



# International Journal Advanced Research Publications

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND THE GROWTH OF REFLECTIVE THOUGHT

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Article Received: 08 December 2025, Article Revised: 28 December 2025, Published on: 16 January 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.3764>

### ABSTRACT

The present condition demands a change in teaching methods i.e., a paradigm shift from teacher-centred methods to child-centred methods. One of the child-centred methods is experiential learning. Experiential learning can be understood as a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skills, and value from direct experiences. In other words, it is about learning through experience. Moreover, based on the constructivist approach, experiential learning (EL) as a new method in education and a learner-centric pedagogy is at the centre of attention, as a result of its contributions to improving the value of education which centres on developing abilities, and experiences. NEP 2020 also highlighted that experiential learning should be adopted as standard pedagogy for every subject at all stages, with an exploration of relations among different subjects. Reflection and experiential learning are deeply intertwined with each other and reflections are central in integrating theoretical and practical competencies. Reflective thinking is often a result of some state of doubt or some difficulty that leads to the thought and generates some conclusion or solution. Reflection is a structured, focused way of thinking that is far removed from random thinking. Reflective thinking is a key skill for teachers and should be taught as part of their education.

**KEYWORDS:** Experiential learning, Reflective thinking, learning by doing, Concrete experiences,

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of experiential learning is not new. Experiential education has solid basis. By deviating from the conventional road, they progress from Aristotle to Buddha, from

biological phenomena to trends on the correct path in daily life. The philosophical pragmatism beliefs of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin's social psychology theory, Carl Rogers' theories of learning while learning, Maria Montessori's Montessori method, and Jean Piaget's cognitive theory serve as the foundation for the integrated model of learning from experiences.

The idea of experiential learning was introduced for the first time by John Dewey in 1938. John Dewey, the founder of modern experiential education, regularly promoted experience as a crucial component of learning. He believed that gaining knowledge by practice or by doing is a crucial element of academic achievement. For a lesson to be progressive, Dewey contends that experiential learning is a requirement. Later, Lewin, Piaget, Roger, Montessori, and Kolb developed this concept. Each of them held the opinion that students should actively participate in the lesson rather than simply observe it. According to Rogers (1969), experiential learning contains practical information that has a greater educational impact on the pupils. A person's experience is transformed, in accordance with Piaget (1973), through an active process that encourages event knowledge and the growth of the person's creative talents. Hence, "the process by which knowledge is generated through the transformation of experience" is what learning is (Kolb, 1984). In order to learn meaningfully, David Kolb (1984) also underlined the importance of concrete experiences. As a result, in this pedagogical method, the student is the focal point of experiential learning, and learning (the knowledge obtained) happens as an outcome of personal interaction.

The four stages of Kolb's experiential learning model comprise real learning events that are supported by processes of reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. Based on the knowledge gained in the first three steps of active experimentation, students take on the last step. Exposing students to real-world scenarios permits them to apply what they have learned and reflect on those situations, is known as experiential learning (Silberman, 2007). Experiential learning places a strong emphasis on applying information and skills in real-world contexts to assist students better understand concepts and develop competence in their abilities and conduct. According to the Association for Experiential Education (1995), experiential learning may be summed up as "challenge and experience followed by reflection leading to learning and growth" (1995). Experiential learning is a procedure that develops knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on purposeful reflection on an event, according to

UNESCO (2010). Learning by doing, learning by action, learning through experience, and learning via discovery and exploration are some names for the experiential learning approach. Given the significance of education, NEP (2020) has made a number of proposals, with a focus on reforming the pedagogical and curricular agenda to make it pertinent and responsive to learners' developing needs. Children ranging in age from 6 to 18 (Grades 1–12) will be seen as learners who are enrolled in school, and their education should be enjoyable, holistic, and integrated. The traditional methods of learning, such as the lecture technique, recitation, rote learning, etc., were once thought to be used in schools (Sharma, 2022). However, given the demands of the modern world, content knowledge is insufficient for the learners' overall growth. Many policy documents emphasized the need for pedagogical innovations that would shift away from the existing culture of rote learning and towards true understanding and learning how to learn at all levels of school instruction (NCF 2005, NFG 2006 & NEP 2020). Hence, experiential learning should be embraced as a standard pedagogy for every topic at all levels, with a study of relationships between various courses, according to NEP 2020. Today, experiential learning has taken the place of rote learning as a key strategy in all modern, creative pedagogical practices as it holistically aims to move students away from rote learning and towards learning via doing and personal experience. Yet, the state and federal governments of India have taken many steps to introduce learning through experience into the classroom and promote learning by doing.

### **Significance of Experiential Learning**

1. Learning through experience is the procedure of learning by doing. It is a successful method for including pupils and making sure they are learning well. It enables practical knowledge and improves the capacity to apply classroom knowledge to real-world circumstances.
2. Experiential learning fosters strong linkages between conceptual classroom concepts and student experiences by allowing reflection on lived experiences. These discussions make the theoretical concepts and information provided in the classroom applicable and approachable.
3. The students may engage successfully, be creative and interested, test their assumptions, and actively apply their prior knowledge to attain new information due to experiential learning.
4. The goal of experiential learning is to make the learner the focal point of the classroom. By creating themselves, students are able to think critically, make choices, and master knowledge.

## **Experiential Learning and the Growth of Reflective Thought**

Experiential learning is a process through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes by engaging directly with real-world experiences. At its core, it moves beyond passive forms of education and involves active participation, reflection, and application — all of which foster reflective thinking, a critical skill for personal and professional development.

### **The Foundation of Experiential Learning**

David Kolb (1984) is one of the most influential theorists in this field. The four phases of the cyclical process he referred to as experiential learning are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

According to Kolb, effective learning requires the learner to go through each stage, particularly emphasizing the role of reflection in making sense of experiences: “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

### **Reflective Thought as an Outcome and Process**

Reflection is not just an outcome of experience but a vital part of the learning process itself. The idea of the "reflective practitioner" was first presented by Donald Schön in 1983. He argued that in order for professionals to improve their practice and respond meaningfully to complicated situations, they must participate in reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and reflection-on-action (thinking after doing). This reflective process helps learners make sense of their actions and internalize lessons, thereby transforming experience into deeper understanding and wisdom.

### **Dewey's Perspective on Experience and Reflection**

John Dewey (1933) viewed reflection as essential to meaningful learning. He believed that education must be based on real experiences, but warned that “not all experiences are educative.” The critical difference lies in the learner's ability to reflect on the experience, extract insights, and apply them in future situations. Dewey stated that “we do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience” (Dewey, 1933, p. 78).

### **Linking Experience to Critical Thinking and Growth**

The development of metacognitive abilities, or the capacity to reflect on one's own thinking, is inherently supported by experiential learning.

Through systematic reflection, learners become more self-aware, recognize patterns in their behavior or decision-making, and take responsibility for their learning paths (Moon, 2004). This growth is not only intellectual but also emotional and social, preparing individuals for complex, real-world challenges.

### **Applications in Education and Professional Settings**

In educational contexts, experiential learning is implemented through service learning, internships, project-based learning, and role-plays — all of which are designed to promote reflective practices. In professional environments, reflective thinking aids continuous improvement, ethical decision-making, and lifelong learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

Reflection and experiential learning go hand in hand. In order to integrate theoretical and practical skills and reveal latent assumptions, reflections are essential (Mezirow, 1997; Schön, 1983). Students will encounter a variety of ambiguous, confusing, unstable, complex, and contradicting objectives with uncertain results in real-world situations. Such situations call for careful consideration. The complexity of the situation is further highlighted by Moon's (1999) description of reflection as a mental processing technique: When applied to somewhat complex or unorganized ideas for which there is no obvious answer, reflection appears to be a type of cognitive processing with an objective and/or a desired result (p. 98).

Kolb (1984) offered a four-stage experiential learning cycle as one method of cognitively connecting reflection with experiential learning. Students have a tangible experience in the first stage, and they reflect on it in the second. The third stage comes next, during which students adapt their experiences and reflections as well as change or build upon their abstract conceptualisations. In other words, they learn from their mistakes. Students ultimately use these ideas in a variety of contexts to acquire fresh experiences that start the subsequent learning cycle. Similar to Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), they identified three phases required to facilitate learning from experience, although they placed more emphasis on the actual activities during stages two and three.

The first step is to revisit the event as it occurred, ideally in writing, without thinking on or passing judgement on it. The second stage is to be aware of any feelings that could come up as you think back on the incident. Reevaluating the experience, placing it in the context of previous experiences, adding new information, testing it in different ways, and personalising it are all part of the third stage. When the whole person is welcomed into the classroom, their

emotions, experiences, and frames of reference all influence how they engage with the material (Coulson & Harvey, 2013).

### **Reflective Thinking**

The teaching and learning processes are a current issue that has drawn a lot of interest in educational research. A variety of student academic learning concerns, such as worries regarding the effectiveness of learning approaches and the degrees of reflective thinking displayed by students in their academic learning, are of particular relevance. There has been a significant resurgence in curiosity in the discipline of reflection in recent years (Herrington & Oliver, 2002). Reflection is described as "those intellectual and affective processes in which individuals engage to analyse their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985). According to Andrusyszyn & Davie (1997), reflection is also "a human process that arises from the cognitive and affective synthesis of ideas and that it may be strengthened through discourse," with the aim of creating sense. Reflection is "deliberate thinking about action with a view to improving it," according to Hatton & Smith (1994). Dewey (1916) lists five characteristics of reflective practice that include: Confusion and uncertainty arise when a student encounters a novel scenario or experience. Conjectural anticipation occurs when a pupil starts to assess the circumstance and formulates tentative assumptions or hypotheses. Examining, inspecting, exploring, and analysing: Learner does a complete analysis of the circumstance. The mental processes that allow one to observe a past experience, incident, or action and analyse it to learn about one's future actions are referred to as "reflection." It involves Metacognition, or "thinking about thinking,".

According to Dewey (1933), reflective thinking frequently results from a situation of uncertainty or a challenge that sparks the idea and produces a inference or an answer. He described reflection as a concentrated, organised mode of thinking distinct from random thought. According to Zimmerman (2000), reflection is a procedure that encourages analysis and allows for judgements regarding previously completed work. The cognitive processes of self-evaluation, event clarification, conclusion-making, and adopting adjustments to satisfy predetermined criteria are triggered during reflection. Reflective thinking should be taught to teachers as part of their education because it is a crucial talent for them. Written reflection methods reveal student teachers' meta-cognitive processes, including their professional self-image, attitudes towards their instruction, and beliefs and perceptions (Collina & Karsentib, 2011).

Written reflection tools show the meta-cognition processes of student instructors, including their attitudes towards their instruction, their beliefs and perceptions, and their professional self-image (Collina & Karsentib, 2011).

## **Significance of Reflective Thinking**

### **1. Broadens the Perspective**

Reflective thinking can enable you to see things from others' perspectives and help you be more understanding of them.

### **2. Key to make Improvement**

Growing both personally and professionally requires making improvements. Increasing your self-awareness and understanding of your identity will help you decide where to concentrate your efforts.

### **3. Ability to Take on New Challenges**

Being a reflective thinker might increase your motivation because you'll understand your goals and motivations better. As a result, you might be more eager to accept new challenges and less afraid of them.

### **4. Apply Knowledge to Other Situations**

Reflective thinkers are able to relate new ideas to prior experiences in order to broaden their comprehension of events. This increases your total knowledge and confidence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reflective practice is an ongoing, dynamic process of critically analysing, reflecting, and thinking honestly about all aspects of professional activity, while learning through experience involves students in practical experiences that enable them to apply what they have learnt and give them the opportunity to reflect on those experiences. In order to create new strategies that can enhance instruction, reflective practice involves systematically studying and assessing one's own work. Teachers are urged to use reflective practice to better understand their students. Experience is the first step in the cycle of learning, which is followed by reflection, action, and finally a tangible reflection experience.

In today's rapidly changing and complex world, reflective thinking is no longer optional — it is essential. Experiential learning equips individuals with the flexibility and insight needed to navigate uncertainty, solve problems creatively, and engage ethically with diverse contexts. Whether in formal education or professional development, reflective growth grounded in experience nurtures **lifelong learners** who are self-aware, adaptive, and committed to

improvement. In conclusion, we can state that reflection and experience both are essential to effective learning for both teachers and students.

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