy, self-awareness,

inspiration, or another EI/SI competency, students are responding and learning coping skills. Having teachers with high EI helps to teach EI to students (Maamari & Majdalani, 2019), creating a welcoming learning environment. In my experience, the professors who appear to have high EI/SI tend to have more students talk to them after class.

Tiffany: This makes sense and aligns with my experience as well. However, I could also imagine that because high EI/SI faculty are approached more frequently by students, they could have more demands on their time and engage in more emotional labour. Finding the right balance and learning to bound their time appropriately could be key.

Linda: I was the chair of the parent's association at my children's school for over four years and volunteered in the school and classroom activities. I saw how stressful teaching could be as teachers tried to balance the needs of students and the demands from administration and parents. Beyond supporting students' EI/SI development and classroom experiences, teachers with higher EI have better coping skills and may be better able to manage stress (Vesely et al., 2013). This isn't surprising given that self-management is part of EI/SI. Faculty EI has also been linked to the development of student EI and student satisfaction (Maamari & Majdalani, 2019), so fostering the development of EI in educators could be simultaneously beneficial for students' development, faculty well-being, and the overall learning experience. Of course, educators can be supported in developing these skills. A Canadian study (Vesely et al., 2014) conducted with pre-service teachers in 2014 gave EI training to an experimental group while the control group received no EI training. After one month, the experimental group (but not the control group) improved their EI skills and performance, and their resiliency and positive psychological factors were also trending upward. Can you imagine how much better prepared for teaching educators would be if PhD programs focused not just on research skills but also on EI/SI development and learning theory?

Conclusion

Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory suggests that learning is a continual process of embracing dialectical tensions between experiencing and thinking on one axis and reflecting and acting on the other. Throughout this discussion, we have shared some of our experiences and reflections, while also drawing on abstract concepts and how we have experimented with those concepts in our teaching and learning. Our experiences, reflections, and use of the concepts discussed reflect our unique adaptation and will not necessarily align with those of other instructors and learners, and yet we hope our reflections and insights might help others reflect on how the models and concepts may fit with their own experience and practice. We have also reflected on how emotional and social intelligence competencies may support teaching and learning. We observe that faculty are generally skilled in subject matter and evaluating abstract conceptual knowledge and yet navigating the personal and emotional aspects of learning, such as connecting with students' prior knowledge, can be easily overlooked (Kolb, 2015; Zull, 2002). Given the importance of emotional and social intelligence competencies in supporting the emotional (experiential) and reflective parts of the learning cycle, we believe support for faculty development of EI/SI would likely foster more caring and supportive learning environments that enhance student well-being and academic achievement.

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