

**THE FRACTURED FIGURE EIGHT:  
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL AND  
PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE**

D. Christopher Kayes

The George Washington University

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London, OT, Canada.

Assistant Professor, Human and Organization Studies  
2134 G. ST., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20052  
Phone: 202-994-1146  
Fax: 202-994-4928  
Email: dckayes@gwu.edu

**Abstract**

This paper reviews current critiques of Kolb's experiential learning theory. Critiques converge on the belief that the theory places undue emphasis on the role of individual experience at the expense of social, political, and cultural elements of learning. This paper suggests that such critiques are based on a limited, selective, or simplistic reading of the initial theory. The theoretical relationship between social and personal knowledge is extended based on post-structuralist theory to conceptualize experience as structured like a language. Relationships between personal and social knowledge and the learning are proposed and the centrality of experience in the learning processes suggested. An experiential learning approach to management learning is contrasted to organizational learning, organizational knowledge creation, and critical theory perspectives. Externalization in the form of conversational learning, story-telling, and verbal description is suggested as a means to enhance management learning.

## **THE FRACTURED FIGURE EIGHT: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL AND PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE**

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) continues to be one of the most influential theories of management learning. Kolb (2001) points to over 1000 studies, referred articles, dissertations, and papers conducted on the topic since 1984. The humanistic roots of ELT provides a basis for its application to a wide range of management issues (Sims, 1983; Carlesson, Keane, & Martin, 1976; Dixon, 1994; Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997; Van der hygen, 1997; Hunt, 1994) and the application of ELT through the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) has introduced countless managers to the basic ingredients of the learning process. As ELT continues to be one of the most widely cited theories of management learning, it has come under increasing criticism for its humanist emphasis on the importance of experience and its subsequent failure to provide a detailed account of social, political and culture forces that influence learning (Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe, 1997; Miettinen, 1998; 2000; Reynolds, 1999; 1997; Vince, 1998).

This paper conducts a critique of these arguments to suggest that current criticisms of ELT selectively exclude a key element of Kolb's initial formulation: the relationship between personal and social knowledge. Experience is defined within the context of post-structuralist psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977) and the centrality of experience in shaping personal and social knowledge within the context of the learning cycle is explored. This paper concludes with propositions about the relationship between individual experience and social processes and the implications for management learning theory and practice.

Even critics of ELT recognize its broad influence on management learning (Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe, 1997; Miettinen, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998). Since Kolb first began to develop the theory in the late 1960's, ELT has influenced a diverse range of management topics including person job interaction (Sims, 1983), teams (Carlesson, Keane, & Martin, 1976), organizational systems (Dixon, 1994), strategy development (Van der Heijden, 1996), design of management education (Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997), and job counseling (Hunt, 1994).

Miettinen (1998) suggests a reason for its popularity:

[ELT] combines spontaneity, feelings, and deep individual insights with the possibility of rational thought and reflection. It maintains the humanistic belief in every individual's capacity to grow and learn, so important for the concept of lifelong learning. It includes a positive ideology that is evidently important for adult education (p. 170)

Along with its humanistic appeal, some of the success of ELT may lie in its ambitious and comprehensive nature. ELT provides a theoretical basis for a diverse range of

management learning topics, such as learning style, professional and adult development, knowledge transfer, and education, as well as a comprehensive integration of previous theories of adult learning (Kayes, 2001). Kolb's conceptualization of learning as the "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences" (Kolb, 1984: p. 41) is based on six principles.

1. Learning is a process, not an outcome.
2. Learning derives from experience.
3. Learning requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed modes of adaptation.
4. Learning is a holistic integrative process.
5. Learning requires the interplay between a person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of knowledge creation (p. 25-38).

### **The Learning Process**

According to ELT, learning results from recognizing and responding to a diverse set of environmental and personal demands. Learning involves two interdependent dimensions of knowledge transformation: acquisition and transformation. Each dimension requires an individual to resolve a dialectic tension or a set of competing learning demands. The knowledge acquisition dimension requires an individual to resolve the tension between apprehension (concrete experience) versus comprehension (abstract conceptualization). Apprehension requires an individual to accept new knowledge through sensory perception and direct experience with the world (i.e., feelings or emotions). A person engaged in knowledge apprehension might describe learning as a continuous series of uninterrupted new experiences. In contrast, comprehension occurs when an individual gathers knowledge through abstract concepts and symbolic representations. Comprehension occurs when a person breaks down experience into meaningful events and places them within a framework of symbolic meaning of culture and society. A person engaged in knowledge comprehension might describe learning as a process of integrating, organizing and ordering experiences.

Knowledge acquired through apprehension or comprehension stands ready to be transformed by the second learning dimension, which is the process of knowledge transformation. The transformation dimension of learning is also characterized by a dialectical tension: knowledge intention (reflective observation) versus knowledge extension (active experimentation). Learning by intention describes the process whereby a learner moves inward to reflect upon previously acquired knowledge. In contrast, learning by extension requires a movement beyond the individual and requires him or her to interact with an external environment.

Taken as a whole, learning is described as a continuous process of dealing with diverse personal and environmental demands. Learning, as a holistic process, entails using experience as the basis for reflection, thinking, and taking action, which in turn, creates new experiences.

## The Learning Cycle

As its name suggests, one characteristic that distinguishes ELT from other learning approaches is its emphasis on experience as a key component in the learning process. Experience is central to learning because it catalyzes learning and development. Despite its centrality, learning is only one of four important learning processes that constitute the learning cycle. Kolb (1976) describes the interrelated process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation as the learning cycle. The cycle describes the process whereby a person resolves the dialectal tensions of learning in a cyclical fashion as depicted in Figure 1. Kolb (1976) explains:

Learning is conceived of a four-stage cycle. Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a theory from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences (p. 21).

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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In summary, ELT provides a comprehensive model that describes learning as a process of resolving diverse and competing demands. While experience provides the catalyst for individual learning, it is the transformation of experience through reflection, conceptualization, and action that constitutes the learning process.

## CRITICS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Despite the persistent popularity of this model in management learning, ELT has increasingly become the target of a growing body of critical scrutiny. Critiques of ELT come primary from two forms. One form of criticism arises from empiricists who question the psychometric properties of experiential learning theory and its measurement (Freedman & Stumpf, 1978; 1980). A second form of criticism, and the basis of this inquiry, points to the theoretical limitations of the theory's initial formulation. Scrutiny generally focuses on the theory's emphasis on the central role experience plays in learning, as it suggests an emphasis on the individual aspects of learning at the expense of social, cultural, and political processes that influence learning (Vince , 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe, 1997). Such criticisms generally focus on the theoretical foundations of ELT, suggesting that it decontextualizes the learning process, or that it provides only a limited account of the learning process.

Vince (1998) is representative of this position and points to five limitations of ELT. First, he suggests learning and experience have not been considered within the context of power relations such as social status, gender and cultural dominance and second, that ELT does not give ample status to the influence of these power differentials on learning. Third, Vince believes that ELT fails to focus on the “here and now” of experience. Instead it gives undo status to retrospective reflection. Fourth, he believes ELT fails to recognize the “unconscious” learning processes and defense mechanisms that may inhibit learning. Fifth, he concludes that ELT does not adequately propose a “second order” or higher meta-learning processes, such as the questioning of assumptions of learning communities (p. 309). Reynolds (1999) echoes such criticisms by suggesting that ELT promotes a largely “individualized perspective” on the learning process at the expense of social and political influences of learning. Similarly, Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe (1997) advocate that the cognitive nature of ELT overemphasizes the role of the individual and “decontextualizes” the learning process. This is important, they suggest, because the “isolated individual quickly becomes divorced from their historical and social position and material existence (p. 139).”

Critiques of ELT often propose alternative solutions to Kolb’s initial formulation. A broad range of alternatives have been put forth, including a better account of the power and social relations in learning process, stronger emphasis on critical reflection or ‘reflexivity’, a total reconceptualization of the theory based on object relations theory, that integrates Kolb’s theory with other experiential learning theories, and an emphasis on rhetorical aspects of learning. Vince (1998), for example, proposes to extend ELT to include an additional set of processes that explains not how people learn, but rather those processes that discourage learning. Vince’s “Theme of Anxiety”, reminiscent of Argyris and Schon’s (1978) concept of defense mechanisms, suggests that experience, the initial stage of learning, is often characterized by emotions of “anxiety, fear, and doubt” and that these emotions manifest themselves in denial, avoidance, and a variety of other learning inhibitors that are more accountable to the realities of power relationships and social context (p. 331).

Holman et al. (19xx) argue for a constructivist and activist theory of experiential learning by drawing extensively on Vygotsky’s (1978) social learning theory. Their proposal suggests that individual learning is best viewed in terms of the embedded social and historical position of the learner. As an alternative to the four fold process of experience, reflection, conceptualization and action, they proposes that learning should be conceived as a literary act focused on “rhetoric, argument, and social response” (p. 143). This movement from the mind to the word is designed to counter what they perceive as the cognitive bias of ELT.

Similarly, Reynolds (1999), drawing on theories of communicative action (e.g, Habermas), emphasizes the role of critical reflection over reflective observation in an attempt to unmask the seemingly objective role of experience in the learning process. Challenging the notion that learning is an objective and rational process, Reynolds focuses on how the emancipatory power of learning helps the learner to recognize his or

her philosophical assumptions and how they influence the learning process. Reynolds (1997) calls for a redefinition of learning styles to emphasize the individual variance, rather than the convergent similarities of how individuals learn.

This emphasis on the social, cultural and rhetorical elements of learning is echoed in Miettinen's (1998) critique of the humanist epistemology ELT. Miettinen advances the position that ELT is founded on a misreading of Lewin, Dewey, Piaget, and other theoretical influences. The diverse theoretical foundations of ELT, Miettinen argues, leaves its agenda searching for an epistemological home in more traditional academic fields, such as psychology and sociology. This academic wandering, he argues, leaves the theory impotent when attempting to exercise institutional clout when influencing the more pressing issues of how social and cultural beliefs influence learning.

Taken as a whole, the growing criticism of ELT suggests that the theory's emphasis on the centrality of the experience of the individual has come at the expense of a clear accounting for the social, political, and interactive processes of learning. Alternatives proposals include the introduction of critical theory, emancipatory philosophy, normative psychology, and complete institutional boycotts of the theory as appropriate remedies to the ills of ELT.

### **Critique of the Critics**

This critical scrutiny has enlightened ELT by highlighting ambiguities, omissions, and potential limitations of Kolb's initial formulation. The success of these critics at providing adequate reinterpretations, alternatives or extensions, however, remains unclear. Because these critiques often rely on distilling a complex account of a diverse process, they risk replacing it with a theory that is intoxicatingly simple and easy. While these critical works provide important learning for learning theorists, their value in furthering theory and practice on management learning also remains unclear. In addition, these critiques often attack the fundamental humanist spirit of Kolb's initial formulation. Indeed, current criticisms often seem more focused on razing one of the most influential paradigms in management learning than on refocusing the discussion on its advancement. Often based on a limited reading of Kolb's (1984) formulation, these criticisms often focus selectively on specific areas of this broad and comprehensive approach to learning. Instead of providing full and comprehensive alternatives to ELT, critics provide alternatives that are limited and specific, reflecting, as they do, a limited reading of a complex and broad theoretical position. Critics seem guided by a preoccupation with the learning cycle, learning styles, and the experiential basis of learning, often at the expense of the fundamental assumption of the learning process: resolving the dialectics of knowledge and the competing demands of the learning process. Reynold's (1999) recognizes that criticisms of ELT are often "simplistic reductions of Kolb's work" and "invariably neglect the social, institutional, or cultural aspects of which experience is comprised" (p. 539). For example, Holman et al. fail to acknowledge the influence of Vygotsky on ELT (Kolb, 1984: p 133.) while giving no account of how language is

internalized (integrated with experience), a key element to Vygotsky's (1978) formulation of the learning process (see p. 52).

Second, critiques of ELT fail to preserve the humanistic assumptions of the learning process, the inherent ability of people to learn and develop, provided they have access to the adequate tools and are situated within a supportive context. Critical theory approaches (e.g., Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998) seem particularly problematic. In their attempt to emancipate learners from their social cuffs, critical theorists seem uneasily willing to adapt a program that strips the learner of the very tools that enable him or her to find emancipation in the first place. Critical pedagogy and learning, like many critical theory approaches, can be accused of a kind of socio-cognitive elitism (Rorty, 1997), as they engender language that is often inaccessible to everyone except a small group of highly trained elites, schooled in specialized forms of rhetoric or critical thinking and cut off from the daily experiences of the working manager. As Kegan (1994) has pointed out, critical approaches themselves often lead to greater feelings of repression as new ways of thinking and often demand a set of higher-level social-cognitive skills that take years to develop. Critical approaches may well provide individuals with insight into their social contexts but leave them stranded in a complex world, without the appropriate tools to order this complexity. Inevitably, the newly 'emancipated' individual may feel more repressed than ever as they become alienated from his or her own capacity to adequately respond to the new demands of the situation. What may be lacking ultimately from the critical perspectives is a theoretical connection that preserves the role of individual experience, placing it within the context of socially accumulated knowledge.

Finally, criticisms that suggest ETL lacks sufficient institutional standing (Freedman & Stumpf, 1980; Miettinen, 1998) appear overly simplistic in light of recent debates in organizational studies about the nature of low consensus fields (Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Donaldson, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Pfeffer, 1993). Management learning has yet to engage in the diversity-consensus debate raging in the study of organizations but it might take its cue from ELT itself. To paraphrase Kolb (1976), the best learning systems are those that tolerate diversity.

If these three proposals seem inadequate, one plausible proposal may lie in explicating a theoretical relationship between personal and social knowledge. Just as Dewey seeks to preserve the underlying traditions of educational institutions while at the same time reforming their agenda, this study seeks to preserve the underlying values of experiential learning while redirecting its agenda to further its relevancy for management learning. The starting point for such an agenda lies in exploring the structure of knowledge.

### **The Structure of Knowledge**

Kolb proposes a relationship between social and personal knowledge that preserves the prominence of individual experience in the learning process, but ties experience directly to the social, political and cultural world of the individual by conceptualizing the personal

and social aspects of learning in terms of experiential learning theory. Kolb (1984) provides a starting point:

Apprehension of experience is a personal subjective process that cannot be known by others except by the communication to them of the comprehensions that we use to describe our immediate experience. Comprehension, on the other hand, is an objective process, a tool of culture, as Engels would call it. From this it follows that there are two kinds of knowledge: *personal knowledge*, the combination of my direct apprehensions of experience and the socially acquired comprehensions I use to explain this experience and guide my actions; and *social knowledge*, the independent, socially and culturally transmitted network of words, symbols, and images that is based solely on comprehension (p. 105).  
(emphasis original)

The distinction between personal and social knowledge manifests itself into two distinct knowledge structures: personal and social knowledge. The movement between social and personal knowledge arises in the experiential learning dialectic of apprehension versus comprehension. Thus, knowledge is created as it moves between a personal (implicit) mode and a social (explicit) mode.

### **A Post-structuralist Approach to ELT**

Before proposing the specific relationship between personal and social knowledge, the work of French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1977) is enlisted. Drawing on and integrating new theoretical influences is consistent with ELT's integrative learning theory. Lacan believes that human behavior is subject to a set of relationships between the internal and the external world. The nature of these relationships is often evasive to both the individual acting in the world and the specialist seeking observing this behavior from afar. While Lacan draws heavily from Freud, other thinkers of his day also influence his work. In particular this includes French existentialist thinkers like the linguist Saussure, phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, structural anthropologist Levi-Straus, and novelist philosopher Sartre (Grosz, 1995). A central theme that emerges in Lacan's work is the idea that the mind is structured like a language (Kurzeil, 1996; p. 144). The idea that mind is structured like a language challenges conventional thinking about experience because it suggests that learning is not the product of biological development, but rather is shaped by its symbolic, social, and cultural environment. Lacan's view of experience, however, lies in sharp contrast to conventional theories of socialization as learning and change in the individual does not begin with a socially constructed world, internalized by the individual (Berger & Luckman, 1966) as well as conceptualizations American empiricism associated with Dewey. In contrast, Lacan believed experiences began with a desire in the individual which sought to be externalized in the available symbolic world. Lacan believed human experience was an individual phenomenon that could only be expressed in social terms. Similarly, individual experience could only be realized in available social terms. If we apply Lacan's thinking to the topic of learning, experience is conceptualized as a series of symbolic events, structured as it were, by the language



through which experience is expressed. It is this idea, that experience is structured like a language, that allows us to reconsider the relationship between the learning cycle and personal-social modes of knowledge. Learning is not solely a process of internalizing the external world, but rather a process of externalizations: the process of expressing internal desires, emotions, feelings and motivations (e.g., experiences) in the socially embedded world of language and the rules of culture.

As depicted in Figure 2, the transformation between social and personal knowledge is conceived as a figure 8. This “*K*” Schema, depicts the transformation

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between personal and social knowledge as a continuous process that turns back onto itself. Consistent with ELT, learning begins with an experience that serves as the basis for reflection. The two learning processes of experience and reflection are the most personal knowledge categories as they remain largely tacit (see Nonaka, 1994). While these first two stages of learning are tacit, they do not occur completely separate from the social world. Rather, experience and reflection are shaped by language. The tacit world of experience is not separate from the explicit world of the symbolic. It should become clear that the social and personal are not distinct categories of knowledge but inter-related ones. Social knowledge is manifested in the process of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Personal knowledge is transformed through social means and social knowledge is constantly interpreted in terms of personal knowledge. The inter-relationship between social and personal knowledge represents the transaction between person and environment, crucial to the initial formulation of ELT.

The model suggests a split, a divide perhaps, between personal knowledge of concrete experience/reflective observation and abstract conceptualization/active experimentation. Reflection and abstraction serve to transform personal knowledge into social knowledge, while experience and action serve to transform social knowledge into the personal. Yet, the movement between the explicit and the tacit, the social and the personal, is never an exact transformation, but rather this transformation process is one characterized by a schism, separation, and distance. This “fracture” in Lacan’s terms is represented by the letter *k*. The *k* signals a separation between personal and social knowledge that can never be completely reconciled. Instead, it is this separation that signals a transformational loss as the personal translates into the social and vice versa. While personal knowledge always remains subject to the limited symbolic universe of the social, so too is social knowledge limited by the personal knowledge it represents. The dialectical relationship between action/reflection and experience/abstraction is preserved.

## A “Twist” on Kolb

This slight “twist” on Kolb’s initial formulation illustrates the interdependent relationship between social and personal knowledge. Although personal knowledge is structured like language and continually married to the social rules of culture, it can never be truly reflected in social terms as it is always stripped of accuracy as it moves from the personal to social. Likewise, social knowledge can never be directly internalized as personal knowledge as it must continually be integrated into extant experience. Personal knowledge remains continually subject to the ordering process of reflection and social knowledge is subject to the constant distractions and updates of action in the world. What remains intact from ELT are the sequential stages of the learning process and the dialectical nature of knowledge creation. What is new is the defined relationship between personal and social knowledge, a new marriage between post-structuralist and experiential learning theory. Along with this recognized relationship is the idea that the learning process, particularly the movement between social and personal forms of knowledge itself, is characterized not by accuracy, correctness, and objectivity, but by slippage, deception, and subjectivity. The transformation from action to experience (social to personal) conspires against the transformation from reflection to abstraction (personal to social).

This extension of ELT allows us to consider the notion that learning is a process of ordering and transforming experience through reflection and action. Specifically, four propositions about the nature of learning emerge from the relationship between personal and social knowledge:

- 1) Experience forms both the basis and limits of knowledge creation. Learning does not arise from a clean slate, but rather people always draw on personal experience and process such experience through its social context.
- 2) Social knowledge and language provides the super structure of experience, determining its basic structure, content, and boundaries of the experience. Thus, while individual experience forms the basis of learning, experience is always confined by its context and bound by its own assumptions, beliefs, and ability to justify itself in socially accessible ways. Experience is subject to the learner’s capability to represent it available social terms.
- 3) Experience can be measured as a series of language events and represented through the effects of this language.
- 4) The movement between social and personal knowledge creates a break, or a schism, between personal and social knowledge.

### **Implications for Management Learning**

These four propositions are designed to shift the current discussion on experiential learning theory from deconstructing its basic assumptions, to building on them and to restoring the role of individual experience in the learning process. In contrast to recent characterizations, experiential learning does not describe learning as an individual process, but rather a socially embedded process of interaction between social and

personal knowledge. This renewed focus on the role of experience and its emphasis on the relationship between personal and social knowledge provides the basis for defining management learning in terms of individual experience. Learning is defined as the process of increasing an individual's capacity to gather and transform knowledge and to represent this experience in more complex symbolic ways drawing from the tools of cultures and to apply this experience to management problems.

This model challenges the notion that ELT learning is fundamentally a cognitive theory where learning occurs in isolation (Holman et. al, 1997; Meittinen, 1998; Van der Heijden, 1996) because there is no clear distinction between personal and social forms of knowledge. Nor is there ever an exact translation between personal and social knowledge, but rather a movement between two diverse forms of knowledge. Thus, ELT is more like Hegal's dialectic, continually in a process of flux and movement, than Decarte's cogito, a process born purely from the minds own self-awareness.

An experiential learning approach to management learning contrasts to organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1976; Dixon, 1994) and learning organization (Senge, 1990) theory because it emphasizes the transactional and local nature of learning. ELT focuses on the immediate role of experience and the individual or group level learning processes rather than the organizational processes, which are more about strategy and other abstractions often removed from the daily experiences of the individual. The model of experiential learning proposed here is more closely aligned with Hunt's (1987) emphasis on the interactive processes of learning and how these interactions facilitate movement around the learning cycle. Argyris and Schon's (1976) distinction between espoused theory and theory in practice provides a point of departure from the organizational learning approach to management learning to an experiential approach. The limitation of the organizational learning approach lies in its suggestion that a "correct," or objective statement of knowledge actually exists (Nonaka, 1994). In contrast, experiential approach to management learning prevents theorists from being tied down to explaining failures in terms of defensive mechanisms by suggesting that learning is more related to the skills necessary to acknowledge and legitimize a variety of experiences than simply the result of a person's need to defend one's own espoused theory. As Nonaka contends, emphasis on defense mechanisms tends to create unrealistic expectations about attaining or acknowledging a "right" answer that can be known objectively.

The experiential learning approach to management learning is more in line with ontologically oriented approaches to knowledge that see experience itself as the starting point of knowledge creation and conversation as its means (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1998). An experiential learning approach suggests that the increased capacity to learn in organizations is a result of skill and knowledge acquisition, that learning is embedded in the direct interactions between people, and that knowledge creation, as it moves between the explicit and tacit, is an imperfect, albeit often adequate process of transforming knowledge from personal to social. This experiential model aligns with, and extends, Nonaka's (1994) concept of organizational knowledge creation by suggesting that the movement between explicit and implicit (social and personal) knowledge is not a clean one, but one characterized by slippage and loss.

Importantly, this experiential approach does not discount the broader social norms or beliefs in the larger system; instead, it focuses on how these social norms are related to localized actions and their application to specific problems. Carlesson, Keane, and Martin (1976) recognize the importance of localized interactions in their study of research and development teams. They conclude that R & D teams need to develop specialized skills to maneuver through the unique learning demands related to solving complex and new problems.

An experiential model provides several insights into management learning practice. First, the emphasis on externalization or transforming personal to social knowledge, has been largely ignored in much of the literature on management learning. Experiential learning approaches to organizational behavior (Kolb, 2000), writing of life stories, and use of critical incident interviews (Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1996; Boyatzis, 1998) provide techniques that catalyze externalization. Yet these techniques may only represent the start of externalization if they do not create broader vocabularies with which people can meaningfully transform implicit knowledge into the explicit. Conversational learning provides another means for catalyzing externalization (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1998). Conversational learning, a “pedagogy” based on discourse rather than the traditional lecture method, emphasizes the relationship between language and experience: a kind of teasing out experiences through language. The conversation does not necessarily represent the experience in symbolic form; rather, the conversation actually contributes to creating the experience as the metaphorical distance between the symbolic and experiential worlds shorten.

Another technique that shows promise in improving externalization emerges from research on communication and cognition. Techniques such as “verbal-description” or “communication accuracy” proposes to help individual memory, cognition, or recollection by providing verbal associations with events or objects. Verbal description training is designed to provide detailed and highly descriptive language utilized by individuals to recognize and describe detailed parts of a process or product (see Malpass, Lavigueur, & Weldon 1973). Finally, storytelling, which orders experiences in sequential and meaningful ways may, provide another method of externalization (Klein, 1998).

Experiential learning theory continues to exercise considerable influence in management learning, despite persistent criticism from several fronts. Researchers and practitioners alike enlist it for its explanatory strength and practical significance. Critics taught the theory for its emphasis on individual experience at the expense of social, political, and cultural aspects of learning but have provided inadequate resolutions based on limited or mis-readings of the theory. This paper proposes that a stronger representation of the relationship between personal and social knowledge provides a better alternative than those currently proposed, while maintaining the theory’s underlying core assumptions. A better understanding of this relationship promises to reclaim the central role of experience in the learning process and guide future research on management learning.

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Figure 1  
The Experiential Learning Cycle

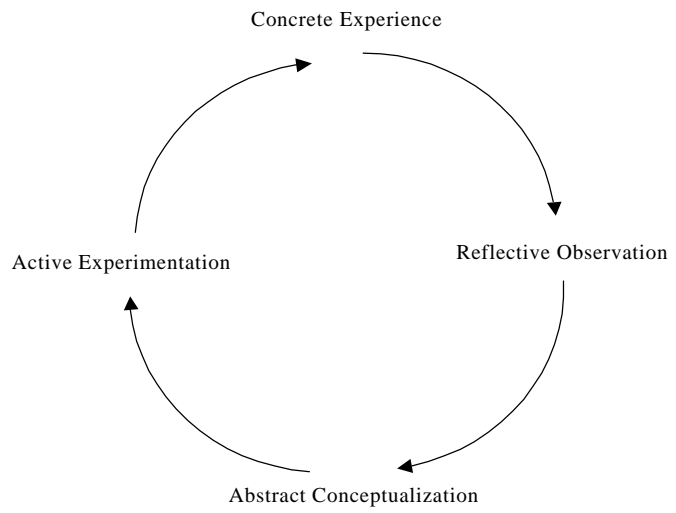




Figure 2

The K Schema

