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## The Experiential Learning Theory and Interpreter Education

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# The Experiential Learning Theory and Interpreter Education

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## Abstract

Learning to become an interpreter is a hands-on and interactive experience. Students entering an interpreting program have a wide variety of language skill levels and backgrounds. In the context of American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreter education, some students arrive at an interpreting program with no knowledge of ASL, whereas others have more experience and some proficiency with the language. Even though some of the students may be familiar with ASL, the process of interpreting is often a new skill set. As students learn how to interpret through hands-on practice, they follow a 4-mode learning cycle that is based on their experiences. D.A. Kolb (1984) developed the *experiential learning theory* (ELT), which is grounded in the experiences of the learner. This article focuses on how interpreting students learn, using the experiential learning cycle. Although this commentary is directed at students, the learning cycle can be applied to mentoring programs, and working interpreters can use it for life-long learning.

Keywords: experiential learning theory; interpreting students; learning cycle; reflective practice; mentoring; interpreter education program

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# The Experiential Learning Theory and Interpreter Education

## 1. Experiential learning theory

Learning through experience is an important aspect of training for all interpreters. Much of the learning for American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreters takes place in the field where they have hands-on experiences. For students, this learning occurs during their practicum, when they learn experientially, as they interpret under the supervision of a mentor (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). Prior to the students' practicum, educators should attempt to develop experiential learning opportunities; as Sawyer phrased it, they should have "the ability to bring the field into the classroom and the classroom out into the field, for example through a reflective practicum" (2006, p. 118) to give students a taste of their future career. Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning theory* (ELT) takes the learner through a cycle of four learning abilities. This theory and the four learning abilities of the cycle directly relate to how interpreting students learn as they advance through their classes, commence their practicum, and subsequently participate in mentorship programs; they can then apply ELT to their work as practitioners.

### 1.1. The ELT defined

To understand how the learning process of interpreting students relates to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, one must understand the theory itself. Kolb's book, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, introduced the ELT and the theories that paved its way. Kolb divided his book into three sections: (a) experience and learning, (b) the structure of learning and knowledge, and (c) learning and development. Kolb defined *learning* as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). As student interpreters progress through this cyclical process, they learn more about interpreting and about themselves.

Four abilities and their associated forms of knowledge are acquired in the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). These abilities comprise a cycle that includes: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). Kolb went on to describe the abilities in relation to students in the following way:

That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE). (p. 30)

These abilities are the core of the ELT. Students must progress through each ability for effective learning to occur. As depicted in Figure 1, CE and AC, and RO and AE complement each other in the cycle for an optimum learning experience.

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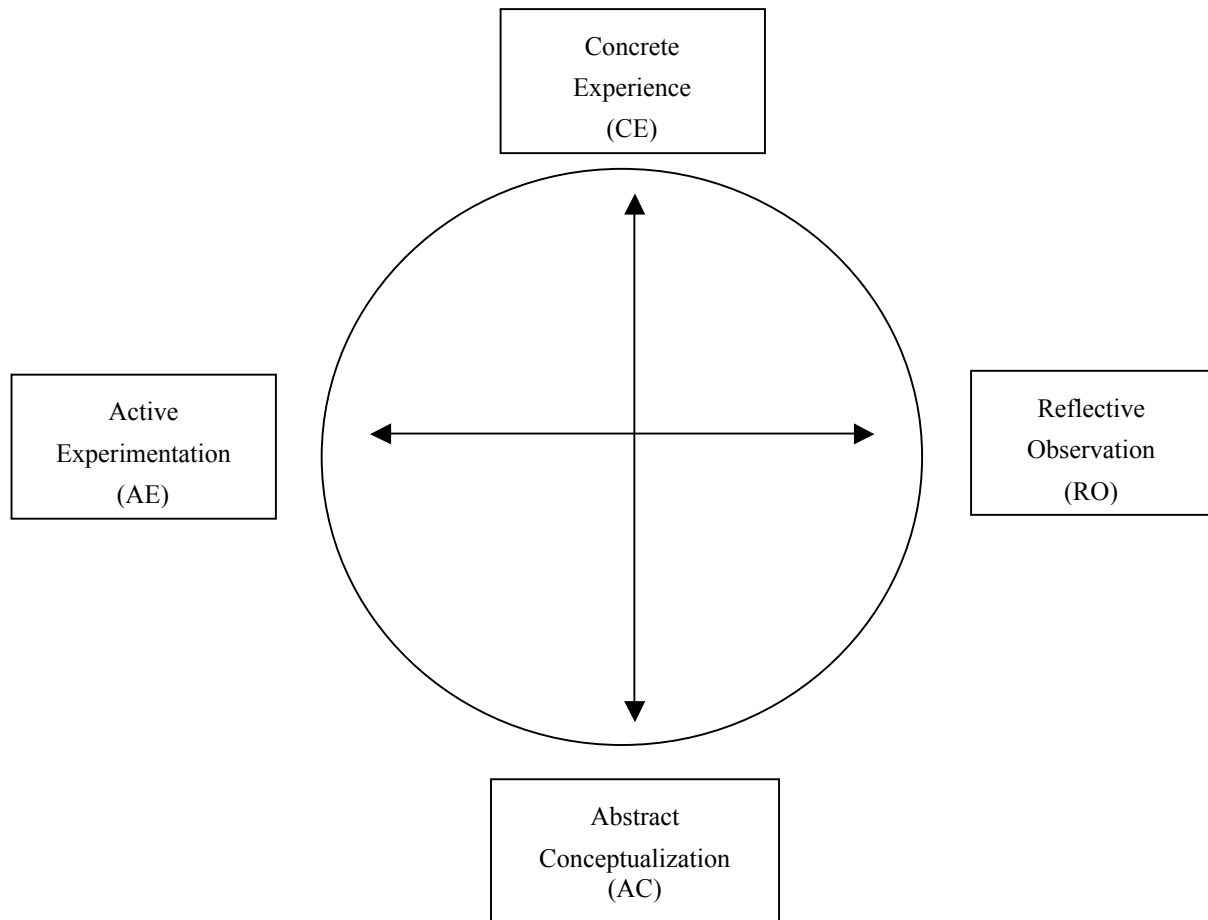
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Figure 1: The four abilities of the ELT

Furthermore, Kolb (1984) addressed the developmental aspect of the ELT. He applies the theory to development in higher education and for lifelong learning. For higher education, the skill set that is learned is then applied to the first job as a continuing apprenticeship. This is where the experiences and knowledge acquired in school are now applied and mastered in the field.

## 2. Application of the ELT

Kolb's (1984) ELT is representative of how students learn in the field of interpreting, in their coursework, during their practicum, in mentorship programs, and beyond. The four learning abilities described by Kolb are ways that students learn through experience during their education. *Concrete experience* (CE) occurs each time an in-class situation is interpreted. Students naturally have feelings associated with the interpretations that they have rendered. *Reflective observation* (RO) is grounded in understanding through observation. Witter-Merithew and Johnson discovered that when students work together to reflect on their work, they "gain deeper levels of understanding" (2005, p. 45). When students videotape themselves interpreting in-class assignments (CE), they

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are required to look at their work, both observing and analyzing what they interpreted. Students must observe and examine their work and reflect on the effectiveness of their own interpretations. At Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, students are required to spend time during their coursework and their practicum observing certified interpreters. Through observation, students witness how the certified interpreter interacts with the participants, they learn new vocabulary in both English and ASL, and they have the opportunity to reflect on how the Code of Professional Conduct (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf [RID], 2005) was implemented. Students are encouraged to talk with their teacher or mentor about what they have observed/interpreted and learn through the feedback they receive.

The third ability is *abstract conceptualization* (AC). At this point, students need to employ critical thinking in relation to the interpreted event (e.g., how it could be improved, what ethical decisions were made) and self-analyze their work. During AC, the teacher or mentor should be facilitating active listening skills and allowing the students to conduct an analysis of their work. Through their own analysis, they can discover areas where they did well and opportunities for improvement. In their book *Toward Competent Practice: Conversations with Stakeholders*, Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005) noted that there needs to be more attention on teaching critical thinking skills in IP. The abstract conceptualization portion of the ELT addresses critical thinking because students must self-critique and analyze their interpreted work. The fourth, and final, ability is *active experimentation* (AE). During this phase of interpreting, students can apply what they have learned to a new interpretation. The more varied settings and clients that the students encounter during class simulations and their practicum, the more it helps them to refine their skills and develop their potential as interpreters.

Affording opportunities for students to learn through the ELT during their time in an IP will better prepare them for working in the field upon graduation. An IP offers various outlets for learning. These range from hands-on activities that involve translating or interpreting to discussion of ethical decision making and assessments of classroom interpreting work; this is done to examine what is appropriate for certain clients and situations. The ELT can be applied to all of these areas. Monikowski and Peterson (2005) recognized that the classroom provides a structured and standardized environment for the students. They also noted Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The stages of the ELT parallel the sequential nature of the interpreter training course work. Students need to see a variety of interpreting and signing models to construct how they might interpret a similar situation. Requiring observation hours provides a foundation for students to learn by observing certified practitioners. The provision of observation allows students the opportunity to reflect on what they have seen, think about how they could interpret that situation, and then test their conclusions by interpreting something similar in a laboratory environment. After rendering a new videotaped interpretation, students can view and analyze their work. This process enables students to progress through each learning ability in the ELT cycle.

Interpreter educators should become familiar with this cyclical process of learning (i.e., CE, RO, AC, and AE), so that they can understand how each phase applies to student learning. Educators can explain the ELT to students prior to their first hands-on interpreting course so that the students understand how the cycle applies to their interpreted practices and projects. Without these guidelines, students may not know how to reflect on their work or self-critique what they have interpreted. Educators should take time to guide the students through these experiences for optimal learning to occur. Educators should also provide diverse and frequent hands-on experiences, affording students the opportunity to work through the ELT cycle.

### 2.1. Application to practicum

The capstone of an interpreter education program is the practicum. Students have the opportunity to apply the foundational knowledge they obtained during their training and interpreting situations under a mentor's supervision. If students were required to complete observation hours or field experience prior to their practicum, they may have become accustomed to seeing a certified interpreter at work and should be aware of proper interpreting etiquette.

As students begin to interpret during their practicum, they can take their experience (CE) of interpreting and reflect on their interpretation choices after the assignment. When the mentor asks the student, "How do you think you did?" the student reflects (RO) by contemplating their interpretation. Through discussion of the interpreted

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assignment with their mentor, the choices that the student made during their interpretation can be analyzed (AC). AC occurs when students critically think about their linguistic, cultural, and ethical decisions. Through feedback from their mentors and preparation for future assignments, students can take the final step of application by using what they have learned from their assignments and applying it to their next interpretation (AE). Winston states that “practicums, service learning, and interacting with community groups all reinforce the underlying understanding that students need...to learn though [sic] interactive, collaborative experiences with others” (2005, p. 223). Winston goes on to say that the aforementioned activities are “student-centered learning activities that foster the development of critical thinking, decision making, and self-assessment that are essential to interpreting effectively and competently” (p. 223). Critical thinking, ethical decision making, and self-assessment are key factors deemed necessary characteristics for students to possess as they enter the field of interpreting. The interactive and collaborative experiences relate to the learning cycle, as this cycle is based on experience. Through their practicum, service learning and interacting with the deaf community, students are continually learning based on what they experience\_hence, the term *experiential learning*.

### 2.2. *Application beyond interpreter education*

Upon completion of their practicum, Bloomsburg University signed language interpreting students are encouraged to become involved in a mentorship program or find a mentor to work with on a one-on-one basis. Mentoring is a significant aspect of skill development and refinement for new or seasoned interpreters. Through mentoring, interpreters are able to observe another interpreter work, dialogue with their mentor about things they observed or interpreted, and ask any questions they may have, thus learning via reflection and experience. Gordon and Magler (2007) co-authored a book about mentoring in the field of interpreting. Their book provides a myriad of skill-building activities for mentors and protégés. The authors discuss the mentoring process whereby the protégé interprets (CE) and the mentor takes notes, later engaging the protégé in a conversation about their perception of how they did. The mentor can provide immediate feedback on the protégé’s interpretation. Then, the protégé can reflect (RO) on the experience through self-analysis (AC) and the feedback provided by the mentor and then formulate a plan to improve the interpretation by using critical thinking/analyzing skills. They then apply what they learned to the next activity or interpretation assignment (AE). In this way, the ELT cycle can be applied to interpreters in mentorships.

Working interpreters who strive for excellence in their interpreting can apply the ELT as a means for enhancing their personal growth. They can do this independently or with a team. If the interpreter is working independently, after completing an assignment, s/he can reflect on the interpretation, analyze the effectiveness of the work and consider ways in which the interpretation could have been enhanced. The interpreter can implement these ideas in a future assignment. If working with a team, the interpreter can ask the team to sit down after the assignment to discuss the interpretations. The interpreter should reflect on his or her work, analyzing it prior to asking colleagues for feedback. Through this dialogue, the interpreter reflects on the work, analyzing what was done well and what could have been improved. The interpreter can take the feedback and implement what was learned into the next interpretation. By having a conversation about his or her work with a team, the interpreter is learning through experience and can keep following Kolb’s ELT cycle. Progressing through the cycles of the ELT can benefit a seasoned interpreter and keep interpreters from becoming stagnant in their professional skills development.

## 3. Conclusion

The ELT specifies a four-ability cycle that mirrors how students learn to interpret. If students are exposed to this learning process, they can apply it to their interpreting program and how they learn. Students need to grasp the importance of first trying to interpret a stimulus then reflecting on the work they have done. Work should be analyzed by employing critical thinking skills to explore alternative interpretations for the stimulus and areas that need improvement. After students identify these areas, they are ready to analyze how a concept could have been

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conveyed more clearly. Once this is determined, revisions can be implemented during the next interpretation. The process can be repeated indefinitely.

Educators can take the information gleaned from this article and apply it to the classroom. Preparing students for entry-level interpreting assignments upon graduation is paramount. Educators need to be grounded in the theoretical framework of the ELT and how it applies to learning the interpreting process. Mentors who work with students during their practicum should be equipped with the tools (including the ELT) to successfully assist in skill development of their protégés. Teachers, as well as mentors, should understand the ELT and how each step works in order to guide students or protégés through the learning process. When discussions take place after a concrete experience (CE), such as in-class practice or interpreting during their practicum, the students are engaged in reflective observation (RO) and abstract conceptualization (AC). Students can then apply their knowledge to the active experimentation (AE) stage in a new setting. Thus, the cycle begins again. Daley (2001) found that learning from experience relies on prior experiences and subsequent experiences that guide learners from doing to reflecting to thinking and back to experiencing again. Not only can the ELT process provide students with a rich learning experience, it opens an avenue for the seasoned practitioner to achieve life-long skills refinement.

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