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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Experiential Learning Model

Most educators and experienced 4-H volunteers will tell you that the best way to engage youth in learning is to create experiential learning opportunities, allowing youth to explore and discover rather than listen to lectures or read information. In fact, the science behind how we learn supports this theory. We are more likely to remember things that we do or teach other people rather than information that we read or hear. It is also vital as we support positive development in youth that we help participants learn life skills, growing in each of the four parts of the Clover: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. How do we teach these skills using research supported, youth-centered, active learning? We use the Experiential Learning Model!

The Experiential Learning Model is a teaching method that focuses on creating experiences for youth and taking time to process those experiences as a group. The reflection portion of learning encourages young people to apply new life skills in different situations. It shifts the experience from a fun activity to long-term learning and application. There are five steps in the Experiential Learning Model:

DO

1) Experience: Participants engage in learning activity

REFLECT (skill focused)

2) Share: Participants review what occurred during the activity

3) Process: Review how the activity was performed

APPLY (activity focused)

4) Generalize: Make connections between activity and life skills

5) Apply: Relate new skills to everyday life

Each step should naturally lead to the next, and the process can become somewhat circular, as it makes sense to practice newly learned skills in different contexts. You do not have to go through each step in every activity, but it is helpful to work through all 5 steps over the course of a unit or series of activities. Let's examine each step more in depth.

Experiential Learning: Step-by-Step

Step One: DO—Experience

This is the DO section of the model. Youth will take part in an activity that allows them to explore and practice certain life skills without too much direction from adults or older youth. Volunteers should provide guidance but should not direct the learning too closely. The volunteer role is to be more of a coach than a boss: encouraging youth to explore, do the activity, and problem solve on their own rather than telling them what to do.

Quiz time!

What is the role of a volunteer during experiential learning?

- A. Direct the learning and make sure that youth aren't running into any problems.
- B. Provide guidance but let the youth explore and problem solve on their own.
- C. Leave the room and hope for the best.

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Correct Answer: B. Provide guidance but let the youth explore and problem solve on their own.

Step Two: REFLECT—Share

In the first part of applying and reflecting on the learning experience, participants should focus on the activity. Ask them to describe what happened and how they responded. The conversation should generate information for the next step, which is to process.

Example questions:

- How did you plan? Tell about most/least favorite parts.
- What did you learn? What surprised you? What was easiest?
- What did you do? Where did you go? What was your goal?

Quiz time!

What is the role of a volunteer during the sharing phase of experiential learning?

- A. Tell the youth what you think happened during the activity.

- B. The volunteer should not contribute to the sharing phase.
- C. Ask youth to describe what happened and how they responded.

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Correct answer: C. Ask youth to describe what happened and how they responded.

Step Three: REFLECT—Process

This step focuses on the process of the activity, highlighting how the experience was conducted or the activity was done. Youth identify the most important parts of the experience, which will lead to the next step, to generalize.

Example questions:

- What procedures or steps were used?
- What problems came up as you did the activity?
- How did you deal with these problems?
- Why is this skill important?

Quiz time!

How is processing different from sharing?

- A. I have no idea.
- B. During sharing, youth are more focused on their personal experiences and feelings. During processing, they are focused more on the logistics of the activity.
- C. Sharing is a group activity, while processing should happen individually.

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Correct answer: B. During sharing, youth are more focused on their personal experiences and feelings. During processing, they are focused more on the logistics of the activity.

Step Four: APPLY—Generalize

In this step, the focus shifts from the activity to the life skill(s) that participants were practicing. The questions become more personal, exploring what the experience meant to the participant and what they learned. The discussion should set up information for the final step, applying the life skill to other situations.

Example questions:

- What did you learn about [life skill] from this activity?
- How does this relate to other things you have been learning?

- What are some similar experience you have had with [life skill]?

Quiz time!

What new information should be gained from generalizing?

- A. The general skills and impact the activity had for participants.
- B. How these skills could be useful for the general population.
- C. The general relation of the activity to participant's personalities.

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Correct answer: A. The general skills and impact the activity had for participants.

Step Five: APPLY

Finally, youth should apply what they have learned to their everyday lives. Discuss ways they could use this learning in other situations or change how they approach certain tasks in the future. The focus here should be on gaining knowledge and practicing skills rather than the subject matter of the activity.

Example questions:

- How does this activity relate to your everyday life?
- What have you learned about yourself? Others?
- How will you act differently as a result? General Suggestions: In working through the Experiential Learning Model, it is important to remember that debriefing and discussing the experience moves youth from simply doing an activity to learning through it.

Quiz time!

What is the volunteer's role in the application stage?

- A. Volunteers should not participate in this stage.
- B. Present to youth on the applications of the skills they discussed in the generalization phase.
- C. Facilitating youth discussion by asking questions, serving as a sounding board, and occasionally providing thoughts if needed.

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Correct answer: C. Facilitating youth discussion by asking questions, serving as a sounding board, and occasionally providing thoughts if needed.

Planning/Preparation:

At first, it may take more time to plan an experiential learning opportunity than an activity focused on more traditional learning methods, but the long-term benefits make it worthwhile. Participants will learn faster and can help more with planning, and the experience is usually more enjoyable for youth and adults.

There are several considerations that volunteers should take into account when using the Experiential Learning Model:

1. Be clear about the learning objective, or what the youth are meant to learn.
Which life skill(s) are you trying to teach?
2. Make sure the experience or activity lends itself to that life skill.
3. Consider reflection ahead of time. What developmentally appropriate questions will you ask in each step of the method?

Here are some examples of interactive activities that lend themselves to certain skills:

- For the activity of playing a game, youth learn the skills of teamwork, risk taking.
- For the activity of experiments, youth learn the skills of decision making, problem solving.
- For the activity of planning activities, youth learn the skills of teamwork, planning, leadership.
- For the activity of giving presentations, youth learn the skills of communicating.
- For the activity of interviewing others, youth learn the skills of communicating, relating to others.
- For the activity of solving problems, youth learn the skills of decision making, problem solving.
- For the activity of making models and products, youth learn the skills of problem solving, leadership, accessing resources.

Some general suggestions when leading group discussion:

- Form pairs or groups of three youth to discuss outcomes. Then ask them to report back to larger group.
- Focus the group by asking the same question or finishing a statement (“I learned that...” or “I felt...”)
- Adjust questions based on responses to previous questions.
- Help participants build on their experiences. Find opportunities for them to practice new skills.
- Discussion may take a short period of time (5 minutes or less)

In working through the Experiential Learning Model, it is important to remember that debriefing and discussing the experience moves youth from simply doing an activity to learning through it. The model allows participants to integrate their learning. It provides closure. It is important to set aside plenty of time to reflect, ask the right questions, and listen carefully.

Wrap-Up

List at least three things that you remember from this training...

Thank you for completing this training! Now that you understand the basics of experiential learning, you can enhance your skills by serving as a coach for students, and preparing activities that empower youth to explore, engage, and problem solve on their own!

[Link to Certificate of Completion](#)

Adapted from research by Kolb, D. (1974) *Organizational Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, MF: Prentice-Hall; and Pfeiffer, J. W., & Jones, J. E., Eds. (1985). *Reference guide to handbooks and annuals (revised)*. San Diego: University Associates Publishers. The University of Wisconsin–Madison does not discriminate in its employment practices and programs and activities on a variety of bases including but not limited to: age, color, disability, national origin, race, or sex. For information on all covered bases, the names of the Title IX and Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinators, and the processes for how to file a complaint alleging discrimination, please contact the Office of Compliance, 361 Bascom Hall, 500 Lincoln Drive, Madison WI 53706, Voice 608-265-6018, (relay calls accepted); Email: uwcomplianceoffice@wisc.edu. © 2019 Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System