

Experiential Learning - kolb learning styles

David Kolb's learning styles model and experiential learning theory (ELT)

As babies and children our natural way of learning is through experience and experimentation. As adults we can lose this highly effective method.

Having developed the model over many years prior, David Kolb published his learning styles model in 1984. Kolb's learning styles model and experiential learning theory are today acknowledged by academics, teachers, managers and trainers as truly seminal works; fundamental concepts towards our understanding and explaining human learning behaviour, and towards helping others to learn.

Kolb's experiential learning theory (learning styles) model

Kolb's learning theory sets out **four distinct learning styles** (or preferences), which are based on a **four-stage learning cycle**. (which might also be interpreted as a 'training cycle'). In this respect Kolb's model is particularly elegant, since it offers both a way to understand **individual people's different learning styles**, and also an explanation of a **cycle of experiential learning that applies to us all**.

Kolb includes this 'cycle of learning' as a central principle his experiential learning theory, typically expressed as **four-stage cycle of learning**, in which **'immediate or concrete experiences'** provide a basis for **'observations and reflections'**. These 'observations and reflections' are assimilated and distilled into **'abstract concepts'** producing new implications for action which can be **'actively tested'** in turn creating new experiences.

Kolb says that ideally (and by inference not always) this process represents a learning cycle or spiral where the learner 'touches all the bases', ie., a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Immediate or concrete experiences lead to observations and reflections. These reflections are then assimilated (absorbed and translated) into abstract concepts with implications for action, which the person can actively test and experiment with, which in turn enable the creation of new experiences.

Kolb's model therefore works on two levels - **a four-stage cycle**:

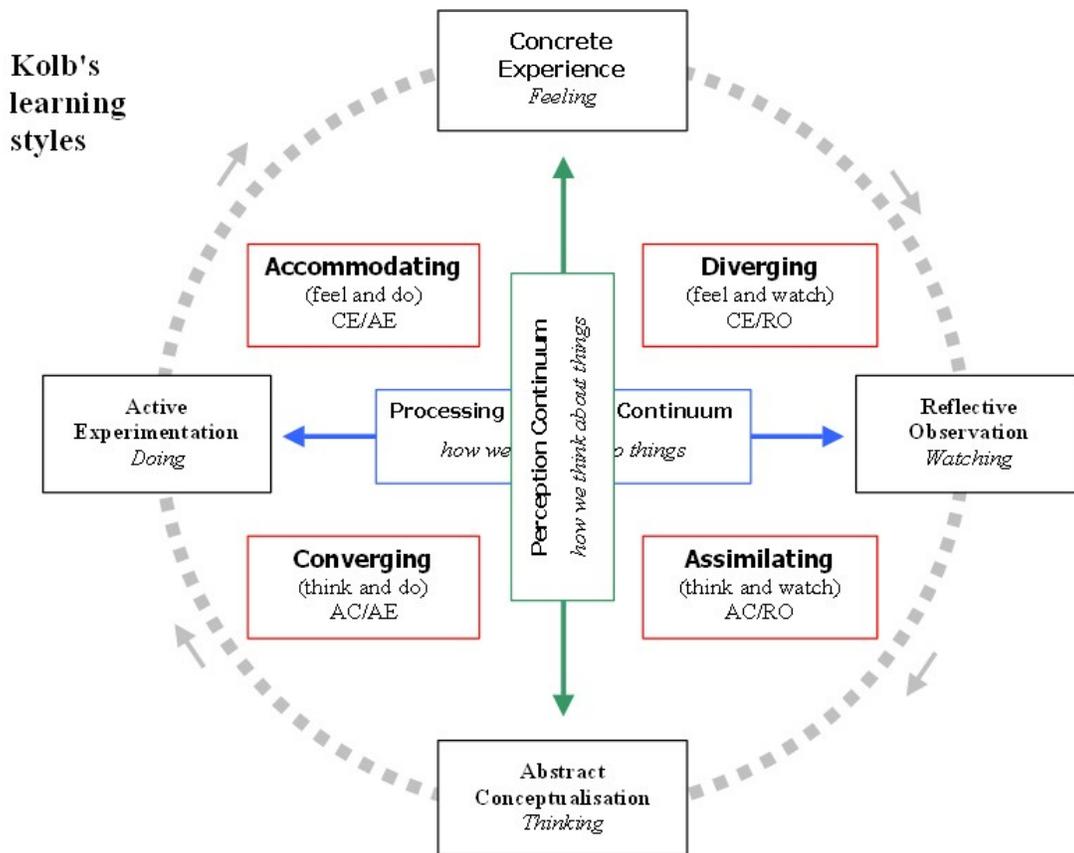
1. **Concrete Experience - (CE)**
2. **Reflective Observation - (RO)**
3. **Abstract Conceptualization - (AC)**
4. **Active Experimentation - (AE)**

Or what, so what, now what, when!

and a **four-type definition of learning styles**, (each representing the combination of two preferred styles, rather like a two-by-two matrix of the four-stage cycle styles, as illustrated below), for which Kolb used the terms:

1. Diverging (CE/RO)
2. Assimilating (AC/RO)
3. Converging (AC/AE)
4. Accommodating (CE/AE)

diagrams of kolb's learning styles



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learning styles

Kolb explains that different people naturally prefer a certain single different learning style. Various factors influence a person's preferred style: notably in his experiential learning theory model (ELT) Kolb defined three stages of a person's development, and suggests that our propensity to reconcile and successfully integrate the four different learning styles improves as we mature through our development stages. The development stages that Kolb identified are:

1. Acquisition - birth to adolescence - development of basic abilities and 'cognitive structures'
2. Specialization - schooling, early work and personal experiences of adulthood - the development of a particular 'specialized learning style' shaped by 'social, educational, and organizational socialization'
3. Integration - mid-career through to later life - expression of non-dominant learning style in work and personal life.

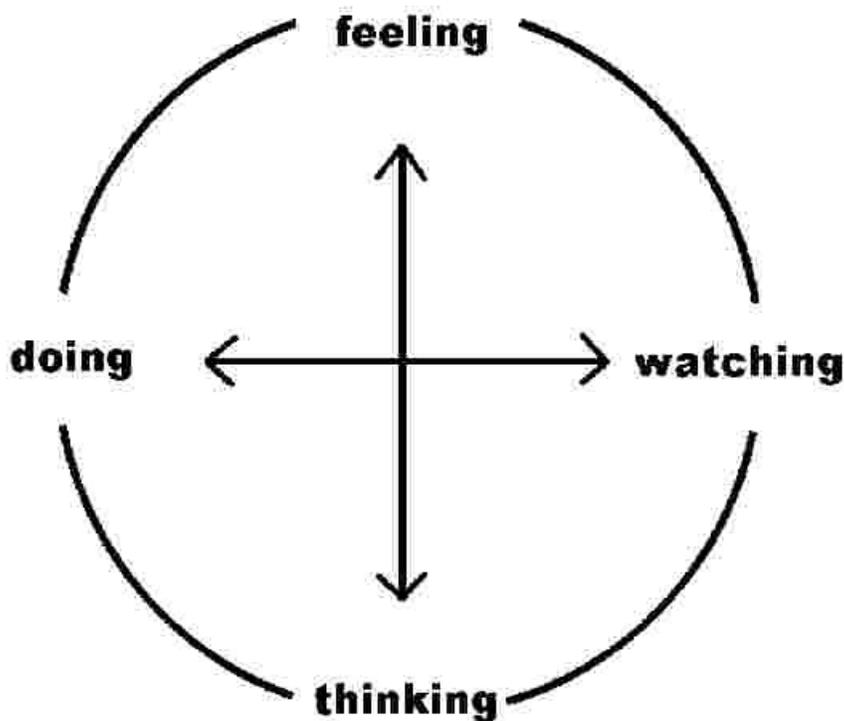
Whatever influences the choice of style, the learning style preference itself is actually the product of two pairs of variables, or two separate 'choices' that we make, which Kolb presented as lines of axis, each with 'conflicting' modes at either end:

Concrete Experience - CE (feeling) -----**V**-----**Abstract Conceptualization - AC** (thinking)

Active Experimentation - AE (doing)-----**V**----- **Reflective Observation - RO** (watching)

A typical presentation of Kolb's two continuums is that the east-west axis is called the Processing Continuum (how we approach a task), and the north-south axis is called the Perception Continuum (our emotional response, or how we think or feel about it).

These learning styles are the combination of two lines of axis (continuums) each formed between what Kolb calls 'dialectically related modes' of 'grasping experience' (doing or watching), and 'transforming experience' (feeling or thinking):



The word 'dialectically' is not widely understood, and yet carries an essential meaning, namely 'conflicting'. Kolb meant by this that we cannot do both at the same time, and to an extent our urge to want to do both creates conflict, which we resolve through choice when confronted with a new learning situation. We internally decide whether we wish to **do** or **watch**, and **at the same time** we decide whether to **think** or **feel**.

The result of these two decisions produces (and helps to form throughout our lives) the preferred learning style, hence the two-by-two matrix below. We choose a way of 'grasping the experience', which defines our approach to it, and we choose a way to 'transform the experience' into something meaningful and usable, which defines our emotional response to the experience. Our learning style is a product of these two choice decisions:

1. how to approach a task - ie., '**grasping experience**' - preferring to (a) **watch** or (b) **do** , and
2. our emotional response to the experience - ie., '**transforming experience**' - preferring to (a)**think** or (b) **feel**.

In other words we choose our **approach to the task or experience** ('**grasping the experience**') by opting for 1(a) or 1(b):

- 1(a) - through watching others involved in the experience and reflecting on what happens ('**reflective observation**' - '**watching**') or
- 1(b) - through 'jumping straight in' and just doing it ('**active experimentation**' - '**doing**')

And **at the same time** we choose how to **emotionally transform the experience** into something meaningful and useful by opting for 2(a) or 2(b):

- 2(a) - through gaining new information by thinking, analyzing, or planning ('**abstract conceptualization**' - '**thinking**') or
- 2(b) - through experiencing the 'concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world' ('**concrete experience**' - '**feeling**')

The combination of these two choices produces a preferred learning style.

Thus, for example, a person with a dominant learning style of '**doing**' rather than '**watching the task**, and '**feeling**' rather than '**thinking**' about **the experience**, will have a learning style which combines and represents those processes, namely an '**Accommodating**' learning style, in Kolb's terminology.

Understanding more about how you prefer to learn offers the possibility of incorporating learning into all your experiences using the simple – what, so what, now what, when approach more consciously.