The Power of Experiential Learning

By Peter DeArmond

The late Paul Halmos, a genius mathematician, was one of those gifted professors who understood the key to helping people learn. He said something profound that I share with anyone who wants a career in education or training:

"The best way to learn is to do; the worst way to teach is to talk."

Nearly every college student can recall at least one course in which the professor droned on with boring lectures that set off the napping reflex. Dr. Halmos, and others like him, identified a much better way. It's commonly known as Experiential Learning.

In the last century, educational reform pioneers such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Kurt Lewin and others described the need for more enlightened approaches to teaching and learning. Just a little over 30 years ago David A. Kolb and Roger Fry published the theory of experiential learning, and the rest is history.

Today you'll hear it referred to as "the experiential learning cycle." It's the method used most often by people who train and facilitate behavioral change, such as improving skills in interpersonal communications, team-building, customer service, management and leadership.

(Personal note: Experiential Learning is used by certificated teachers who love to witness their students really learning. My sister, Margaret DeArmond, was president of the California Math Council and was a major influence toward incorporating experiential learning methods to improve math education.)

There are different interpretations of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, but the basic version includes 1) a concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, 3) the formation of abstract concepts and 4) testing in new situations. The facilitator's role is vital, not just to design the right activity for the intended "learnings" with clear instructions, but especially to facilitate the discussion of the remaining three stages of the cycle.

For example, as a facilitator who uses the experiential learning cycle all the time, I have often witnessed an interesting phenomenon after the initial activity. There are always some participants who want to jump to conclusions about what to do next. Instead, I've found that it's vital to take time for stage 2, observation and reflection. I say to my participants, "Let's rewind and think: what happened just now?" Not why it happened, just what actually happened.

Another reason stage 2 is so important is that it allows the participants to ask questions and communicate with each other. They eventually get on the same page about what took place. In real life we often skip this, resulting in disagreements about what to do next. Taking the time for reflection is essential before going to stage 3.

In the third stage the participants make sense of all the things that happened in the initial activity. They can make comparisons between what they did, what others did, refer to what they already know and apply that to the discussion. If they're in an academic setting, they might refer to textbook theories to add some perspective, or refer to personal life experiences, or any other knowledge they have. This makes the discussion a real learning event, because it is directly relevant to everyone.

The last stage of the experiential learning cycle is for the participants decide how they are going to apply what they've learned. This allows them to do some thoughtful planning, to consider what specific actions should be taken, what should be done differently, and anticipate what is likely to happen next. During the last stage each participant should be considering how his or her "learnings" (which I like to call "take-aways") are personally relevant to the application of the next steps. And it's essential that each participant has one or more relevant take-aways. If not, then as a facilitator I would question whether I used the right activity in stage one, or if I facilitated the discussions properly, or if I ensured everyone had the opportunity to participate.

A seasoned facilitator can make the experiential learning cycle a fun and relevant learning experience. Personally, whether I'm teaching a college class or doing contract training for an organization, I like to begin by drawing a diagram of the experiential learning cycle on some flip chart paper before I begin the lesson. I briefly explain what we'll be doing in each of the steps. This way the participants have an idea of what to expect from me, and what I'll expect from them.

Here's one warning about designing activities and using the experiential learning cycle: It takes time and preparation to do it right. Some classroom teachers I have known stopped using experiential learning methods because it took far more time to prepare, execute and tie in to required learning "outcomes."

Dr. Stephen D. Brookfield, a renowned educator and proponent of experiential learning, says that some teachers tend to be so concerned with presenting information that they overlook student needs to reflect upon it. He says curriculum should not be studied in some kind of artificial isolation, but that "ideas, skills, and insights learned in a classroom are tested and experienced in real life," and that it's essential to "reflect on experience, so that formal study is informed by some appreciation of reality."

It's daunting when a facilitator is asked to provide training with the expectation that it will result in changed behaviors. With that in mind, I'll conclude with a quote from Dr. Carl Rogers, one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th Century:

"The only kind of learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered or self-appropriated learning — truth that has been assimilated in experience."