



Experiential Learning Model

Learning theories help us to understand the ways in which people learn. Experiential learning is a process during which young people learn skills and develop knowledge through real-world, hands-on experiences. Experiential learning is one of many ways young people learn and grow.

Since its beginning in the early 1900's, 4-H was influenced by the learning theory of John Dewey (1900, 1938) who advocated for grounding learning in real-world experiences within the local community. Dewey's theory identified the natural interests of children that influence the process of learning. Children have

- A constructive instinct to make and shape real-world materials;
- An inquiry or investigation instinct – do and see what happens;
- A social instinct and the desire for conversation and communication;
- An artistic instinct that grows out of communicating and constructing.

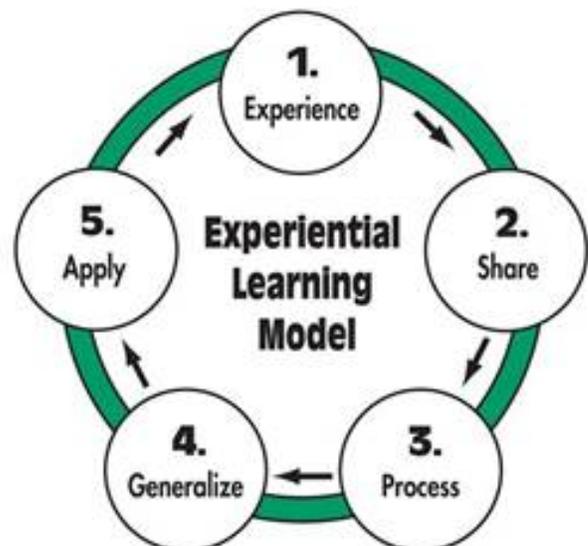
Dewey wanted to fuse a connection between the home and school to engage children in actual practice. It's easy to see the influence of Dewey's theory of learning in 4-H's experiential approach to hands-on, real-world learning that takes place in community.

As 4-H moved toward a youth development focus in 4-H project work during the 1980's, 4-H curriculum began to be modeled after David Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning. In Kolb's model, the experiential learning process begins with a concrete experience, followed by learner reflection. The learner processes the learning experience and applies the knowledge or skills in new situations.

The experiential learning model was adapted for 4-H youth development. The model has three basic phases: an experience or problem situation; a reflective phase in which the learner examines the experience and creates learning from his/her reflection; and an application phase in which the new knowledge or skills are applied to a new problem or situation.

The experiential learning model was further informed by constructivist learning theory (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Constructivist learning theory identifies three roles for learners. First is the active learner who engages in discussion,

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predictions, investigation, and formation of opinions. This requires a social influence on knowledge that is created in interaction with others. The final role is the creation of knowledge for self.

For over 100 years, multiple learning theories have offered growing support for the experiential learning model which serves as one of the frameworks for 4-H programs and curriculum. The experiential learning model allows youth to participate in engaging, stimulating activities that have a real-world basis. The experiential activities help the learners to connect what they are learning to prior knowledge and apply it to new situations or problems. Just as importantly, engaging in shared learning experiences creates social and cultural bonds that influence identity, relationships, goals, and success.

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