Designing Experiential Learning in Adult Organizations

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by Rollin Glaser, EdD and Barbara Roadcap

The popularity of experiential learning in organizational training has been increasing over recent decades, perhaps because it often provides more effective organizational learning and change. Silberman (2007, p. 3.) describes the current interest in experiential learning as a "virtual explosion."

The purpose of this paper is to describe the **HRDQ Experiential Learning Model**™ (ELM) and how it can be used by designers, trainers/facilitators, and learners to produce consistent results, as well as making the design process itself considerably more efficient.

What Is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is not a new way to learn. It has its origins in the early twentieth-century work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Levin. Together, these theorists gave us a basis for our current theories of experiential learning. David Kolb (1984) later developed an excellent description of their work and how it underlies contemporary experiential learning theory.

The term *experiential learning* can be confusing as it is often applied to many varieties of learning that are connected to an experience of some sort. It can be argued that all learning is based on experience in one form or another. Even a lecture may be thought of as experiential learning if one takes into account that the lecturer is reporting on his/her experience and the listeners are experiencing the lecturer's experience second-hand. But unfortunately, this broad generalization does not help us to understand experiential learning and or how to apply its principles.

One way to view experiential learning is as a scale of different experiences, each requiring the learner to take on increasingly more responsibility for his/her learning. Such a scale was developed by Gibbons and Hopkins (1980) that postulated five different modes of increasing experientiality: *Receptive* (learner remains relatively passive during the experience); *Analytic* (learner studies systematically and attempts to apply theory to solve

problems); *Productive* (learner creates or builds things); *Developmental* (learner pursues excellence and develops mastery in a particular area); and *Psychosocial* (learner grows personally and socially). Although the scale has drawbacks, it alerts us to the fact that not all experiential learning is the same. Experiences can be grouped by the degree of responsibility placed on the learner for his/her learning. The higher up on the scale, the more a learning experience may be considered a true experiential learning situation. HRDQ products and programs generally advocate experiential learning that is psychosocial in nature, aiming for changes in personal and organizational behavior.

In general, most definitions of experiential learning contain the following elements:

- The process must contain an experience that is *meaningful* to the learner, one that changes his or her internal knowledge or attitude or level of behavioral skill.

- The experience must be followed by critical thought and reflection about the experience and how it affects previous experience and learning.

- As a result of the meaningful experience and critical thinking, the learner may decide consciously or unconsciously to undertake some kind of action aimed at internal or external change.

At HRDQ, we define experiential learning as a process that is characterized by constructed internal or external events that can lead to reflection on the meaning of those events, and subsequent personal, group, and/or organizational change.

Origin of the HRDQ Experiential Learning Model

The HRDQ approach to experiential learning draws on the early work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin, as well as the more recent work of Robert Mager (1984), David Kolb (1985), Stephen Brookfield (1986), Peter Jarvis (1987), Malcolm Knowles (1989), Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1989), Jack Mezirow (1991) and many others who have worked in the area of adult learning.

HRDQ has consulted and trained in hundreds of organizations with thousands of learners for more than 30 years. The result has been a learning model that is a refined and practical tool for preparing and presenting adult organizational learning material of any kind.
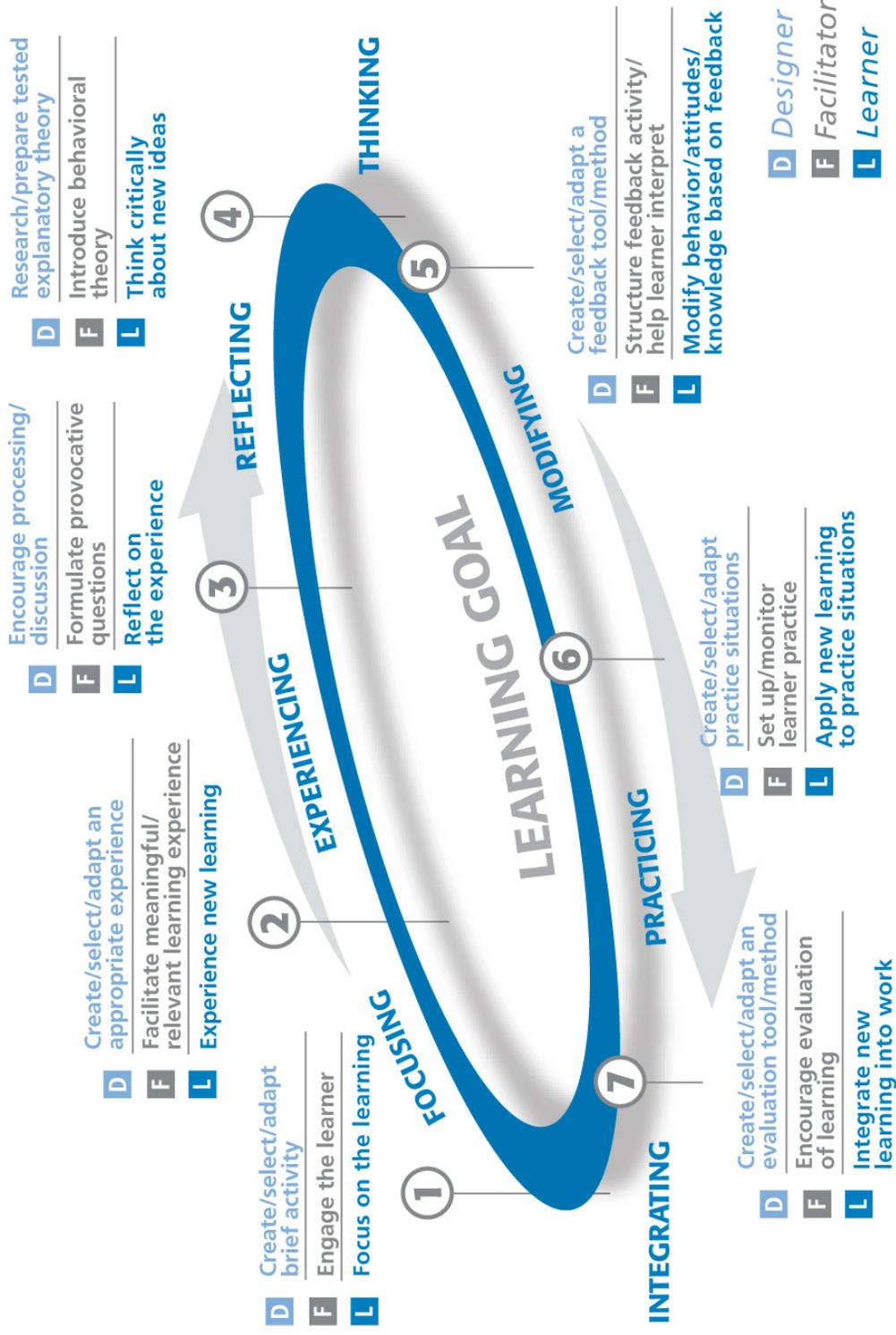
Overview of the HRDQ Experiential Learning Model

The HRDQ Model is intended as a guide for designers of learning materials, facilitators of experiential learning, and learner/participants in experiential settings. No other model that we are aware of can be used for all three purposes. Most models confuse learning and facilitating the learning of others. Few provide much specific help to those who design experiential learning materials for facilitators and learners. As we describe the HRDQ Model, we will reference all three groups.

The HRDQ Experiential Learning Model is presented as an ellipse composed of seven distinct phases. The ellipse rotates around and is driven by a single learning goal. Each of the seven phases is designed to further the learner's movement toward the achievement of that learning goal. Movement toward achieving the learning goal begins with Phase 1: Focus, and moves through the subsequent phases to Phase 7: Integration. These phases in the learning process are considered sequential and dependent on the preceding phase.

Each phase in the Model provides direction to the designer, the facilitator, and the learner. For example, Phase 1 is an awareness phase in which the attention of the learner is brought to bear on the learning goal. The learning designer's task is to prepare or find a simple activity that will capture the learner's attention and begin focusing on the goal of the learning. The facilitator's task is to present the activity and engage the learner. The learner's task is to focus his/her attention on the learning goal and begin to think about its importance and how it may be reached.

The entire Model is considered a process rather than a discrete event. The phases are considered open-ended with no clear beginning or end because learning is a continuing process without definite beginnings or endings.

HRDQ® Experiential Learning Model™

LEARNING GOAL

① FOCUSING

Create/select/adapt brief activity
- **D** Create/select/adapt brief activity
- **F** Engage the learner
- **L** Focus on the learning

② EXPERIENCING

- **D** Create/select/adapt an appropriate experience
- **F** Facilitate meaningful/relevant learning experience
- **L** Experience new learning

③ REFLECTING

- **D** Encourage processing/discussion
- **F** Formulate provocative questions
- **L** Reflect on the experience

④ THINKING

- **D** Research/prepare tested explanatory theory
- **F** Introduce behavioral theory
- **L** Think critically about new ideas

⑤ MODIFYING

- **D** Create/select/adapt a feedback tool/method
- **F** Structure feedback activity/help learner interpret
- **L** Modify behavior/attitudes/knowledge based on feedback

⑥ PRACTICING

- **D** Create/select/adapt practice situations
- **F** Set up/monitor learner practice
- **L** Apply new learning to practice situations

⑦ INTEGRATING

- **D** Create/select/adapt an evaluation tool/method
- **F** Encourage evaluation of learning
- **L** Integrate new learning into work

D *Designer*
F *Facilitator*
L *Learner*

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Although the Model appears to offer a somewhat rigid formula for learning, it should be understood that learning is fluid and may move from phase to phase or back to earlier phases. The Model is a simplification of what is to be presented to the learner and how the learner is expected to behave during the learning process. But by prescribing the specific steps involved in experiential learning, it is hoped that the task of the designer, facilitator, and learner are made easier and the end result is more effective.

Is a Learning Event Really the Answer?

The HRDQ Experiential Learning Model assumes that the designer has pre-determined that training is an appropriate solution to a current individual, group, or organizational challenge. It can be helpful to think of a learning need as a gap between an individual or group's current performance and what someone else (or others) believes that performance should be. Learning may be used as a solution when a gap in knowledge, attitude, or skill needs to be closed. Experiential learning can work very well to close gaps in many types of training: interpersonal skill development, team building, safety training, customer service, and more.

Learning Goals and Learning Modules

Although somewhat artificial, thinking in terms of learning goals and learning modules is a practical way to design and present learning. A module is defined as a sequence of learning activities that is geared to the achievement of one major learning goal with perhaps many minor goals, depending on the situation.

The notion of learning goals and learning objectives was given a great boost by the proponents of Behaviorism and Robert Mager in the 1970s. (We will use the terms "goal" and "objective" interchangeably in this paper.) Mager's work convinced most training and development designers that air-tight behavioral objectives had to be specified before a learning experience could be developed. Behavioral objectives answer the question, "What will the learner be able to do at the completion of the instruction or learning segment?" A whole science was formed around the development and specification of behavioral learning objectives. A "good" objective in behavioral terms specified what the learner would be able to do, how well it would be done, and how the trainer/learner would know that it was being done competently. The more precise the goal or objective, the better.

Certainly knowing what your learning experience is supposed to achieve and having some idea as to how well your participants have succeeded is better than having no clear purpose and merely hoping that the learners will change their behavior after the event is over. But it can be argued that too close a specification of predetermined learning objectives can be seriously restrictive to the adult learning process. By identifying objectives in advance of the learning

experience, a program designer may miss the opportunity to involve learners in the process of deciding what they will learn. The learning may remain too impersonal because it ignores individual learner needs. Tightly drawn objectives may not foster self-directed learning competencies in adults who become dependent on the designer/facilitator for what is to be learned and how it is to be learned.

Rather than following a rigid formula for charting learning goals and objectives, the trainer/facilitator should consider aiming for clarity of purpose and method instead. This means that discussion, involvement of the learner, and mutual understanding are more important in the long run than a single, well-constructed learning goal or objective.

The success of the HRDQ Experiential Learning Model depends on a clear learning goal with sufficient flexibility to allow the various nuances of the learning process to operate. This is symbolized by placing the learning goal at the center of the experiential cycle.

Creating an Environment for Adult Learning

The HRDQ Experiential Learning Model is intended for use in an adult learning environment. Malcolm Knowles (2005) did much to help educators think about the differences between adult learners and younger learners who did not have the same life experience as adults. Knowles referred to the assumptions important to adult learning as *andragogical*, meaning the art and science of teaching adults as opposed to immature learners. These assumptions include the following about adult learners:

- They are essentially self-directing

- They enter any learning experience with a great deal of prior experience

- They are ready to learn when they perceive a need to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives

- They are problem centered in their learning

- They want to apply immediately what they have learned.

These conditions need to be present any time an experiential learning model is used.

The Seven Phases of the HRDQ Experiential Learning Model

The ellipse-shaped Model represents the learning approach an instructional designer should follow in preparing material to achieve a specified learning goal. The Model also represents the phases a facilitator should follow in presenting an experiential design to his/her learners. Finally, the Model prescribes how learners should engage in the learning to achieve a particular learning goal. The purpose behind this coordinated effort is to increase the likelihood that a learner will in fact achieve the prescribed learning goal.

Phase 1 – Focusing the Learner

The first phase of the learning process is to help learners relate to the learning about to be presented. Learners enter any learning process with defused or misplaced energy. They may have correct or incorrect expectations of what they will learn. They may even have few or no expectations they will learn anything new or worthwhile. The task of the facilitator is to help the learners focus on the knowledge, skills, or attitudes under consideration and see them as valuable learning goals.

For example, if the learning goal was to understand the nature of team conflict and develop skills to manage it in their groups, it might be appropriate to ask the learners to describe their reactions to conflict in their teams.   Is disagreement always inappropriate or could it in fact serve a beneficial purpose? This could focus the learners' attention and energy on the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to be learned relating to productive conflict management. It is more efficient to focus learners' expectations than to leave them with unclear or ambiguous expectations about what they will learn and what will be expected of them.

Focusing activities are not meant to take more than five to ten minutes of the learners' time. These kinds of activities can be created by the designer/facilitator or found in the many sources available. HRDQ, for example, publishes a number of collections of focusing activities, including: *Energizers; TeamBook; Pen and Paper Games for Training;* and others.   .

D **Designer's Role**:   Locate or create appropriate focusing activities.

F **Facilitator's Role**:   Facilitate focusing activities designed to get participants on track.

L **Learner's Role**:   Raise personal interest level and bring energy to bear on the learning goal.

Phase 2 – Experiencing

In this phase, learners are presented with a concrete problem situation that immerses them in the subject of the learning goal. An example might be a game whose purpose is to immerse the team in a fictional conflict. Team members have different personal views of how people should behave when they disagree. The problem facing the learners is how a team can become more productive under these conditions. The experience immediately involves the learners in the issues, emotions, feelings, and dilemmas of the problem. While the constructed experience may not appear at first to have a clear parallel, upon reflection, the learners will be able to make the connections.

The key to the effectiveness of this approach is to provide an engaging and *meaningful* experience for the learners. "Engaging" means an experience that grabs the learner emotionally. "Meaningful" means the experience has relevance to the learner and his/her needs. But how does the designer or facilitator know, what is a "meaningful experience"? Moon (2004, p. 18) suggests whether an experience is meaningful must be determined by the learner. Not all experiences are meaningful. We may or may not learn something from them. A meaningful experience causes the learner to make an internal or external adjustment by learning something new or reinterpreting an old experience. As the designer cannot tell for sure if the experience he/she is presenting will be meaningful to the learner, the designer can only make a reasoned judgment. The greater the experience of designer, the more likely it is that the constructed experience will provoke the insights and reactions needed to move toward the learning goal.

Meaningful experiences for learning can be created by the designer or found in many commercially available structured experiences. HRDQ publishes a number of collections of structured activities, games, and simulations such as: *TeamBuilders, 25 Problem Solving and Decision Making Activities, 40 Activities for Training with NLZ, Jungle Escape, Communication Derailed, Flight from Savo, Black Bear,* and many more.

D	**Designer's Role**:	Research and develop appropriate experiences or locate, possibly modify, existing activities for use in the learning module.
F	**Facilitator's Role**:	Become thoroughly familiar with the operation of the structured activity and give directions for its use as needed.
L	**Learner's Role**:	Fully engage in the activity, being sensitive to what is happening internally and externally as a result of the experience.

Phase 3 – Reflecting

Reflecting is the act of considering an experience and recalling previous learning and experiences and comparing them to new learning. In the game described above in Phase 2, the learners might recall previous teams of which they were members. Perhaps they might observe that their former teams had the same problems of unresolved disagreement. Perhaps they may believe as a result that all teams have irreconcilable differences. Someone might venture that differences need to be acknowledged and worked through, remembering that she heard of a team that was able to do this.

Roger Greenaway (Silberman, 2007, p. 59) refers to this phase of the learning process as "debriefing." He describes the process as "the facilitation of learning from experience." Without this phase, there is no guarantee that learners will come away with anything useful from their experience.

The Reflecting phase asks learners to consider their feelings, thoughts, past experiences, and past learning during the structured experience presented. Although the facilitator may not be able to predict accurately what learners will conclude, he/she may help the process by asking questions designed to provoke critical thinking and possibly some "aha"-type sudden insights. Critical thinking asks that learners consider their past experience in light of their assumptions. The Facilitator can initiate the discussion and the processing of the experience but then play a more passive role. He/she may intervene only if the learners are stuck. The best intervention is often a provocative question. The reflecting phase should take at least as long as the Experiencing phase.

HRDQ experiences always contain questions aimed at stimulating reflection by learners.

D **Designer's Role**: Allow adequate time for processing, discussion, and connection to past experiences. Provide facilitator with provocative questions to stimulate learners.

F **Facilitator's Role**: Allow adequate time for processing, discussion, and connection to past experiences. Formulate provocative, relevant, meaningful questions for learners.

L **Learner's Role**: Consider experience, relate to previous experiences, use facilitator's questions to make new connections. Use constructed experience to gain new insights into current knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Phase 4 – Thinking

Sometimes learners do not have an adequate conceptual base to understand fully their experience in Phase 2. In Kolb terms, this input helps the learner to learn by thinking. The purpose is to stimulate thought and enlighten minds. After having a relevant experience and processing that experience, learners may need some clarifying theory. The theory should be used to understand both the experience and the reflective observations of the learners. The conclusions that were drawn from Phase 3 should be analyzed by the learners and added to their existing knowledge, attitude, or skill base, if appropriate.

Clarifying theory should be authoritative as opposed to opinion based. For example, behavioral science or organizational behavior theory is more reliable than untested opinion. "Personal Styles of Conflict Resolution" in *Models for Management: The Structure of Competence* (Hall & Shtogren, 1988) would provide more valid information than a popular magazine article on the subject. Theory to assist thinking can come from journals, books, DVDs, or lecturettes by the facilitator. Generally, theory inputs incorporated into an experiential learning design are relatively short, ranging from five to twenty minutes.

HRDQ materials always contain scientific theory when applicable.

D	**Designer's Role**:	Locate theory relevant to the learning module.
F	**Facilitator's Role**:	Understand and present relevant theory to learners to clarify experiences and reflection.
L	**Learner's Role**:	Use theory to understand experiences and critical reflection.

Phase 5 – Modifying

As a result of an experience, critical reflection, and theory, learners need to think about their own knowledge, attitudes, or behavior and possibly modify them in ways that are more productive and satisfying. If one assumes that he/she is already performing effectively, change is unlikely. What is needed is specific feedback about current information levels, attitudes, and behavior. Kolb and others omit this as a formal step in the learning cycle. Yet, unless learners receive specific, objective information about their current performance as it relates to the theory, they may assume that they are already behaving in accordance with the model proposed.

Learner feedback may be obtained in a variety of ways: learning instruments completed by the participants or others familiar with the participant, group feedback, feedback in pairs or feedback from the facilitator. The important event is the comparison learners make of their behavior to the model. Is there a gap, and if so, how wide is it? The learner needs information on the model as it is currently reflected in his/her practice. This step may lead learners to consider modifying their knowledge, attitudes, or behavior to bring it more in line with accepted theory.

HRDQ publishes many learning instruments for the purpose of providing feedback to learners interested in change. Learning instruments include: *What's My Communication Style, Interpersonal Influence Inventory, Negotiating Style Profile, Conflict Strategies Inventory, Team Effectiveness Profile*, and many other research-based assessments.

D	**Designer's Role**:	Locate appropriate instrumentation or organize other feedback methods.
F	**Facilitator's Role**:	Understand the instrument selected and be prepared to administer, score, and interpret it. Be skilled in the facilitating of feedback to individuals and groups.
L	**Learner's Role**:	Consider the feedback and decide what to change, if any thing.

Phase 6 – Practicing

In this phase, learners are provided with an opportunity to practice and apply their new learning. The purpose of this phase is to help learners incorporate the new knowledge, attitudes, and skills into their personal repertoire by trying them out in a protected setting and considering how they might be used on the job or other life environment. Kolb refers to this phase from the learner's point of view as "active experimentation." By this he means ". . . testing implications of concepts in new situations." Phase 6 may be facilitated in a variety of ways, for example:

- Critiqued role plays

- Solving work-related problems

- Performing work-related tasks

- Developing specific action plans that incorporate the new learning

In our conflict illustration, learners may be asked to develop some typical examples of team conflict and role play these using their new concepts and skills.

Clark Quinn in "Computer-Based Simulations" (Silberman, p.140, 2007) lists a number of elements of effective practice garnered from a several sources. The list in includes an practice in a context familiar to the learner; the practice poses a clear learning goal; it creates an appropriate level of challenge; the task is a real application of the skills learned; the learner cares about the task; there are different options to try; the learner must commit to a choice; the learner receives feedback that relates to the concepts or skills just learned; and others.

HRDQ publishes a variety of activities that may be used for practice such as: *SkillBuilders: 50 Communication Skills Activities, Pump Them Up!, Sales Training Activities, Team Development Activities for Trainers,* and many other practice activities.

D **Designer's Role**: Create appropriate practice activities or locate practice activities from commercial sources and adapt them to the specific use of the learning module.

F **Facilitator's Role**: Conduct and critique practice activities.

L **Learner's Role**: Practice seriously using new knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Phase 7 – Integrating

Evaluating and integrating new learning into changed ways of behaving is an effort that must be made, principally by the learner. The integration phase might be more accurately referred to as a process of *re-diagnosis.* The key questions to be answered are as follows:

- "To what extent have I learned the new information, skills or attitudes?"

- "To what extent have I used the new knowledge, skills, or attitudes in the performance of my real life roles?"

- "How has what I have learned affected my thinking and behavior?"

- "What else do I need to learn or re-learn?"

Phase 7 might occur in a variety of ways: self-evaluation, colleague evaluation, supervisory review, pre-determined performance measures, and other indicators of change. In our team conflict example, the team might gather in 90 days and review its new operating style. Some improvement may have occurred, but some hidden disagreement may be undermining the group's total effort. Re-diagnosis may occur many times in the future.

Accommodating Individual Learning Styles

The HRDQ Experiential Learning Model can become a powerful tool in individual, team, and organizational learning. Group learning is difficult to individualize, but a consideration of individual learning styles can be useful in the design, facilitation, and learning strengths of the individual learners.

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (1989) developed the *Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ)* to help learners understand how they prefer to learn. Their model draws on Kolb once again, but the Honey-Mumford theory can be found embedded in the HRDQ ELM as well.

Honey and Mumford suggest that people have one of four learning styles or combinations of these styles. They label the styles as *Activist*, *Reflector*, *Theorist*, and *Pragmatist*.

Activist learners involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences bored with the implementation and longer-term consolidation of learning.

Reflector learners like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to any conclusion. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant, unruffled air about them.

Theorist learners adapt and integrate their observations in complex but logically sound theories. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step, logical way. They tend to be detached, analytical, and dedicated to rational objectivity, rather than anything subjective or ambiguous.

Pragmatist learners are interested in trying out ideas, theories, and techniques to see if they work in practice. They are essentially practical, down-to-earth people who like making practical decisions and solving problems.

A glance at the HRDQ Experiential Learning Model reveals that Activists prefer the Focusing and Experiencing parts of the cycle. Reflectors prefer the Reflecting phase. Theorists prefer the Thinking part. Pragmatists prefer the Modifying, Practicing, and Integrating phases.

Effective learners are aware of their own learning preferences. They have learned to capitalize on their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. They are able to use all styles appropriately. Learning designers and facilitators can help their participants by recognizing the mix of learning styles in their groups in the preparation and delivery of the learning process.

Summary

The HRDQ Experiential Learning Model is a tested model for adult learning. It has been developed from recognized learning theorists and through many years of practice with clients. Designers and facilitators of organizational learning can be assured that the results attained by using this model will far exceed the effectiveness of pure lecture, e-learning, or video-based training programs. If designers and facilitators demand change and a commitment to change from their learning experiences, the HRDQ ELM can provide significant help.

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