

HeartWood

Centre for Community Youth Development

A Learning Theory

Learning Theory

John Dewey said that we learn by experience. Malcolm Knowles developed this idea further as an adult learning theory. He maintained that adults learn best by the process of reflecting on and making sense out of their experience. We learn from experience that has been looked at, analyzed, and projected into a future situation. We do this all the time either consciously or subconsciously, and we have all done it since birth. The advantage of doing it consciously is that we become aware of the conclusions or generalizations that we have reached that may help us in similar situations at another time. There is a further advantage when adults learn in a group setting (such as a training program) because they can then “piggy back” on each other’s learning experience.

The theory is called experiential learning. One way to reflect consciously and intentionally is to use the IAG process.

1.

I = Identify, or recall the experience.

Select a very specific portion of the experience being recalled, and then isolate and focus your (or the group’s) attention on a piece of behaviour that you (or the group) would like to understand.

Questions to ask:

- What happened? What did you see? Hear?
- Who else had the same experience?
- Then what happened?
- What did you observe when you did that?

{Note: this resource draws generally on the work of Malcolm Knowles and has evolved through the practice of many hands.}

2.

A = Analyze what happened.

Find out how people felt and thought, how they reacted to what happened.

Questions to ask:

- What stood out for you?
- How did you feel about that?
- What did you think?
- What surprised you?

3.

G = Generalize from this experience.

Pull out the learning (the conclusions, insights, etc.) so that it can be applied in another situation in the near and distant future.

Questions to ask:

- What does this mean to you?
- Is this what you thought might happen?
- What did you decide must be true? What conclusions did you reach?
- So what?
- What is the underlying principle that will be of help in a similar situation?
- Where do you go from here? What's the first step?

{Note: One useful way to develop a generalized conclusion is to construct a "When/then" statement. E.g., "When (X happens), then (A, B, or C results)."}

Obviously we cannot take time to consciously reflect on all of our ongoing moment-to-moment experience. If we did that we would spend all of our time thinking about our life instead of living it. As we grow and mature, our experiences become more diverse, extensive and challenging and our understanding of what is happening in our experience becomes more complex.

The purpose of this process of reflection (what we call 'debriefing') is to help the participants be consciously aware of the conclusions that they have reached so that they can modify their behaviour in the future. These modifications enable them to better elicit the outcomes they desire whenever they want.

{Note: Although it appears in some ways to be similar, a "reflection process" is different than the process of reporting back to the large group where the primary objective is to hear what was discussed in the small groups.}

For us as facilitators, we do not teach! Our role instead is to facilitate learning by helping individuals to be more aware of, and to focus on how they made sense of their experience from their own perspective. This also means that while each activity does have a learning objective, it is not our job to see that the participants learned the "right thing" - whatever that is! In fact, each individual is likely to have a unique learning experience because of their different values, attitudes, and general life experience.

When we debrief, essentially what we do is to ask open-ended questions that help group members look back at their own experience. When we find ourselves pushing certain conclusions (usually by asking questions to which we already know the answer, or by pointing out what they should have learned), we have fallen out of the facilitator role into the teacher role. The result of this is usually that the debriefing begins to elicit less and less participant insight and dialogue, and more and more facilitator talking.

Open-ended questions, such as the following, are particularly effective in encouraging the person being asked to share their thoughts and feelings:

- What's the biggest value you've gotten from what we've done so far?
- What two or three things from this exercise are you appreciating most?
- What was particularly effective about the way that worked?
- What would you do differently another time?
- What would be the benefit of doing it differently?
- What options do you have for getting past that obstacle?
- What makes the most sense about what we've covered so far?

What helps individuals to reflect well at each stage of the IAG process is:

1. Pinpointing the experience really specifically.
2. Connecting how they felt with what they thought, and determining how that dictated their behaviour.
3. Looking at alternative ways that they might have behaved.

{Note: Reflection helps my self-esteem if I say to myself: "What would I do differently next time?" rather than, "I did it wrong, I blew it."}

The experiential learning approach does put the Trainer in much more of a process consultant role, that is, helping the learning process to happen. It is often appropriate, however, at the end of a debriefing, to point out one or two observations or insights that you may have had yourself, suggesting them as another way of looking at what happened, or another conclusion that might be reached. In any case, it is important for the Trainer to maintain a facilitative role by soliciting input in a non-judgmental manner.

Some of the learning we do will continue to be subconscious. We always have the choice, however, about whether to make our learning more conscious and intentional, and thus more accelerated, intense, and self-directed. Understanding and deliberately using the reflection process can help us do that.

{Note: An interesting observation is that preschool children are fast, intense, and self-directed in their learning process, that is, they are natural learners.}