

ENCOURAGING LEARNERS TO ADOPT A DEEP APPROACH TO LEARNING THROUGH KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE: A CASE STUDY

Yvanka Fiorini | Institute of Business Management & Commerce | Tutor: Dr A. Higgins (UCL)

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Despite the fact that there seems to be some form of consensus, both in the literature and in EU educational policy, that learners in higher education should adopt a deep approach to learning if they are to achieve the outcomes which are expected at this level of study, the pedagogical practices mentioned by the educators during the research interviews have been categorised according to the four educator roles presented in the Educator Role Profile (Kolb *et al.*, 2014), shown in the diagram to the right. Educator roles focus on helping the learner move from one learning mode to another.

RESEARCH QUESTION

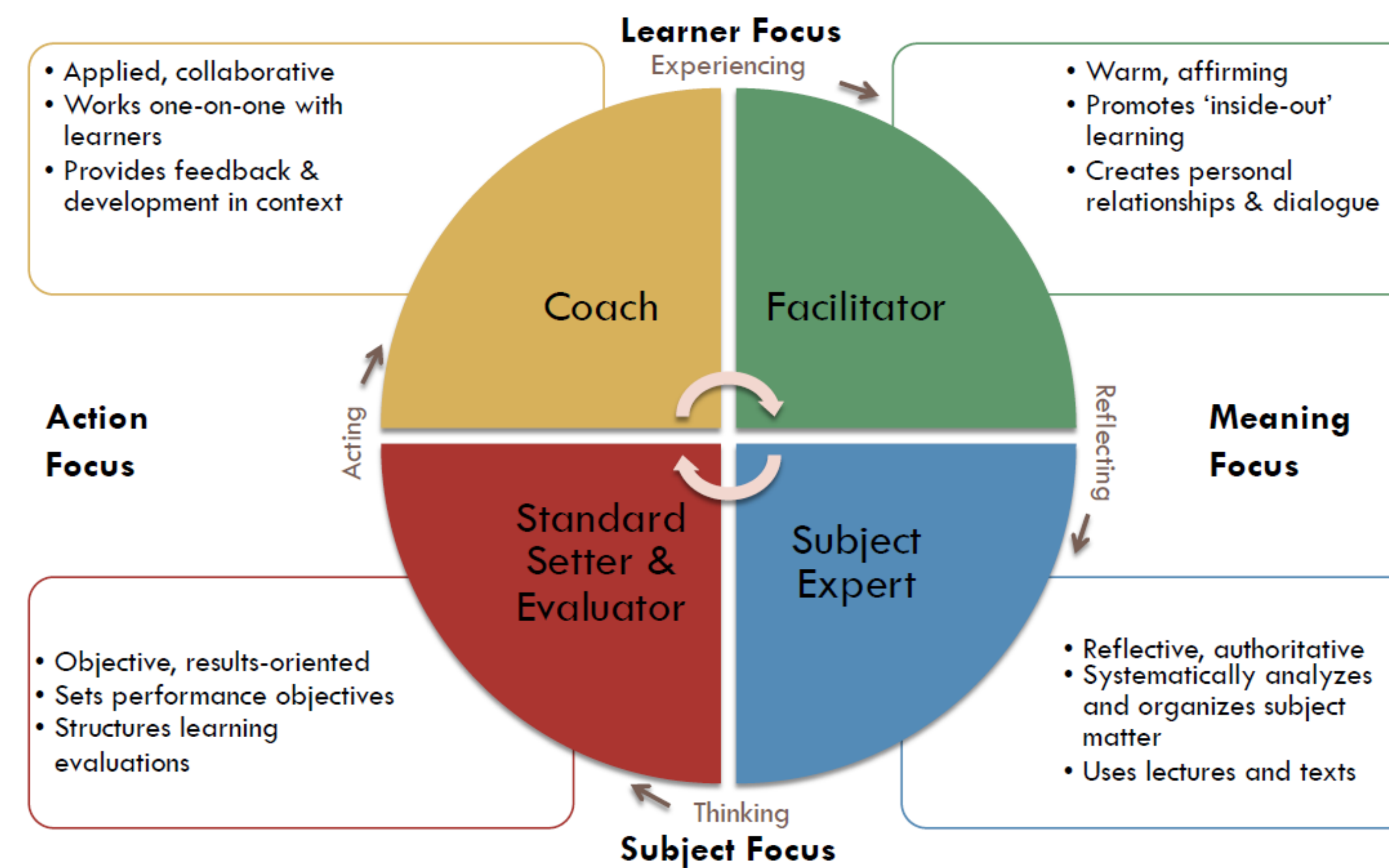
How do educators, teaching business subjects at Level 4, 5 and 6 at a vocational and training institution in Malta, use Kolb's experiential learning cycle to encourage learners to adopt a deep approach to learning?

METHODOLOGY

The methodological choices made throughout this research study were guided by the assumptions of an interpretive-constructivist paradigm. The research design of the project is that of a case study, with the business institute of a vocational and training institution in Malta being the case and therefore the context of the study. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven business educators selected through purposive sampling. In order to fulfil the aims of the study, the data collected from the interviews was subjected to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79)'s thematic analysis process with the help of MAXQDA, a computer-assisted data analysis tool.

DATA ANALYSIS

In view of the fact that the intended use of a learning activity is more important than the activity itself (Svinicki and Dixon, 1987), the pedagogical practices mentioned by the educators during the research interviews have been categorised according to the four educator roles presented in the Educator Role Profile (Kolb *et al.*, 2014), shown in the diagram to the right. Educator roles focus on helping the learner move from one learning mode to another.



The table below gives an overview of the roles adopted by each participant based on an interpretation of the pedagogical practices that they claim to use.

	FACILITATOR	SUBJECT EXPERT	STANDARD-SETTER/EVALUATOR	COACH
Participant 1	✓		✓	✓
Participant 2	✓		✓	✓
Participant 3	✓		✓	✓
Participant 4	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participant 5	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participant 6	✓	✓	✓	✓
Participant 7	✓	✓		

THEMES

THE FACILITATOR ROLE

In the *facilitator* role, the experiential educator helps the learner connect with personal experience and reflect on it, in order to encourage understanding and the extraction of meaning.

I encourage them to give me their own experiences ... to tell me what they've seen at their work placement. (Participant 1)

I try to come up with scenarios that they might face in their work experience. (Participant 3)

Usually, I leave it to a brainstorming session where everyone would say whatever they think works best in the scenario. I will start jotting things on the whiteboard, and eventually we develop a discussion. (Participant 6)

THE SUBJECT EXPERT ROLE

As *subject expert*, the educator helps the learner link what has been understood through personal experience to existing knowledge on the subject.

Eventually you need to explain and link what you've done in the experiential exercise to actual cases, and then to theory. (Participant 7)

So first, I try to bring out the theory from their end and then I will actually ask them what they think about this theory. After doing this session, then I would explain the actual theory. (Participant 4)

THE STANDARD-SETTER/EVALUATOR ROLE

As *standard-setter/evaluator*, the educator sets performance objectives for the learner to evaluate learning

[...] whatever theory I'm discussing in class has to be put into practice. (Participant 2)

I try to ask myself 'For this particular topic, in the job, what would the deliverable be?' And I try to replicate that and keep faithful to that in terms of assessment. (Participant 5)

THE COACH ROLE

In the *coach* role, the educator guides the learner as he/she applies what has been learned.

I believe in drafts because that's how it works in real life. I see it, I give them feedback and I refer them back to theory as well... It's not about getting it perfect the first time around. It's about whether you listen to the feedback, you act on it and you improve. (Participant 2)

Usually when the scenario is presented to them, I go through the scenario once with them in class to make sure that they understand exactly what the context and what the scenario is all about. And I'll go through the tasks involved. (Participant 6)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this case study suggest that when the participants link theory and practice in order to encourage learners to adopt a deep approach, they all adopt at least two of the four educator roles. The least common role adopted is the *subject expert* role which connects *reflecting* and *thinking*, most likely because all participants, but one, seem to start the cycle in the *standard-setter/evaluator* role where theory is applied in a real-life context, rather than starting from experience. Moreover, because theory seems to be the starting point for many of the participants, when they adopt the *facilitator* role, they often fail to give learners the chance to actively connect with and reflect on their own experience. Rather than eliciting the learner's past or current experiences or creating activities that could serve as a direct experience for the learner, most participants resort to providing real-life examples themselves in order to demonstrate the theory. This is possibly due to time constraints, the volume of subject content in the curriculum, and the educator's preference for a particular role/s. It is only the most experienced participant who seems to give learners the opportunity to engage with all four learning modes (*experiencing, reflecting, thinking* and *acting*) in the same learning situation, referred to as *full-cycle learning*. Kolb & Kolb (2017) argue that learning must be *full-cycle* for it to give rise to *deep learning*.

REFERENCES

- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101.
- Kolb, A.Y. et al. (2014) 'On Becoming an Experiential Educator: The Educator Role Profile', *Simulation & Gaming*, 45(2), pp. 204-234.
- Kolb, A.Y. and Kolb, D.A. (2017) 'Experiential Learning Theory as a Guide for Experiential Educators in Higher Education', *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education*, 1(1), Article 7. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol1/iss1/7>.
- Svinicki, M.D. and Dixon, N.M. (1987) 'The Kolb Model Modified for Classroom Activities', *College Teaching*, 35(4), pp. 141-146.