

Learning fast and forever – by experience.

People learn in the simplest and most natural way: by doing.
Part 1 in a 2-part series



How you learned everything.



Focusing on the task-at-hand helps reinforce learning.

Trial and error makes learning sticky.

Remember the first time you used a smart phone? Was it not amazing? All the different functions, app icons and symbols – now second nature – looked foreign and unfamiliar when you saw them for the first time. How did you learn to use them? Did you take a class? Did you study for a test on the history of telecommunications? Did you listen to a lecture on mobile app development?

No. You learned to use a smartphone by trying it out. You touched the screen. You looked through the menu. You opened the apps, and played around until you figured out how they worked. You learned in the simplest and most natural way people learn anything: by doing.

Learning by experience – by doing – is how we learned to walk, how we learned to ride a bike, and how we learned to flip a pancake on a griddle. In the business world, learning by experience is called problem-, challenge-, or project-based learning, and just as in day-to-day life, it is the most efficient and effective way for people to acquire new skills and abilities.

“In experiential learning, you are presented with a task to carry out or a problem to solve. You have resources available to help you figure out how to do it, and you have a facilitator to guide you – but you learn simply by trying something, and seeing the result. You get immediate feedback based on whether or not your attempted solution succeeded. If it didn’t, with the feedback you now have from your first attempt, and guidance from the facilitator, you try another approach,” said Ronnie Ashline, Director for Learning Services.

A learner-driven approach.

“The essence of experiential learning is that it’s learner driven,” Ashline added. “This is in significant contrast to a traditional classroom, where you have an instructor essentially pouring his or her knowledge out onto you. You’re typically just memorizing facts and being tested on how well you’ve done that. If your instructor is good, maybe you’re being tested on your understanding of the topic too -- but you’re not being tested on your ability to perform. The goal of learning isn’t the ability to regurgitate facts; it is behavior change and performance. That is what experiential learning delivers.”

It goes beyond memorizing 100 things you can do with a wrench.

Ashline shared an analogy that Ryan Mainey, from Freeman, had used: “Imagine traditional learning as if it were a class on how to use a wrench. The instructor holds the wrench and says to the class. Here are 100 things you can do with a wrench. Then the class memorizes as many of those 100 uses as they can, so they can pass a test. That’s all they get out of it. In experiential learning, you’re holding the wrench yourself, and actually using it to fix something. You walk out of that class with a skill and a clear understanding that you can demonstrate. You leave with a new behavior, whereas in a typical traditional classroom, you’re just walking out with knowledge – most of which you will not retain.”

Sarah Thompson, Director of Brand Development for Learning Services, noted most learners will leave a traditional classroom environment remembering about 30 percent of what was taught – and that small amount will drastically shrink to 2-3 percent if it is not applied to a task almost immediately.



Working together to solve a problem enables learning retention.

Your brain is a natural filter.

“Your brain filters information as it is being presented. As the instructor is giving the data in class, the learner’s brain is already thinking, I need to remember that... I don’t need to remember that. They leave class having already sifted out a lot of information, because they don’t recognize how it is relevant. Without the opportunity to apply knowledge right away, the brain often just dumps it.”

Not only does immediate application of new knowledge to a challenge lead to greater retention, Thompson said, it also allows learners to build on skills and increase their confidence before leaving the learning situation. “An experiential learning environment offers a safe place to practice and further develop a new skill,” she noted. “Employees want to feel comfortable and confident in new abilities they’re bringing to their jobs. They want to try out a new skill, test it, and learn from what they experience – from what they fail at, as well as their successes – before they’re back on the job, where it actually counts. Having that opportunity builds confidence and puts people in a position to comfortably move forward.”

Experiential learning is more efficient than a traditional classroom.

Experiential learning is more efficient in other ways, too. In a traditional classroom, if you already know some of the information being taught, you still have to receive it, because the instructor has to deliver all the content to everyone in that classroom. Not so in an experiential learning environment. “If you already know how to do something walking in, you don’t have waste your time to relearn that. You can demonstrate it, and move on,” Ashline said.

The opportunity for collaboration and reflection with other learners is even more valuable. “The social aspect of the experiential learning environment is a great benefit,” Thompson added. “Another learner who has knowledge that you don’t have, or the facilitator who acts as a coach, providing guidance and feedback, can make the learning even more valuable. Working with others in that social, experiential setting allows learners to solve a problem and figure out all the moving parts together as a team. As this happens, they share thoughts that make you consider the project in new ways. The collaboration helps you reflect and learn, and increases retention.”

In Part 2 of this series, discover common misconceptions about experiential learning, why some companies resist it – despite its far greater effectiveness compared to the traditional classroom – and how these challenges can be overcome.

Discover more about Conduent™ Learning Services and customized experiential learning strategies at www.conduent.com/learning.

