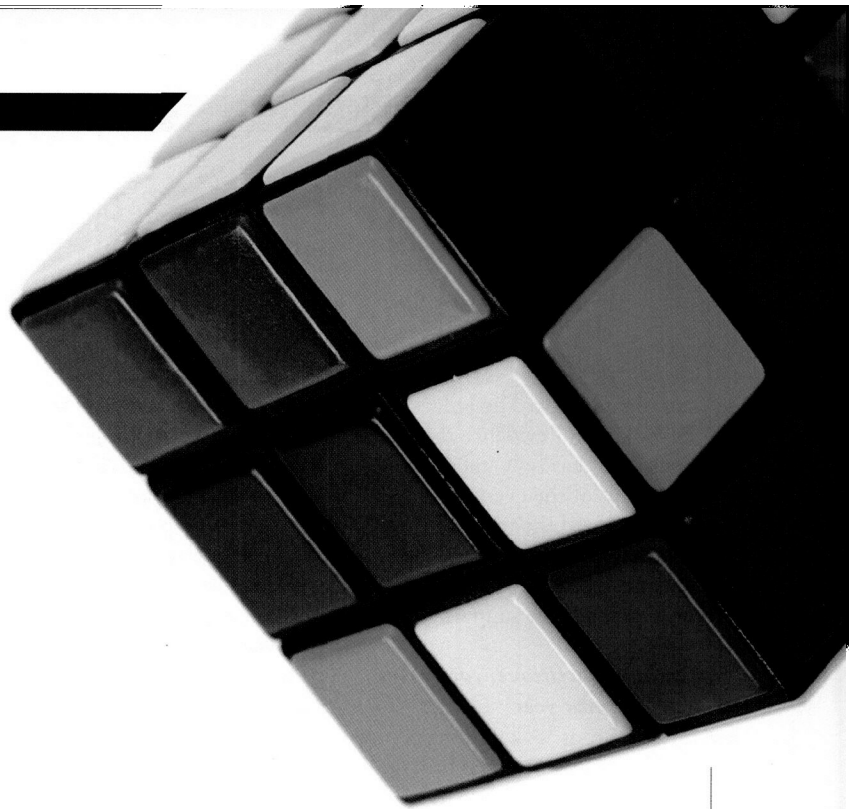


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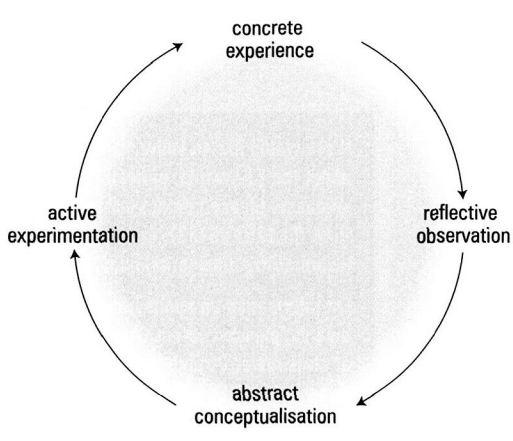
Learning by doing

The most effective way to learn is through participation. **Liggy Webb** suggests some training methods that use a hands-on approach

Research indicates that individuals learn best when they are involved and active. The 'chalk and talk' and PowerPoint approaches are definite second-class citizens in the sophisticated world of modern learning. Unquestionably the most effective way to learn how to do something is simply to do it.

Of course, it's not enough just to 'do', and neither is it enough just to think. Learning from participation must involve links between.

The four-stage model below of learning by doing was designed by



David Kolb. Quite a few theorists have proposed cyclical models to explain how people learn from experience, but all share the important features of Kolb's model. Learning from experience involves four stages, which follow each other in a cycle, as shown.

Kolb's learning theory sets out four distinct learning styles based on a four-stage learning cycle. His model offers both a way to understand individual people's different learning styles, and also an explanation of a cycle of experiential learning that applies to us all.

Kolb includes this 'cycle of learning' as a central principle of his experiential learning theory, typically expressed as the four-stage cycle of learning, in which 'immediate or concrete' experiences provide a basis for observations and reflections. These observations and reflections are assimilated and distilled into 'abstract concepts', producing new implications for action that can be 'actively tested'.

He found that the four combinations of perceiving and processing determine the four learning

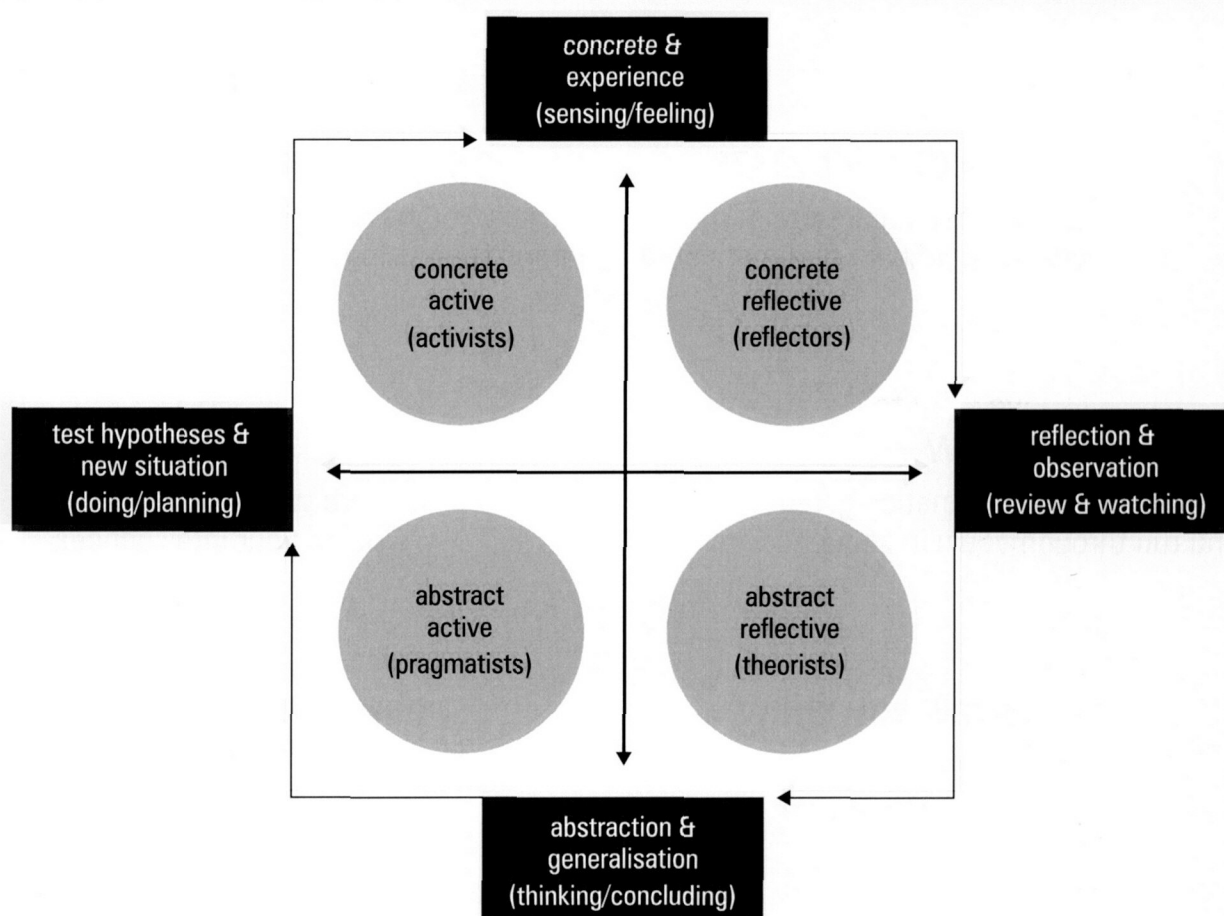
styles. According to Kolb, the learning cycle involves four processes that must be present for learning to occur:

- **Activist – Active**
Experimentation (simulations, case study, homework). What's new? I'm game for anything!
- **Reflector – Reflective**
Observation (logs, journals, brainstorming). I'd like time to think about this.
- **Theorist – Abstract**
Conceptualisation (lecture, papers, analogies). How does this relate to that?
- **Pragmatist – Concrete**
Experience (laboratories, field-work, observations). How can I apply this in practice?

An assumption could therefore be made that the participative approach is the preferred style that suits the Activist. However, this is a misconception, as each learning style benefits from the participative approach.

Research suggests that the brain learns best when confronted with a balance between stress and comfort: high challenge and low threat. The brain needs some

Kolb's experiential learning style



challenge, or 'environmental press' that generates stress as described above to activate emotions and learning.

Why? Because stress motivates a survival imperative in the brain. Too much stress, and anxiety shuts down opportunities for learning. Too little, and the brain becomes too relaxed and comfortable to become actively engaged.

The phrase used to describe the brain state for optimal learning is that of 'relaxed alertness'. Practically speaking, this means trainers need to create places that are not only safe to learn, but also spark some emotional interest through practical activity.

Getting people actively involved also encourages accelerated learning. This is a practical process of training and development, which enables the trainer to accommodate significant differences in learning styles automatically within a single session.

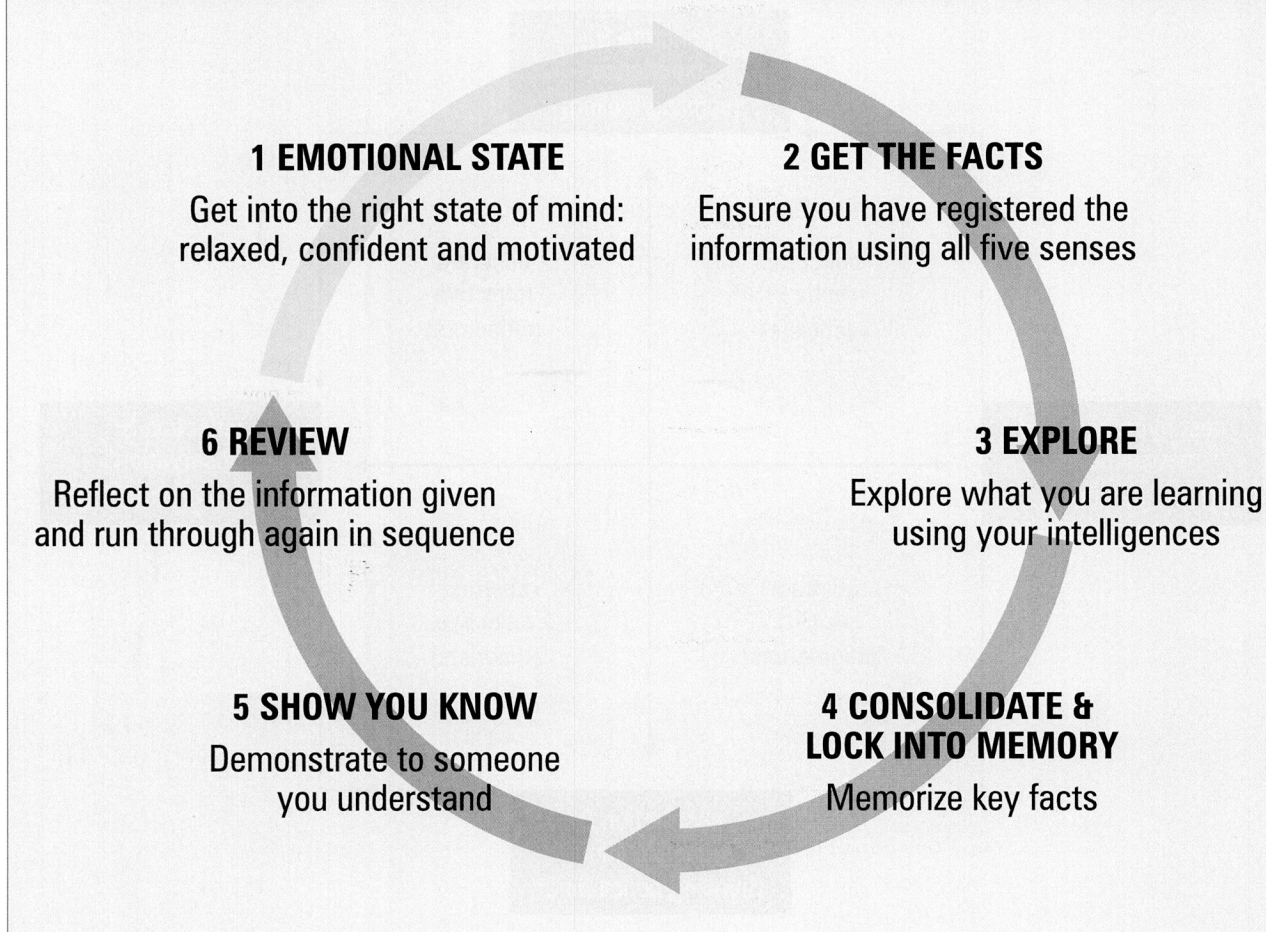
It provides a consistent framework, so that the trainer can be confident that the information is being learned in such a way that each person will absorb it readily, and that they will make behaviour changes as a result. People learning with these principles will soon recognise their own capacity for learning and become more self-confident and motivated.

A participative approach to training directly complements the learning cycle and participants' learning styles. By enhancing the exploration of learning, the training will contribute to creating a person-centered environment, empowering individuals to grow and develop.

Participative training can be applied to the majority of training approaches, though the main methods will include:

- Syndicate work
- Case studies
- Practical exercises
- Management and soft skills activities
- Role plays.

A six-stage cycle



One of the most popular and participative methods used in training is role play, and the following is an explanation of how to incorporate and conduct these to achieve optimum output.

Role playing

Here is a technique in which you present a controlled, partial replication of the real world by asking individuals to assume roles and then work their way through an open-ended 'script'. You stop the action and guide participants through an analysis of the role play.

The benefits

This provides the opportunity to rehearse new behaviour in a relative-

ly safe but challenging environment:

- Assists participants in developing such interpersonal skills as problem-solving, counselling, interviewing
- Allows participants to play roles that are different from their usual behaviour.

You need your players; all others are designated as observers. There is really no limit to the size of the audience, but the larger the audience, the more you have to structure the discussion following the role play.

Professionally trained actors can be extremely beneficial in this environment. Preparation is needed in any case, depending on

the complexity of the scenario.

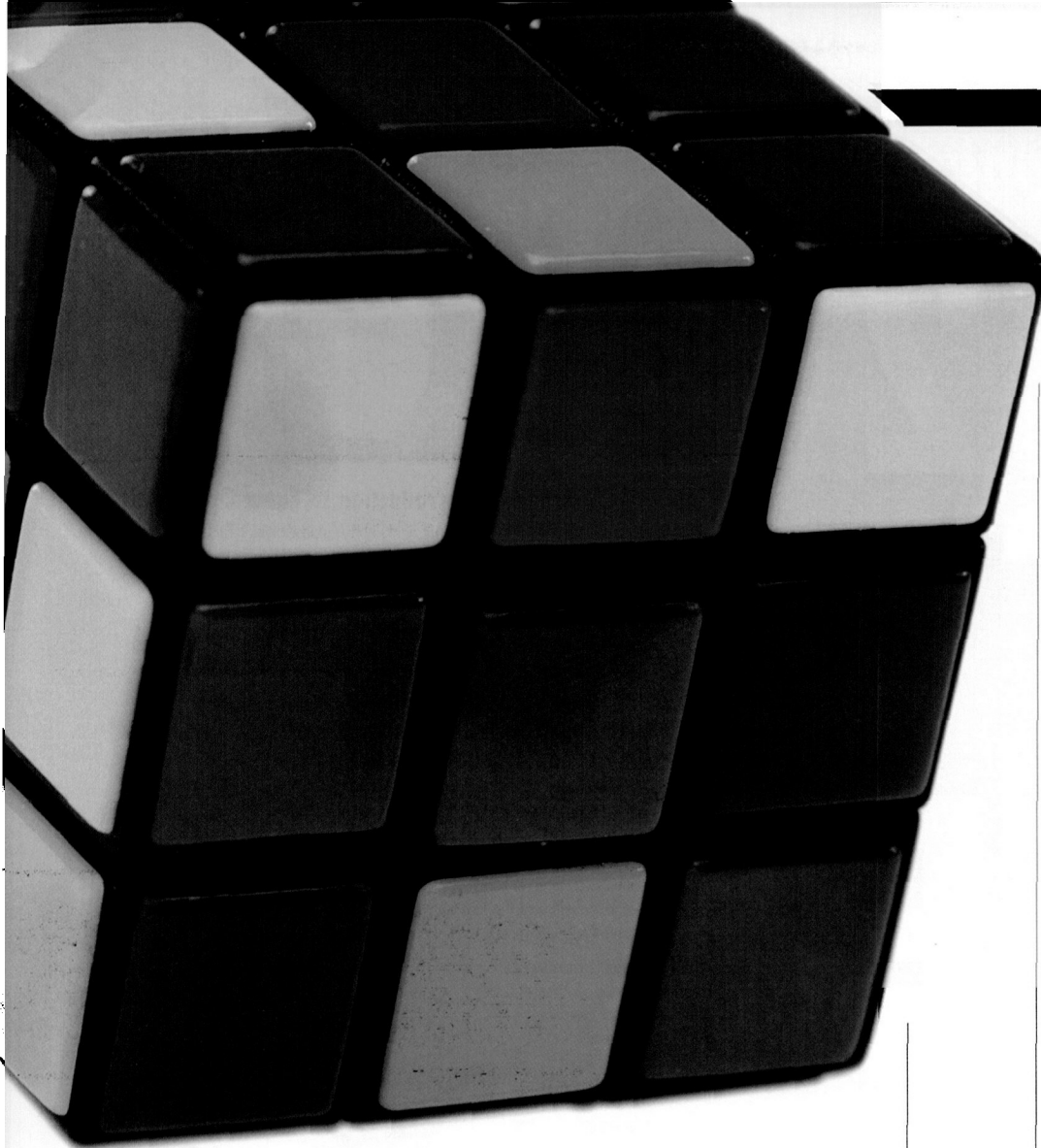
Everyone must be able to see and hear the role players. The role play itself may require some set-up, such as an interviewer's office with desk and chairs.

There are four distinct steps in a well-run role play:

- Scene-setting
- Role play content
- Debriefing, observation and feedback
- Closure and learning outcome consolidation.

Setting the scene

Your task is to prepare the group for the role play and provide a valid reason for its use. Several strategies are available:



Discussion

Start with a discussion, during which you post a number of problem situations elicited from the group. During a discussion leadership class, for instance, you might pose the question: 'What do you see as the most common mistake a chairperson can make when opening a meeting?'

From the discussion a list of typical errors is generated. You then suggest that one way to get a feel for the difficult task of opening a meeting would be for the group to engage in a short role play, where one person acts as the leader and others as participants.

Speech

Give a delegate a prepared speech, lasting no longer than 10 minutes. You could try presenting research findings on common meeting mistakes, with a special focus on the role of the manager during the opening phase of a meeting.

For example: 'Here are some of the problems you will have to deal with as effective group leaders. Now let's do a short role play to see how it feels being either a chairperson or a participant in such a situation.'

Film/case study

Show a film of a group struggling through a meeting, and stop the film at a point where they start spinning their collective wheels, or try giving participants a written case study outlining a situation such as described above.

Role play

Be very specific in your instructions, and then get on with it. The longer you talk about role playing as a technique, and the more you talk about what might happen (or happened to you the last time you did it), the more you can raise anxiety in some group members who have never participated in such an event.

- Assign specific roles to people. Call for volunteers, or ask individuals if you think they might do a good job in a part. Short, written descriptions of less than 50 words can be helpful, but don't set out whole scripts or lengthy role profiles. Give players a moment to read the material or to state what they think their role is to be.
- Instruct those not involved in the play to situate themselves so that they can be observers.
- Give observers clear instructions on what to look for and what to write down. They will be asked to report their observations after the role play. Prepare the learners to be active observers.
- Get the role play started. If prepared roles are used, let the play run for a little while and then stop as soon as the point has been made. Unless your participants get stuck, it's best to stay out of the way while you jot down your own observations.
- Put an end to the role play with something like, 'You seem to have reached a point where we can break,' or, 'Please take another two minutes and then we'll stop.' Do all this before things get boring or the discussion too heated: somewhere between 10 and 15 minutes seems about right for the typical role play.

The longer you talk about role playing, the more you can raise anxiety levels

There are several ways to intensify a role play by breaking in and directing the process. One is role reversal, where you ask players to change roles with others and continue the play in the new spot.

This can be particularly interesting in 'us vs them' situations: players can now experience how the world

Checklist

Does the activity maximise participation?	Yes/No
Does the activity involve the trainee in finding a solution rather than telling him/her the answer?	Yes/No
Does the activity provide an opportunity to try out new skills or behaviours?	Yes/No
Does the activity provide a new source of information on the performance, behaviour or attitude of a trainee?	Yes/No
Does the activity allow for application of new knowledge/behaviours/attitudes in a 'real world' situation (e.g. the workplace)?	Yes/No
Does the training balance the need for tension to learn, but not become so threatening that the individual backs away?	Yes/No
Does the activity reflect the real concerns and needs of the trainee?	Yes/No
Does the activity meet more than one objective at a time?	Yes/No
Does the activity reinforce previous learning?	Yes/No
Is the activity something that the trainer knows how to do, or feels flexible enough to try?	Yes/No
Does the time available allow for this activity to complete the learning cycle from doing through processing, generalising and applying – OR does it fit in a sequence to the next activity, which will be the next step in the learning cycle?	Yes/No
Does the risk level of the participants, or the level of complexity in the activity, fit with the development of the group, i.e. is it too early, too simple, too involved, etc. for the amount of knowledge or information they have?	Yes/No
Has this type of activity been used too often? Does the trainer need another type of activity to offer some variety or respond to other learning styles?	Yes/No

looks from the other's viewpoint, or different people can display different approaches to a given situation.

Another way to intervene is by way of a brief interview of the key player(s). You might ask a player, 'How is the interview going for you?' or 'Do you want to take a different approach? What would you like to do differently?' or, 'Let me make a suggestion: look at the techniques we wrote on the flipchart earlier. Which one might help you get this interview flowing again?' Once the delegates have been given this little push, get out of the way and let the play take its natural flow.

A third intervention is based on paradoxical intention. Before asking delegates to 'do it the right way', instruct them to go with what may come more easily. For instance, in a workshop on interviewing techniques you might say,

'See if you can demonstrate an interviewer who really is not listening at all to the client.'

After a few minutes of the role played interview, stop the action and invite the interviewer to switch and 'now try to demonstrate as many active listening skills as you think appropriate'.

De-briefing, observation and feedback

Ask the role players to report how things went for them. No long dissertations are needed here, just a quick summary from each, to hear their view of the situation while in role and at the same time to allow them the emotional release they might need to step out of the role.

Assist delegates to step out of their roles; sometimes you'll need to ask them to change chairs and physically move away from their role before they rejoin the group.

Ask observers to report what they saw and heard. Emphasise descriptions of actual behaviours over interpretations and second-guessing.

If there is a doubt, remind the group that 'We have some expert witnesses here. Why don't we ask Ricky what he felt when Elspeth confronted him about his doodling?' The clearer the instructions to the observers at the outset of the role play, the higher the quality of comments at this point.

Summary

Assist participants in integrating role play results with material previously discussed. Ascertain what they will do differently as a result of the learning, and how this can be directly transferred to the workplace. To consolidate the learning, action plans can be implemented.

This is an example of one of the most popular methods of participative training, and when done well, it can be extremely effective.

Selecting the best participative approach

While deciding upon the methodology that you will incorporate into your training intervention, ask yourself the questions in Table 1.

The participative approach is proving increasingly effective in the swift transferral of learning outcomes into real time as well as addressing behaviours and encouraging a can-do attitude.

As the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) so aptly philosophised, 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.' ■

Liggy Webb is commercial director for Linac, a Gloucestershire-based training organisation, prior to which she held key learning and development roles within Thomson Holidays and Esporta Health and Fitness. She can be contacted at liggy@linac.co.uk.