
On the experiential learning cycle in a hosting & harvesting context

The other day, my Austrian hosting colleagues Rainer von Leoprechting and Martin Büchele ran a webinar on “Action-Learning”. It was a small group of 5 or 6 participants and we were working on one participant’s project case study. The setting was similar to a Pro-Action Café setting. At the beginning however, Martin explained, that there would be one additional “role” in the hosting team. The “Coach”, whose task it is to interrupt the conversation at a given time to make the group reflect on their way of brainstorming and moving the conversation forward. So after 20 minutes or so, that the group had spent on getting a better understanding of the case owner’s question, Martin stopped the conversation for “coaching time”. He asked: “As a group, what are you doing well in this conversation?” and “What could you do better?”. We became aware, that some of us were still not sure about, what the case owner’s key question was. So we did a quick “online survey” with each of us writing his/her understanding of the question in the chat. Based on this the case owner refined her question. Also, as a group we became aware that we needed to start asking “radically new” questions. With these insights from some 10 minutes of “coaching time”, we went back our initial conversation, with fresh energy and new perspectives. The conversation took a totally new course.

Through witnessing Rainer’s and Martin’s approach I realized, that the experiential/action learning approach, that is often used in the context of (outdoor) teambuilding is really relevant in the hosting/harvesting context, too. During this session Rainer and Martin had used a mini-version of the action learning cycle, in order to have the group reflect on their communication patterns. The learnings were directly fed back to the group and could be applied in the next round of conversation.

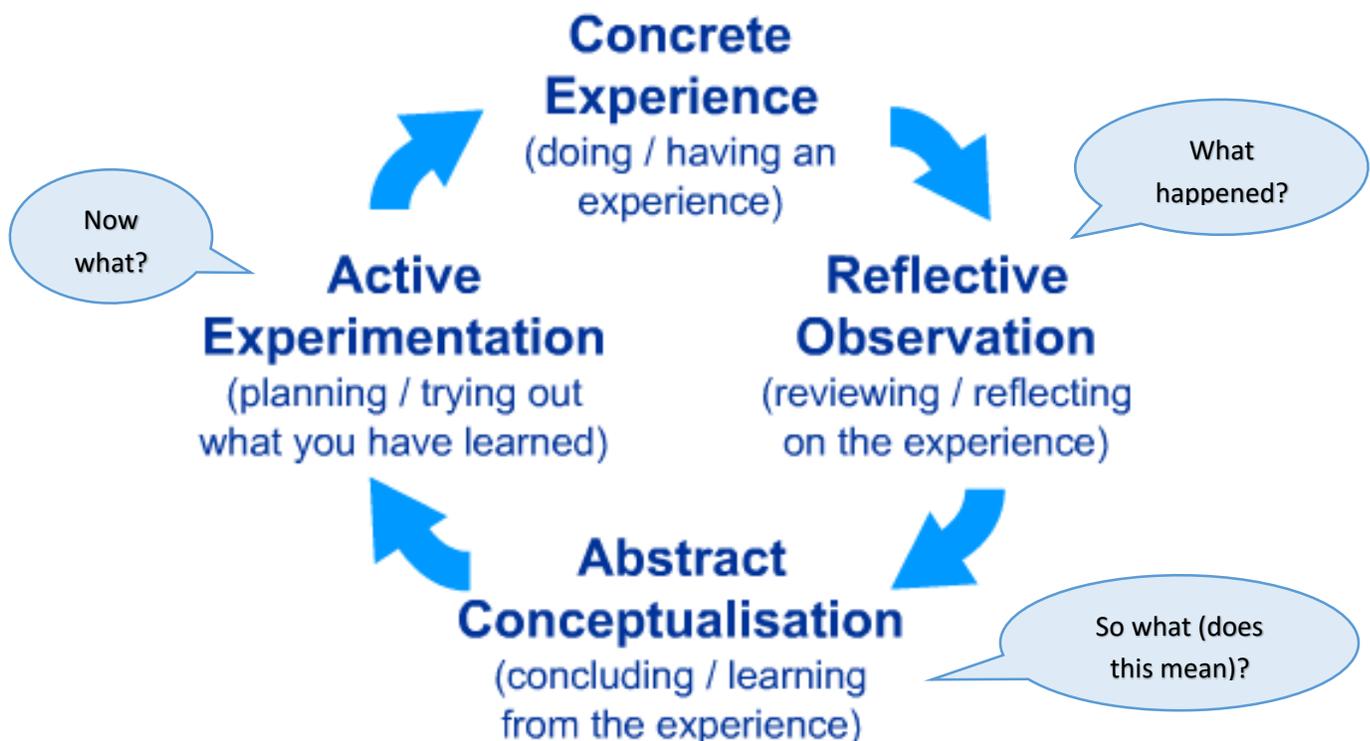
In the following, I would like to give some more information on the experiential learning cycle, that I am familiar with from working in other contexts (mainly corporate teambuilding). I hope that having a deeper look at this concept, might be inspiring for you as hosts. I will give some ideas on how this could be translated to the hosting/harvesting environment, where I see them, but I would also like to invite you, to be creative about other ways of using this framework for hosting and harvesting.

About the experiential learning cycle

The model of the experiential learning cycle is used to structure/facilitate debriefing processes, so that people can learn from direct experience. The underlying experiences can be outdoor challenges, games or practical tasks, that require teamwork, e.g. like building a playground.

If you want to inquire further about the concept you can google “experiential learning” or “action learning” as well as “David A. Kolb” and “John Dewey”, who are famous personalities in the field. For the sake of simplicity I will just use the term “experiential learning” for the rest of this piece of writing.

The Experiential Learning Cycle



Source: <http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

Concrete Experience

The cycle starts (and continues) with some sort of learning experience, something an individual or a group is doing. In the hosting and harvesting environment, this could be a conversation that just happened. e.g. some small group storytelling, a World Café etc.

Review & Reflection

Once the experience is over, the group is invited to review the experience and reflect on it. The overarching questing is: WHAT HAPPENED? In a strict experiential learning setting, we start with just describing, what could be heard and observed, without judging the experience.

Typical questions would be:

- How did the group achieve the end result?
- What process did the group use?
- What roles did people play during the activity?
- What seemed to work well for the group?
- How did group members listen to each other?
- etc...

In a hosting and harvesting environment, we could ask very similar questions that invite the participants to reflect on the conversation experience e.g.

- How did the flow of the conversation go?
- Could you notice critical moments in the conversation? – Which ones?
- Were there any turning points, that made the conversation go down a different path?
- How did you feel during the conversation?
- How did people contribute to the conversation (Equally or just a few people participating?)
- Were there any taboos/"elephants in the room", that did not get addressed?
- Was the conversation rather slow or fast paced?
- Did people feel they got heard during the conversation?
- Were people able to follow the conversation, did they get the big question?
- ...

As a host, you can either invite people to discuss some of these questions in small groups (like Rainer and Marin did) or conduct a “poll” e.g. with a rope scale on the floor, along which people can position themselves (Feedback loop!). This works well with questions such as:

- To what extent do I feel my ideas got heard during the conversation versus did not get heard?
- To what extent could I follow the conversation (scale from: I could follow really well... versus I was completely lost)
- ...

Generalization

Once people have shared their understanding about what happened during the conversation, we move into the next step asking, SO WHAT? What does this mean in a broader context? What can we truly learn from this experience in a broader and deeper sense?

In teambuildings, those generalizing questions would be around teamwork & leadership, e.g.

- From this experience, what can we learn about teamwork?
- When teams work well together, what do they do?
- How do they communicate?
- From this activity, what can we learn about leadership?
- ...

In a hosting and harvesting environment, generalization could be around exploring helpful versus not so helpful conversation behaviors as well as limiting beliefs and biases. One goal can be to deepen the understanding of how certain communication patterns might be an obstacle to group learning. Possible questions could be:

- So what does a “choppy” conversation pattern (with people not really listening to each other”) do to a conversation?
- What are the dynamics that determine whether “baby-ideas” get nourished or squished?
- What limiting beliefs do we all share, that prevent us from finding out-of-the-box ideas?
- As a group, what are we avoiding?
- What happens if only a few people contribute to the conversation?
- How does the focus on tangible outcomes help/hinder our inquiry process?
- ...

Application

“Application” is about the “NOW WHAT?”, e.g. transferring the learnings to real life. This can be either the next activity a group is doing together during the event/workshop or some task (e.g. a project) that needs to be done in “real life”. Early in an event, we usually just focus on the next activity, e.g. the next round of conversations, while towards the end of an event we would stress the application of the learnings to real life (like we did in session 3 of module 3).

Typical questions regarding the next round of conversations could be:

- As a group, what do we want to differently during the next round of conversations?
- How do we ensure, people get heard?
- How do we make sure, new ideas get enough space to grow?
- How do we want to deal with the tension arising from the need for tangible outcomes versus the need for deeper inquiry, good listening and slow pace?
- As a group, how can we track, whether our conversation is moving (versus stuck) and how can we all contribute to not getting into dead-ends?
- ...

Questions regarding the application in real life could address both, the implementation of tangible and intangible workshop results. Here are some examples:

- What key learnings do you take away from this workshop? What will you do, to apply these learnings “at home”, in your project?
 - What will you do/implement by next Monday?
 - What will you implement in the next couple of weeks?
- What did you learn about helpful/not so helpful communication patterns and how will you help improve the communication patterns in your organization?
- ...

A few thoughts on practical application

As I write this, I note a few other things might be important, when working with experiential learning in practice:

Educating the client upfront is important

Over time I have noticed the need to educate my clients around the difference between “workshop facilitation” and “facilitating team learning”. In the past I made the mistake to “sell” the “facilitation of strategy workshops”. As a consequence I felt responsible for delivering neat tangible end products and often times I ended up not addressing team issues due to the lack of time. Recently I have started explaining the concept of facilitating team learning to the clients.

We still work on strategic content, yet we do frequent coaching breaks. If the team gets stuck on certain issues, we take time to explore the team's communication patterns. Contentwise we go as far as we can during a day, flexibly deciding on priorities after each piece of work. For me, having the client's buy-in and understanding to work that way, makes all the difference

There is a natural tradeoff between team learning and tangible outcomes

During the design phase, we need to weigh whether we give priority to tangible outcomes versus deeper team learning. If we want tangible outcomes, we would rather use structured, small group formats with tighter rules, that will prevent group dynamics from showing up fully.

If we go for exploring group dynamics, open formats with little direction tend to work better. They give space for the group dynamics to develop, providing a solid "here-and-now" experience for the team, that then can be processed through the experiential learning cycle. In this case, there will be more opportunities for the group to learn about their communication patterns and possibly more "aha"-effects. Yet the progress with content work will be slower as much of the groups's energy will be consumed by dealing with the group dynamics.

It is not a cycle but a spiral

The experiential learning cycle is a framework, that helps us identify types of questions, that can take group learning to a next level. Yet, it is our task as hosts to closely observe, where a group is at and determine the right "pacing", to move the group right towards the edge of it's comfort zone, where good learning can happen. We can do this, either by closely observing the group, especially it's resistances or by asking the group to give feedback or expressing their emotions.

In practice, we might only use a few questions from the cycle in one session (like Martin and Rainer did), sometimes without even completing the full cycle. In the next session, we will find a new "field" and again assess, which questions could generate valuable learning for the group at this point in time, going deeper and deeper, like in a spiral....