

MIRIAM WEINSTEIN WEBB
DOCTORAL QUALIFYING THESIS

A DEFINITIVE CRITIQUE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Candidacy Committee Approval

Dr. Frank Friedlander

Dr. David Kolb

Dr. Eric Nielsen

Department of Organizational Behavior
Division of Graduate Studies
Weatherhead School of Management
Case Western Reserve University

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Miriam W. Webb

The research was begun in 1977 at the request of Dr. David Kolb, co-originator of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), the Experiential Learning Cycle Model, its Learning Style Inventory, and adaptive competence instruments and measures. It was undertaken to substantiate the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the theory, i.e. to test for construct validity. The document was to have been published as part of a research project on Life Long Learning and Adult Development funded by the National Institute of Education, through the Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. Although Kolb signed off on the research conclusions, the findings were not published. Neither was the theory amended to make it valid.

ABSTRACT

The paper is a critique of Experiential Learning Theory and its hypothesized construct validity. A thorough examination of the intellectual and scientific roots of Experiential Learning Theory, its assumptions, and foundational references were analyzed to address three substantive questions fundamental to the theory. What is learning? Are the Experiential Learning Model modes separate and distinct in their functions so as to necessitate a four-stage cycle for learning to take place? Is dialectic tension the mechanism that mediates the relationship between the modes and between the person and the environment? First, the research addresses learning, and the definition derived by Experiential Learning Theory. This section concludes that Experiential Learning Theory's definition is a dramatic distortion of the very epistemological fundamentals it references. The author proposes a different definition more consistent with those fundamentals. Second, the research addresses Experiential Learning Model's foundational propositions, experiential learning modes, their constitutive natures, and their place in relation to learning theory. It concludes that all four modes are *not* required for learning to take place, and demonstrates that this component of the theory is rife with inherent contradiction and inconsistency. The author suggests ways in which these contradictions could be resolved. Finally, the research addresses the use of dialectic tension as the mediating function of learning, by tracing the meaning of dialectic from its inception with Socrates through Karl Marx and up to its place in Experiential Learning Theory. The research concludes that dialectic tension is *not* a viable mechanism for mediating modes of learning. The research further substantiates that the proposition that learning, by its very nature, is a tension and conflict-filled process is a misapplication of dialectic tension. The author recommends a complete re-examination of the mechanisms which mediate between learning modes. The paper concludes that the infrastructure of Experiential Learning Theory, its Model, and the Learning Style Inventory is faulty at the core, and recommends that the operational evolution of learning styles as a combination of contiguous modes of learning be re-evaluated.