The Design, Conduct and Evaluation of Experiential Learning Systems[*]

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ABSTRACT

The Problem: To develop an operational conceptualization of experiential learning and to specify practical methodologies needed to effectively design, conduct, and evaluate experience-based learning systems. These systems will provide a workable alternative to effectively meet the individualized needs and learning styles of students.

Objective: To demonstrate the potential of experience-based learning by conducting an entire MBA program for 25-30 students designed solely around experience-based learning processes. Further we intend to disseminate our findings to the academic community to increase the potential for wide-spread use of experienced-based learning systems.

I.   PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND DISCUSSION

For the past seven years, the School of Business Administration at Southern Methodist University, has been actively involved in developing and implementing a Master of Business Administration degree program which is designed as a dramatic departure from tradition. Among the various directions this program has taken are two which are particularly significant here: (1) to provide for individualization of learning needs and styles by making available multiple processes of learning, and (2) to place significant emphasis on learning by doing, on action-experienced-based learning. Overall, the results of these experience-based learning systems have been very positive.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

Drawing from our collective experiences with experience-based learning systems, we have identified four major problems they present: (1) Students find it difficult to organize and articulate what they have learned; (2) Both students and faculty tend to find the means for demonstration, assessment, and evaluation of learning from these experiences difficult and unsatisfying; (3) our lack of a complete cooperational conceptual understanding of the learning process, especially experiential learning, has limited our ability to enhance both the learning process and outcomes for students; and (4) There is a substantial variability among students in terms of attitudes toward the learning process and levels of learning reported from experienced-based learning systems.

It is toward overcoming these problems and the expanded use and variety of experienced-based learning systems that this project and research is directed.

Some of our recent research on the design, conduct, and evaluation of a complex management simulation game was reported at the National Conference on Business Gaming and Experiential Learning in April, 1974.

The research now under way is based on a model of experiential learning developed by Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre.[1] Figure 1 represents a basic description of this model. The process of learning through experience is conceived as a repetitive cycle in which the learner first engages in some concrete experience. This leads to reflective observations on that experience from which the learner derives abstract concepts and generalizations. Once formed, these conceptualizations lead to new actions which will test their implications, and the new actions lead to new concrete experiences which initiate the cycle again.

By linking a tendency toward one end or the other of the two polar dimensions, Kolb has identified four common categories of learning styles: divergers,

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[1] Kolb, David A., Rubin, Irwin, and McIntyre, James, <u>Organizational Psychology: An Experiential Approach</u>, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971.

Figure 1. Learning Styles and
the Learning Process
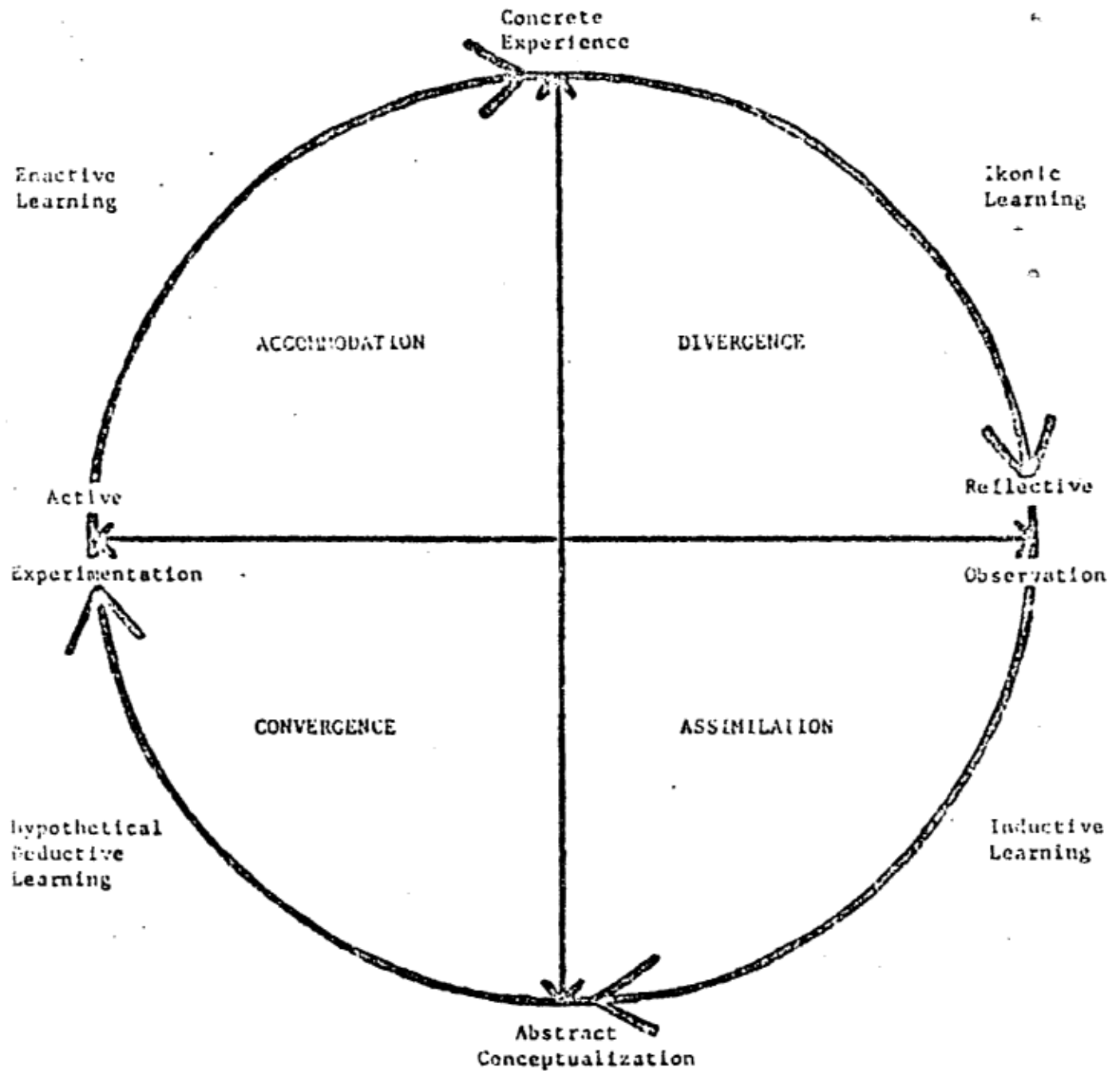
convergers, assimilators, and accommodators (see Figure 1). For any person, each of these learning styles can be identified using the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI), an instrument developed by Kolb.

Quz current research is focused on the use of the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) as a means for assessing individual learning style differences and relating them to significant factors in the student's learning environment. More specifically, we are examining the learning process in three pedagogically different course designs, all intended to accomplish the same learning objectives for the same required course during the same semester.

This research will provide us with some empirical evidence of the relationship between preferred learning styles and learning opportunities available, as well as learning outcomes.

II. INTENDED OUTCOMES

There are four major outcomes which we seek to accomplish with this project:

1. To demonstrate the potential for successfully conducting an entire MBA program designed solely around experience-based learning processes.

2. To develop a more complete, operational conceptualization of the experiential learning process, including identification of sources of variability of preferences among students that impact the learning process.

3. To develop a written set of simple methods useful to the design, conduct, and evaluation of experiential learning systems, including the use of the LSI and other input measures; and

4. To develop methods and guidelines for the effective use of learning styles and other measures in academic and career counseling for students.

Each of these intended outcomes is accompanied by a set of evaluation criteria and, during the three year period of the project, we intend to disseminate our findings to the general academic community through working papers arid eventual publication of our findings.

III. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

To accomplish these intended outcomes, we have designed a complex project extending over three years. There are four phases to this project with the major phase (Phase III) being the conduct of a totally experience based MBA program for thirty students.

Phase I. The first phase of the project involves a major expansion of our current research. We are now engaged in studying the relationships between learning; styles and learning outcomes in three pedagogically different sections of a required MBA course. For this project, we intend to make similar comparisons within a match wider range of experience-based learning processes.

Phase II. The second phase involves the design and planning for an experimental program for approximately thirty MBA students. Drawing directly on the results and findings of Phase I, we will design an MBA program based entirely on experience-based learning which will be carried out during the second year of the project. This phase of the project will be completed during the spring and summer, 1976.

Phase III. The third and major phase of the project represents the actual implementation of the experimental MBA program using the LSI data and other information available, we will work closely with the students in their planning and choosing of experience-based learning processes to meet their individual needs and learning styles. As needed, this will include adaptations to the original design and development of alternative learning experiences. It is our intention throughout the year to involve the students in the on-going process of conducting this program.

The investigators will be the primary contact point for the students in this experimental program. It will be our responsibility to insure that needed resources are available to the students, including consultative services of faculty, contact and cooperation of business persons and organizations, and the availability of multiple options for experience-based learning.

In conjunction with the conduct of the experimental program, we will continue to collect data on learning styles, student: performance, and student-perceived learning as we did in Phase I. This will include students in both the experimental and the regular MBA programs who are involved in experience-based learning. Between semesters we will work jointly to complete the analysis of these data from the fall semester and develop a revised design for the spring semester, working jointly with the students.

Phase IV. The final phase of the project will be devoted to evaluation of the project and to preparation and dissemination of the results and findings. During the fall semester 1977, we will complete the preparation of the several working papers into final form, including completion of the annotated bibliography on experiential learning. We will also work closely with a consultant to complete the final analysis and report on the evaluation of the experimental MBA program. During this period, a series of seminars on the design, conduct, and evaluation of experience-based learning systems are planned for the faculty of the SMU Business School.

To extend our findings beyond SMU, we will initiate contacts with other institutions desiring to expand or implement experience-based learning systems in their educational programs. We will assist these institutions in developing the competencies needed to design, conduct, and implement the experiential learning process, integrating them with their on-going programs. As requested, we will also make ourselves available to follow through with critiques and assistance with evaluation.

The collected working papers will be disseminated to selected colleagues across the country to serve as a stimulus and common ground for conducting a National Conference on Experience-Based Learning. This conference, to be held in the spring, 1978, will bring together the leading change agent practitioners in the field of experiential learning process.