

The Learn-By-Doing Approach to Life Skill Development

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As an integral part of the 4-H mission, the process of “learn-by-doing” or experiential learning, is an essential component of all 4-H programs and curricula. The learn-by-doing approach allows youth to experience something with very little guidance from an adult. Instead of being told “the answers,” they are presented with a problem, situation, or activity which they must make sense of for themselves. Learning by doing is called “experiential learning” because it is based on learning from experiences. This approach is also useful with adult learners.

A Model of Experiential Learning

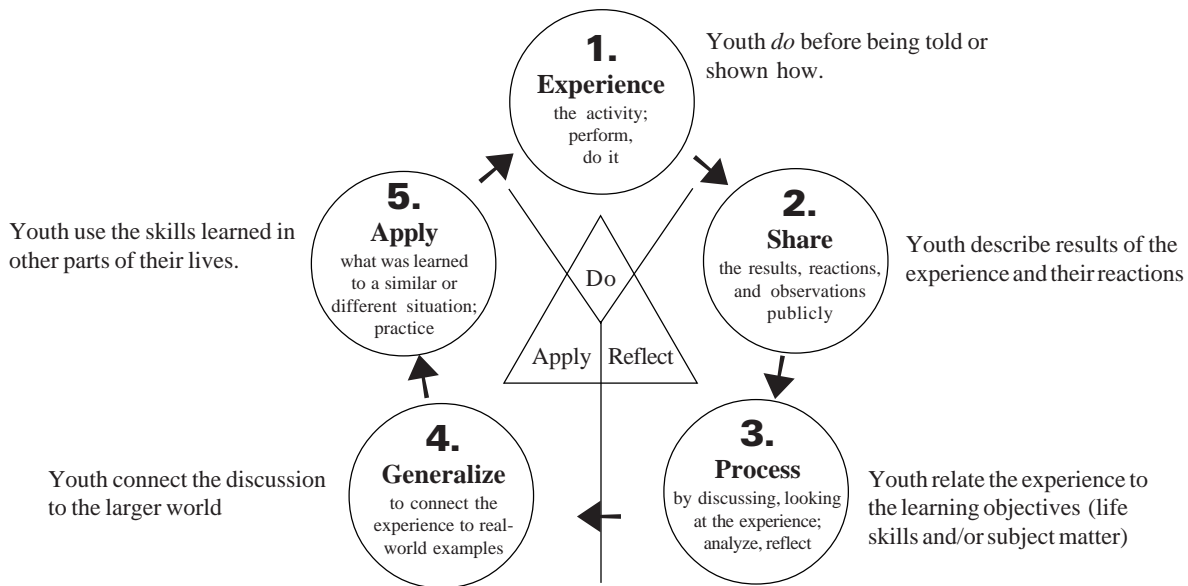
Figure 1 is a diagram of the Experiential Learning Process used nationally by the 4-H Youth Development Program.

The Experiential Learning Process

The steps of the experiential learning process are:

- 1. Experience** the activity; perform, do it. Except for basic instructions on organization, safety, or time requirements, youth do before being told or shown how.
- 2. Share** the results, reactions, and observations publicly. Youth describe the results of the experience and their reactions.
- 3. Process** by discussing, looking at the experience; analyzing, reflecting. Youth relate the experience to the targeted life skills being taught.

Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Process



4. **Generalize** to connect the experience to real-world examples. Youth connect the life skill discussion to the larger world.

5. **Apply** what was learned to a similar or different situation; practice. Youth use the new life skill experiences in other parts of their lives.

Why Experience-Based Learning?

Consider that we remember:

- 20% of what we read;
- 20% of what we hear;
- 30% of what we see;
- 50% of what we see and hear;
- 70% of what we see, hear, and discuss; and
- 90% of what we see, hear, discuss, and practice.

Advantages:

1. Multiple teaching/learning methods can be integrated
2. Very learner-centered
3. Process of “discovery” builds self-esteem
4. Learning is more fun for students, teaching more fun for leaders/teachers
5. Other life skills can be learned, instead of only science content

Disadvantages:

1. Requires preparation by leader/teacher
2. Requires patience and guidance by teacher; decentralized approach can seem less orderly; may be less comfortable to an authoritarian-style teacher
3. There is often no single, “right” answer

The Group Leader’s Role in Experiential Learning

First, it is important to review the materials and practice the activities to be taught. As a group leader, the adult should never freely give “the answers” to a problem. Instead, the leader helps guide the youth in a process through which they can determine “solutions” for themselves. Here are the adult leader’s roles in each of the steps of the experiential learning process:

1. **Experience (Doing)**—Describe the experience or activity you will have learners do before they are told or shown how.

2. **Share (What happened?)**—Develop questions you will ask the learners about their experience and their reaction to it after they have completed the activity.

3. **Process (What’s important?)**—Develop questions that you will ask the learners about something they felt was important about the experience.

4. **Generalize (So what?)**—Develop questions that will ask the learners how the experience related to their own lives.

5. **Apply (Now what?)**—Develop questions that ask the learners how they could apply what they learned to a similar or different situation.

Life Skills Taught by 4-H

4-H is recognized for making learning fun and for teaching kids to try new things for themselves. 4-H curricula are just as focused on teaching youth important life skills as on teaching any specific subject matter. 4-H learning experiences urge youth to think and learn and apply what they have learned to their lives and surroundings. Life skills taught by 4-H are:

- Enhancing learning skills
- Strengthening and using decision-making skills
- Developing a positive self-concept
- Communicating with and relating to other people
- Responding to the needs of others and the needs of the community

References

Rutgers Cooperative Extension Curriculum Development Guide for 4-H/Youth Audiences, E211 (5/97)

Curriculum Development for Issues Programming—A Handbook for Extension Youth Development Professionals. ES/USDA Youth Curriculum Development Task Force, 1992. Rev. 1996. (Published by CSREES)

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