

Exploiting existing experience

Learning by doing does not always need to start from an experience devised by the teacher. Learners come with many useful and relevant experiences from life outside the classroom. Effective learning can tap into this. If you start with an activity that uncovers prior experience, this not only mobilises this experience, but also allows you to establish the learners' various starting points.

Learning from mistakes

Expert learners understand that mistakes are a learning opportunity. They appreciate that learning involves taking risks: trying an unfamiliar activity, voicing a new theory or, perhaps, devising a new way of performing a familiar task. When mistakes occur, learners need an opportunity to reflect on what happened and why. Teachers who embrace reflective practice mirror this process in their own work.

Managing experiential learning

Experiential learning involves taking risks and needs more careful management than traditional rote learning. Initial assessment of learners' skills and knowledge is especially important, so that experiential learning can be planned to ensure they are not overwhelmed or discouraged. It is also essential to build in enough time for learners to process the experiences and consolidate learning.

Hands on research

Do you want your learners to understand why something happens or what the issues are in a particular situation? Let them do the research themselves, collecting data from a range of sources and working out what it means.

Mind mapping

Experiential learning taps into our natural ability to create a mental map of our world that we constantly review and refine in the light of experience. Learners can be encouraged to externalise their mental maps through graphical representation. This can be done on paper, with tactile objects or using mind mapping software.

Scenarios, case studies, simulations

These can encapsulate the features and dynamics of real life situations. One approach uses simplified versions of the world, enabling learners to engage with material that might otherwise be too complex. Another approach encourages the learners themselves to construct the case study or scenario, allowing them to engage with the complexities of a topic.

Multiple environments

Good planning takes into account how learning can take place in many different environments: at home, in the community, at work, through a visit, in cyberspace, and so on. Expert learners understand the value of such diverse experiences and can see the links between them. Their learning does not sit in separate silos.

Role play

If well planned, this can be a powerful approach that allows learners to rehearse challenging situations and take risks in a safe, supportive environment. Role play also promotes affective learning, where the emotions that learners experience during the role play have a lasting impact on their behaviour and attitudes.

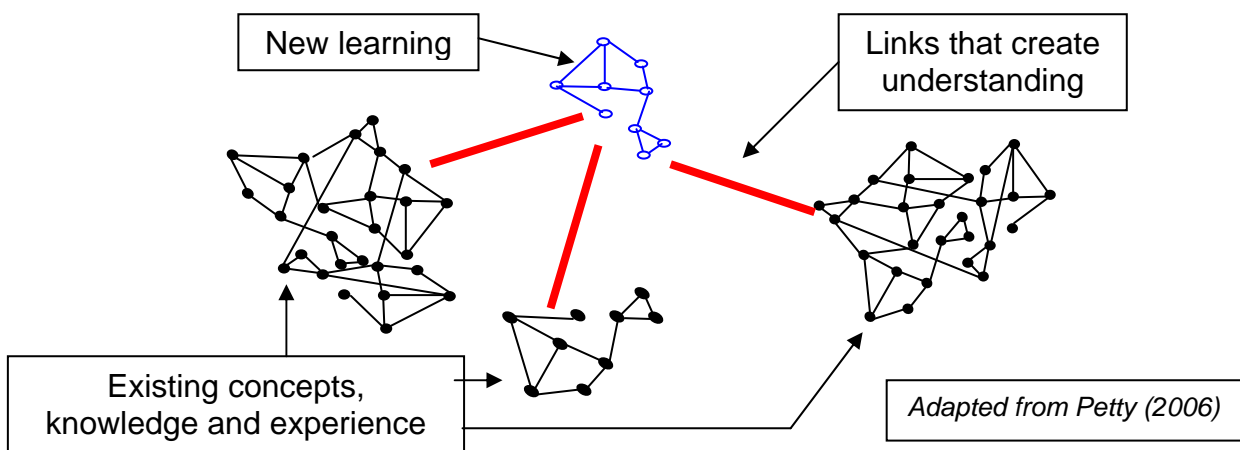
Quick start guide

Experiential learning

Experiential learning

Experiential learning, or ‘learning by doing’, has a long pedigree in education (Dewey, 1938). It is the process of engaging learners in an authentic experience. Learners make discoveries and experiment with knowledge first hand, instead of hearing about, or reading about, the experiences of others. When learners reflect on their experiences, they develop new skills and attitudes, new theories and ways of thinking, resulting in deep understanding and emotional and affective change.

Experiential learning enables us to construct new knowledge, systematically, from our experiences. A related model that describes how learning happens is ‘constructivism’, based on the work of Piaget (1950) and Bruner (1960). Bruner argues that learning is an active process during which we construct new ideas based on current understanding and perspectives. We do this by selecting, then transforming, information by organising and elaborating it. Learning is not understood until it is connected to existing concepts, knowledge and experience. Links between the concepts ‘explain’ the new knowledge in terms of what we know already; they define and ‘locate’ the new information and give it meaning. But only we, as learners, can create the links that ensure new understanding. We do this most successfully by using active approaches to learning.



Assimilation occurs when our experiences are aligned with, and agree with, our internal understanding of the world. Accommodation is how we refine our mental representation of the world to fit our new experiences. This is also the mechanism by which failure leads to learning. If our previous experience tells us that the world operates in one way, but then a new experience violates that understanding, we make mistakes.

This makes us check, think and reframe our model of the way the world works, so that we learn from experiencing failure. Then we go on to test our new understanding in a new situation – and perhaps revise our understanding again. The result is deep learning achieved through true understanding, rather than surface learning that can result from rote instruction. Effective teachers* help learners to develop a systematic approach to this process by adopting a learning cycle routine throughout their practice.

* We use 'teaching and learning' and 'teacher' as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.

References

Dewey, J. (1938) *Experiential Education*, New York: Collier Books.

Piaget, J. (1950) *The Psychology of Intelligence*, Cambridge, MA: University Press.

Bruner, J. (1960) *The Process of Education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Petty, G. (2006) *Evidence Based Teaching: A practical approach*, Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

You will find links that exemplify experiential learning in the Teaching and Learning Programme resources.