

# Coaching Experientially: Using Life Content to Produce Excellence

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## Summary

Most practitioners of coaching as a profession are aware that the field as a whole is still in its infancy. In a newly developing field, practitioners are sometimes tempted to avoid integrating theories or ideas from other disciplines lest the viability of the new field be threatened by close approximation to another. This paper examines the parallels between professional coaching and the Experiential Learning Theory as espoused by David Kolb and others. We will look at the ways this learning theory is implemented in practical settings. We will examine and explore some current models for effective coaching. And, last, we shall look for parallels and integrating points between experiential learning and professional coaching that will enable us to work effectively using best practices from both worlds.

## Introduction

The idea of learning by experience has been around for ages. In this country the work of John Dewey (1971) brought the concept of experiential learning into both the common language and into the general educational curriculum. At roughly the same time in Europe, Kurt Hahn (Smith, 1998) was developing a practical approach to experiential learning which would be the predecessor of the Outward Bound movement. In a somewhat evolutionary process, experiential learning has now become a worldwide phenomenon, embracing both mainstream education and a plethora of courses, workshops, and programs within a broad heading called personal growth and development. Lewis & Williams (1994) suggest that the twentieth century has seen a move from formal, abstract education to one that is more experience based. One typical definition of experiential learning or education is the following: "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (Association for Experiential Education [AEE], 1998). A definition from another perspective is: "Experiential learning is a process that takes place when a person is involved in an activity, looks back at it critically, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity (University of Iowa Cooperative Extension Services, UICES, 1998). With these definitions in hand, we will look at experiential learning within the context of its use within the area of personal growth and development.

The roots of professional coaching are a bit murkier than those of the experiential learning field. The coaching and mentoring of new employees, executives, and others, particularly in the apprenticeship movement, has been around in one form or another from before the era of the industrial revolution. It may be, however, that the true evolution of

professional coaching as a field lies in the work of W. Edwards Deming. In his book *Out of the Crisis* Deming (1986) evokes many of the current definitions and ideas about coaching when he says:

Once the individual understands the system of profound knowledge, he will apply its principles in every kind of relationship with other people. He will have a basis for judgment of his own decisions and for transformation of the organizations that he belongs to. The individual, once transformed, will: set an example, be a good listener but will not compromise, continually teach other people, help people to pull away from their current practice and beliefs and move into the new philosophy without a feeling of guilt about the past. (p. 35)

From the work of Deming and the quality movement, professional coaching has ridden a surge of interest and publicity to the point where it is utilized in one form or another in most Fortune 500 companies and in government agencies and other nonprofit organizations. Despite its current status as an important tool in influencing organizational behavior, coaching as a whole has elicited little interest so far from academia. Perhaps this fact lies in the lack of a common definition of coaching or a common term for the field. For now, we will look at two definitions of coaching as a context for examining the field. James Flaherty (1993) describes coaching as evoking excellence in others. James Hargrove (1995) takes a similar approach when he says coaching "involves expanding peoples capacity to take effective action" (p. 15). One other reason for academia's apparent lack of interest in coaching may be its generality and overlap with several disciplines including experiential education.

I have been a practitioner in the field of experiential education for over twenty years and a student of coaching for the last three years. As a student I was immediately struck by the similarities in approach from both disciplines. I am convinced that the application of the best practices and models of experiential learning make me a more effective coach. By examining the contexts of experiential learning and professional coaching simultaneously we may be able to see one possible course for the future evolution of the coaching field.

### Models of Learning and Coaching

In examining parallels between experiential learning and professional coaching, the place to start is David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model. In one of the original documents on the model, Kolb and Fry (1975, p. 33-34) describe the process in this manner: (a) here-and-now experience followed by (b) collection of data and observations about that experience. The data are then (c) analyzed and the conclusions of this analysis are feedback to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behavior and choice of new experiences. According to Kolb the learner must continue cycling through the three parts, thus creating a "learning spiral of ever-increasing complexity" (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 7). This learning process should be repetitive and continuous throughout the adult learners life. This process is also analogous to what Flaherty (1993) calls the products of coaching which are: "long term excellent performance and the ability to be self generating and self correcting in reacting to life experiences" (p. 5).

A diagram (Figure 1) of the Kolb model that can be generalized to experiential learning as a whole follows (UICES, 1998):

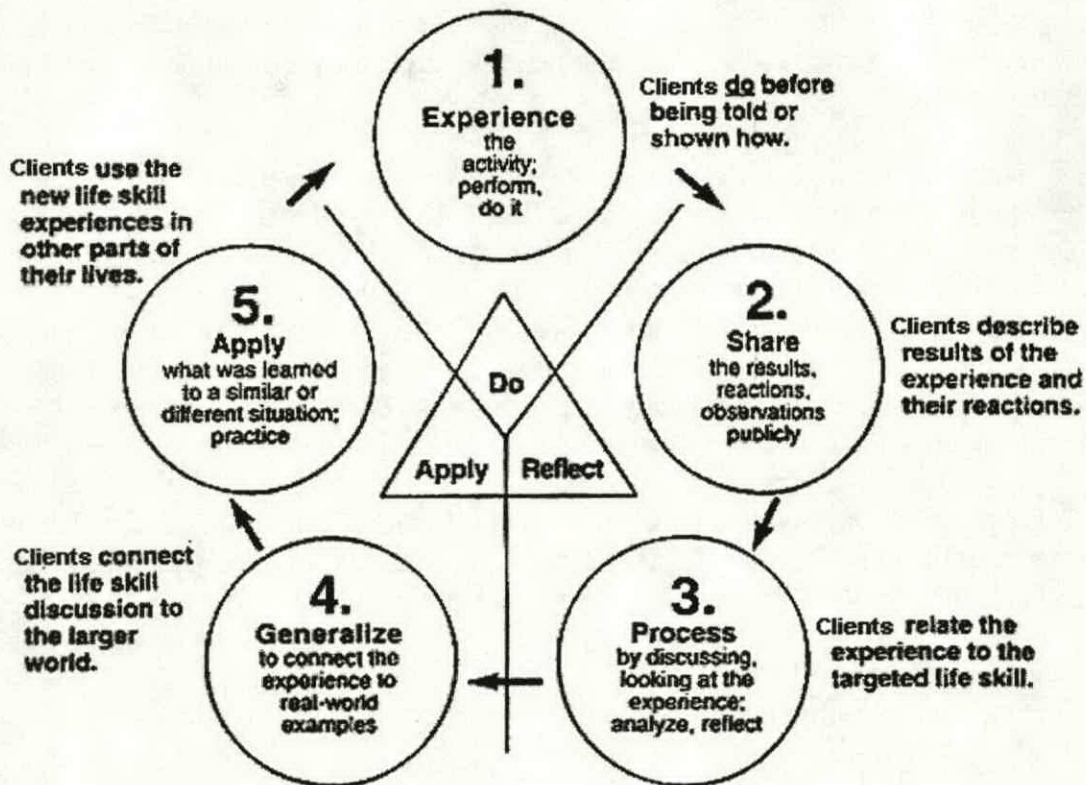


Figure 1. Experiential Learning Cycle

Another model of experiential learning that might be appropriate to look at when comparing it to professional coaching is Dean's Process Model of Experiential Learning (Dean, 1993), which is a thorough expansion on Kolb and a seven-stage process encompassing:

1. Planning—getting ready to start.
2. Involvement—getting started.
3. Internalization—learning by doing.
4. Reflection—making meaning.
5. Generalization—making connections.
6. Application—transfer of learning.
7. Follow-up—assessment and planning.

Both of the preceding models emphasize the reflective observation piece which is so critical in generating effective coaching. This is the point where learners give meaning to experience and transfer it to other areas of their lives. At this point experiential learning also fits quite closely with the adult learning theories of Malcolm Knowles (1980) and others. This is an important consideration in our comparison as most recipients of coaching are adult learners.

On the coaching side of this comparison are differing models of coaching. Many of these models focus solely on motivating the client to achieve goals. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will look at more global models of coaching, which look at coaching the whole person rather than seeing the coach as a behavioral conditioner. This view has a direct tie into experiential learning where students are responsible for the direction of their learning rather than having it imposed on them.

The two coaching models cited here use the same tools to get to the same result but in a different order. The first model is Flaherty's Coaching Flow Model (1993, p. 35). This model consists of a linear flow from establishing relationships, finding openings for coaching, self-observation assessment, enrollment, and coaching conversations. Flaherty's model looks at coaching from a coach's perspective rather than that of a student or client. There is a clear parallel between this model and the experiential learning models seen previously. Once a relationship with a coach has been established, one can see a cycle of learning develop that could endlessly develop meaning and action.

Hargrove's Coaching Fundamentals Model (1995) is another coach focused model. Hargrove sees the intent of coaching as "Creating transformational learning in individuals, groups, and communities" (p. 38). His seven coaching fundamentals are:

1. Setting stretch goals.
2. Eliciting internal commitment and motivation for self-directed learning.
3. Creating a successful theory of action.
4. Practicing fundamentals.
5. Observing breakdowns.
6. Providing meaningful feedback.
7. Teaching new skills and capabilities.

While also having clear parallels with experiential learning, Hargrove's model propels us into asking the question: What is the difference between a coach and a teacher?

So far we have dealt with the conceptual in order to be able to ask this question: In a practical sense, aren't coaches practicing experiential learning with their clients? We can look at this question from a practical perspective in two different ways:

- Teaching versus Coaching
- Activity Based Reflection versus Life Content Reflection

### Teaching versus Coaching

In a practical sense the difference between teaching and coaching is subtle and somewhat semantical. One of Merriam Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary's (Merriam, 1973) definitions of coach is: "To instruct, direct, or prompt as a coach." The same dictionary's definition of teach is: "To instruct by precept, example, or experience." One might infer from the preceding definition that the common perception is that teachers take a somewhat softer approach to learning than the traditional view of a coach. This inference is somewhat skewed by the sporting context in which most coaching is viewed, but it, nonetheless, has some implications for professional coaching as a field. This view of teacher as coach is validated by Theodore Marchese (1998) in a recent article in which he states that:

The more a teacher can emphasize...

- learner independence and choice
  - intrinsic motivators and natural curiosity
  - rich, timely, usable feedback coupled with occasions for reflection and
  - active involvement in real-world tasks
  - emphasizing higher-order abilities
  - done with other people in high-challenge, low-threat environments
  - that provide for practice and reinforcement
- ... the greater the chances he or she will realize the deep learning that makes a difference in student lives. (Online document)

This description matches perfectly with the experiential models of Kolb and others plus Flaherty and Hargrove's coaching models. So in essence, in effective coaching you call yourself a coach, but you act like an effective experiential educator. It is beyond the scope of this paper to categorize the personal qualities that make one either an effective coach or an effective experiential educator, although Hargrove devotes a chapter to coaching qualities, and Rohnke and Butler do the same for experiential educators and facilitators. It is important to note, however, that these intrinsic qualities are similar for each and may be the bedrock upon which successful coaching starts.

### Activity Based Reflection versus Life Content Reflection

Ronald Heifetz (1994, p. 16) writes that the most difficult task facing new leaders is learning to recognize adaptive challenges. "Adaptive challenges are those that demand 'innovation and learning'." He distinguishes those challenges from what he calls technical challenges: "Routine or non-routine problems that can be solved using past experience and accessible information." Most coaching done today appears to be addressed toward solving technical challenges. That is, the frame of reference for self-observation and debrief is always the clients own life content, which may or may not have experiences that lead to the learning necessary to successfully face adaptive challenges.

Here is where experiential learning can be the value-added process that leads to effective and successful coaching. Simon Priest (1998) in his experiential learning web site lists four types of action events or activity types.

- Recreational - designed to change the way people feel (to entertain, re-energize, relax, re-create, socialize, teach and learn new skills, etc.);
- Educational - intended to change the way people feel and think (to gain awareness of needs, to add knowledge of new concepts, to understand new ways to look at old or familiar concepts, etc.).
- Developmental - designed to change the way people feel, think, and behave (to increase positive or functional behavior, to be better at interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, etc.)
- Therapeutic - intended to change the way people feel, think, behave and mal-behave (to decrease negative or dysfunctional behavior, to find new coping strategies for mal-behavior situations, etc.). (Online document)

These action events can form the basis for experiential reflection and can be the catalyst for learning needed to meet adaptive challenges. Setting clients up for successful reflection is the crucial piece in utilizing action events. Some of the more effective tools for generating this process involve the use of metaphorical transfer, problem-focused or solution-focused facilitation, funneled facilitation and front-loaded facilitation (Priest, 1998).

It is also beyond the scope of this paper to list the actual ways and formats in which action events can be integrated into coaching settings. It is important though, that coaches/teachers experience and understand the value that reflecting on action events has brought to their own lives. In recognizing this value we hope they take the next step, which is to plan and design congruent experiences and effective debrief sequences that enable clients/students to take the great leap from understanding to action.

### Conclusion

Recently I read a new book on professional coaching. In reading this book, I became aware that in the course of absorbing the material in the 300 pages, I had looked at and attempted to absorb over 125 drawings, diagrams, lists, and other graphic materials all representing aspects of professional coaching. While not meaning to belittle either the anonymous author or the content, I was, however, reminded of the acronym KISS (keep it so simple). Herein lies the beauty of the experiential approach to coaching.

Lost in time somewhere and unattributable are the origins of perhaps the simplest model for debriefing action events experientially and generating reflective behaviors. The debrief sequence of: What happened?, So what?, Now what?, is deceptively simple in presentation, yet it allows a teacher/coach to generate observations, create a climate of reflection and meaning, and allow students/clients to generate goals and action-oriented, next-step plans.

In advocating for integration of an experiential approach into existing coaching efforts, I am not inferring that experiential learning is the best model for all types of coaching situations. Indeed, in many technically-oriented situations experiential learning is not the technique of choice. Haifetz (1994, p. 16) clearly states that trying adaptive solutions on

technical problems may be a waste of time and energy. What I am implying is that experiential learning and its many facets can be the most effective tool to use in many coaching situations. Although the model and the methods are straightforward, they require training and much practice in order to master them and to be able to use them in the most efficient manner. They can be the practices that bring your coaching aspirations and goals into full bloom and turn you into a teacher as well as a coach.

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