

## The learning cycle: Steps in the process of learning and change

Learning is a complex process that is frequently understood as an intellectual activity of gaining knowledge or as a combination of intellectual and physical dimensions, required to develop a certain skill. However, by describing it that way, we leave out a number of key components of the process, which in turn impact the result.

From the many definitions of learning, I like the one by Argyris (1993): "Learning is not simply having a new insight or a new idea. Learning occurs when we take effective action, when we detect and correct error." Linking learning to a change is the key facet that I would like to highlight, given the fact that my experience with adults learning is aimed at people changing the way they interpret and judge events, and ultimately the way they respond and react to daily life challenges.

From this perspective, there are several steps in the learning process, some of which lead to change. In order to understand the steps of the learning cycle, it is helpful to locate where an individual is in the process. This is especially useful for those who support others through coaching, as the model allows to offer more appropriate supports and tools, according to what stage of the process the person is going through.

### Figure 1.

*The Learning Cycle*



### The Relevance Principle

This learning cycle begins with an **Action**. The reason to root the process in an action, is that it brings relevance to the learning. Various authors have used the relevance of the current action as an important launching platform for the learning process (Dewey, 1916; Vigotsky, 1988; Kolb, 1984, Revans, 1982, Bruner, 1986, Fosnot, 1996). The relevance of the current action seems to bring the ownership and interest required to engage in a learning process. So rather than starting with a concept chosen and brought in by the instructor or the expert, who then tries to instill the contents into the learners, taking a current action

that directly involves the learners is the preferred place to start. This points to the need to set up learning scenarios where the learning can flow naturally from an action that is both current and relevant to the learner.

But action by itself does not imply learning. While plain repetition and practice may develop skills and expertise in certain domains, it is called implicit or tacit knowledge (Hayes and Broadbent, 1988). What we learn without being aware of it, what we are unable to explain or express in words, is tacit knowledge and is the heart of many successful decisions based on “intuition”. However, we don’t have control over that knowledge, as we do not know what it is, therefore we are unable to share it, to transfer it to others, to build upon it or even to apply and repeat it consciously. It just “happens” – sometimes successfully and we are happy about it. But we are also unable to make any corrections when our “intuition” guides us in a direction that ends up being less successful.

### **Reflection on Action**

So for the purpose of building a conscious learning, we need to start the learning process, and the next step is to reflect on what happened, to draw meaning from an action taken.

This step was first defined by John Dewey (1916). , for whom learning depended on action. Knowledge and ideas emerged only from a situation from which learners were able to extract experiences that had meaning and importance to them. Be it through individual reflection on the result itself or hearing what others have to say, if we don’t realize if and why an action was successful or not, we cannot develop any learning. *We just jump from one action to the next.*

This step to reflect on action involves a pause to ponder what happened, to look back and develop observation skills by describing a result:

- What happened?
- How did it go?
- Why so?

The US Army is one of the few organizations that has institutionalized this reflection step after an event. Their “After Action Review” procedure (Sullivan and Harper, 1996, Garvin, 2000) is implemented formally or informally after an exercise or an important activity, to identify successes and failures and how to perform better the next time. With a similar goal as our Reflection on Action step, the first part of After Action Review procedure involves the questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- Why did it happen?

This step is necessary to launch the learning process, as it creates a first moment of awareness. Learning should go beyond tacit and intuitive knowledge, and has to include

the possibility of articulating in words the connections within an event, the elements that played a role and the relationship with the result obtained. As in a scientific experiment, we invite individuals to observe carefully, to describe the variables, to formulate relationships between the variables, and to develop hypotheses that can be tested.

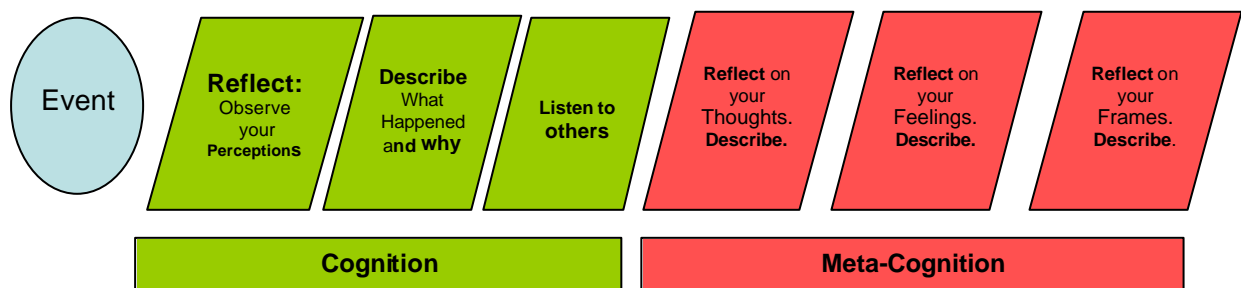
This principle of reflection on action and the impact on learning has been researched by Figueiredo and Barros (2004). The authors highlight that every student comes with his/her own knowledge, which will only be questioned when a new experience shows that the knowledge is not applicable, or cannot explain a result or event. But for this to happen, the students will have to reflect on the event, describing it and explaining it with their frameworks. The instructor (acting as a learning facilitator) can invite students to talk about such an event, with the purpose of having them:

- observe what they perceived
- describe it in their words
- reflect on the thoughts the event triggered in them
- reflect on the feelings the event generated in them
- reflect on the frames of observing and describing

This describes a process that can increase in depth going from mere cognition to meta-cognition (Ribeiro, 2003), from being aware of what happened to developing awareness of how their frames, their thinking patterns, and their assumptions and values condition their interpretation of what happened. (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Feedback Step at Cognition and Meta-Cognition Levels as defined by Figueiredo and Barros*



It is clear that our own mental paradigms define (and limit) the spectrum of our perceptions: our values, cultural conditioners, habits, experiences, assumptions etc. will shape what we describe, and what we are not even able to perceive. For instance, if we are used

to participate freely in a meeting of peers, we may not perceive this as something to be described, while someone coming from a cultural context that honors seniority (like the Malay culture) may immediately notice that people were talking without waiting for their elders to go first, which can be perceived as disrespectful. This is the reason why it is a good idea to design this step in a group setting (Figueiredo and Barros, op.cit.), where differing perceptions open other participant's minds to new perspectives, helping them become aware of their own blind spots and broadening their horizon. This was recommended by Dewey in 1916 : "These [learning] situations had to occur in a social context, such as a classroom, where students joined in manipulating materials and, thus, created a community of learners who built their knowledge together." (op.cit.).It also can pave the way to deeper questions, addressing the meta-cognitive level, by uncovering mental models, assumptions and beliefs (i.e. "What makes me see things as I do, as opposed as how you see them?").

The more diverse the group, the richer the reflection experience, because group members will hear, and be confronted by, differing frames and experiences to challenge their own experiences and assumptions. The greater the variety of voiced perceptions, the deeper the learning among members. As participants become familiar with this step, they will increase their observation skills, knowing that they will be asked to reflect on what they observed and perceived. This is a secondary benefit from this step.

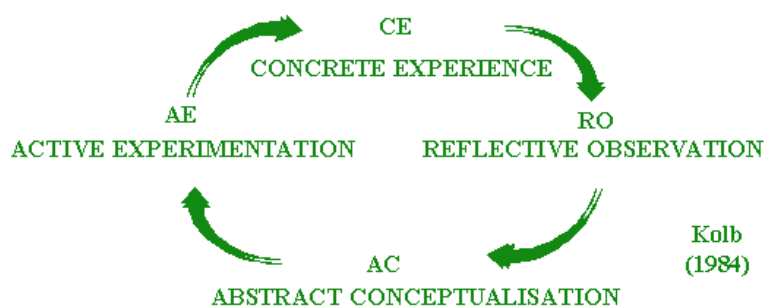
Both the Learning and Change model I propose and the "After Action Review" approach, as well as other learning cycles (Kolb, 1984) invite us to search for reasons and meaning, looking for the "why".

### Self-Awareness

One important element that is not explicitly mentioned in the different learning cycles (Juch, 1983 cited by Greenaway, 1995) is the reflection on the individual's contribution to an event.

### Figure 3.

*Kolb's Learning Cycle*



Source: Greenaway, 1995

(Continued on page 6)

While Kolb (Figure 3) goes from concrete experience, through reflective observation to the abstract conceptualization in order to make meaning, there is a factor missing that has a significant impact on the learning. I am referring to the question: *How did I contribute to this?*

This question transcends the mere description of an event or the variables that played a role in the results, and concentrates attention on the individual's contribution to the result. This is not to disqualify the other intervening factors, but it brings to the front what an individual has done that made an impact on the result. This step helps the person increase awareness of the power and impact of one's own actions, be it words, decisions, attitudes, etc.

We live in a fast paced world, where we spend our time doing and reacting to what others do. We invest time interpreting the behaviors of others, trying to make meaning, with a significantly low percentage of our time devoted to reflect on ourselves (Figueiredo and Barros, op.cit). This contributes to frequent feelings of being exposed and at the mercy of events, of other people's actions and decisions, with a restricted level of influence and no control of what happens. This feeling of powerlessness is at the root of much of the stress we suffer these days.

It may well serve a purpose to attribute all the responsibility for events that occur, outside of our area of control: it is easier to blame others than to acknowledge our own contribution. To do so, however, is to short change our learning, and to inhibit our personal growth. Research done with students (Morais & Valente, 1991 cited by Ribeiro, 2003) showed that understanding their own cognitive processes helped the students to control and manage them, increasing their feelings of ownership of the task, of responsibility for the results, and of raising their self confidence with respect to their capabilities. This seems to indicate that the more we know about ourselves, the more resources we have to control our own decisions and actions, and to feel better about ourselves.

This is a principle very much used in psychological therapeutic contexts, as well as in conflict resolution settings (Stone, Patton and Heen, 1999). Goleman (1996) took the Socratic "Know Thyself" to a number of pragmatic levels in his work on Emotional Intelligence.

I call this step the self-awareness, which is the time to explore how *WE* contributed to what we obtained as a result of the action. It is not enough to realize how successful or not we were. If we don't discover what our contribution was, we lose our chances to learn.

### **The Need**

However, if we are looking at learning as changed behavior, the real turning point is the next step: Establish the need for change. If we understand what happened, realize how we contributed to it, but don't see any need to change our behavior no change will occur. ***The need is the fuel for change..***

*(Continued on page 7)*

The energy required to effect behavioral change, to learn and try out something new, to “unlearn” a pattern of behavior, is directly proportional to the benefits that are anticipated to accrue to the individual making the effort.

This step has not been made explicit in the various versions of learning cycles. A possible reason may be that the learning cycles focus on intellectual learning and address how individuals develop new mental frameworks or a new conceptualization of reality. Within this scientific approach, an individual would analyze an event, reflect on its variables, establish hypotheses and try them out in a new experiment. This cycle, however, seems to have some shortcomings when it addresses change of human behaviors, which include emotions that increase the complexity.

The need for change can originate in avoidance of certain results or attraction of certain results.

When the avoidance of certain results is the main origin of the need, it is desirable to explore what scenario would be the attractive one. This principle of the power of the positive goal was developed extensively by Cooperrider (1990). Observing that the traditional approach to change had been based on an inventory of what is not working, what needs to be solved, David Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University challenged this approach in the Seventies, suggesting that attention be put on what works. “The tangible result of the inquiry process is a series of statements that describe where the organization wants to be, based on the high moments of where they have been.”(Hammond, 1998). By building a positive goal-scenario, that is strong and appealing, it will be possible to sustain the energy level required to draw and implement a plan.

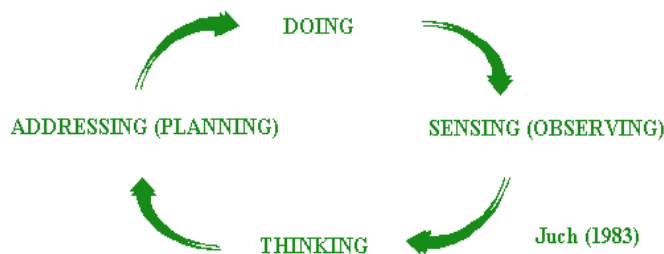
### **The Plan**

While intellectual learning can remain at the awareness level, if we understand learning as changed behavior or, as in Argyris (1993) words, “Learning occurs when we take effective action”, the energy provided by the need has to be channeled into a feasible, concrete plan.

Bert Juch (1983), cited by Roger Greenaway (1995) has collected and listed 17 different learning process cycles linked to various learning theories, and came up with his own version (Figure 4).

### **Figure 4**

*Juch’s 4-stage Learning Cycle*



The importance of a Plan cannot be overstated. We may have the wish to change a behavior, but in absence of a plan for making it happen, the chances of failure are high. The plan connects **what we want** with **what we can do** and control, with what we can influence. A plan gives us back the power we think we have lost when we feel victims of failure. (See Appendix)

**The New Action**

Finally, the learning is not really anchored until it is expressed in a changed behavior, in other words, until the plan becomes a **New Action**. All learning cycles have a spiraled shape, leading into a new action where the cycle can restart.

**Applying the Change Model**

During the course of a session designed with the Action Reflection Learning methodology (Rimanoczy, 2002) the Learning Coach will intervene at different appropriate moments to help the group and/or the individuals to move along this change cycle, with questions, tools and concepts. That does not mean that there is only one change cycle going on, and that all the participants go step by step through the process together. Most frequently, there are several simultaneous cycles going on, some individual, some for the team, and even several for each individual as they address different behavior challenges.

In addition, as learning does not occur in an instant, it requires repetition and practice. It is critical that the individuals put into practice what they have learned. For this reason, ARL interventions take place over time so that participants try out new behaviors, practice some new skills and get feedback from their colleagues on their results. Program members then report on their experiences when they next meet and reflect with their teammates on their experience and what they have learned. With the help of the Learning Coach the team members analyze the obstacles and seek alternate ways to overcome them.

The purpose of the Change model is to establish a framework that helps both the learner and the coach to understand at what stage of the process they might be stuck, in order to find the appropriate tools/support to help moving the process forward.

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## APPENDIX

### ***Characteristics of a successful Plan***

For a plan to be successful, it has to be feasible and realistic. Planning does not necessarily refer to extensive long term strategic plans. A plan can be as simple as “I will remind myself to smile on the phone by sticking a smiley face on my screen”. The simpler, the better the chances to succeed. Behavior change plans are mostly about little things.

Nevertheless, there are some elements to pay attention to when drawing a plan.

**Table 1.**

#### *Elements of a Plan*

Identify and act on behaviour chains	What behaviours or context conditions are linked to the one you want to change? Example: I cannot listen carefully when I have urgent pending issues
Make them feasible	Concrete small steps, clearly defined: ‘I will check what my urgent issues are, before agreeing to a meeting where I need to listen carefully’
Ensure available resources	Time and timing (how long and when): ‘The late afternoon is the critical time’ Knowledge (know what) ‘I will stick a reminder on my screen’ Skills (know how) No special skills required
Establish measurements	How will I know that I completed a step? ‘I will look at the reminder and just know’
Involve others around you	Who can help/support? ‘I will ask my PA to remind me not to book meetings in the late afternoon’ Be clear in your requests, get clarify about the terms of their acceptance ‘I will explain that her support is needed, but has to be sensitive to critical meetings’

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