



KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL REFLECTED IN ODL SUCCESS STORIES: A CASE STUDY ON SELECTED OUSL ALUMNI

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only National University in the island that is exclusively dedicated to the Open Distance Learning (ODL) method of knowledge development and delivery while adopting and endorsing lifelong learning based on concepts which are internationally accepted (Liyanagama & Vidanapathirana, 2012). Within these broad parameters, it currently caters to a population of more than 35,000 students that is particularly heterogenous, and this is a characteristic that differentiates the OUSL with the Conventional Universities in the country. To elaborate further, unlike in a conventional university, the OUSL pool of learners consists of representatives of various age groups, civil status and employment thus making them a diversely experienced lot. In such a scenario, the learning process of each student clearly becomes dissimilar to one another depending on the lifestyle he/she leads. Accordingly, each learner must develop a study practice that suits him/her best in order to perform well in the selected study programme.

Over the years, the OUSL has witnessed the graduation of many students who have successfully managed their personal life and employment along with their studies and have well reached their educational and professional goals. At a time when the demand to be a part of the ODL system has progressively increased among the prospective student population in the country, it seemed apt to discover some of the strategies that have been followed by the former OUSL undergraduates while performing well in their respective courses. At the same time, it was also imperative to locate what consequences led them to those strategies. In doing so, David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model which is also known as the Reflective Model seemed a fitting paradigm to reflect on when observing the stances these students have followed. A study conducted on the Learning Styles of the Open University Students of Sri Lanka (Gunawardena, Jayatilleke & Lekamge, 1996) has examined the learning styles of adult learners of two specific study programmes offered by the OUSL in relation to the Kolb Learning Style Inventory based on the Experiential Learning Model which is relevant to many adult learning situations. However, the current study exclusively focused only on the latter.

In a nutshell, Kolb's Experiential Learning Model is based on one's own experience that involves reviewing, analyzing and evaluation. As Dr. Nicole Brown (2017) explains, once these three stages are completed, a new cycle will commence based on the former experiences that would lead to further learning.

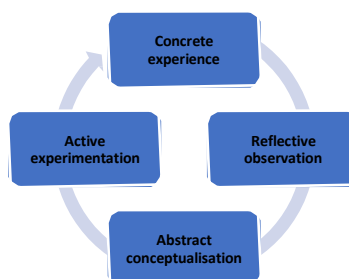


Figure 4.2: Kolb's Experiential Learning Model



Evidently, this cycle stresses on four steps that play key roles in the process of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. As Kolb (1984) states, learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibly in a range of situations. Furthermore, he elaborates that the incentive for the development of new concepts is provided by new experiences. He also insists that each individual prefers a particular approach to learning which ultimately becomes his/her dominant style.

The purpose of this study was to expose the current and future Open and Distance learners to an array of possibilities of becoming academically high achievers via strategies that would suit them best by applying Kolb's Experiential Learning Model.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with the participation of four OUSL alumni representing four bachelor's degree programmes offered by the OUSL: Bachelor of Arts in English and English Language Teaching, Bachelor of Education Honours in Drama and Theatre, Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences and Bachelor of Technology Honours in Engineering. They were a purposive sample since they were selected based on their learner performance and current profession and as well as their gender; two each representing male and female. Three of them are currently employed as lecturers at a National University while the fourth is the Vice Principal at an International School. Further, except for one who has gained a First Class, the other three have obtained a Second Class Upper in their respective study programmes.

All four were interviewed individually on the study process they followed as undergraduates, and the provided data were analyzed against the Kolb's Experiential Learning Model to discover how the particular paradigm had reflected on the steps they had taken along their path to success. Accordingly, this study relied on a qualitative method of data analysis following the format of a case study. In maintaining the anonymity of the respondents, they were re-named as Himali, Senthil, Riyasa and Derek and the Results and Discussion of the study are presented as four different case studies in the form of a narration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case study 1 – Himali

Himali commenced her higher studies by following the Bachelor of Arts in English and English language Teaching after a lapse of seventeen years of active studying, and when she obtained 5As and 1B in Level 3 (1st Year), she was pleasantly surprised. However, being a single parent and a primary school teacher, she found it difficult to dedicate sufficient time for her studies which eventually led to a drop in her performance at the end of Level 4. This time, Himali was 'unpleasantly' surprised and in relation to Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, this was her 'concrete experience' which made her reflect on her actions in order to improve the prevailing situation. Accordingly, an eventual leading to the second stage of the cycle, which was 'reflective observation', was inevitable as Himali was adamant on being a much better performer. However, despite her efforts in recalling how she obtained good grades in Level 3, she was unable to identify any special tactic which she had practiced. This is when Himali decided to experiment with a possible strategy that would enable her to achieve her goal. She commenced answering questions on all available past papers pertaining to her relevant courses and created what she referred to as 'Answer Books'. She wrote complete answers to all questions, sometimes, which were repetitions, and closer to her final examinations, she revised



them until she was thorough with its content. This, in fact, was her stage of 'abstract conceptualisation' according to the Experiential Learning Model, and with the aid of this strategy, Himali successfully increased the number of A and B passes on her result sheet of Level 5 which also was an incentive (as Kolb suggests) which made her further improvise her strategy. Accordingly, she stepped into the fourth stage, 'active experimentation', by involving her close friend in writing answers to the past papers of Level 6. This time, the 'Answer Books' were enriched with more knowledge as two people had made their inputs, and both their results had further improved. Consequently, Himali successfully developed her 'abstract conceptualisation' into a 'concrete experience' creating a full circle based on her experiences as an undergraduate.

Case study 2 – Senthil

In the case of Senthil, though he had no family commitments, he was occupied in a fulltime employment when he was an undergraduate of the Bachelor of Education Honours in Drama and Theatre offered by the Faculty of Education, OUSL. As a result, he was unable to attend some of the day schools which were anyway conducted in limited numbers, and when attempting 'take home' assignments, he found himself at a loss of content to be included in his answers. Accordingly, he felt less confident of his performance which was a 'concrete experience' that he needed to analyze. Further probing of the situation made him realize the lack of the presence of a teacher in his learning process. This realization, in fact, was his 'reflective observation' that led him to be his own teacher. Thus, he began playing the role of a teacher while studying on his own based on an 'abstract conceptualisation'. Eventually, Senthil witnessed a noticeable improvement in his grades which was an incentive that aided him in building up his self-confidence. He further developed this approach by speaking aloud while attempting the 'take home' assignments which was the 'active experimentation' according to Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. Accordingly, his abstract concept which was further improved with active experimenting became a positive 'concrete experience' for him.

Case study 3 – Riyasa

Similar to Himali, Riyasa too had commenced her tertiary education at a later stage in life and was a teacher in an international school. She was already married and having two school going children, and initially, she was disheartened by having to forego some of the day schools due to her personal and professional commitments. In addition, she found the knowledge she gained through the course material was insufficient in performing well in the assignments and final examinations which was a 'concrete experience' that needed to be addressed. After observing her situation reflectively, she realized she needed to accumulate more knowledge related to course content. Accordingly, Riyasa, as an abstract concept, which she assumed to be helpful, commenced browsing the internet for additional information on certain study areas such as 'Ethnic Groups' and 'Family and Living Styles' that are part of the Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences which she was following. This strategy proved to be successful as her grades improved thus encouraging her to apply this approach to all courses she was offering. Consequently, Riyasa's search for extra readings became her dominant style of learning with which she stepped into a stabilized 'concrete experience'.

Case study 3 – Derek

Derek, who offered the Bachelor of Technology Honours in Engineering at the Faculty of Engineering Technology, OUSL, comparatively, faced the 'concrete experience' at the initial stage of the programme. He considered that being younger than all his batchmates and unemployed was a disadvantage since the others brought in more experience to the day school. Therefore, he developed the 'reflective observation' stage fairly early based on assumption,



unlike the other respondents. So, instead of striving to follow an individualistic approach, Derek decided to interact well with his more experienced peers. While reaching the 'abstract conceptualisation' stage, he assumed that working in a group will enable him to gain more shared knowledge. Derek insisted that this strategy worked well for him, especially, in project work. Throughout the Programme, he had 'actively experimented' by broadening his network with almost everyone in his batch, which he believes, led him to obtain a First Class, a Gold Medal and also top his batch. Furthermore, at the end of every year, he would enter a 'concrete experience' with the incentive of gaining excellent results, which could be considered the beginning of another cycle of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. Accordingly, and he had kept on reaching out to his peers as an 'active experimentation'.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

When considering the above discussed cases, the 'concrete experience' of all four respondents has clearly been related to a struggle in wanting to better their performance. However, the dominant approach each had developed had varied depending on the individual's personal and professional capacity and availability of time. The narrations also evidenced that there is a common pattern in how each learner would locate their most suitable approach in achieving their goal. Furthermore, their experiences well reflected the four significant stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. Accordingly, the study evidenced Kolb's claim on this paradigm being relevant to many adult learning situations. As mentioned in the Introduction, the OUSL learners come from diverse backgrounds; hence, the strategies they would follow too would seemingly vary. Concurrently, the significant similarity between how they persevere their goals and Kolb's stages of experiential learning could be considered an encouragement for potential possibilities of being a successful learner in the Open Distance Learning system.

This study could be extended with a larger sample by observing the approaches utilized by current undergraduates and conduct a comparative study to identify the differences between the strategies used then and now.

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