



How to Process Experience

**By Larry K. Quinsland
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The class has just returned from a tour of the advertising agency. On the return trip students have been enthusiastic and animated. Their excitement is obvious. Upon entering the classroom, the teacher (fully cognizant of the "Nation at Risk..." report) asks the students to please get their multiplication tables out and to practice quietly by themselves. He has just committed a major faux pas in experiential learning theory.

"What is this grave error?" you might ask

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After facilitating a two hour series of ropes course activities, the instructor has assembled the participants in a circle and begins the "processing" session:

"Well...how do you feel about this experience?..."

"...(silence)..."

"How about you, David?..."

"...uh...I don't know..."

"Paula?..."

"...um..." (shrugs shoulders)

We've all been there. We know the students/participants have "experienced" something. We saw it in their expressions, heard it in their exchanges. So why can't they talk about it?

The above two examples illustrate the two most common missed opportunities in an experiential instructional sequence. The first example illustrates a missed opportunity to explore, through structured processing, the new learnings that occurred. The second example, although careful to include "processing" as part of the instructional sequence, fails due to an inability to "connect" with the participants. In other words, David and Sue had great difficulty responding because the facilitator did what many of us do automatically... ask the most difficult questions first!

But why do we need to process in the first place? And, why are some questions more difficult to answer than others?

This paper is designed to explore the concept of "processing" as an integral component of experiential learning and to suggest a method of approaching the design of processing activities.

Experiential Learning Models - Something in Common?

It is important to recognize that experiential learning is defined in a great variety of ways and that a universally acceptable definition does not exist. This paper begins with the premise that *all learning is experiential ... but some learning (in an educational sense) is more experiential than others.*

A variety of experiential learning models have been proposed and serve as the basis for continuous debate among interested professionals (for examples, see Coleman, 1973; Kolb, 1974; Gager, 1977; Williamson, 1979; and Joplin, 1981). Greenberg (1978) has transcended the academic debate and suggests something of use to the practitioner: "Which theories (of learning) we choose may not be as important as choosing something." In other words, it is critical for anyone in the position of facilitating experiential learning to have a conceptual foundation (e.g. model) upon which to test one's ideas and to base the planning of learning activities/ contexts/ events/ situations. For the experiential educator to achieve and maintain credibility within the academic community, it is essential that she be able to justify her actions at any given time while facilitating learning. She must be able to succinctly explain why she is doing what she is doing and to what end she is working. Readers without this conceptual base are encouraged to search for a model that feels right, perhaps beginning with an examination of the models cited above.

Although it is not the intent of this paper to explore the range of experiential learning models in depth, it is important to point out the components which are common to each. Although the language differs, each experiential learning model refers

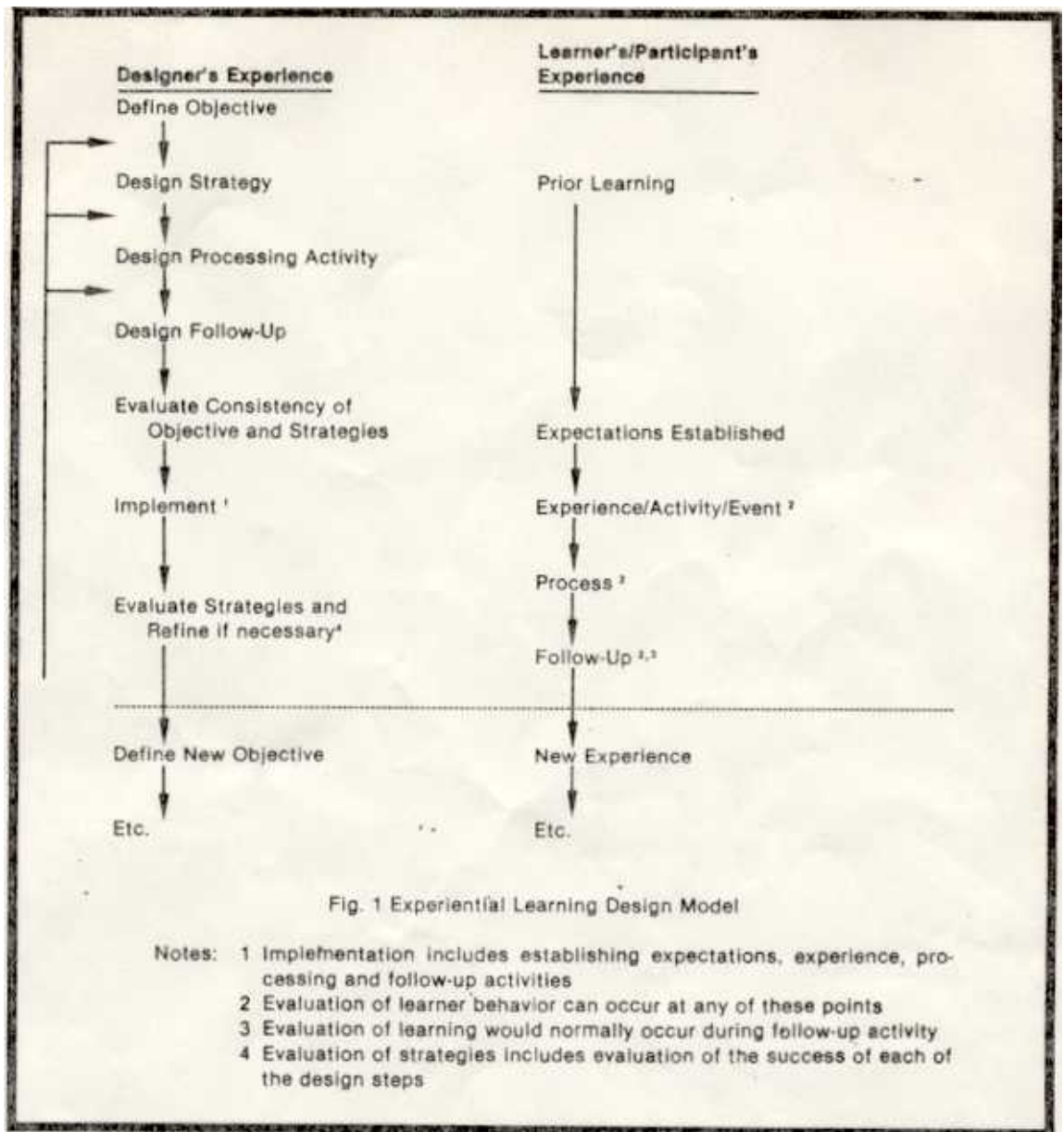
to some form of action, some form of reflection and some form of application. Processing is the reflection component, the pause for each learner to consider what is important about that thing which was recently experienced. The model we will use in this paper is illustrated in Fig. 1. Although the model is self-explanatory, it is important to emphasize two points: 1. The designer/facilitator necessarily expends energy in planning before the learner becomes involved; and related to this, 2. a processing activity is a pre-planned part of the learner's experience. In addition, it is strongly recommended that a processing activity be designed to address all types of learning including cognitive [knowledge], psychomotor [skills], and affective [feelings], and not artificially limit the focus of the learner's experience through consideration of only one aspect of development (see Quinsland & Yust, 1982).

Processing is an activity which is employed for the purpose of encouraging the learner to reflect, describe, analyze, and *communicate* in some way that which was recently experienced. Communication implies action. The communication can be written or oral - to oneself, to another individual, or to a group. Written processing activities might be in the form of a journal which is structured to elicit a description of events, an analysis of the experiences, and a description of impressions. Other verbal processing activities might be designed to encourage the sharing of the salient parts of the experience. The critical suggestion here is that something be done with the reflection so that the individual is forced to assume responsibility for that which was encountered and learned.

By utilizing active participation and active processing, the learning event will become "more experiential." In a relative educational sense, the learner will be more "in-touch" with his/her own learning through forced bridging or meaning-making which is caused by the processing.

Cognitive Hierarchies

Bloom (1956) outlined a taxonomy of cognitive processing or thinking levels



which is helpful in the planning and sequencing of processing activities. Many other cognitive processing models exist (for examples see Lewin, 1951; Piaget, 1971; and Bruner, 1973). Bloom's six levels of thought were most recently described and utilized in an experiential learning context by Moore (1983) in his analysis of the forms of thinking required of interns in work or other out-of-classroom environments. The following six levels of thought are listed from the most basic thinking level to the most complex; i.e., in terms of complexity of thought, the lowest level is first.

- KNOWLEDGE (memory level - remembering information by recognition or recall)
- COMPREHENSION (understanding level - interpreting or explaining knowledge or learnings in a descriptive literal way)
- APPLICATION (simple usage level - correct use of knowledge; e.g., to solve rote problems or answer rote questions)
- ANALYSIS (relationship level - breaking knowledge down into component parts and detecting relationships between them; e.g., identifying causes and motives)

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SYNTHESIS (creative level - putting together pieces to form a whole; e.g., to formulate a solution)

EVALUATION (opinion level - making judgments about the value of ideas, solutions, events)

It can now be seen that the instructor in the ropes course example given in the introduction began the processing session by asking an evaluation or opinion question first. Put in this context, it is not surprising that the participants could not answer immediately. They undoubtedly had ample information to be able to answer the question, "How do you feel about this experience?" (Translation = "In your judgment or *opinion*, how do you feel about this experience?") The problem was that the information was not organized sufficiently for them to be able to respond. In other words, they did not rapidly use the same hierarchical thought processes that led the instructor quickly to the highest level of questioning!

An Approach to Processing

Comprehension of the fact that hierarchical cognitive processing must take place before a participant can state an opinion makes the approach to planning a processing session much less serendipitous. It now makes sense to begin a processing session at a lower level.

Preparation

Begin by asking yourself the following questions:

1. "What are the most important questions to which I want participants to respond?"
2. "At what level are these questions?"
3. "What questions should I use to lay the foundation for the important questions to be more easily answered?"

With a little practice this planning process can become almost automatic. However, the difference that this small amount of pre-planning can make in your processing sessions can be dramatic!

Example

The following example of a processing

"Is it more important to experience much or to make meaning out of that which is experienced?"

session will illustrate how a processing session might go:

(Facilitator:) "OK...we're going to play a memory game. One person will start and explain in detail everything that happened from the time we began the first activity today. The challenge is for each of you to listen carefully. If anyone else in the group thinks that the person talking missed something that happened...say 'hold it!'...and then explain what the speaker missed. Then the person who said "hold it!" will continue, again in great detail, until she is interrupted by someone who thinks something was missed...etc....until the whole story is told..."

Begin a processing session at the *Knowledge* and *comprehension* levels. "What did you do?" "Who said what?" "Is that what you saw, too?" Strive for a consensus of observation and a *detailed* recall of the sequence of events from the perspective of *all* observer/participants.

Once that is taken care of, it is possible to move on to *application* and *analysis* level questions:

"Did all groups/individuals try to solve that problem in the same way?"... "What did Mary Lou's group do that allowed them to finish so quickly?"... "Compare Kent's strategy to Gary's..."

Next, move to the *synthesis* level and discuss possible solutions to problems faced: