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Letters to New Leaders

Letter 4



The How's and Why's of Experiential Learning

In this letter you'll find:

- An explanation of the Experiential Learning Process
- Descriptions of each of the five steps in the process
- Applying experiential learning
- Applying the cone of experience

Dear Leader,

The 4-H slogan is "learn by doing." We also call it hands-on learning. Research tells us that, within three weeks, learners remember only 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see and about 50% of what they see and hear. When learners see, hear and do something with what they learn, retention rate shoots up 70% to 80%. When young people do or apply something they've learned, knowledge gives way to understanding. Much of what we do in 4-H is geared to developing life skills. What members learn from their project work can be applied to many different endeavors.

Your role as leader involves guiding your members through a thinking process that helps them understand what they learn from their project work. It can also be applied to other facets of their lives.

The Experiential Learning Process

Everyone has a preferred learning style or way of learning. Some learn best by listening, some by reading or observing and some by actually trying to do something. Learning that occurs from this latter approach, by trying to do something or experience something, is called experiential learning. Regardless of one's preferred learning style, experiential learning can be most useful in helping members understand and apply new knowledge, attitudes and skills.

The experiential learning process is a five-step method intended to help members think about what they learn and find ways of applying new knowledge, attitudes and skills to their everyday lives. You, the leader, play a

crucial role in guiding members through the five steps in the learning process.

Hands-on activities allow youth to learn by doing. They not only learn project concepts and skills, they learn to cooperate, plan and organize. Learning follows a model known as the experiential learning process. The steps in this process are:

1. Experience the activity: perform, do it.
2. Share the results, reactions and observations publicly.
3. Process by discussing, analyzing and reflecting.
4. Generalize to connect the experience to real-world examples.
5. Apply what was learned to a similar or different situation: practice.

Step 1 - Experiencing

The first step in the process is experiencing. Members actually do the activity. Experiencing activities range anywhere from doing a simple analogy to trying a real life simulation, to doing the actual activity such as shearing a sheep, testing a water sample, mounting insects for a collection or assuming greater leadership responsibilities.



Often we, as leaders and teachers, spend too much time on the experiencing step and not enough time on the other four steps. As a rule, no more than one-third of the time should be spent on the experiencing step.

Step 2 – Sharing

Step two begins the reflecting part of the learning process. The purpose of this step is to have members share their feelings, observations and reactions to the learning activity just completed. Your role is that of a facilitator drawing information out of the participants.

You could ask them questions like, “What did you see happening?” or “What were you thinking and feeling during the activity?” or “What was new or different in this activity?” or even “Tell me what you did!”

Step 3 – Processing

In this step, try to focus the members’ attention on what was most important about the experience. Draw out the common theme(s) and patterns of behavior your members observed.

For this step you might ask questions like, “What happened in this activity?” or “Did you notice any patterns or actions in common among your group members?” or “What did you learn about yourself by doing this activity?” or “How did the group decide to ___?” or “What problems came up as you were going through this activity?”

Keep your discussion focused on the activity itself. Some members may try to relate what they observed in this activity to other experiences. Remind them that first you want to get as much information as you can about the activity they just completed.

Step 4 – Generalizing

With this step we move from reflection to application. “What can we take from this learning activity and apply it to other situations?” Here, your challenge is to get your members to relate their observations to the outside world. Good questions to ask for this step are: “What did you learn today that you could apply to other areas of your life?” or “How can you use what you’ve learned today at home or school?” or “In what other situations have you seen similar reactions or results?”

Step 5 – Applying

The final step is really two steps in one. The first part pertains to the goals members make to use what they’ve learned; the second part is clarifying how they can use what they’ve learned in other situations.

Let’s look at the second part first. The best way to be sure members understand and can use what they’ve learned is to have them tell you. Have them answer the questions, “How do you plan to use what you’ve learned today?” or “What have you learned that you can apply to other situations?”

You can strengthen your members’ commitment by having them record their plans for what they have learned. Have them write their plans on a sheet of paper. Research tells us that learners are more likely to use what they’ve learned by making a “contract” to do so within a specific period of time. The contract can be oral, in which members say out loud what they will do and when. Or, you can have them write it down and share it with a partner, the group or with you. If you want to make sure they follow through, collect their written plans and, share a verbal or written reminder with them later.

**A simpler way of explaining the experiential learning process is:
Do – Reflect and – Apply**

Applying Experiential Learning

Now you know how to turn any experience, good or bad, into a learning experience. It’s a process every leader, parent, teacher or friend needs to know. Create learning experiences based on the goal desired, time allowed, materials needed and physical setting. To make this process work effectively, your learners must understand how they can apply the results of the activity to other settings.

It’s a matter of using the group’s resources to:

- Do an exercise.
- Reflect on the immediate feelings and observations derived from that exercise.
- Apply what was learned, experienced and observed in other settings.

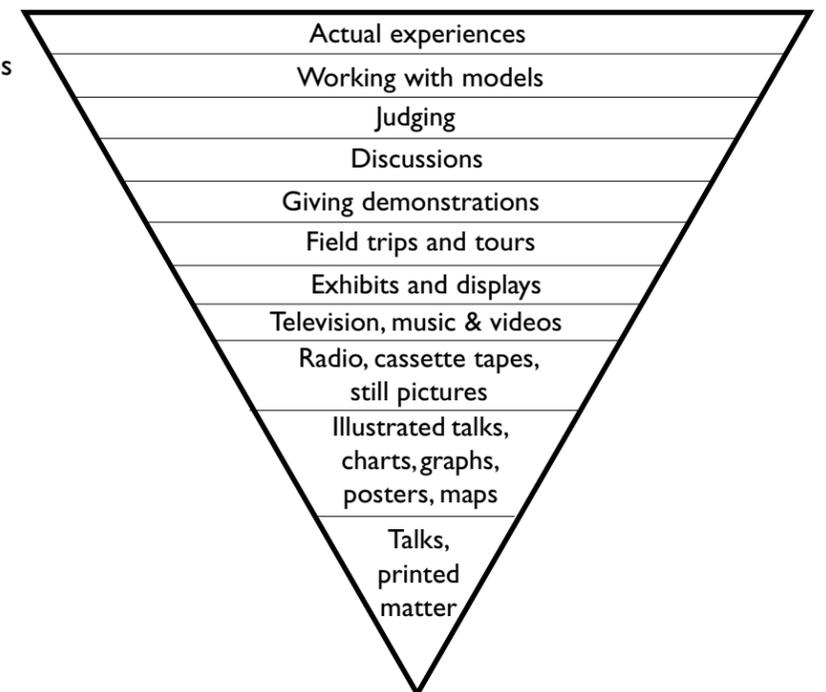
Selecting the Right Learning Activity - The Cone of Experience

As you might imagine, learning experientially and using the experiential learning process can take more time. The best teaching method depends on many factors in addition to time available. Other factors to consider are size of group, facilities, resources and subject matter content.

Remember, regardless of one’s preferred learning style, we all gain more understanding and retention by doing something with new information. The cone of experience is a useful tool for deciding how best to present new information to members. The higher you go on the cone, the more the member will have to apply the new knowledge.

Cone of Experience

Effectiveness of learning increases as one moves up the cone.



Check your project leader guides for more information and ideas. And remember in learning, just like most everything else, variety is the spice of life. Enjoy your 4-H members as they learn from you.

Resource materials

“T3 – Training Trainers to Teach” – Units 6 and 8.2
Introductions to the Project Leader Guides

This is what 4-H is all about: the personal development of the boy and girl.

Welcome to the world of 4-H!
4-H volunteer leaders are lay faculty of the
LSU AgCenter and Southern University

