

A Holistic Approach to Professional Development: Integrating Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory for Soft Skills Mastery

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Abstract - Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory emerged as a foundational educational framework in higher education, offering a structured approach to design sessions and courses that encompass a complete learning cycle. The theory aligned specific phases of the cycle with varied learning styles, acknowledging the diverse preferences individuals have for learning. Recognizing these distinct learning styles constitute the initial stride in cultivating learners' awareness of alternative learning strategies. The research investigated the practical application of Kolb's theory within professional studies encompassing disciplines such as management, engineering, design, and law. Through a stage wise application of the theory, the research delved into how Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory effectively enhanced the understanding of soft skills. The objectives of the study were twofold: first, to understand the dominant learning styles of the mentioned professional courses and apply Kolb's Experiential Learning Model in a step-by-step process to teach and learn soft skills for each course, and second, to evaluate the effectiveness of the stage-wise application of Kolb's theory in understanding soft skills to the management learners for holistic student development, which could further be applied to other professional courses too. By integrating theory into practical scenarios stage by stage and in a cyclic way, educators and practitioners actively contribute to assimilation, thus paving the way for the holistic development of professional learners, equipping them with the soft skills necessary for success in their respective fields.

Key words: Kolb's experiential learning theory; learning styles; professional learners; soft skills; teaching and learning

JEET Category— Research

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kolb's influential study, "Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development," of 1984, has profoundly shaped minds of educators and trainers. Particularly, (Cimatti, 2016) those who engage with learners over higher secondary and above have been significantly impacted by the ideas put forth by this American organizational psychologist. (Fielding 1994, Robotham 1995). In contrast to the works of numerous other authors, the research by Kolb provides

a solid foundation (Holman et al. 1997) in theory. The process of erudition entails the production of knowledge through involvement into experiences (Kolb, 1984). His theory provides a structured approach for organising and sequencing curricula, outlining how individual sessions or entire courses can be designed to enhance student learning.

The theory proposes a cyclical learning process comprised of four stages: experience, reflection, generalisation, and testing (Cowan, 1998), with each stage intricately linked to a distinct learning style (Cimatti, 2016). The initial step in enhancing learners' adaptability to diverse learning situations (Gibbs, 1988) is to increase their awareness of various approaches by recognising individuals with diverse learning preferences. Similarly, educators should acknowledge one's own style of learning as the foundation for developing effective teaching and learning methodologies (Fielding, 1994). Inconsistencies between a learner's style and an educator's approach can hinder the progression of learning (Fielding, 1994). Kolb's work emphasises the importance of experiential learning and the synchronisation of pedagogical techniques with individual learning preferences, providing educators and learners with invaluable insights (Robotham, 1995).

As higher education experiences growth across multiple countries and a heightened focus on inclusivity, diversity, retention rates, and lifelong learning emerges, the exploration of varied learning styles is steadily gaining significance. (Asif et al., 2021; Buheji, 2020). This is especially relevant in the context of soft skills education, where recognition and appreciation of skills and usage diversity have risen to prominence (Cimatti, 2016; Garcia, 2014). The concept of diverse learning styles aligns with these principles as it is deeply ingrained in an educational framework that recognizes all essential facets of active learning, while also adeptly embracing a broad spectrum of individual and culturally influenced differences (Medriano, 2021). The theory's validity and practicability have gained widespread acceptance, with it frequently functioning as the primary or sole framework in discussions about experiential learning (Henry, 1989) and soft skills education (Cornali, 2018). This theory's appeal