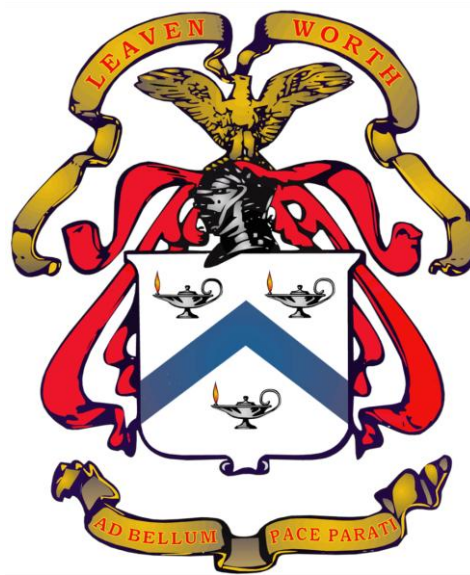


**Concrete Experience:  
The Foundation for Students' Value for Learning**



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**Concrete Experience: The Foundation for Students' Value for Learning  
The Teaching Professor Conference**

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### **Presentation Overview**

This presentation will describe how to enhance student learning through the use of a *concrete experience* that establishes a sound foundation on which new knowledge can be constructed. Used effectively, the *concrete experience* motivates students to learn, and provides a common reference to integrate and reconcile their diverse life experiences and perspectives. Additionally, it serves as a touchstone to connect new information to past experiences in a meaningful and enriching way that helps students achieve higher cognitive levels of learning and promotes longer-term retention of critical, life-or-death knowledge requirements for such audiences as medical professionals, emergency responders and the military.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Numerous authorities have highlighted the significant role of experience in the education of adults. Lindeman (1961) Knowles (1970), and Mezirow (1981) underscored the influence of experience in adult learning. Kolb (1984) incorporated the perspectives of Dewey (1938), Piaget (1972), and Lewin (1952) into his experiential learning model. Jarvis (1987) offered a more comprehensive model that accommodated learning and non-learning effects of experience, as well as reflective and non-reflective aspects of experiential learning. The US Army recognizes the tremendous value of experiential learning to prepare officers for the complex and ambiguous challenges that face these officers in their future leadership roles. In graduate-level educational programs for intermediate and senior-level leaders, US Army schools, centers, and service colleges use an experiential learning model based on the Kolb model. The concrete experience begins the learning cycle by “unfreezing” students from their held perspectives (Lewin, 1952), providing an “impulse” to trigger learning (Dewey, 1938) and providing a basis for reflective observation (Dewey, 1938; Lewin, 1952; Piaget, 1972; and Kolb, 1984) on which new knowledge can be assimilated or accommodated (Piaget, 1972) into their meaning schemata.

### **Key Ideas**

- A concrete experience contributes to student motivation to learn.
- A concrete experience provides a common reference to integrate and reconcile the diverse experiences and perspectives of students.
- A concrete experience serves as a touchstone to connect new information to past experiences.

- A concrete experience promotes learning at higher cognitive levels.
- A concrete experience helps improve retention of essential or critical knowledge.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- Understand how the concrete experience promotes critical thinking.
- Understand the value of the concrete experience to enhance student learning at higher cognitive levels.
- Understand how the concrete experience can heighten students' value for lesson content.
- Understand how the concrete experience promotes retention of learning.

### **Examples of Concrete Experiences**

A good concrete experience sets the stage for the students' learning by engaging them on an affective or emotional level. It provides a setting through which the student connects to a past, present, or anticipated future experience. It helps create a concrete connection with the lesson content, establishing a firm foundation on which to build abstract concepts involving higher-order cognitive learning levels. The concrete experience should provide students with an opportunity to personally and individually reflect on a situation or event. This could be a brief video clip, a picture, a practical exercise, a story, or a role play scenario.

#### *Video Clip*

Concrete experience for Media or Communications class: In the original *Bob Newhart Show*, psychologist Dr. Bob Hartley is interviewed for a television talk show. The talk show host, Ruth Corley, assures him that the interview will be painless and then introduces him:

"I'm with psychologist Dr. Robert Hartley. It's been said that today's psychologist is nothing more than a con man, a snake oil salesman peddling cures for everything from nail biting to a lousy love life and I agree. We'll ask Dr. Hartley to defend himself after this message."

The host then proceeds to attack Bob's credibility and asks questions for which Bob clearly was not prepared to answer: "How much do you make?" "Do you cure anyone," and "Who are your patients."

Students easily connect with the experience of Dr. Hartley, perhaps recalling their own experiences in similar situations, or imagining themselves in similar situations in the future.

#### *Picture*

"One picture is worth a thousand words." Present a single image or a series of images that depict a situation that will evoke an affective or emotional response from student. While the image itself may not directly connect to the specific content in the lesson, the ideas or concepts that the image conjures for the students should connect logically to the lesson content. For example, an image of an aircraft accident could certainly be used to set the stage for a lesson on an aspect of aircraft maintenance; however, used creatively, it could also lead into a lesson on planning, or on leadership, or a number of other topic areas that, if executed poorly, could result in the image that the students are shown in the concrete experience.

After the students have been given time to internally process the concrete experience, having the group members share their perspectives can enhance the power of the concrete experience by causing students to reconcile their own views with those of their classmates.

### *Practical Exercise*

Journalism 101 (Heath & Heath, 2008): On their first day in a high school journalism class, students were asked write the lead for a newspaper story based on the following facts:

Kenneth L. Peters, the principal of Beverly Hills High School, announced today that the entire high school faculty will travel to Sacramento next Thursday for a colloquium in new teaching methods. Among the speakers will be anthropologist Margaret Mead, college president Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins, and California governor Edmund “Pat” Brown. (p. 75)

Students diligently worked on their stories to include all of the relevant facts as concisely as they could—who, what, where, when, and why. They then turned them in to the teacher who scanned through them, confirming that they had all missed the real lead: “*There will be no school next Thursday.*” (p. 76)

In this concrete experience, students were exposed to a current experience that creates a personal sense of value for the lesson content that will follow.

### *Story*

“A story is powerful because it provides the context missing from abstract prose.” (Heath & Heath, 2008, p. 214) It can affectively engage the students in the learning by creating an unexpected concrete connection with the lesson content. A history professor might prime his or her students for a lesson addressing the Allies attack on Gallipoli during World War I. The professor might begin by having the students close their eyes and imagine that they are in one of the troop landing boats making their way to shore as the barrage of enemy fire is already upon them. The professor could proceed to describe sounds of the artillery fire, the motion of the round-bottomed boat in the choppy seas, and the smells of the sweat and vomit that fills the cramped space.

The professor should allow the students sufficient time to contemplate their imagined world before asking them to comment on such things as what would the ANZAC soldiers be thinking, how would they be acting, and how would that affect their actions when they reached the beach.

### *Role-play scenario*

Role-playing is an effective way to cause students to examine issues from other perspectives. As a concrete experience, a role-play can elevate the affective state of the students, and can lead to higher-order critical thinking by forcing the students to examine a situation from a perspective different from their own. For example, students could be asked to role-play a counseling session or to participate in a mock interview. After they participate in the concrete experience, the instructor should allow the students time to reflect on what happened before asking them to share with their classmates. These scenarios can help students recognize the learning value of the lesson content that will follow and can increase their intrinsic motivation to learn.

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