Experiential learning occurs when a classroom learner participates in an activity, reviews the activity, identifies useful knowledge or skills that were gained, and transfers the result to the workplace. This is the natural learning process we go through in our day-to-day lives, called life experience. The most successful training is based on experiential learning.

Experiential learning activities attempt to duplicate life experience. Participants “experience” what they are to learn before they discuss it. Ideally, learners participate in actual situations on the job. When this is not possible or when learners need some guidance before the real situation occurs, trainers can create “experiential learning activities” (ELAs) in a traditional or virtual learning setting.

Experiential learning activities (ELAs) are based on several characteristics.

- They are directed toward a specific learning goal.
- They are structured, i.e., they have specific steps and a process that must be followed to ensure results.
- There is a high degree of participant involvement.
- They generate data and information for participant analysis.
- They require processing, or debriefing for maximum learning.

The steps in Pfeiffer and Jones' experiential learning cycle explain what must occur during an activity to ensure maximum learning occurs. The five steps are experiencing, publishing, processing, generalizing, and applying.

1. **Experiencing: Do Something**
   This is the step that is associated with the “game” or fun or the experience. Participants are involved in completing a defined task. If the process ends here, all learning is left to chance and the trainer has not completed the task. A word of caution: as a trainer, you do NOT tell the participants what they will learn or take away from the activity. They are to **experience** the learning—which of course, is why it is called an “experiential learning activity.”

2. **Publishing: Share Observations**
   The second step of the cycle gives the learners a chance to share what they saw, how they felt, and what they experienced. The trainer can facilitate this in several ways: recording data in the large group, have participants share or interview in subgroups, or lead a variation of a round robin. The facilitator typically begins with a broad question and then focuses on more specific questions. The facilitator may probe for turning points or decisions that affected the outcome. This stage is important because it allows the participants to vent or express strong emotions and it allows the facilitator to gather data.

3. **Processing: Interpret Dynamics or Concepts**
This step gives the participants a chance to discuss the patterns and dynamics they observed during the activity. Observers may be used to discuss this step. The facilitator will again begin with broad questions and then hone in on more specific questions. This stage allows participants to test various hypotheses preparing them to apply what they learned. This stage allows the facilitator a way to observe how much participants learned from the experience.

4. Generalizing: Connect to Real Life
The key question in this step is “So what?” Participants are led to focus their awareness on situations that are similar to what they have experienced. This step makes the activity practical and ensures that the participants grasp the lesson/learning that was intended. The “what if” question becomes a bridge to the last step.

5. Applying: Plan Effective Change
The last step presents the reason the activity was conducted: “Now what?” the facilitator helps participants apply generalizations to actual situations in which they are involved. The group may establish goals, contract for change, make promises, identify how something will change at the workplace, or any other actions that may result from the experience. Participants frequently follow this step with an action plan or at least spending some time noting their thoughts about how life might be different as a result the ELA.

The ELA is a powerful tool available to facilitators. It can be time consuming and therefore is used sparingly. When you facilitate an ELA, don’t take any short cuts. The value is truly in the process.

Questions You Could Ask at Each ELA Step

Each step in the ELA learning cycle has a specific purpose. Facilitators use questions such as these to achieve the purpose.
1. Experiencing: do something
   • Do you understand the activity?
   • What questions do you have before you begin?
2. Publishing: share observations
   • What happened? What did you observe?
   • What occurred during the activity?
   • How did you feel about this?
3. Processing: interpret dynamics or concepts
   • Why do you think that may have occurred?
   • What did you learn about yourself?
   • What did you learn?
   • What theories or principles might be true based on your experience?
4. Generalizing: connect to real life
   • How does this relate to . . .?
   • What did you learn about yourself?
   • What does this suggest to you about . . .?
   • How does this experience help you understand
   • What if . . .?
5. Applying: plan effective change

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• What will you do differently as a result of this experience?
• How will you transfer this learning to the workplace?
• How and when will you apply your learning?
• How might this help you in the future?
• What's next?