

Kay Peterson and David A. Kolb

# How You Learn



# Is How You Live

USING NINE WAYS OF LEARNING  
TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

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## **More Praise for *How You Learn Is How You Live***

“As a leadership development coach and continual learner, I loved this book! The authors expertly demonstrate the importance of maximizing our potential through recognizing and developing our personal learning styles. They stress how critical this process is for navigating modern, complex, and ever-changing environments. This book offers assistance through a compelling blend of science, reflective exercises, and real-life examples. I highly recommend it for you, your clients, family, and friends.”

—**Sandy Carter, MSW, MBA, PhD, Professional Certified Coach**

“Many thanks to Kay Peterson and David Kolb for advancing the important discussion of approaching our learning from a place of intention. Their new book, *How You Learn Is How You Live*, is a valuable blend of theory and practice, providing research-based depth to their assertions while also bridging to practical examples that meet the needs of a world that looks for immediate application and results. In my work with leaders, I find that the most successful leaders are those who are open to their own learning. This new work from Peterson and Kolb would be a worthy addition to any leadership library and provides a rich addition to the field of adult learning.”

—**Mindy Hall, PhD, President and CEO, Peak Development Consulting, LLC**

“This is a terrific, practical book about an expanded version of the Kolb learning model. I thought the stories, examples of application, and application tips were practical and at the right degree of detail to help people at all levels and in all functions see how the Kolb learning model can help them grow as individuals and help teams realize their potential.”

—**Anne Litwin, PhD, President, Anne Litwin and Associates**

“*How You Learn Is How You Live* is a practical guide grounded in theoretical research. A useful quick read to identify one’s preferred style and provide insight in building human capacity in learning and living.”

—**Lisa Massarweh, MSN, RN, Director, Kaiser Foundation Hospitals, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellow (2006–2009)**

“I strongly recommend this book to learners who seek to progress in life, who might be by choice or unexpectedly in transition, or who feel there is more to life than just finding your niche of happiness through pure strengths. Knowing your strengths is imperative, yet having the vision to expand your strengths is inspiring.”

—**Nancy White, founder and CEO, Workshop AZ**

“*How You Learn Is How You Live* portrays a straightforward, clear, and comprehensive approach that helps readers discover and appreciate how their learning style impacts how they experience life. The book is one that you want to reread again and again—something you want to experience again, each time mindfully approaching living and relating to oneself, to others, and to one’s contribution to our world’s conscious evolution. This is most definitely an impactful book for individuals, for couples, for teams, for organizations—and for the world.”

—**Philip R. Belzunce, PhD, and Lalei E. Gutierrez, PhD, holistic psychologists, life-relational coaches, and diversity facilitators**

“In their book, *How You Learn Is How You Live*, Kay Peterson and David Kolb have gifted us with a highly understandable and eminently practical guidebook on experiential learning and its importance to everything we do in life. In our pressured world of skill shortages and talent gaps, this book is recommended reading for every employer, teacher, guidance counselor, workforce developer, and economic developer concerned about creating the workforce of the future. Learning by doing has eclipsed traditional educational and training and development strategies because it works far better. Learning is a leading source of competitive advantage in today’s fast-changing global economy.”

—**Don Iannone, President, Donald T. Iannone & Associates**

“If you have ever wondered how you learn or why others around you may not be adapting and changing, this book will enlighten you. Read it, absorb it, and you will never talk to your children, colleagues, students, patients, or clients the same way!”

—**Richard Boyatzis, PhD, Distinguished University Professor, Departments of Psychology, Cognitive Science, and Organizational Behavior, Case Western Reserve University**

**How You Learn  
Is How You Live**

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# How You Learn Is How You Live



## Using Nine Ways of Learning to Transform Your Life

**Kay Peterson**

*Institute for Experiential Learning*

**David A. Kolb**

*Experience Based Learning Systems*



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San Francisco

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**Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.**

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

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First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-870-9

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-871-6

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-872-3

2017-1

Cover Design: Susan Malikowski/DesignLeaf Studio

Cover Image: Getty Images and 123rf

Interior Illustrations: Getty Images and 123rf

Book Production: Adept Content Solutions

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## Foreword

*How You Learn Is How You Live* provides a life-enriching formula: become a more attuned learner and you will be better for it. In your career, family, and personal life, a better understanding of the learning process and your learning preferences is the key to a better life.

Kay Peterson and David Kolb provide an engaging look at how to renew your natural ability to learn. Kay and David remind us how exciting and enriching learning can be. By taking what the authors term “the learning way,” you can learn more than you ever imagined.

Since the first time I read David Kolb’s classic book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, I have been hooked on the power of its message: we all learn from experience, and by engaging in the four-phase learning cycle, we can learn almost anything. The ideas and practices associated with learning from experience have informed me professionally and personally. Since being introduced to experiential learning twenty years ago, I have regularly looked for ways to integrate experiential learning into my life, my teaching, and my research. By reading this book and following the learning way, your life will be enriched as well.

If this book marks your first introduction to experiential learning, then you are in for a life-altering experience. The notion that we learn from our experience grew out of the

ideas of philosophers and psychologists. David Kolb found a common theme in the diverse thinking on the topic of experiential learning. His work on experiential learning cycle is among the most influential approaches to learning. In colleges, business, and school systems, it is impossible to talk about learning without the mention of David Kolb.

David also introduced the concept of learning style nearly fifty years ago. Learning style describes an individual's unique preference for learning in different ways. As the author of *The Learning Style Inventory*, now in its fourth iteration, David transformed the experiential learning cycle into a hands-on exercise of self-discovery. The learning style inventory has helped hundreds of thousands of individuals realize their potential as learners.

In *How You Learn Is How You Live*, David has partnered with Kay Peterson, an innovative thinker and sought-after consultant. Kay has seen firsthand the power of experiential learning in transforming lives and careers. In her consulting practice, she has implemented organizational and individual change using the underlying values and ideas of experiential learning. Kay's work has proven that experiential learning should be on the agenda of every organizational change effort and on the reading list of anyone looking to enact personal change.

This partnership between Kay and David has resulted in an extraordinary book. As you will see, the book builds on David's work, making it practical and personal. Kay and David provide step-by-step instructions on how to live the ideas of experiential learning.

If you have already discovered Kay and David's work on experiential learning, you will find new insights in this book. Experiential learning is made more accessible than ever.

Even the avid follower of experiential learning will find new applications of a tried-and-true formula.

One of the key insights I gained from this book is the power of learning flexibility. Learning flexibility describes our potential to change and adapt. Many of us find change difficult, and this difficulty at change can be traced to our learning style preference. We can get stuck and rely only on a limited set of learning tools. This book describes how to embrace change and move beyond our comfort zone. Luckily, Kay and David provide hands-on exercises and descriptive examples of how to overcome our limits and build upon our strengths by embracing learning flexibility.

Just before reading this book for the first time, I was watching a full moon shining over the Maryland Chesapeake Bay. This wonderful experience was cut short. My thoughts turned to a documentary I had watched earlier in the week about the engineering and psychological challenges of landing the first people on the moon. Experiential learning provides a formula for understanding both the experience of the moon shining and the concepts behind the moon shot. For me, understanding the moon from different perspectives, for example, through my direct experience and through abstract concepts, I am able to see the world in a much richer way. This is the power of experiential learning, to be able to learn from different angles. The ultimate promise of this book is that you, too, will learn how to enrich your life, experience events more deeply, and understand situations with greater clarity.

D. Christopher Kayes,  
Professor and Chair, Department of Management,  
George Washington University

# Introduction

*How You Learn Is How You Live* is a guide to awakening the power of learning that lies within us—to show how we can increase our capability to learn from experience throughout our lives, in each and every moment. To say that experience is the best teacher is an understatement—it is our only teacher. We are totally enveloped by our experience like a fish is by water. We awake each day to swim in our stream of conscious experience, surrounded once again by the ongoing story of our lives: the trials and tragedies, hopes and dreams, family, friends, and coworkers who make up our world. How we make sense of it all to find meaning, purpose, and direction in our lives is called learning from experience, or experiential learning.

Experiential learning has been studied extensively in the twentieth century by some of the greatest thinkers of our time, including John Dewey, William James, Carl Rogers, and Jean Piaget. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory has integrated the ideas of these scholars into a model of learning from experience that is uniquely suited to the learning challenges of the twenty-first century. Since the turn of the century, research studies on the model have more than quadrupled. The current experiential learning theory bibliography includes over four thousand entries from 1971 to 2016. In the field of management alone, a 2013 review of management education research showed that 27 percent of

the most cited articles in management education journals were about experiential learning and learning styles.<sup>1</sup>

In over forty-five years of research on the theory by scholars and practitioners all over the world, the principles and practices of experiential learning have been used to develop and deliver programs in K–12 education, undergraduate education, and professional education. In the workplace, training and development activities and executive coaching practices are based on experiential learning concepts. Practices that are based on experiential learning include service learning, problem-based learning, action learning, adventure education, and simulation and gaming. These practices make use of community service, adventure, and gaming to help people become aware of how they process information and apply that awareness to their personal and professional development.

Like the many people who have been introduced to experiential learning through universities or our organizational programs, you can use the approach deliberately to recreate and transform yourself. Experiential learning gives you the tools to take charge of your life. This process can help you improve your performance, learn something new, and achieve your goals. In this book, you will see how understanding the learning process and your own approach to learning is the key to self-transformation and growth.

The first chapter describes the learning way of living, suggesting how giving learning a top priority in your life can bring great satisfaction and fulfillment of your potential. The learning way is an approach to living that requires deep trust in your own experience and a healthy skepticism about information. It demands both the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. The learning way begins with the awareness that learning is present in every life experience and is an invitation for

us to be engaged in each one. We become aware *that* we are learning, *how* we are learning, and—perhaps most importantly—*what* we are learning.

The second chapter, “I Am a Learner,” introduces two important first steps on the learning way journey: embracing a learning identity and learning how to learn. The starting point for learning from experience is the belief that you *can* learn and develop from your life experiences. Many people think of themselves as having a fixed identity, believing that they are incapable of changing. At the extreme, if you do not believe that you can learn, you won’t.

To thrive on the learning way requires knowing how to learn. The experiential learning cycle is a learning process initiated by a *concrete experience*, which demands *reflective observation* about the experience in a search for meaning that engages *abstract thinking*, leading to a decision to engage in *active experimentation*. This cycle is so simple and natural that people engage in it without being aware that they are learning. It goes on almost effortlessly all the time and is constantly transforming our lives, but we can learn to employ this process actively and take control of our transformation.

Chapter three, “My Learning Style, My Life Path” invites you to examine your own unique approach to learning, your learning style, and its consequences for the path you have taken in your life. You will explore nine ways of living and learning, each of which brings its own joys and satisfactions, presents its own challenges, and brings the learner to a different place. You will probably relate to one way of learning. Other ways will remind you of people you know, friends, family, and coworkers. Understanding your unique way of learning and your learning style will shed light on the path you have taken in your life. It can help you assess your strengths and weaknesses and understand your preferences.



Because each of the learning styles has an upside and downside, it's important to identify the learning styles you use and those you avoid. Recognizing the different paths of learning and living that others are on can illuminate the communication problems that arise when someone you know is coming from a different place. It can bring the team synergy that occurs when a partner's strengths cover your weaknesses and vice versa. You can also model yourself after those with styles different from your own and expand your capabilities.

In chapter four, "Building Learning Style Flexibility," you will think of one thing you would like to change in yourself that is most critical for your success—just one, no matter how small. This may be a quality or capability that you would like to acquire. It may be a strength that is overplayed or a weakness that holds you back. This will be a goal that increases your flexibility to use a learning style that is not as familiar to you. This one step will be the beginning of a lifelong quest to increase your ability to use all nine styles of learning. Being aware of your preferences and broadening your comfort zone will help you avoid getting stuck in a rut. Instead, you can create a path of your own by seeing all the possibilities instead of just one style.

Chapter five, "Learning Flexibility and the Road Ahead," shows how, with learning flexibility, you can use the full learning cycle to master whatever challenges you may face on the road ahead: perfecting your special skills, rising to greater responsibility, changing your career, finding work/life balance, or serving a greater purpose.

Finally, chapter six, "What's Next? Deliberate Learning for Life," offers checklists that support the application of the learning way in your life so that you can master the challenges of continuous, lifelong learning.

## Chapter One



# The Learning Way

*For he had learned some of the things that everyman must find out for himself, and he had found out about them as one has to find out, through errors and through trial, through fantasy and delusion, through falsehood and his own damn foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused. As he lay there he had gone back over his life, and bit by bit, had extracted from it some of the hard lessons of experience. Each thing he learned was so simple and so obvious once he grasped it, that he wondered why he had not always known it. Altogether, they wove into a kind of leading thread, trailing backward through his past and out into the future. And he thought now, perhaps he could begin to shape his life to mastery, for he felt a sense of new direction deep within him, but whither it would take him he could not say.*

*Thomas Wolfe*

There are many ways to live your life. Each of us is unique, and the life path we choose reflects this uniqueness, amplified

for better or worse by luck and circumstance. Stop and think about where you are now at this moment in your life and reflect on the path you have taken to arrive here. You have likely made many good choices with consequences that have brought you happiness and success. There are also probably bad times, bad choices, and unpredictable and uncontrollable events that have challenged you greatly. Through it all you have learned from your experience and have acquired life lessons that guide you on your way. Some of these lessons serve you well, but others, often emotional beliefs born out of disappointment and pain, offer poor advice for living. As Mark Twain advised, “We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it—and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again—and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore.”

Living each life experience with a learning attitude can help us extract the right lessons from that experience. The learning way is not the easiest way to approach life, but in the long run it is the wisest. Other ways of living tempt us with immediate gratification at our peril. The way of dogma, the way of denial, the way of addiction, the way of submission, and the way of habit; all offer relief from uncertainty and pain at the cost of entrapment on a path that winds out of our control. The learning way requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure, but this process opens the way to new, broader, and deeper horizons of experience.

The learning process itself is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery. The key is to use the *process* of learning as a guide. Oprah Winfrey says it well: “I am a woman in process.

I'm just trying like everybody else. I try to take every conflict, every experience, and learn from it. Life is never dull."<sup>1</sup> Oprah's ability to learn from experience cannot be denied: from a young girl in rural Mississippi in the 1950s to talk show host, media entrepreneur, and actress, Oprah keeps learning as she follows her ever-expanding interests.

The lessons we learn from our past experiences are not fixed rules for living but must be open to revision. Each new experience is like no other and must be experienced fully to reap its wisdom. In a life of learning the rules of the game, the rules are always changing, and our process of experiencing is the guiding star.

## **Experiencing as the Gateway to Learning**

Without new experiences there can be no real learning. We only recombine and reiterate what we already know. Opening ourselves to new experiences and living those experiences fully with awareness in the moment is necessary for learning, renewal, and growth. Yet our habits and beliefs tend to engage automatically, turning a new experience into an old pattern of response. Ironically, what we think we know can be the greatest barrier to our learning.

The Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman says that we actually have two selves—an experiencing self and a remembered thinking self. Our experiencing self perceives and registers our feelings and reactions to every moment of our lives. For the experiencing self, life is a succession of momentary experiences—happiness, sadness, amazement, boredom, curiosity, love, pain—that exist only in the present and are soon replaced by another feeling. In ancient Theravada Buddhism this succession of experiences is depicted as a string of pearls. Kahneman similarly thought

of this succession of experiences as a string of moments. He took a mathematical approach, calculating the duration of each of these moments:

*... each of these moments of psychological present may last up to 3 seconds, suggesting that people experience some 20,000 moments in a waking day, and upwards of 500 million moments in a 70 year life. Each moment can be given a rich multidimensional description. ... What happens to these moments? The answer is straightforward: with very few exceptions, they simply disappear.<sup>2</sup>*

The remembered thinking self is like the string that holds together the pearls of our experiences. The pearls and the string together form the story of our lives—what we think and feel and who we are. We base all our choices on this life story, but our life story is not always the best basis for decision making. The way that we remember our experiences is very different than the active process of experiencing—our minds create illusions that impact how we remember experiences.

For example, we often give more weight to our most recent experience. This can cause us to remember an event that ended well as a positive event, even if it was filled with painful experiences. A study on vacations found a substantial difference between the vacationers' recalled enjoyment and their actual experienced enjoyment. Their recalled enjoyment, not their actual experienced enjoyment, led them to desire to repeat the vacation. Another study found that people predict they will be happier on their birthday, but their actual experience of happiness is the same as other days. Studies like these emphasize the importance of being in touch with both the experiencing and remembered thinking selves when making

life decisions. Being aware of the experiencing process can help us use relevant experiences instead of illusions to guide our decisions.

The balance between the experiencing and remembered thinking selves shifts over the course of our lifetime. As children we are guided primarily by our experiencing process and as a result are spontaneous, authentic, and able to easily embrace contradiction and change. As we grow older our remembered thinking self takes charge. Our experiences are impacted by memories, beliefs, and values that are not always relevant. Carl Rogers argues that the mature adult needs to recapture the child's capacity to experience directly. He describes this as a process of "letting oneself down into the immediacy of what one is experiencing, endeavoring to sense and to clarify all its complex meanings."<sup>3</sup> He explains that adults experience not only the present moment but also their memories of the past and predictions about the future, so they must strive to consciously interpret each experience anew.

## **Creating Ourselves by Learning**

Much of who we are is determined by what we have learned from our life experiences. As we have seen, experiences matter, but we use the meaning we make of them to define ourselves. Our birth brings us into poverty or privilege, yet many have risen from the lowest to the highest rungs of society by choosing to see their conditions as a challenge while many of the most privileged have squandered their riches through indifference. Sometimes learning creates profound transformation in a person's life. By learning, doors can be opened through the barriers of class, race, gender, and ethnic identification. It can open eyes and hearts to the experience

of others. It transforms the child's awkward grasp into the surgeon's skilled hand.

Some experiences are thrust upon us; some we create for ourselves. We string these experiences together like pearls to define who we are. Looking forward to the future, we see the pearls are only dreams and distant visions of our future experiences. The experience in *this* present moment is all that actually exists. In the present moment, we fashion a pearl of meaning to remember and choose the next experience ahead. The next experience offers new possibilities for meaning and choice, and on so on in a lifelong process of self-creation and learning.

In some spiritual traditions we humans are thought to be basically asleep, going through life in a semiconscious way, strangely disengaged from our own lives. The learning way is about awakening to attend consciously to our experiences and then to deliberately choose how they influence our beliefs and choices. The spiral of learning from experience—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—is the process by which we can consciously choose, direct, and control our life.

## The Learning Life Force

The learning way is about awakening the learning life force that lies within all of us. It is a power that we share with all living things. The Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in their search for the defining characteristic of life discovered the process of *autopoiesis*, the continual process of remaking ourselves through learning from experience.<sup>4</sup> The basic example of autopoiesis is the biological cell with a nucleus and boundary membrane made up of nucleic acids and proteins, and it happens at every level of a

system. The bounded structures of the cell like the nucleus and membrane rely on external energy and molecules to produce the cell components that maintain these. Learning from conscious experience is the highest form of this auto-poetic learning life force. Every human invention and achievement is the result of this process. The great humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow, described the process as “*self-actualization*”—the human motivation to fulfill our full potential.<sup>5</sup> Our learning is driven by this desire to get it right, to do better, and to reach our greatest aspirations for ourselves and the world.

We develop and grow as human beings through learning. As children we acquire the basic skills we need to survive. In our early adult years we strive to find a specialization that suits our interests and gives us a place to fit in to society. But we are not done growing when we finish our formal education or even when we successfully arrive at the top of a chosen profession. In fact, we continue to grow throughout our life in a predictable pattern of adult development. In much the same way that we expand our understanding of the world from adolescence to adulthood, we can continue to expand our mental, emotional, and relational capabilities to entirely new levels of complexity and flexibility in response to the increasingly demanding world around us. Maturity in life and career should be seen as a process of unfolding rather than a status achieved once. Contemporary adult development theories describe the course of adult life as a process of learning from life challenges that culminates in what is called self-authorship—becoming the creator of one’s own life story. Self-authorship describes individuals who see themselves as independent selves who are responsible for their actions and in control of their lives. They trust their



experiences and build a belief system around those experiences, developing meaningful relationships and a strong sense of personal identity.

## **A Life of Moral Purpose**

There are some who warn against trusting our experiences to guide our learning and life. They believe that focusing on personal experiences leads to self-absorption and obliviousness to the needs and concerns of others, and they argue that we should follow time-tested moral rules instead. Yet Carl Rogers maintains that our internal process of deep experiencing is a highly developed way of knowing the good, the true, and the beautiful. He believes that we developed this process through centuries of evolution, making it acutely attuned to survival not only of the individual but all of humanity. He argues that our true moral purpose is not to blindly follow the values developed by philosophers, religious and political leaders, or psychologists but rather to connect with our innate sense of morality through deep experiencing.<sup>6</sup> Deep experiencing means paying attention to and learning from our experiences; doing so helps us develop as both individuals and members of communities, benefiting the whole of humanity.

Empathy, the ability to identify with others, is what drives us to act morally with others. Learning through shared experience with others is the foundation of a life with moral purpose. John Dewey describes that purpose "... to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living."<sup>7</sup>

## **Learning as a Humble Way**

To learn requires giving up the certainty that we know something. We must be open to seeing new possibilities. We must recognize that we can only drink from the ocean of experience teacup by teacup and that our previous conceptions must always be tested by new information—we must be humble learners. Being a humble learner does not mean being simple, weak, or insecure. Because the gift of learning is mastery and greater knowledge, as learners we acquire a secure self-confidence and sense of competence. Yet the openness to experience that brings new learning also prevents this self-esteem from becoming arrogance or dogmatism. Humble learners are fully aware of their talents and abilities but also know their limitations. Recognizing that they are always in the process of learning allows them to admit limitations and mistakes and be willing to learn from others.

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