

## THE DO'S OF DOING: LOOKING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WITHIN A WIDE PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper has focused on experiential learning and its operation at various levels. For this purpose various definitions of experiential learning were identified and experiential learning was investigated through literature. Within this review of literature the next step was to focus on the characteristics of experiential learning. The next stage then was investigating experiential learning in terms of curriculum and implementation within educational training and teaching institutions. The final element of the paper was concentrating on experiential learning and its relationship with personal growth and emotional development.

**Key words:** experiential learning, personal and emotional development, affective education

### ÖZET

Bu çalışma yaşantı yoluyla öğrenme ve onun farklı ortamlardaki işleyişini temel almaktadır. Bu amaçla literatürdeki yaşantı yoluyla öğrenme tanımlamaları ele alınarak bu yolla öğrenmenin karakteristik özellikleri üzerinde durulmuştur. Daha sonraki aşamada ise yaşantı yoluyla öğrenme ders programı içeriği açısından ele alınıp eğitim kurumlarında nasıl uygulanabileceği üzerinde tartışılmıştır. Bu yazının son olarak ele alınan unsuru ise yaşantı yoluyla öğrenmenin grup sürecinde kişisel ve duygusal gelişimle ilişkisidir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** yaşantı yoluyla öğrenme, kişisel ve duygusal gelişim, duyuşsal eğitim

### Introduction

I hear and I forget  
I see and I remember  
I do and I understand  
Confucius

This Chinese proverb points to a very important aspect of education, which is the concept of learning from experience. We all learn from experiences; “*learning builds on and flows from experience*” (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993 p.5). However, it would be very wrong to say all education comes through experience or “*all experiences are genuinely or equally educative*” (Dewey, 1938. p.13). In order to gain the full value from an experience -

*genuinely or equally educative*- there should be the engagement at least, at some level and opportunity, to reflect on it and to learn from it. In other words, people “learn ‘from’ doing rather than simply ‘by’ doing” (DES, 1979 p.3).

We can see the roots of learning through experience as a significant part of history yet the thought of experiential learning as an educational notion is relatively recent and can be traced to the work of American philosopher and educationalist, John Dewey (1916, 1938). Kolb (1984) explains various contributions in the field of experiential learning and how experiential learning developed. In his work he states that John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget are the founders of the experiential learning approach. He describes in a graphical form the conceptions of learning of these educationalists (Kolb, 1984). Also he points that the approach was further developed by therapeutic psychologies based on psychoanalysis (Carl Jung, Eric Ericson) and humanistic psychology (Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow) as well as by radical educationalists such as Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich.

The techniques and methods employed in Lewin’s T-groups (Shaffer, 1978; Kolb, 1984), encounter groups’ of Rogers (1970), person-centred learning (Rogers, 1969, 1983; Brandes and Ginnis, 1986) have contributed to the conception of experiential learning. What is it in this learning process that makes an effective difference? Surely, it is not the banking concept of education (Freire, 1970) where students patiently receive, memorise and repeat the knowledge as in the traditional passive learning system. On the contrary, in order to move from incompetence to competence and create powerful learning there is more emphasis on the control of learner. Therefore, it is time to look at what experiential learning is.

### **Definitions Of Experiential Learning**

Evans cites various definitions of experiential learning, including one from the Review of Vocational Qualification in April 1986 “*learning through experience rather than through study or formal instruction*” (Evans 1987, p.6).

Boud, Cohen and Walker in their definitions of experiential learning refer to Macquaria Dictionary. “*As an adverb it suggests it is either a particular instance or a process of observing, undergoing or encountering. As a noun; it is all that is known, the knowledge or practical wisdom gained from the observing, undergoing or encountering*” (1993, p.6).

According to these definitions, the emphasis is on ‘observing’ as a detached role, ‘undergoing’ as a passive role, and ‘encountering’ as an active role. In their view the idea of experience has within it judgement, thought and connectedness with other experiences, it is not isolated sensing. Experience is always and everywhere significant. They also refer to Dewey’s idea, which includes the concept of ‘having’ and ‘knowing’. ‘Having’ emphasises the immediacy of contact with the events of life; ‘knowing’ refers to the interpretation of an event. They emphasise the idea that “*...experience is not simply an event which happens, it is an event with meaning...experience is a meaningful encounter. It is not just an observation, a passive undergoing of something, but an active engagement with the*

*environment, of which the learner is an important part*" (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993, p.6).

If we look at Whitaker, he defines experiential learning at its broadest using terms such as "*a living process of awakening*" (1995, p1). Whitaker emphasise the holistic approach to learning and goes on to refer to Mezirow's (1983) concept of learning as a process of adjustment, acclimatisation and understanding of the world around the learner (Whitaker, 1995).

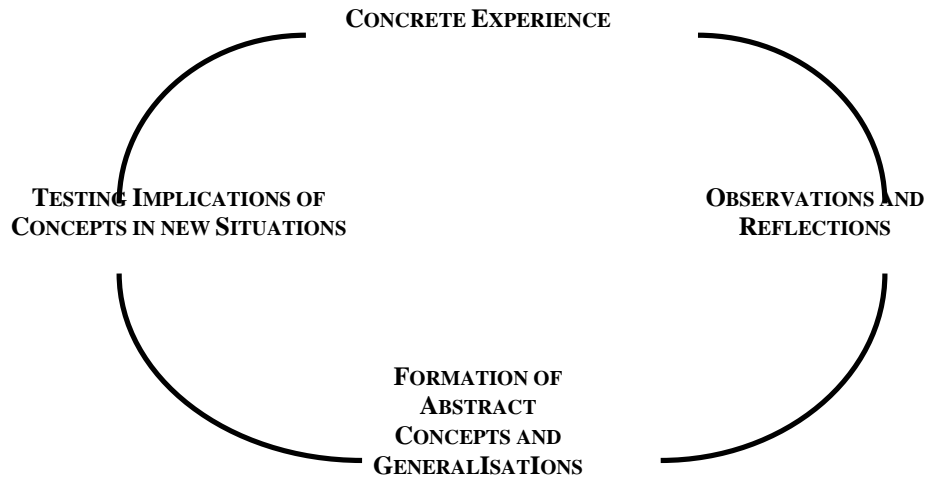
These views suggest that the learning potential is in all of us and that this ability merely needs to be developed. This idea can be expanded where experiential learning has several phases, from the idea of everything being a learning experience, through to the next stage where experiential learning becomes reflective experiential learning, i.e. the ability to analyse one's experience for its full learning potential, and it is important that trainers or facilitator give learners the necessary tools to use their experiences as a form of learning. Thus, experiential learning requires the ability of a learner to reflect on their experiences. Wallace (1996) highlights the idea that because experience by itself becomes a teacher then emphasis can be placed on the reflective process, where participants make meaning out of whatever has been experienced. Thus, there is a need to look at how the experiential learning cycle works and consequently in what sense it is different from the traditional way of receiving knowledge.

### **The Experiential Learning Cycle**

Green and Holloway (1997) points out that since Dewey, there has been a trend to characterise experiential learning in the form of an experiential learning cycle in which learning is usually conceptualised in three or more stages involving immediate or present experience that is used as a foundation for reflection. This reflective learning is then assimilated into a new theory, which can be tested thus creating new experiences allowing the cycle to carry on. A similar view is also put forward by Burnard's (1991) review of the literature and he states, "*the idea of learning from experience being a cycle involving action and reflection was a theme frequently echoed amongst modern writers*" (p. 11).

Thus, a real experience is the key characteristic yet it is not enough. As Johnson and Johnson (1997) stressed, people learn from a combination of experiences and the conceptualisation of their experiences. Boud (1989) stressed that the most significant work of this type has been directed to an understanding of the cycles of learning activity in experience-based learning and the role of reflection (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). If we look at one of the most known experiential learning models, that of Kolb's four-stage cycle (Kolb, 1984) (Figure 1) there is a similarity. The cycle begins with an immediate concrete experience, which can be seen as basis for observation and reflection. The observations are assimilated into an idea or theory from which new applications for action can be concluded. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides to generate new experiences (Chickering, 1977; Wallace, 1996). Therefore, for me when we are talking about experiential learning there is a key aspect, which is that ideas lead to actions. When

we use these ideas and they are tested in action, they are no longer something that we have read or unexamined abstractions. In order to convert experiential learning into real learning, the results of this test or actions must be observed and analysed. Without these observations and analysis activities do not have any meaning and do not turn to new ideas and experiences. Finally there must be a period of reflective review (Chickering, 1977), for not only dealing with the here and now experience and giving meaning to our past experiences but also to prepare for future experiences. Carr & Kemmis (1986) states that the form of reasoning appropriate to the practical sciences was called praxis. In my view the praxis, which is dialectical, is in a way the reflective review. Carr & Kemmis (1986) explains it as: “In praxis, thought and action (theory and practice) are dialectically related. They are to be understood as ‘mutually constitutive’ as in a process of interaction, which is a continual reconstruction of thought and action in the living historical process, which evidences itself in every real social situation. Neither thought nor action is pre-eminent... In praxis, the ideas which guide action are just as subject to change as action is” (p.34).



(Kolb, 1984, p21)

**Figure 1**  
Kolb's Four-stage Cycle

### **Characteristics Of Experiential Learning**

The previous discussion can be clarified with characteristics of experiential learning. Not only Kolb (1984) identifies some characteristics of experiential learning but also Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993), suggest some characteristics of experiential learning as well.

General consensus of authors is in the same line and the followings are the brief explanations of their stated characteristics of experiential learning.

- Ideas are mutable elements they are not fixed of thought but are formed and reformed through experience (Kolb, 1984).
- Learning builds on and comes from experience. Learning can only exist if the experience of the learner is engaged at some level (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993).
- A learner's past is unique and that past will reflect on the learner. If the past is unique so is the experience of that learner unique and has to be taken into account (Kolb, 1984). *"Learning does not occur in isolation from social and cultural norms and values...We can not escape from external norms and values as they are embedded in the language we use and the concept which we have developed to make meaning of experience"* (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993 p. 14).
- Also Kolb (1984) emphasises that learning involves a transaction between the person and the environment. That environment goes beyond the school, books and teacher and must be recognised as such *"in experiential learning theory, the transactional relationship between the person and environment is symbolised in the dual meaning of the term experience one subjective and personal and the other objective and environmental. These two forms of experience interpenetrate and interrelate in very complex way"* (Kolb, 1984, p.35).
- The other characteristics of experiential learning that of the holistic approach (Kolb, 1984; Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). According to them, all learning involves feelings and emotions (affective), the intellectual cerebral (cognitive) and action (conative). We must know when behaviour is governed by thought and when by feeling. Emotions and feelings are the key concepts to both possibilities for and barriers to, learning. Denial of feelings is the denial of learning.
- We must see the experiential learning process as continuous. *"Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience has important educational implications. Put simply, it implies that all learning is relearning"* (Kolb, 1984, p.28).

### **Experiential Learning In The Classroom**

After characteristics of experiential learning we can continue to issue how experiential learning effects to curriculum and how experiential learning shapes the classroom. Firstly, it is useful to describe the educational activities that could be used to instigate experiential learning (Boot and Reynolds, 1983). These include: group discussion - simulations - cases - role play - skill practice exercises - critical incidents - action projects - consultative supervision (coaching) demonstrations - field projects - laboratory methods - seminars - counselling - work conferences - group therapy - community development.

Most experiential learning starts with tutors organising an experience for their students; the opportunity of 'doing' something (Dennison and Kirk; 1990). After doing an exercise, the next stage is that of 'review'. In these two stages tutors have some control. The other stages of the learning cycle, tutors have a less active and clear role. The main task of a tutor

is to guide each student around on his or her individual learning cycle. According to Kolb (1984), this learning cycle is continuously recurring. We continuously examine our concepts in experience and adapt them as result of our observation of the experience. In a very important sense, all learning is relearning and all education is re-education. Second, the direction that learning takes is governed by one's felt needs and goals, and so we form concepts and then test implications of these concepts that are relevant to these felt needs and goals. The implication of this fact is that the process of learning is unreliable and inefficient when personal objectives are not clear. Third, since the learning process is directed by individual needs and goals, learning style becomes highly individual in both direction and process. Kolb (1984), furthermore suggest that learner needs four different capabilities in order to be effective. They are:

- Concrete experience (CE) skills; learner must be able to get involved fully, openly and without bias in new experience
- Reflective observation (RO) skills; to reflect upon and interpret these experiences from different perspective
- Abstract conceptualisation (AC) skills; to create concepts that integrate these observations in logically sound theories and
- Active experimentation (AE) skills; to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems leading to new experiences. (Kolb and Levis, 1986, p.100)

In my opinion these skills cannot be developed by simply receiving knowledge; yet, there are more elements in experiential learning, which empower learners to gain those skills. Therefore, it makes sense when Boud (1989) argue "*It is impossible to discuss experiential learning without bringing in many ideas and issues from closely related aspects of education, training and learning. Experiential learning is not a realm of activity, which can be divorced from other educational practices. It may be less controllable and more context-related, but it is no less in need of clear thinking which builds upon useful concepts from elsewhere*" (p. 40).

It must be remembered that experiential learning affects both tutors and students. The tutors previous experience, needs, attitudes and knowledge are different from their pupils, but while they assist their pupils, the tutors learning cycle is affected. Also tutor's role is different from that of the students'. If experiential learning is to be effective, it must be well organised and purposeful, but sometimes if organisation is too tutor-directed, the elements of learning will be no different than the traditional method. Therefore, students and teachers together have more responsibility in experiential learning than in traditional learning forums. Teachers do not impose or reinforce the "correct" answer but strengthen the child's own process of reasoning. The emphasis is on the students' own thinking and judgement. The teacher requires management skills. School-based experiences must be planned, organised and controlled. Organisation does not mean that students sit and work quietly and listen to the teacher talk nor does it mean telling students what to do and making sure that

they do it. Classroom atmosphere should be “conducive to learning”. The students should spontaneously get involved with objects and activities that interest him/her. Effective experiential learning environment may require constant reorganisation of classroom space to allow flow of students, access to materials, and practical use of space. The teacher must be active in creating an environment that works for the teacher and the students alike (Wadsworth, 1978).

There is a significant harmony between experiential learning and person-centred learning. What Carr & Kemmis (1986) called *the practical view* is very much in same vein. This view sees education as a process or an activity. This perspective asserts that the social world is simply too unpredictable, open and reflexive to allow systemisation as in the traditional way (*technical view*). A practitioner’s work does not consist of designing a set of sequenced means and techniques that drive learners towards a set of expected learning outcomes. It consists of spontaneous and flexible direction and redirection of the learning activity, guided by a sensitive reading of the slight changes and responses of participants in the learning process. If we examine at Rogers’ experiential learning definition –as a big contributor to experiential learning and person-centred learning theory-, we can see its significance and how it is different from the other passive forms of learning.

1. It has a quality of personal involvement. The whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects is involved in the learning event.
2. It is self-initiated. Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within.
3. It is pervasive. It makes a difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner.
4. It is evaluated by the learner... The locus of evaluation may be said to reside definitely in the learner.
5. Its essence is meaning. When such learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience.

(Rogers, 1972, p.276)

Another contributor to experiential learning theory is Freire. He (1970) critically analysed the teacher-student relationship and describe it is as fundamentally narrative in character. The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education is not their transforming power; it is sonority of words that turns student into receptacles. “*The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are*” (Freire, 1970, p.53). This is simply a banking concept of education yet Freire (1970) argues that “*those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking conception its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousnesses consciousness intend upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world.* (p.60)

There are inhibiting factors in the traditional way of receiving knowledge but there is still a strong tendency to practice the more traditional form of education. If we ask people what learning is all about, or how people think learning should happen, most likely people will immediately answer that teachers teach, or experts transfer the knowledge, etc. In this technological age, I guess it is not hard to believe that people think about education as a product (or an investment) and to think of educational organisations as delivery systems, which make products available to the clients (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This passive and unprofessional view of teaching and learning can narrow the use of learning and teaching strategies. Teaching behaviour is often shaped by prior educational experiences. This dependence on teachers has been criticised by many educators. Whitaker (1993) stated “...our obsession with teaching and instruction has stolen from the individual the awareness that one of our most significant genetic features is an awesome capacity for self-development, intellectual growth and self-directed learning” (p.50).

The tutor’s role is to specify the overall objectives, provide any materials, structure some aspects of the sessions, direct proceedings as appropriate and try to guide each student through an experiential learning cycle. There are limits of control for teachers. If the students position is unclear about a topic, the first duty for the teacher is to assist the student to gain total clarity of their topic. Then the student will be in a position to learn (Dennison and Kirk, 1990). Whitaker (1995) emphasises that educational needs to focus less on structure and curriculum and more on practice and process.

By way of summary it must be remembered that all perspectives of experiential learning can apply in a multitude of learning environments and some of these environments are counselling, group therapy, consciousness raising, sensitivity training, creative therapy, human relations training etc. (Boot & Reynolds, 1983). In the light of this list, this paper’s next discussion will be how practitioner can use experiential learning on these areas that I prefer to call them group process for personal and emotional development (PED).

### **Experiential Learning And Its Relationship With Group Process For PED**

There are various aspects of experiential learning that are of great significance and can be applied within personal and emotional development arenas. Some of them have been identified by Henry (1989) and the followings are the more pertinent aspects of Henry’s ideas.

- Independent learning; generally uses problem solving and project based methods.
- Personal development; it is focused on affective learning, using “...techniques from the human potential armoury such as drama, guided imaging, narrative exercises, using diaries or autobiographies, bodywork and creative arts approaches such as meditation, drawing, dance.”  
(Henry, 1989, p30)
- Non-traditional learning refers to the integration of independent study, prior learning and open-learning or distance study method.
- Social-change through group discussion and group project activities.



- Prior learning can refer to essays, autobiography, testimonials and references.
- Work experience utilising techniques such as mentoring, shadowing one or individuals working in a relevant environment.
- Learning by doing can be broken into two categories. Firstly, project based learning through research activities. Secondly, activity based learning that includes simulations, games, role-play or expressive approaches like drama, art and imagination.
- Problem based learning approaches using problem identification, exploration, and the process allowing for generation of possible solutions. This would also include implementation of solution and space for evaluation and revision (Henry, 1989).

I now wish to look in more detail at the relationship between these ideas and PED. In such group process individuals can express themselves with methods such as role-play, dance movement, music, drawing etc. This process also allows individuals to learn from feedback from other members or learn from feedback in the games such as drawing, role-play, drama, etc. One example I mentioned is that of role-play, where individuals try new roles thus experience and discover themselves with a new and different sight. In a group session, it is possible to gain reactions from others, and it can be supportive to find themselves in different situations. Another positive measure is that these exercises allow certain levels of intimacy and gives an opportunity for individuals to share, to feel power and to participate in responsibility. It is important that the correct atmosphere is developed in which trust, genuineness, empathy and warmth take place. Furthermore, help, creation, action, dance, music, drama, game, expression of self and emotions will flourish within this environment and they are key to provide spontaneity, confidence, motivation, awareness, recognition, experience, discovery, support, sharing, communication, freedom and belonging. The power of group process for PED helps the individuals build self-confidence, raise their self-esteem and self-awareness, express feelings, discover their uniqueness and understand concepts of the wider world around them with social support, trust, insight, reflection, express emotions.

The reasons of using experiential learning aspects for PED can be that is enjoyable, individuals can participate in a shared pleasure. It is useful for working with fantasy and the subconscious, it is fun and everyone can join in at the same time, at their own level, and it is an important means of communication and expression (Liebmann, 1986).

If we return to Henry's classification of experiential learning activities, there are two that need to be highlighted in terms of group process for PED:

- Personal Development. This can be divided into three distinct dimensions: Firstly, there is "narrative", through autobiography and diary. This tool is useful for individuals for providing a means of developing self-awareness. The second one is "expressive", through drama, art and movement. These concepts are very much central to the ethos of creative expressions for fulfilling of self. The third one is "internal", through visualisation and goal setting that help the individual to shape his or her own personal and emotional development (PED).

- Learning by 'doing'. There are two distinct dimensions: Project Based Learning and Activity Based Learning

In terms of group process for PED, activity based learning needs to be explored further. There are four dimensions to activity-based learning, outdoor, simulation, games and role-play. From them games and role-play are very useful tools for raising self-awareness and discovery as it is mentioned before and is also fun for participants.

Previous discussion shows that experiential learning includes a wide range of levels and activities. Group process for PED can be considered within the school of experiential learning, because group process for PED focus on raising self-awareness and group effectiveness with the emphasis on how to increase an individuals' insight into new ways in which past experiences give rise to attitudes and behaviours that decrease personal effectiveness and also to increase awareness of how people associate with each other in a group and to increase a person's emotional, cognitive and behavioural understanding of influences on group functioning (Weil and McGill, 1989). It is quite clear that this school is strongly influenced by writers such as Carl Rogers, Maslow and Rollo May whose orientation is humanistic psychology and also other theories of psychology such as psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. The humanistic perspective considers that the importance of an individual's inner world and others' effect on it. This leads us to consider that learning is primarily a social process and other people are essential in this process (Boot and Reynolds, 1983), and also as we saw earlier most of what we learn comes from doing. From infancy through to the end of our lives we take actions and we learn. Therefore, our past plays a very important role. In other words in this view learning is cumulative where nothing has meaning and cannot be learned in isolation from prior experience (Rogers 1983; Schuell, 1986; Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). There is also great emphasis in the humanistic orientation on the 'here and now'. This can be interpreted as the value of experiential learning relying on the crucial role the corporeal and emotional experience, attitudes and values play in shaping the future experience without changing personal history i.e. past life events, interaction and prior experiences, yet it may change how people or a learner perceives those same events and thus promotes personal development. From this perspective learning is considered to be a process intending to promote personal development and in this process the emphasis is on increasing of self-awareness and people's emotional, cognitive and behavioural understanding of personal and group functioning. One of the ways to promote personal development, to increase ones personal and group effectiveness, one's autonomy, choice and self-fulfilment is through a group setting especially in an educational arena (Rogers, 1951; Hall & Hall, 1988; Weil & McGill, 1989; Hobbs, 1992; Yalom, 1995). Thus, these group settings provide opportunities to "...*explore new ways of being in the world; to recognise unproductive patterns in our ways of responding; to learn how what we say we do may be contradicted by our behaviour; to change old ways of responding to interpersonal situations; and to affirm aspects of ourselves which we have perhaps undervalued*" (Weil and McGill, 1989, p.16)

The learning cycle used within group process for PED is very similar to that of the models I identified for experiential learning and the facilitators ensure there is sufficient opportunity for individuals to participate in their own constructed learning cycle. This is achieved through good organisation of the materials, of time and clear understanding of purpose is achieved by all and space is given to individuals to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. The second step is reflection on the issues raised where individuals can apply any lessons they have learnt to their own lives through abstract conceptualisation. The cycle can end with active experimentation. The cycle, therefore, has given insights to the individuals about the issues, situations or themselves from 'doing'.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to show how broad a concept experiential learning is. It cannot be limited to learning institutions or training programmes. It is lifelong process; thus, breaking down the barriers between the classroom or training programme and the world in which students or participants live. Experiential learning is changing the balance in education towards concept of the preparation for the realities of life, which is essential. It is danger to place the young people in a quarantine period before real life begins. Therefore, experiential learning provides real life situations to the students or participants by the way of its tools. Also, we can criticise the traditional method here because it is all based on didactic method or technical view and it does not give any real situation and practice to the young people. *"Reading about or listening to someone talk about, an object can not provide the quality of knowing (comprehension) that can be acquired by actively manipulating the object"* (Wadsworth, 1978 p.50). The traditional method or technical view based on the looking and listening yet they are not sufficient. Thus, "I do and I understand" is central to learning.

Experiential learning helps individuals to know themselves better and to discover the real life problems and their own potential at solving them. It is this aspect that the emphasis on experiential learning coincides with group process for PED. It is recognised if we refer back to the Chinese proverb again, that doing is important in all kinds of events if it gives insight to individuals; and thus, the main concept of group process while it is based on action, it tries to gives insight to the person. Therefore, in all dimensions of experiential learning whether it takes place in school or in therapy or a training programme, the concept of 'doing' is inescapable.

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