

## ABSTRACT

*This article defines and explains some key concepts associated with experiential learning and briefly describes several practical exercises. It is hoped that the perspective gained here will encourage volunteer administrators to investigate and use experiential learning in their work and, more importantly, in their lives as well.*

# Play, Parachutes, and Experiential Learning

Stephen Hobbs

## INTRODUCTION

John Dewey (1938), one of the most noted contributors to the field of experiential learning, wrote, "all genuine education comes from experience." I would go so far as to say that volunteer experience is genuine education. When people are involved directly in volunteer activities, they have the opportunity to learn about themselves and the people with whom they are volunteering. They can acquire practical skills and gain a perspective on the intangible values associated with the activity.

Volunteer administrators have an important role to play in constructing experiences that enhance and encourage involvement in the tasks volunteers are assigned. Drawing from the theory and practices of experiential learning, they can develop and maintain meaningful volunteer activities that assist the organization as a whole.

Experiential learning is pluralistic. As a process it is discussed everywhere, yet it is from nowhere. It is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary as evident from this partial list of related fields: action science, action technologies, moral and ethical development, progressive education, holistic education, folk education, adventure programs, character training, on-the-job training, wilderness therapy, adven-

ture based counseling, outdoor pursuits, experience-based training and development, vocational education, career education, clinical training, alternate education, service learning. This list provides terms for an ongoing literature search of the field. It highlights the wide-ranging use of experiential learning. More importantly, it can identify where there may be other experiential practitioners from whom volunteer administrators can learn.

Because experiential learning is from everywhere, it is eclectic. People hold different views of what it is, who should use it, how it can be used, and why. Effort is required to find the pearls of wisdom in all that is said about experiential learning.

A great deal is demanded of the experiential learning practitioner because there is so much to take into consideration. Not only must the practitioner ensure learning is taken from the experience, but also be fully aware of the safety of the learning method. In many ways, experiential activities take people out of their comfort zones. An experiential learning practitioner has to know how to deal with participants' discomfort.

The Association for Experiential Education (1994) defines experiential education as a "process" through which a learner gains knowledge, skill, and value from an experiential learning activity. In order to

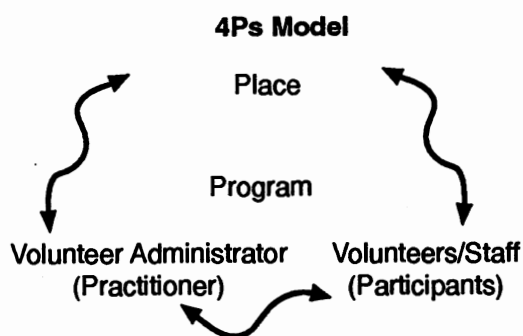
---

*Stephen Hobbs* is one of three partners who established the WELLTH Learning Network in Calgary, Alberta. As a theorist and practitioner he works with a network of educators promoting well-living for individuals, organizations and communities through indoor and outdoor experiential learning programs. He has worked as a college instructor, a manager and volunteer administrator with non-profit organizations, a recreation officer in Western Australia, and as a relief delegate in Eastern Africa. He obtained his doctorate in adult education from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

achieve these goals, I rely on the 4Ps Model and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. My 4Ps Model describes the relationship between the practitioner and the participants; the Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle highlights four important questions the practitioner must ask the participants to help them make meaning of their experiences.

#### THE 4Ps MODEL

The 4Ps model (Hobbs, 1996b) highlights the structure and relationships associated with experiential learning. The structure has four main components about which a practitioner must be mindful. Not only must the practitioner understand what s/he brings to the experience, but also must understand the role of place, program, and participants.



The *practitioner* must be conversant with the theory and practices of experiential learning. While some knowledge and skills can be learned through study, much of it should be acquired through apprenticeships and mentoring. Volunteer administrators who want to learn about experiential learning should work with a practitioner and/or take a workshop.

*Place* refers to the physical space in which the learning occurs. The volunteer administrator must be mindful of the impact of the physical characteristics of the space on the program and the participants: for example, location of the program (whether inside and/or outside), the time of year (particularly if outside), and whether it is possible to move tables and chairs inside a room.

*Program* refers to the experiential learning activities chosen to meet the learning needs of the participants. Depending on the learning objectives of the program, the place selected for the learning to occur, and the characteristics of the group, the practitioner should select activities that meet the group's needs while maintaining the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of the individuals. In a volunteer setting, the activity can serve as an ice-breaker before a volunteer and staff training event or to help solve a problem a group of volunteers has encountered in working together as a team.

*Participants* are groups of volunteer administrators, staff persons, volunteers and/or a mixture of all three. These are the people who must make meaning from the activities. Jarvis (1987) suggests that "all learning has an experiential base ... [more importantly] life is about experience; wherever there is life there are potential learning experiences." The question becomes: Which experiences are meaningful? Which are meaningless? Discovering the answers to these questions is the responsibility of the participants working together with the practitioner.

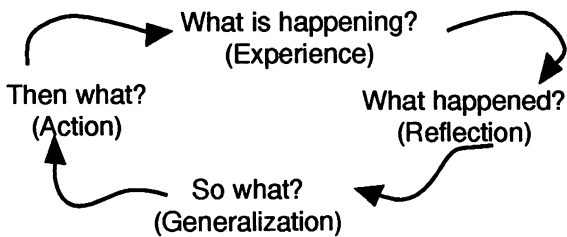
The patterns of interactions (shown by the lines with arrows) outline the relationships between the component parts. While they appear simple on paper, these relationships are complex and require attention by the experiential learning practitioner to ensure a successful program outcome. Paying attention to these relationships is the practitioner's contribution in support of the participants' learning. The wobbly lines highlight the fluidity of the model. Rarely in real life does a straight line best describe and explain the shortest or easiest route. Experience is not necessarily about straight lines and easy travels.

#### KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL

Kolb (1984) presents a model widely used to help participants make meaning from the experiential learning activity.

The model frames four questions a practitioner (volunteer administrator) can pose to help participants (volunteers and staff) gain insight into their learning before, during, and after their involvement in an experiential learning activity.

### Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle



The "what is happening" question helps participants look at their current involvement in the experiential learning activity. Answers result in a list of facts that summarize what they are doing now. The "what happened" question provides time for reflection about what occurred. The "so what" question is used to generalize (create some rules/concepts) for possible use later. The "then what" question helps frame the action that will result from the generalization made.

### METAPHORS

The metaphor of whitewater turbulence in a river has been used quite often to describe and explain an organization. Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon (1986) comment that metaphors create a "novel interpretation of experience by asking the listener to see one thing in terms of something else ... [and by that] create new ways of experiencing reality."

When using metaphors to gain insight into experience, the practitioner must be aware that some images may or may not be known by all participants. Both the practitioner and the participants must understand the image of the metaphor for it to work (Hobbs, 1996a). To use the whitewater metaphor it is useful if the experience of whitewater is familiar to all

participants. Using metaphors supplied by the participants in the workshop can be helpful to support ongoing dialogue around learning from the shared experience. The metaphors are a reminder of the learning taken from the experience until such time as a new and/or improved metaphor is accepted by the participants that serves as a springboard for new learning. A balance beam and juggling can be used as metaphors to stimulate group activities until the group and/or team creates their own metaphors.

In a workshop the balance beam and group juggling activities illustrate problem-solving and build communication and trust. This not only reinforces the experiential learning and metaphor relationships, but also provides a needed break from sitting.

**Balance Beam:** A group of five people is given an eight-foot length of 2" x 4" lumber on which they must stand and follow the instructions of the practitioner. The rules require that the group stay in physical contact with the board. If any member of the group falls off the board, the activity starts again. An optional rule is if the heel and/or toe of a group member touches the ground, the activity starts again. A sample task is to ask the participants to arrange themselves on the board by birth month with January at one end and December at the other.

**Group Juggling:** A group is given the task of tossing a tennis ball around the group until a recognized tossing pattern is established. The person who first tossed the ball ends up with it after each member of the group has caught the ball once. Practicing the decided-upon pattern is important because when a second ball is added, the group members must follow the established pattern. Once the group has learned to toss two balls successfully, they are given a third ball and asked to repeat the pattern. With each success, another ball is added. The challenge is to juggle as many balls as there are mem-

bers. The group can also be challenged to bounce the balls or reverse the pattern. A variation is to use a tennis ball container substituted for one of the tennis balls. This activity works best when the number of group members is five or seven.

Each experiential activity has a range of associated metaphors that serve as a way to gain meaning from the activity for real-world application. What the participants take as learning from the activity varies with the learning needs of the participants and the metaphor selected by the practitioner. The group juggling metaphor can be used to simulate the workshop participants' varied and sometime chaotic work environment and to present ideas related to the well-living workplace.

After trying the group juggling and balance beam exercises, the workshop participants are presented with more in-depth information. The process of briefing and debriefing, and the theory behind framing the experience are explained to them.

#### BRIEFING AND DEBRIEFING

In the briefing at the beginning of the program and preceding a specific activity, the practitioner provides a basic description and explanation of what is to occur without revealing the outcome. These briefing sessions provide sufficient detail to encourage the participants' involvement and cover safety concerns about their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. An essential element of the briefing session is to allow participants the opportunity to agree to the activity and express their level of commitment (Hobbs and Seel, 1997). To brief I:

- **Collect Together**—Help people relax, do introductions.
- **Outline Program**—Cover safety, review level of commitment to experiential learning.
- **Request Agreement**—Ask about willingness to become involved in the activity.

- **Mindfulness**—Draw attention to the importance of reflection while involved in experiential learning.

The debriefing aspect of experiential learning cannot be stressed enough. Without an appropriate debriefing, the learning may be lost and participants can become frustrated. Also, it ensures the activity itself does not become the message; in other words, the participants must understand that the activity and metaphor were the tools used to arrive at the learning. Stolovich (1990) provides one of several debriefing frameworks available to the practitioner. To debrief:

- **Collect Together**—Help people relax.
- **List Facts**—Recall events.
- **Draw Inferences**—Ask what happened.
- **Establish Transfer**—Draw parallels to real world.
- **Make Generalizations**—Create some rules/concepts to improve real world.
- **Identify Applications**—Figure out how to transfer to the real world.

#### PLAY AND PARACHUTES

Edginton, Jordan, DeGraaf, and Edginton (1995) and Kraus (1990) regard play as a reward in and of itself, undertaken voluntarily, self-expressive, always pleasurable, and completely absorbing. While theorists and researchers view play among adults and/or children differently, the characteristics remain the same. For adults, play may be more purposeful in its outcomes while children see the purpose of play to be fun. What are its characteristics and relationship to "a simpler way" of organizing volunteer experiences? Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) describe this simpler way as "... a new way of being in the world. It requires being in the world without fear. Being in the world with play and creativity. Seeking after what's possible. Being willing to learn and to be surprised."

A playful way to view this simpler way of the world is by using a play parachute to illustrate the "connectedness" of the

group while they play together. This activity is framed by Kolb's question, "What is happening?" To start, participants are given a short explanation on how the parachute can be used as a tool to solve several experiential learning tasks. Similar to the piece of wood used as the balance beam or the tennis balls juggled by the group, the parachute is the tool used by the group to solve tasks assigned by the practitioner.

**Play Parachute:** The participants pick up the parachute and spread themselves evenly around the outside edge. They perform simple warm-up tasks to begin to establish rapport, stretch the back and arms to reduce the possibility of injuries, and identify the range of movement required to play with the parachute. For example, participants are asked to stand as though their feet are planted in cement, bend at the waist as if to touch their toes, and then raise the parachute over their heads with arms extended. This task is repeated at least five times. Once comfortable, and still holding onto the edge of the parachute, the group must pass a soccer ball clockwise or counterclockwise around the edge of the parachute so the ball stays within two feet of the outside edge. To be successful the ball must complete one full rotation. The participants are expected to come up with several creative routes.

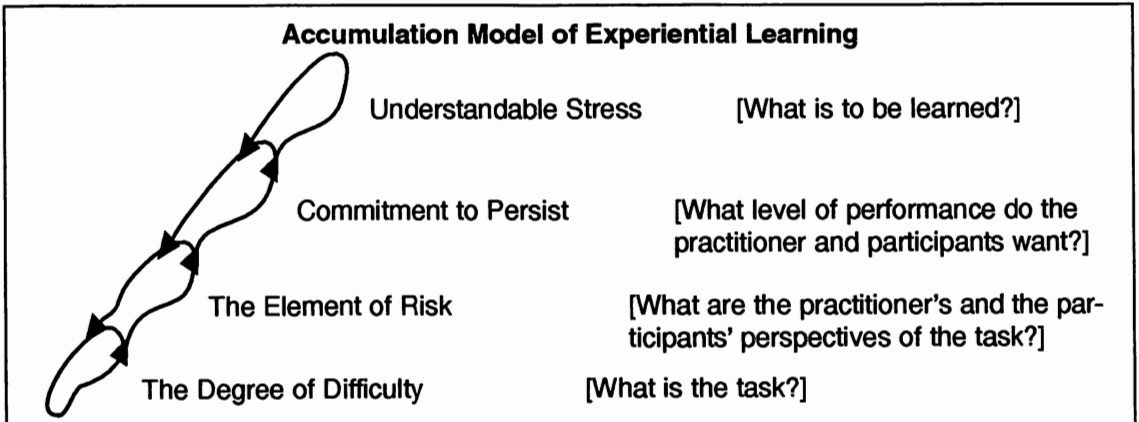
Solving an experiential learning task is successful in context to the instructions given. Solutions have underlying assump-

tions that lead to different levels of participation by members of the group. These assumptions and levels of involvement stimulate discussion in the debriefing. An important observation that never fails to amaze me is how adults begin to giggle, laugh, and play while finding solutions. Their participation in this play activity is truly wonderful to behold and speaks to "a simpler way" of organizing learning experience.

During the debriefing following this activity many questions are asked. One in particular is important: When is it appropriate for a volunteer administrator to use experiential learning? The group is asked to answer the question. Sample responses include: Experiential learning activities can be used as icebreakers and as a way to introduce the work of the organization to a new group of volunteers during their orientation or in training as a different way to learn material. During recognition events, the play aspect of experiential learning allows volunteers and staff to come together to have fun. It is another source of knowledge from which to obtain new ideas.

**ACCUMULATION MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

*The Accumulation Model of Experiential Learning* (Hobbs and Seel, 1997) serves as a reminder of what was presented and lists four important questions a practitioner needs to ask before and during an experiential learning event. There are two ways to work with the questions. The practitioner can move through the model



in a briefing format from top to bottom or debrief by asking the questions from bottom to top. Accumulating learning frequently requires looping through the model to stimulate discussions that are multi-directional and non-linear.

#### ISSUES SURROUNDING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is seen as a way of learning and yet it is not given due credit by mainstream educators. In addition, the question of professionalism surfaces occasionally. Some people view experiential learning as a "grassroots" and "back to nature" understanding of real-world problems. They see the practitioner as skilled in the metaphor activities, but lacking the skill to transfer the learning that occurs to the "real world" of the participant. Coupled with this are safety issues of physical, emotional, and mental well-being especially in more active exercises such as high rope and low rope courses. A high rope course has participants balancing on wires, walking across planks, climbing in cargo nets suspended between large poles while harnessed to safety wires 20 to 30 feet in the air. A low rope course includes many of the same elements as the high rope course, usually two to three feet off the ground. In the workshop described in this article participants explore activities that are ground-based.

Directly linked to the question of professionalism is the question of research. What proof is there that experiential learning works? Within the academic realm ever more studies are being written that help describe, explain, and prescribe the learning to be gained from experience (see endnote on the *Journal of Experiential Education*). Intuitively, experiential practitioners know when experiential learning works because they see it in action. The trick is to convince participants to commit what they have learned to real-world situations.

#### CONCLUSION

Using experiential learning theory and practice, the volunteer administrator can develop new approaches to framing volunteer experiences that will encourage volunteers to remain involved with the organization. By maintaining a spirit of playfulness in what they do to ensure a simpler way of organizing volunteer experiences, they help staff, volunteers, and themselves create an environment that meets the needs of everyone involved. Experiential learning helps to achieve this goal.

---

#### ENDNOTE

For more information on experiential education, contact the Association for Experiential Education, 2885 Aurora Avenue #28, Boulder, CO, 80303-2252. Phone (303) 440-8844, fax (303) 440-9581. This association publishes the *Journal of Experiential Education*.

---

#### REFERENCES

- Association for Experiential Education. (1994). AEE definition of experiential education. Boulder, CO.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan, 25.
- Donnellon, A., Gray, B., & Bougon, M.G. (1986). Communication, meaning, and organized action. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 31, 43-55.
- Edginton, C.R., Jordan, D.J., DeGraaf, D.G., & Edginton, S.R. (1995). *Leisure and life satisfaction: Foundation perspectives*. Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.
- Hobbs, S. (1996a). Development and validation of an holistic organizational learning framework for organizational learning consultants and adult educators. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, #9638804.
- Hobbs, S. (1996b). *The "P" model of strategic program planning*. Calgary: WELLTH Learning Network.

- Hobbs, S., & Seel, K. (1997). *Facilitating experiential learning using ethical and ecological lenses*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Jarvis, P. (1987). Meaningful and meaningless experience: Towards an analysis of learning from life. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 164-172.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kraus, R. (1990). *Recreation and leisure in modern society* (4th ed.). New York: Harper Collins.
- Stolovich, H.D. (1990). A model for debriefing a simulation. *Performance & Instruction*, August, 18-19.
- Wheatley, M. J., & Kellner-Rogers, M. (1996). *A simpler way*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 5.