# Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory: A Meta-Model for Career Exploration

GEORGE ATKINSON, JR., and PATRICIA H. MURRELL

*Kolb's experiential learning theory offers the career counselor a meta-model with which to structure career exploration exercises and ensure a thorough investigation of self and the world of work in a manner that provides the client with an optimal amount of learning and personal development.*

Career exploration, the process of generating and assimilating career information relating to self and the world of work, has long been recognized as an integral element in reaching a career decision. Jepsen and Dilley (1974), Thoresen and Ewart (1976), and others noted that relevant career information is both a prime assumption and a pivotal element in any career decision-making model, whereas Gelatt (1962) warned that inadequate career information in the career decision-making process is likely to end with the decision not to decide. Crites (1976) referred to the gathering and use of occupational information as one of the most neglected, least articulated tasks of career exploration, and one that is still incompletely integrated with the other elements of career counseling.

Only by a systematic and thorough career exploration can clients accumulate the information necessary for adequate career choices. Although information per se is not a panacea for undecidedness, "the adequacy of occupation choice is largely a function of the adequacy of self-knowledge and occupational knowledge [so that] the greater the amount and accuracy of the information the individual has about each, the more adequate the choice" (Osipow, 1983, p. 87).

Clients who are undecided about a career and seek career counseling are often confused by one or more difficulties that can arise during the career exploration process. One difficulty is haphazard and inadequate structure in career exploration, resulting in what is appropriately labeled the "bumble-around method" by Michelozzi (1984). Lack of a systematic structure in exploration of self or the world of work can result in the failure to generate an appropriate quantity or quality of information, upon which any sound decision must be based.

Another source of confusion, cited by Crites (1974b), is the lack of distinction made between the content and the process of career exploration. Consequently, most of the attention has been given to the product of career exploration and not enough to the process itself, even though one of the goals of effective career counseling should be to provide a replicable method and approach to career exploration that the client can apply in the future (Crites, 1974a).

Third, as noted by Krumboltz (1966) and others, there is a need to address client characteristics that may differentially affect the outcomes of career counseling. Unfortunately, a "strong commitment to the uniqueness of the individual" has waned in career counseling with the decline of Williamson's (1939) trait and factor approach (Crites, 1974a, p. 5). Reviewing past evaluations of career counseling interventions, Pelsma (1984) found that career counseling interventions, programs, and services aimed at exploration demonstrated a lack of consideration for and appreciation of individual differences.

From the prominent approaches to career counseling, such as Holland's (1985) typology theory of vocational behavior, Krumboltz's (1976) social learning theory of career development, and Super's (1957) developmental self-concept theory, career counselors can draw on a large number of concepts and techniques to assist student career planning and development. What would be helpful is a meta-model within which appropriate interventions from a variety of theories can be used to arrange the exploration methodology and synthesize information generated in the career seeking process.

According to Ivey and Matthews (1984):

> A meta-model may be defined as a model describing many other models. As such, the purpose of meta-modeling is not to present new information, but to organize and synthesize existing information into systematic patterns. Out of these patterns one can sense an underlying, inherent organization that was "there" all the time. (p. 237)

With the help of a meta-model, career exploration can be structured to exploit the basic similarities and essential features of the process common to most approaches into one fundamental unity.

Beginning with the assumption that learning is the central task of career exploration, we propose that Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory provides an appropriate meta-model within which many diverse techniques, interventions, and strategies may be assembled in an eclectic, but coherent, fashion to guide individuals who are undecided about career choices through a systematic investigation of themselves and the world of work. Career exploration fitted into the Kolbian meta-model will address the difficulties mentioned above by (a) providing a directed and organized process to assist the gathering and accumulation of accurate and relevant career information; (b) addressing considerations of individual differences, especially those related to the way in which clients prefer to learn; and (c) teaching a method of career exploration that can be replicated in future career development.

## KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL

In formulating his model of experiential learning, Kolb primarily built on the work of Dewey (1938), who recognized the importance of experience in the process of learning; Lewin (1951),

who emphasized active participatory learning; and Piaget (1970), who conceived of intelligence as largely a result of the interaction of the individual with the environment.

At the heart of Kolb's model "is a simple description of how experience is translated into concepts that can be used to guide the choice of new experiences" (Sugarman, 1985, p. 264). He described learning as a four-step cycle based on the orthogonal relationship of two continuums of cognitive growth and learning: the concrete-abstract continuum and the reflective-active continuum (see Figure 1). The concrete-abstract continuum, which represents how individuals gather (grasp) information from their environment, ranges from a preference for involvement with particular and palpable events to a preference for detached analysis. The reflective-active continuum, which represents how individuals process the information they gather, extends from learners who take a more observational role in learning to those who prefer active participation. Individuals must continually choose, along the respective continuums, how they will gather and process information to resolve the problems and conflicts presented by any learning situation.

According to Kolb, experiential learning proceeds through these four modes, which require four different kinds of abilities. The *concrete experience* (CE) mode requires individuals to immerse themselves in the immediacy of the moment, relying on their intuitive and affective responses to the situation. Conversely, *abstract conceptualization* (AC) calls for logical thinking and rational evaluation to create ideas that integrate their observations into logically sound theories. *Reflective observation* (RO) demands a tentative, impartial perspective toward a learning situation—a willingness to patiently consider many alternatives. *Active experimentation* (AE) stresses action, participation, and risk taking in learning, with an emphasis on pragmatically testing previously generated concepts.

In Kolb's model, flexibility is the key to effective learning and, hence, to optimal performance in any endeavor. A learner moves



**FIGURE 1**

**Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning**
From *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (p. 42) by **David A. Kolb, 1984, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. Adapted by permission.**

through the cycle by first having an immediate experience (CE), which becomes the basis for observations and reflections (RO). These observations and reflections are assimilated and distilled into a concept or theory (AC), even if highly informal, from which new implications for action can be generated. The newly developed ideas can then be tested actively (AE) and can serve as guides for creating new experiences. The cycle begins anew, but at a higher level of complexity.

The Kolb theory of experiential learning has been adapted and applied as a process model in numerous fields and training endeavors. Abbey, Hunt, and Weiser (1985) used Kolb's theory as a conceptual perspective for describing and understanding the interlocking processes of counseling and supervision. Murrell and Claxton (1987) applied Kolb's theory as a teaching model for structuring and implementing introductory-level counselor education courses. Pelsma and Borgers (1986) integrated Kolb's theory with a scheme of ethical reasoning to teach counselors a process for reaching responsible ethical decisions. Leonard and Harris (1979) used Kolb's learning theory to structure and guide small-group teaching and clinical supervision encounters in a primary care internal medicine residency program. Gray, Quick, and Laird (1977) used the theory to develop a systematic and contingency-based approach to management education and development. As noted by Sugarman (1985), the scope of Kolb's work is wide, and the abstract quality of his theory has allowed it to be flexibly applied to meet a variety of learning needs. The theory has been particularly applicable in instances in which attention to the process is at least as important as attention to the product. Career counseling is an excellent example of such an area.

## CAREER EXPLORATION META-MODEL

If it is assumed, again, that career exploration is a process of learning about self and the world of work, Kolb's model of experiential learning may reasonably be applied as a method of structuring the way an individual approaches this task. The career counselor attempting to guide someone through a program of career investigation may employ Kolb's model in prescribing activities in assessing the world of work as well as the individual's own aspirations, needs, wants, and values. By designing and including tasks that fit each mode or combination of modes, the client might find the investigation a richer learning experience. The important assignment for the counselor is to ascertain where the tasks fit in the cycle. When career exploration activities are arranged according to each mode, the client can examine the situation using all the abilities necessary for learning at increasingly greater levels of complexity.

It is important for the counselor to realize that some tasks may involve only one or two learning modes, whereas others will include all four. Although the modes in the cycle are distinct, they are not completely discrete, and a learning situation will involve a blend and a linking of the abilities that characterize the various modes. The essential question that counselors must ask of themselves in designing individualized career exploration programs is, "Have I provided activities requiring the use and development of the primary skills in each of the four modes?" Exploration exercises using the experiential learning model can be arranged according to the four modes, as indicated below.

### Exploring the Self

*Concretely.* Concrete experience activities should encourage the client to become involved in career-related situations in an open and unbiased manner. Examples of CE tasks that could spark involvement in self-assessment include (a) discussing with a counselor personal values, wants, needs, and interests (via SIGI or DISCOVER, if possible); (b) writing a review of important past experiences and decisions; (c) preparing a vocational life history that describes different job experiences; and (d) asking
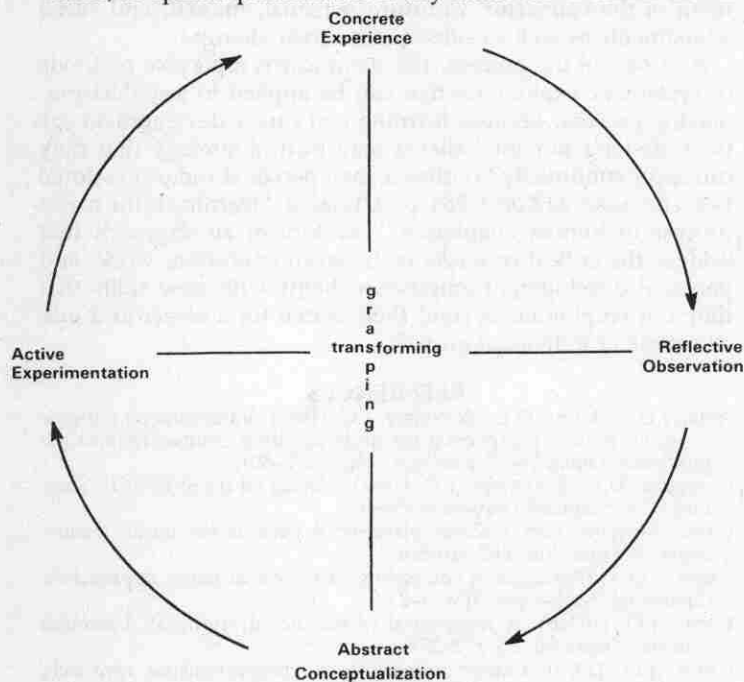
others to help identify personal strengths and weaknesses. For example, the career counselor could suggest an activity similar to Life Line (Career Systems, 1982) that enables people to plot graphically important events and turning points in their lives.

*Reflectively.* Reflective observation assignments should promote understanding through careful observation and impartial description. In RO exercises, participants might consider the meaning of concrete experiences such as the above by evaluating their values, needs, wants, and interests and ranking them in order of importance; seeking to discover the patterns of past life and career decisions; and weighing the value of input from significant others on personal strengths, weaknesses, and skills. Fantasy or guided imagery done individually or in groups could be used as tools to facilitate reflective processes.

*Abstractly.* Abstract conceptualization exercises should use the client's ability to manipulate ideas and concepts logically to generate hypotheses, sift through details, and make plans. Tasks in the AC mode include taking the Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1974) and receiving interpretations of the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (Campbell & Hansen, 1981) or the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1978).

*Actively.* Active Experimentation tasks should engage the client in actively influencing people and events. The activities should give the client opportunities to make practical applications of what has been learned with an emphasis on commitment and some risk taking. Writing a tentative résumé, as Peterson (1986) advocated, interviewing personnel directors from several firms to find out what personal attributes they find important, and writing a personal self-description in the third person are examples of AE exercises. For a structured AE exercise, the counselor could direct the client toward activities for generating personal career goals such as "Expanding Your Past and Present" and "Focus on Goals," suggested by Winefordner (1980, pp. 74–82).

### Exploring the World of Work

*Concretely.* Participation in real-life events gives the client an opportunity to react affectively to unique occupational situations in everyday life. Assignments in the CE mode could include spending the day with willing individuals in different occupations and professions, getting a first-hand view and feel of what the work content and process entail. Similarly, the counselor may help clients obtain part-time or volunteer employment to give them in vivo experiences for exploratory purposes.

*Reflectively.* Tasks in the RO mode could include having clients meet in a small group to discuss their reactions to the occupations they had studied, what skills and personal qualities were necessary in the daily routine, and how the observed employees felt about their work. A group arrangement would provide a structure and feedback to spur clients to take as many perspectives in their evaluations as possible. If a group is not readily available, clients could, as an alternative, write a short paper expressing their perceptions and feelings about the on-site visit.

*Abstractly.* For the AC mode, a client could look up job titles, descriptions, and classifications in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* and the *Guide for Occupational Exploration* supplement; attend a lecture on decision-making strategies; or compile information on the salaries, working conditions, working hours, and benefits of interesting vocations as a data base for making a decision. Other AC activities for gathering data base information include using the skill identification, occupational information, vocational-technical information, and college information portions of such computerized programs as SIGI, DISCOVER, CHOICES, or C-LECT. Generating a definitive career plan from the information gathered in the exploration of self and the world of work would be an activity also falling in the AC sector. Rather than appealing to feelings, projects in this mode should en-

courage the clients to employ their cognitive abilities to analyze and integrate conceptually what they have discovered.

*Actively.* Tasks in the AE domain could lead to any number of role playing exercises simulating job interviews and recreating problem situations in volunteer or part-time employment. Clients could be stimulated to solve problems by disclosing what they would change about the work place where they serve or visit. Thus, they could apply what they had assimilated up to that point. Taking the first steps in implementing a previously developed career plan is an active experimentation step that would lead to new concrete experiences encountered at a higher level of awareness.

### Personal Development

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model suggests that people develop in four primary ways: affectively, perceptually, symbolically, and behaviorally. Each of these areas of development corresponds to one of the learning modes. Through the concrete experiences (CE) of career exploration, clients can develop increasingly more complex, sophisticated, *affective* (sensing-feeling) skills. From opportunities to observe reflectively (RO) their own and others' career search experiences, they can develop increasingly complex, sophisticated, *perceptual* (observing) skills. From opportunities to think abstractly (AC), students can develop increasingly complex, sophisticated, *symbolic* (thinking) skills. Through their chances to experiment actively (AE) with new career information and concepts, they can develop increasingly complex, sophisticated, *behavioral* (acting) skills.

With each added career exploration exercise, there is the likelihood of increased stimulation and complexity in each of the growth dimensions. Researching a greater level of complexity in the different growth areas enables clients to broaden the application of newly developed skills. As has been observed (Crites, 1976), new skills and competencies gained in career exploration can be generalized, especially with the encouragement of the counselor, to future personal, marital, and social adjustments as well as subsequent career changes.

As a part of the process, the client learns replicable methods of systematic exploration that can be applied to any decision-making process. Because learning and career development are both life-long pursuits, clients may learn a strategy that they can apply continually to enhance their personal and professional lives. Because, as Kolb (1984, p. 32) stated, "learning is the major process of human adaptation," mastery of an approach that bridges the critical connections between education, work, and personal development empowers clients with new skills that they can employ far beyond their search for a career and into all realms of individual growth.

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*George Atkinson, Jr.*, is a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Memphis State University and a counseling psychology intern, Student Counseling Service, Texas A&M University, College Station. *Patricia H. Murrell* is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Personnel Services and the Center for the Study of Higher Education, Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Fred J. Dorn in the preparation of this article. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Patricia Murrell, Center for the Study of Higher Education, Memphis State University, Memphis, TN 38152.