

How to Write a Kolb Paper

by Peggy Hailstone

Love it or loathe it the Kolb model is frequently used in a university setting. If you haven't encountered it at undergraduate level, like tinsel on a Christmas tree expect it to feature regularly on your postgraduate course outline.

If you're not one for the academic life and have just sighed in relief at having missed the Kolb boat, don't put your oars away just yet! In recent years the Kolb model has found its way into the corporate world with organisations like Kraft using the concept to analyse workplace behaviour and facilitate workplace learning.

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What Kolb Is

Consisting of four stages—Concrete Experimentation, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation—the Kolb model is a paradigm of (and for) adult learning. In a classroom or higher education setting the Kolb model is generally used as a form of Action Learning¹. In this format the student is required to produce a paper written specifically around the model. As a pedagogical tool the Kolb model is unique, producing an assessable piece of work while simultaneously facilitating meta-learning².

Formulated by David A Kolb, a Harvard graduate and Ohio Professor of Organisation Behaviour, the Kolb model premises that real learning occurs where theory and experience intersect. Like the saying 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand', when our learning is grounded in reality comprehension is solid.

Kolb's (1984) text *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning & Development* (Prentice Hall) draws upon the work of Dewey, Freire, Piaget and Lewin. Consequently the work is an amalgam of individual and social psychology, philosophy, group dynamics, and educational theory. It is this underlying depth and breadth of thought that ensures its current (and no doubt future) inclusion on course outlines.

What Kolb Isn't

Just as Kolb's influences are acknowledged—and contrary to some popular student belief—it is important to note that a Kolb paper is not an opportunity to write an un-referenced essay. As with all academic writing, referencing is necessary to distinguish your work from others', to give attribution where required, and to ensure thought is undertaken critically and at an acceptable academic level. Hence there is (unfortunately) no escaping the usual academic requirements of reading widely, taking notes, and analysing relevant subject matter points.

¹ Action learning is learning by doing, rather than by acquiring information. It is predicated on the learner taking an active role in the learning process.

² Meta-learning can be understood as 'learning to learn'.

The Dualistic Nature of a Kolb Paper

At the micro level, and as previously mentioned, a Kolb paper is constructed by writing around each of the four stages (Concrete Experimentation, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation). Using the title of each stage as a heading, the result is four easy-to-identify essay sections.

At the macro level consideration is given to the big-picture. To obtain this helicopter view the key question is: *'Beyond experience, reflection, knowledge and experimentation with theory, what has my real learning been?'* The key concept is connection. *'How does the experience I am writing about connect to life experience, work experience, circumstances, people, places, or events?'* *'How does my experience connect with those who have gone before me, with national or international events, with policy or social issues?'* At this level the student is called upon to think conceptually, critically, and philosophically.

Importantly for those of us who aren't psychologists or psychics, this big-picture perspective does not reveal itself until the micro level detail has been bedded-down. Trying to do both from the outset is a mistake; it has the potential to freeze the student and ultimately hinder the writing process. Rather than attempting the big picture at project commencement it should be kept consciously in the background [mind], formulating and fermenting as the micro level detail is tackled.

The Kolb Paper Versus the Standard Essay

There are similarities and differences between a Kolb paper and a traditional essay. Primarily a traditional essay is objective. In contrast a Kolb paper seeks a significant amount of subjectivity. The subjectivity required is high-level personal and individual reflectivity. Like the Hokey Pokey it's a matter of putting your whole self in. Conversely a traditional academic essay situates the author solely outside the text. This will always sit more comfortably with some of us, less so for others. Like any skill, practice makes perfect.

In terms of similarities both papers have a beginning, middle and end. In the traditional format these are the *introduction*, *body* and *conclusion*. In the Kolb model the first two stages serve as the *introduction*, Stage 3 is the *body*, and Stage 4 acts as the *conclusion*. Just as the majority of referencing falls in the body of a traditional essay, the majority of referencing under the Kolb framework will occur in Stage 3.

Writing the Four Stages

Stage 1 - Concrete Experience

There's an old proverb that says 'experience is what you get after the fact'. Keep this in mind as you write your Concrete Experience because it is an experience you've *had* which you need to document. 'Documenting' is also used purposefully because it sums up the Stage 1 requirement.

Stage 1 is the **feeling** stage. Aside from the fear this prompts for the rationalists amongst us the main difficulty with documenting the Concrete Experience is the need to reflect upon the situation (ie, it has already happened otherwise we couldn't be writing about it). Consequently—because it has happened in the past—we often inadvertently end up in Stage 2 (Reflective Observation). Two tools to aid the student with Stage 1 are: write in the first person and write in the present tense.

"Hi, I'm Nicola," loudly declares the dark-haired, twenty something girl who has arrived for a three o'clock computer-based training session. I introduce myself and accept the training manual she offers. The organization is a university, and the programme I'm being trained on, CROSSFIRE, is the main student database.

Nicola explains [loudly] that she will log me in and 'we'll go from there'. I wonder whether her heightened volume is due to nerves.

Having organised two chairs I'm somewhat dismayed when she takes the driver's seat. "But I need to know how to log on and what the screens look like," I think to myself. But it's too late as she's already [logged] in and like a filly on race day she's off. Having reclaimed the manual she's attempting to introduce me to two additional sheets of information as her hands fly left, right, up and down, back and forth across the keyboard. "F8 clears the screen," she informs, "and F4 takes you forward a screen. "F6 is the exit key and F9 ... but don't worry about these for now."

I eventually comprehend that the additional information contains instructions about forms and reports, 'for things like Zoaster, Zoonit, and Uldreg' she explains. I have no idea what these mean and it's all moving way too quickly and I feel that at some basic level I am sadly lacking something, it's like some pre-knowledge that I should just know has eluded me. "You're looking really worried," she booms in my left ear.

Given the pace and jargon, and an inner concern I'm secretly being trained on a Lord of the Rings' pilot programme, my inner critic and I have commenced an argument about high expectations [a common and ongoing theme]. "She's very friendly and approachable," prompts my light side.

I opt for small talk. "Does CROSSFIRE stand for something?" I ask. I'm met with a blank stare and a significant pause in verbal and bodily communications. "Is it an acronym?" I elaborate. "I don't know," she says, "no one's ever asked that before".

Her mobile phone rings breaking the break in our conversation and as she answers my dark-side kicks in. Dismay and concern give way to annoyance about poor structure, inadequate facilitation, and basic considerations of courtesy.

Stage 2 - Reflective Observation

In writing Kolb's second stage remember you are still introducing information to your audience. From a writing perspective it is still first person perspective. The difference now is that it's occurring (being written) in the past tense.

This stage is often referred to as the **watching** stage. As the writer you need to 'put yourself in their shoes'. The notion here being to reflect upon the situation you are writing about to broaden your perspective. The key question is: *What might be the view or perspective of those who inhabited my Concrete Experience?* I find it helpful to imagine the situation playing-out on a big screen.

In reflecting on the CROSSFIRE training session I realised that beyond the ad hoc nature of the training and the inappropriate use of jargon there were additional hindrances for both trainer and trainee. These included the IT Department's neglect in installing two additional and linked software programmes, and lack of access to a Local Area Network printer. These issues severely limited the session as crucial data could not be manipulated or printed, and practical exercises could not be carried out.

When combined with the interruption of an unrelated phone call, and the trainer's propensity to speak louder than necessary, the session stands out as disjointed, ineffective, and unprofessional. While total learning duration was 1.5 hours, content covered and experience gained amounted to less than fifty percent of the allocated timeframe.

Consequently at session end dismay about style and format had turned to derision about the organization. I was astounded that a public and high profile organisation such as a university – with a clearly stated policy of a 'learning organization' (for staff as well as students) – could offer such poor service.

Furthermore, as the training session was a clear example of instrumental learning I was baffled by the trainer's choice of driver's seat and her decision not to instruct? Similarly I was unable to comprehend why a system overview wasn't included at commencement, or [minimally] included in the manual? Already confused about boundaries between CROSSFIRE and another commonly used university database, this lack of overview hampered the learning experience from the outset.

Stage 3 - Abstract Conceptualisation

Like the traditional essay, Stage 3 forms the body of your paper. It's the nuts and bolts of what you are reading, writing and formulating. Initially it is important to define and explain the theoretical underpinnings you intend to draw upon. Don't be afraid to provide background. Remember, your audience has not read as broadly or as specifically as you. Like a driving instructor you need to show *where, how, why* and *what* has driven you from point A to point B.

Kolb's third stage is also the **thinking** stage. Here we apply and document our newfound knowledge. I say 'newfound' because over the past few weeks—preceding the writing of your Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation—you have no doubt read many articles, books and papers to facilitate a deep comprehension of the theoretical and empirical constructs of your subject matter!

I tend to think of Kolb's third stage as unpacking or debunking. Using the Concrete Experience, drawing upon the Reflective Observation, and utilising your chosen framework (theory), the idea is to analyse and critique your experience.

From a writing perspective Stage 3 involves a moving away from the subjective to a more objective standpoint. Similarly, language usage and writing style become more academic.

Two significant issues arose from this learning experience: lack of adherence to a workplace learning model, and the importance of voice modulation as an aspect of facilitation.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) defines workplace learning as "... learning or training undertaken in the workplace ...". (ANTA 2002, p. 2). Their definition includes training held on-site but performed separate to actual job locations. Importantly, ANTA points out that a significant aspect of workplace learning is its connection to business strategy. In the case of the organisation and scenario under discussion the offering of training to temporary staff (notwithstanding the calibre of training) does seem to match this criterion. (ANTA 2002).

In Coaching On the Job (1992) author and presenter Peter Quarry posits a five-stage model of workplace learning. Consisting of Need Determination, Explanation, Demonstration, Practice, and Feedback it offers a highly transferable and easily adaptable model for coaching or on the job training, and can be used to facilitate transfer of a variety of instrumental or basic learning (Quarry 1992). While the scheduled training means the Need Determination has already been undertaken, the latter four categories of Quarry's model would have proven an ideal means for transferring information.

Howard (2001) in Effective Communication, Expressing Ourselves Well in Presentation, asserts that vocal expression accounts for 38 percent of communication. In other words an audience will hear, judge and absorb approximately one third of presented information based on voice tone, modulation, volume, vocabulary and pacing. What Howard is rightly attempting to convey is "it's not what you say but how you say it". (Howard & Howard 2001, Sofo 1999).

Like active listening which encourages the listener to hear as well as listen, correct voice usage encourages the learner to learn as well as hear. Can you imagine being yelled at in a meditation class? Or sung to in a lecture?

Sofo in Human Resource Development (1999) describes the purpose of facilitation as a process of making something easier. Incorrect tone, pitch, or poor voice style has the potential to make the learner's life more difficult, impeding both learning ability and agility. (Sofo 1999).

Stage 4 - Active Experimentation

Kolb's fourth stage is Active Experimentation. Like salad dressing it's applied last because it adds zest and binds everything together.

Stage 4 is the **doing** stage. Having reflected, documented, and theorised, it is now time to apply the learning. Sometimes this has not yet occurred so you need to situate learning in a future circumstance. *'In the future I intend to ... Based on this experience I will ...'*

For the journeywoman [or man] the learning is likely to have already played out in a personal or work situation, possibly at an emotional or spiritual level. Think of that salad and its bland loose leaves and apply this experience liberally! Emotional and spiritual learnings have universal resonance and will add zest and depth to a paper. They also have potential to add great cohesiveness to thought.

Finally, stage 4 is the conclusion. Here we move consciously into meta-learning by pondering how the Kolb model has aided the learning process. This is also the time to articulate those macro level formations and fermentations that you've been sitting on for the past few days or weeks. The key, remember, is connection. In previous situations I have written Active Experimentations in both first and third person. I have also used present, past and future tense. In short, no guidelines or rules. Just be confident and trust your inner creativity and voice.

I'm at Hartwell station on a cold morning waiting for the 7.32 am train. As is my propensity, my mind starts to wander to obscure things like university study ...

"Honey, do you know Thomas Merton's famous quote about learning?" The question, addressed to my husband, is met with a glare of indifference, probably because it's 7.35 am and I am in a philosophical mood so early in the day.

"Arh gee, funnily enough, not off the top of my head," he replies.

"Merton said 'the least of learning is done in the classroom'. I've been contemplating it for a few days in regard to my studies. In fact yesterday, after that conflict at work, I sat in the garden and really

thought it through. I think Merton is onto something fundamental about learning and I think I might use it in my HRD essay.”

“But what’s it got to do with Human Resources?” he says, “you know, the subject you’re actually studying?”

“Well the first issue is pretty much common-sense. If I work in HRD – whether it’s induction, health and safety, or computer-based training – I need to know how to impart information while encouraging both a learning environment and learner attitude. I practiced on your Mum last week at home when I taught her some basic excel skills via the explanation, demonstration, practice and feedback model.

The second issue is much deeper,” I explain, “and more important as it has the potential to affect self and others at an emancipatory level. It’s about knowing what I bring to the table. What personal and personality assumptions underlie my facilitation style, are prompting course design? Similarly, if I am aware and honest about my own propensities and defence mechanisms, I can go some way toward understanding what others are playing out in their training, facilitation, or workplace interactions.”

“Sounds deep,” he sighs. “Yes,” I think to myself, “and ironic considering I chose HR as a means of getting away from the self-examination inherent in my previous career.”

Merton is right, I think to myself as the train pulls away from the station. “Real learning, the stuff that affects us at gut and heart level, occurs beyond the realm of the classroom. It occurs in fragments and whispered memories, through daydreams and subconscious revelations. It happens on metropolitan train-lines, in suburban gardens, and often when least expected. But it clings to our formalised knowledge, our structured training, leaving us forever changed, and always for the better”.

In Conclusion

Regardless of format or type a paper is ultimately about documenting thoughts and understanding on a particular subject matter. The more ordered your thoughts, the more cohesive and readable your paper. The diagrammatic Kolb model offered (overleaf) is a tool to aid this process.

Use the blank call-out boxes as a start-point for recording ideas. Give your Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation a name to flag memories. Jot down the people involved in each of the first two stages. Use dot points in the Abstract Conceptualisation box to indicate theories you intend to draw upon. For Active Experimentation, forecast three or four areas where you might apply newfound knowledge. This will probably change as you work your way through the paper, but by process end it will indicate evidence of growth in thinking.

With diagrammatic representation in hand you now have a map for paper compilation. Keep it handy and refer to it often. Re-read this article before you start to write. And may your Kolb experience, like mine, far exceed your expectations.

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The Diagrammatic Kolb

