



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

A Holistic Approach to Learning

Experiential Learning is the process of learning through experience and reflection. It is an active learning process, which first involves youth participating in an activity. Then they're asked to reflect on the activity to determine what was useful or important to remember, and then they're tasked with understanding how the information they learned applies to their lives now and in the future. This learning process is holistic and allows youth to engage, apply, and build upon life experiences.



Figure A. The experiential learning model empowers youth to dig in and experience an idea and to step back and reflect on what they learned and why it is important.

The experiential learning model is commonly used in 4-H (J.W. Pfeiffer and J.E. Jones, 1985). Additionally, other pioneers such as David Kolb provide a wealth of research that emphasizes the importance of the adult facilitator. According to Kolb, the experiential learning model allows the learner actively to participate in what is learned. The facilitator's role is to deeply connect with youth and to spark their interest and intrinsic motivation so they can gain, revise, or enhance their life skills. The facilitator plays multiple roles during this process: balancing the attention of the learner, contextualizing the subject matter, and creating a safe and holistic learning environment.

Tips for creating a welcoming environment for learning:

- **Wait a second.** Be patient and pause after asking a question to give youth time to think and respond.
- **Facilitate follow-up questions.** To encourage rich conversation, follow up with more questions like, "Why? Can you provide an example of what you mean? Can you tell me more?"
- **Be open and inclusive of all responses.** Positively acknowledge all answers (nod your head, ask if there is agreement or disagreement). As the discussion continues, correct answers will arise and be reinforced. There is often no one correct answer, which encourages diverse thinking and open discussion.
- **Write it down.** Create spaces that capture youth' questions and ideas. Make a wonder wall for youth to see their questions and those of their peers.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Experiential questions are open-ended to allow for full expression by youth. As a leader, your role is to facilitate the responses for learning and life skill development. For example, rather than asking "Do you like bugs?" ask "What are some of your favorite/least favorite insects?"
- **Encourage interaction.** Allow the youth to share their responses in pairs rather than with the entire group.



The Experiential Learning Model

The Experiential Learning Model begins with youth experiencing or doing an activity on a certain topic (for example, bees), Figure B. 4-H leaders then help their students process the experience by encouraging youth to share and reflect. Lastly, youth apply what they have learned to their lives and community.

Experience (Doing)

Leader: The role of the leader is to describe the experience youth will do before they are told or shown how. Encourage youth to think about what they might see or what might happen by asking questions such as “What do you expect to see?” During the activity, leaders should observe and facilitate inquiry.

Youth: During the experience, youth should explore, examine, construct, and arrange.

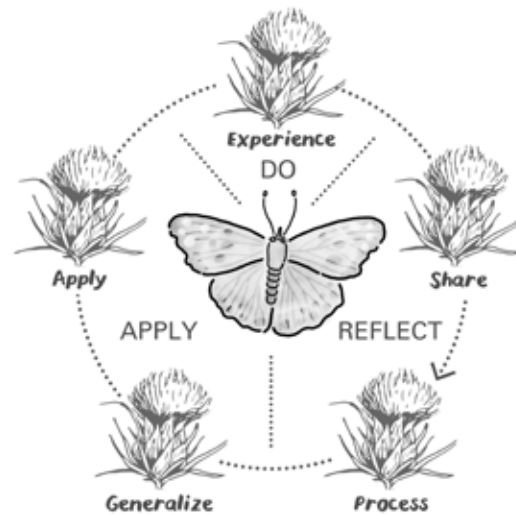


Figure B. The 4-H Experiential Learning Model

Share (What happened?)

Leader: The role of the leader is to engage youth in thinking about the experience and providing responses. Ask youth questions like, “What happened? Why?”

Youth: Youth share the results, reactions, and observations. Youth should be able to describe the results of the experience and their response.

Reflect (What’s important?)

Leader: The role of the leader is to allow adequate processing time for reflecting. Use open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking and feeling. Support youth in analyzing patterns and asking, “What is important?”

Youth: Youth should deepen their processing through discussion, critical reflection, and analysis of the experience. Youth relate the experience to the content ideas shared and relevant life skills being learned.

Generalize (So what?)

Leader: Guide youth in making connections between the personal inner meaning of the activity and the broader world. Develop questions that empower youth to answer, “So what?” and infer how the experience relates to their own lives.

Youth: Youth should relate the experience to real-world examples and connect the topic and life skill discussion to the broader world.



Apply (Now what?)

Leader: Facilitate youth in finding ways to use what they have learned in new situations. Guide youth in making connections between the inner meaning of the activity and the broader world.

Youth: Apply what was learned to a similar or different situation. Youth discuss ways to use the new content and life skill experiences in other parts of their lives.

Share Questions (What happened?)

- What did you like about this activity?
- What part of the activity was the hardest to do?
- How did you decide what to choose?
- What was fun about doing the activity?
- How did your group work together?
- How did you feel about successfully being able to ___?
- What are some decisions you had to make to carry out this activity?
- What steps did you go through before you made your decision?
- Why do you think everyone in your group didn't agree about everything?
- What was it like to have to make quick decisions?
- How did you keep track of everyone's ideas?
- Do you think you get more ideas working alone or in a group? Why?
- What kind of feelings did you have when group members argued?
- What did you observe about the way the groups disagreed (or agreed)?
- How did you use your various senses to ___?
- What new words did you learn?
- Why do you think people have different ideas about what is correct?

Reflect Questions (What's important?)

- What did you learn about yourself by doing this activity?
- Why is it important to know ___?
- How did your group decide ___?
- What did you learn as a group that you might not have learned alone?
- What were some common themes or thoughts you heard?
- How were each person's viewpoints the same? How were they different?



Figure C. 4-H empowers young people with the skills to lead for a lifetime. It's a research-based experience that includes a mentor, a hands-on project, and a meaningful leadership opportunity.



- What problems came up over and over?
- What would you do if _____ were to happen?
- What was easy or difficult about working with a group to _____?
- What did you do if everyone in the group didn't agree on _____?
- How did this differ from the way you are usually taught in school?
- Give an example of a challenge you had and what you did to solve it.
- What works best to get people involved and excited about doing this type of activity?
- Why is learning with others sometimes more fun than learning alone?
- What suggestions would you have for someone who wanted to _____?

Generalize Questions (So what?)

- What other situations like this have you experienced?
- Why is it important that each person has his/her own view?
- When have you had to _____ before?
- Where can you find resources to help you make some of your decisions about _____?
- When else have you had fun and learned new things at the same time?
- Why is it important to have plenty of information before making decisions?
- When do you make decisions that require everyone in the group to agree?
- What do you do when you don't agree with the group?
- What did you learn about your skill in making decisions?
- What did you learn about your skill in communicating with others?
- Describe five ways in which new ideas can be communicated to you.
- In what ways do people help each other learn new things?
- What are some ways you like to learn?
- What did you learn?

Apply Questions (What was learned?)

- How would you teach someone about this activity or concept?
- What did you learn today that you will be able to use in school....at home?
- What did you learn by participating in this process that will help you in the future?
- Describe a time when you might need the skills/knowledge you learned today.
- What are some other situations when you will need to use the skills you learned today?
- What would you do differently if you conducted this activity again?



Figure D. Engage youth in developing critical thinking skills by fostering an atmosphere of questioning and discussion.