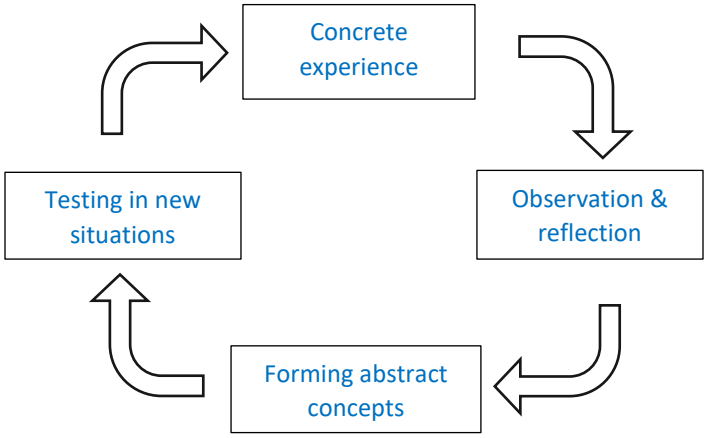
Kolb learning cycle

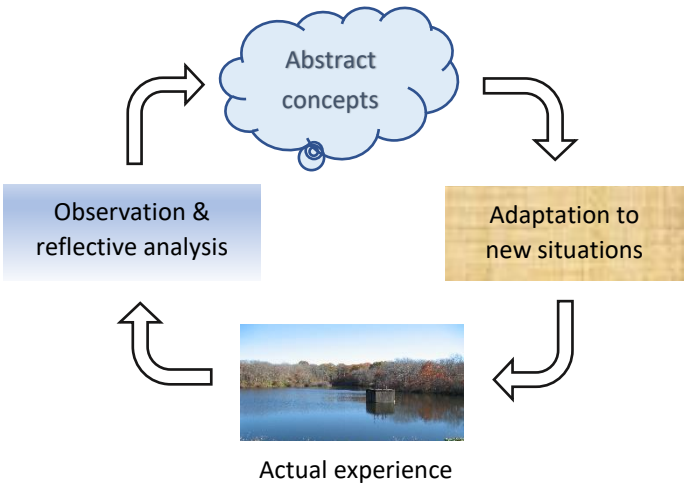
helps to choose good starting points and explanation pathways
when teaching, discussing or researching

by David Wm Brown April 2017

Back in the 1970s, professor-consultant David Kolb offered a model for diagnosing how people learn. He was thinking especially about "experiential learning" styles of adults who are out in the world, not just formal classes. He observed that effective learning entailed a cycle of four learning styles (see chart), but that people differ as to the starting point that fits best. Students and academics often start with abstract concepts. Technicians typically like to adapt things to new situations, with concepts in the back of their minds. Persons in business tend to like real-world case studies as starting points and to feel uncomfortable with abstract talk. Some others like first to observe and analyze real-world experiences, as a basis for shaping better concepts and methods for future use. David Kolb, his wife and associates developed questionnaires that can be used to help uncover the traits and favored learning style of a group that you may be teaching or working with. They found that various world cultures have learning-style differences.



The Kolb model has become much more elaborate than the four phases shown above. There have been some critics. Others in the field of experiential learning have useful approaches too. For more, see:
http://learningfromexperience.com
http://infed.org/mobi/david-a-kolb-on-experiential-learning/
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experiential_learning



I have found the Kolb model to be very helpful for shaping courses, in-service training, and technical aid work in the U.S. and abroad. One change I've made is to use an upside-down version of Kolb's diagram. To my practical-minded students, it made more sense to put Abstract Concepts on top, in the clouds … and Concrete Experience down to earth.

Here in Rhode Island I see useful applications of the Kolb cycle, for example…

- Zoning and planning boards, when weighing requests for special exceptions, could more often bring solid concepts of location, land, and development economics into account. Town/city Comprehensive Plans are a key way to adapt these concepts to our local situations, aims and concerns. More solid reflective analysis could go into the updating of these Comp Plans.
- School committees tend to bog down with details, teacher contracts, budget-cutting predilections. Reaching up into the "clouds" for proven concepts of size economies, inter-district cooperation, and productive teacher arrangements could help. When shaping school programs, starting points that provide practical experience (often leading to felt-needs by students themselves for more depth) could give many young people a big boost—electronics, food preparation, maritime crafts, horticulture, health care, etc.
- In discussion groups, it's common here to have several panel members who present stories from actual experience. But often it's left at that, without ending up with some diagnostic synthesis and concept-building. (What are the implications of these stories? Any generalizations that could help others?)

Kolb's cycle can be applied to research too

When a prof at the University of Tennessee, I went a step further and urged using a Kolb-type cycle as a basis for defining research projects. (See diagram.) The typical thesis study uses abstract concepts to form hypotheses, then tests them in new situations. At UT we had quite a few mid-career international students and returned Peace Corps Volunteers. Several theses produced fresh, more realistic concepts and hypotheses by starting with the actual grassroots experiences of those students, then doing reflective analyses of what worked and didn't work. These reviews of pilot programs and real-world experience often led to creative blending of concepts and methods from more than one discipline.