**IFLA 2011**
**PUERTO RICO**
13-18 August, San Juan

World Library
and Information
Congress:
77th IFLA
General Conference
and Assembly

**Learning by Doing: Toward an Experiential Approach to Professional Development**

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**Meeting:**          **183 — *Africa libraries, not just place but interface* — Africa Section**

**Abstract:**

*Training for the workplace continues to be designed and delivered almost exclusively to meet organizational needs. However, experiential learning /training which develops knowledge and skills through hands-on experience creates an opportunity for valuable and memorable personal learning. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning is a process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Specht and Sandlin (1991) explain that experiential learning focuses on "doing" in addition to the "hearing" and "seeing" that occur in traditional learning.*

*This paper describes the use of experiential pedagogy to train the exhibition area staff of the National Library of Egypt. The Library's newly renovated building, which housed the National Library from 1903-74, includes a three-floor exhibition area that displays some of the Library's rare holdings, including manuscripts, papyri, documents, calligraphic albums and panels, and coins. The paper describes the use of experiential learning to train staff to prepare for a new exhibition of the Library collection. Such an activity involved training staff in a job which was new to them, including collection packing and handling procedures, documentation procedures, selection of exhibition items, exhibition design and installation. The paper provides an overview of the training process using the experiential learning cycle, a three-stage model--do–review–plan--which involves direct experience, followed by reflection, and then the development of a plan for future experience. Each training stage including hands-on participation, structured reflection, and modeling through practice will be described. The impact of this training activity including an increase in the level of motivation and long-term retention will be highlighted.*

**Introduction**

The National Library of Egypt was founded in 1870 as the Khedival Library, the first national library in the Middle East to have been established on modern Western principles of librarianship. The Library included the books and manuscripts of the libraries of public works and education, in addition to other smaller libraries, including charitable endowments which had been bequeathed to mosques, tombs, and schools by the *Mamluk* sultans and their families. In 1886 it required the deposit of copies of all books printed in Egypt. Its manuscript collection, which comprised 19,000 titles in 1916, continued to grow. Today, the collection comprises an estimated 58,000 titles, many in multiple volumes, about 1,500 calligraphic albums and panels, 4, 000 papyri, and 13,000 coins. The National Library of Egypt possesses the largest collection of manuscripts in the Arab World and one of the most important collections of Islamic manuscripts worldwide.

In the year 2000, the Ministry of Culture in Egypt launched a comprehensive restoration project for the old building of the National Library in Bab al Khalq Square, which housed the National Library from 1903-74, in an attempt to reinstate its original function and splendor. The restoration project had three aims: to create high-quality storage for the library's manuscript and papyri collections, to develop the library's facilities for the support of advanced research, and to expand public access to its great treasures through a three-floor exhibition area of the Library's rare holdings, including manuscripts, papyri, documents, calligraphic albums and panels, and coins. This paper describes the use of experiential pedagogy to train the exhibition area staff to prepare for the re-design and re-curating of the exhibition area.

**Theoretical Framework**

The philosophy of experiential learning focuses on experience as the most important tool for learning. The premise of experiential learning is that individuals create knowledge through the transformation of their lived experiences into existing cognitive frameworks, thus causing individuals to change the way they think and behave (Kolb, 1984). According to the 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" (Kolb, 1984,
p. 41).

American educational philosopher, John Dewey was the most famous proponent of hands-on learning, and one of the first to formally define and advocate experiential education. In his classic book, *Experience and Education*, first published in 1938, he regards experience as an essential component of the educational process. Dewey notes, "I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely the organic connection between education and personal experience" (p. 225). Dewey's model of experiential learning consists of a logical sequence which involves perceiving a problem, followed by its articulation, the formation of a hypothesis for finding a solution, experimentation to test the hypothesis, and finally giving reflective consideration to the consequences for society. Dewey believed that the meaning of a given experience is the result of the interaction between what the learner brings to the given situation and what happens there. For Dewey, continuity and interaction are the two fundamental criteria for determining the quality of experience and its implications for education. The learner should

be able to connect aspects of the new experience to what he/she already knows, in addition to actively interact with his/her environment, testing out lessons developed in that environment.

Reflection is an important part of the process of experiential learning. Learning through everyday experience is not enough; it is the ongoing reflective process which facilitates an individual's learning. Experiential learning, as outlined by Kolb (1984), emphasizes reflection on direct, concrete experience. During an experience there should be opportunities for reflection, allowing making connections between the actual experience and the knowledge drawn from the experience. According to Georgiou, Zahn and Meria (2008), "the heart of experiential learning lies in reflectively observing concrete experience and actively experimenting with abstract conceptualizations" (p. 813). Anderson, Pirolli, and Farrell (1988) note that individuals do not learn from abstract instruction, instead, learning result from the challenge of solving a problem and combines prior areas of expertise including pattern recognition, memory, problem solving, decision making, and learning (pp. 153 – 184). Grosby (1995) emphasizes the same point, "The educational process is based on the human experience of movement from difficulty to resolution. After resolution comes reflection on the movement so that what is learned may be generalized and used again" (pp. 12-13).

An 'experiential learning cycle' is a means of representing sequences in experiential learning. According to Neill (2004) experiential learning cycles are models for understanding how the process of learning works. They are commonly used to help structure experience-based training and education programs. Several models of experiential learning cycles are currently available, ranging from a one- step model to a six-step model. Kolb's (1984) classic model proposes that learning consists of four interdependent constructs: (a) concrete experience—engaging with the world through direct experiences, (b) reflective observation—taking serious consideration and meditation, (c) abstract conceptualization—transitioning from the experience to creating a plan for future actions and (d) active experimentation—testing the plan by implementation.

**Experiential Training**

The experiential approach has been used in a variety of settings, including training programs, in which participants learn through active participation, reflecting upon the experience, and connecting it with related theory to create behavior change. Using such an approach, the participants learn more about their current behaviors and skills and how they influence performance and results. Experiential training also offers an environment that support risk taking and provide a consequences-free way to try something new (Experience Based Learning, 2005).

An experiential learning cycle, a 3-stage model, experience-reflection-plan, (also called do-review-plan) was used for the Library staff training (see Figure1). This training cycle involves direct experience, followed by reflection, and then the development of a plan for future experience.
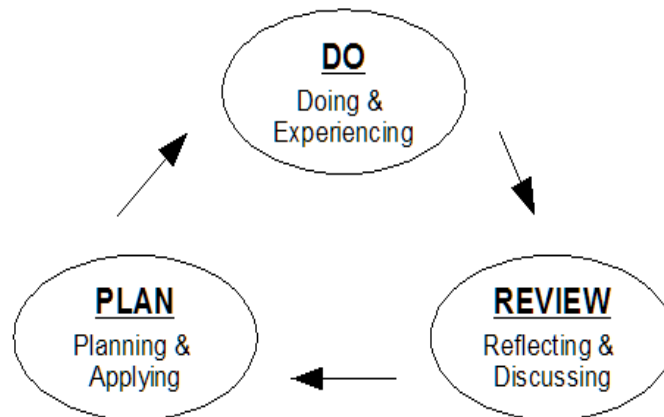
Fig. 1   A three-stage model: experience-reflection-plan

The first stage of the training cycle requires the participant  to undergo a concrete experience.   During the second stage the participant reviews what he /she has experienced, so learning can be identified and applied.  Following that, on the basis of those reviews, he/she is lead toward the planning phase, that is acquiring knowledge about tackling the next experience.

Prior to the renovation of the exhibition area, the staff had received short formal training in manuscript handling.  The training was provided by experts from the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, an organization working in the field of  the preservation of  Islamic manuscript collections, which funded the project for the re-design and re-curating of the Library exhibition area.  The Library staff was to undertake the renovation project, which involved training them in a job which was new to them, including collection packing and handling procedures, documentation procedures, selection of exhibition items, exhibition design and installation.

The first stage of the training cycle included hands-on participation, facilitated by the group leader, a senior staff member, together with one of the experts, who acted as facilitators, resources, guides, and co-learners   One of the major tasks for the group was dismantling of the current exhibition, a process that required full collaboration of the exhibition area staff and the conservation staff in removing items from display cases, wrapping, and storage.  During that stage, the situation was presented to the group in a briefing session to explain the procedures for the removal and storage of all exhibition items.  As the staff carried on the task, the facilitators would interfere to demonstrate a technique or negotiate a problem.

In the second stage of the training cycle, the staff was required to conduct a group debriefing session to reflect upon their experience.  Those who have experienced the task shared what they saw and how they felt during the experience.  The purpose of such an activity was to make the experience of each individual available to the group. To stimulate the discussion, the group was provided with a set of questions.  During those reflection sessions, they reviewed training material, asked questions, and made connections between present and past experiences, forming principles they can apply to other situations.  During those sessions, the staff grappled with a number of issues.   For example, one area they decided to work on was closer collaboration between them as curatorial staff and the Library conservation staff.   By reflecting on their experiences, the staff was more aware of the need for change in their attitudes and practices.

The third stage of the training cycle included planning and application. In that stage the experience is evaluated and an assimilation of previous and new knowledge takes place through abstraction and generalization. On the basis of the structured reflection of the second stage, the staff worked on planning the next phase, drawing useful insight from their experiences, and putting the result to work. The staff negotiated with one another the ways in which they would apply generalizations to actual situations which they were experiencing. Working in small groups, they planned how to approach the next task, using a range of resources, including themselves, each other, facilitators, library and resource materials, and their own experience.

**Training Outcomes**

Although staff members expressed the importance of formal training in providing foundational information, they pointed out a number of major benefits of the experience-based training. They particularly noted hands-on experience and learning from others as very valuable learning experiences. The staff constructed relevant knowledge bases through contextual experience-based training, thus acquiring the learning necessary to develop expertise. They developed their own knowledge and skills through observation, shadowing, and modeling. This form of learning is significant because as much learning can be derived from failure as from success (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Yukl, 2002). As Yukl notes, "Surprises and failures usually provide more opportunity for learning than expected events and outcomes" (p.175).

The participants also stressed that learning occurred as they interacted with each other and exchanged experiences. In an experience-based training context, prior learning and experience are taken into account and peer experience is viewed as a valuable asset. The trainees said that they appreciated getting constructive feedback from senior staff and peers.

Another form of informal learning that the participants emphasized was self-directed learning. Participants attempted to broaden their base of knowledge by accessing books, films, and the Internet, in addition to visits and field research.

The staff also asserted that this experience-based approach was a powerful tool for building relationships. Using the experiential model also provided the staff members with the opportunity to be responsible for their own learning and behavior rather than having this responsibility rest with someone else.

**Conclusion**

This paper has described the use of an experiential approach for training the exhibition area staff of the National Library of Egypt. The paper provided an overview of the training process using an experiential learning cycle, which involved direct experience, followed by reflection, and then the development of a plan for future experience. This experience-based model of training focused on the learning process and engaged participants intellectually and physically. An important component of the training was the integration of reflective practice with experiential learning. Satisfying outcomes of the training included an increase in the level of motivation, long-term retention, and belief in the value of self-directed learning.

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