



One-Wan Musical in Museum: A New Normal of Theatre Experiential Practice in the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims to explore the integration of experiential learning theory (ELT) by David Kolb with theatre practice for degree programs in the musical class during the COVID-19 pandemic. By adapting the concept of Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) and Learning Style Inventory (LSI), the instructor designed A New Experiential Cycle for Theatre Practice, comprised of 7 components for creating a musical show called “One-Wan Musical in Museum”. There are 1) Large Group Activity 2) Group Assignment 3) Independence Learning Task 4) Self-Reflective Class 5) Rehearsal Practice 6) Team Reflective Class 7) Theatre Performance. The researcher also suggests Three New Normal Teaching Strategies to encourage students to achieve their full education and learning potential during the pandemic, which are 1) Hybrid Learning Platform 2) Double-casting technique 3) Student-to-student Interaction.

Keywords: theatre practice, experiential learning theory, COVID-19, musical theatre

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis made a massive impact worldwide, forcing the cultural and creative industries to shut their doors. As a consequence, entertainment and site-based activities, such as theatre, live music, festivals, cinemas and museums, have been hit extremely hard (UNESCO, 2021). At the time of writing, the education institutions have brought the students back to campus. The challenge of transitioning to a new normal format raised concern for educators in drama and theatre practice because the study environment have changed. Therefore, educators have to construct new learning methodologies and techniques within the context of the pandemic to sustain the experiential elements.

Musical Theatre Practice for degree programs is place-based learning and requires experiential training. Before the pandemic, students rehearsed and performed in the theatre. Every execution was done onsite as a traditional mode of practice. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the traditional concepts and transformed the education system into new directions. David Kolb's experiential learning theory defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience (Kolb, 1984). The ELT models suggests that learning is cyclical, involving four stages and associated with distinct learning styles (Fielding, 1994). The theory also offers various learning methods, including project-based learning and problem-based learning, which led to the initiation of a new curriculum for theatre practice.

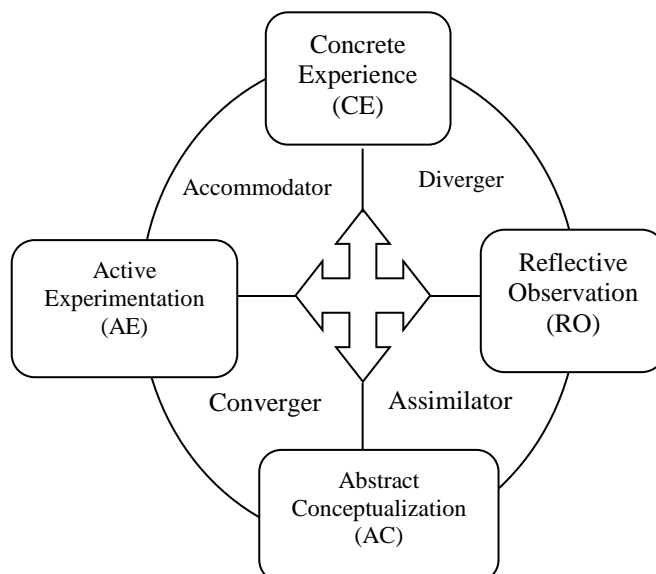
This paper focuses on the instructor's experience in adapting the concept of Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) and Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to theatre practice for degree students during the COVID-19 crisis. The research conducts A New experiential Learning Cycle for Theatre Practice from qualitative content analysis, and support the result of the new curriculum by gathering information with semi-structured interview, focus group and participatory observation of 38 students in musical class, through the creation of the performance called "One-Wan Musical in Museum".

2. From theory to theatre practice

2.1. Relevant Literature

According to Dobbs-Oates et al. (2020) learning relies on partnerships with real-world context and social-service agencies. The collaborative project stands apart from classroom learning and could facilitate development of the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for future professional roles. The goal of education is to develop students' ability to transform experiences into new knowledge by reflecting on inter- and intra- personal experiences. (Kolb, 1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed by David Kolb, has its root in the Education Theory of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. ELT is intended to be an adaptive process on learning that merges experience, perception, cognition, and behavior. (McCarthy, 2010) Kolb's experiential learning theory becomes one of the best known educational theories in higher education. (Healey & Jenkins, 2000) This theory suggests that learning is a cyclical, known as the 'Kolb Learning Cycle'. There are four modes of learning, i.e., Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle and Basic Learning Styles (Kolb, 1984)



Source: (McCarthy, 2010)

Each stage of the cycle is associated with distinct learning styles. The learning style are not fixed and can change. Kolb (1984) suggests that the students develop a preference of learning in a particular way, He identifies four styles of learners based on their approach to obtain knowledge—Diverger, Assimilator, Converger, and Accommodator. (McCarthy, 2010) In 1971 Kolb developed the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to assess individual learning styles, this tool was applied to accounting curriculum to plan assignment, courses and programs. Francis et al. (1995) described instructional methods for each learning style (see Table 1).

Table 1: Learning style preferences in formal learning situations

Learning style	Instructional Method in a Formal Learning Environment
Diverger	Prefer working in groups, listening with an open mind, and receiving personal feedback.
Accommodators	Prefer working with others to get assignments done, setting goals, performing field work, and testing different approaches to completing a project. Tend to solve problems in an intuitive trial and error method relying on other people for information.
Assimilators	Prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and thinking things through.
Convergers	Prefer experimenting with new ideas, simulations, laboratory assignments and practical applications. Tend to do well on conventional intelligence tests where there is a single correct answer.

Source: (Francis, et al., 1995)

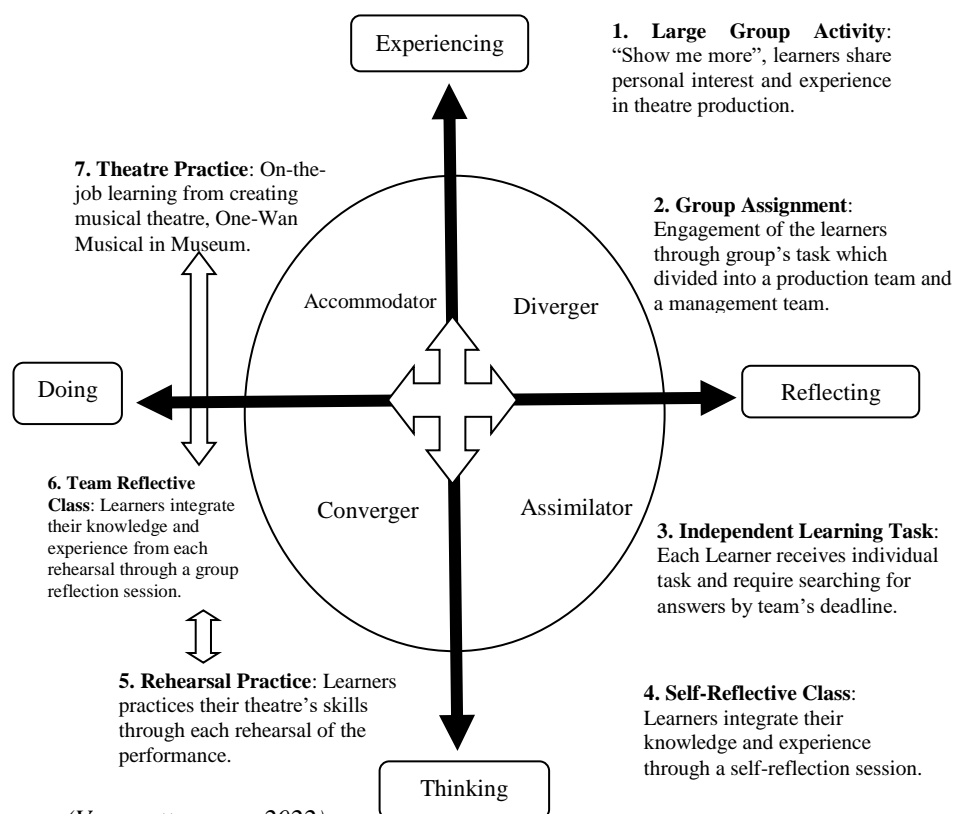
In 2016 Boggu examined the effectiveness of the experiential learning theory in language learning context, they recommended the educators to embed the experiential learning cycle in their content modules. The study provided insight into the potential of experiential learning cycle through an integrated skills-based curriculum. Miller et al. (2016) adapted Kolb Experiential Cycle for medical education. However, theatre practice is distinct from accounting and language learning methods so the instructor had to create a new normal education curriculum of theatre experiential practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. After

reviewing a several research articles, conferenced papers, online documents and books about ELT and teaching strategies during the heath crisis, the instructor has adapted various database to make a new experiential learning cycle for theatre practice which will be explained next.

2.2. A New Experiential Learning Cycle for Theatre Practice

From an experiential perspective, it is important that the students are actively involved in how they are assessed (Christian, McCarty & Brown, 2021). The instructor invents a new theatre practice based on the Kolb the concept of Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) to optimize theatre practice. Figure 2 illustrates a new 4-stage cycle according to Kolb Experiential Learning Theory and the theatre practice activity. Each quadrant described learning activities conceptualized by 2 adjacent stages, noted as experiencing, reflecting, thinking and doing. Through this cycle, the students’s CE form a basis for RO. These reflection observations are assimilated into AC for producing musical theatre. Active Experimentation in real-life practice will in turn create a new experience whereby the new cycle begins.

Figure 2: A New Experiential Learning Cycle for Theatre Practice



Source: (Vongpattaranon, 2022)

In the following paragraph, the researcher will describe the process of A New Experiential Learning Cycle for theatre practice, supported with the interview data of 11 males and 17 females students in musical class of 2022 at Sripatum University. A new experiential learning cycle for theatre practice was comprised with 7 components. The first quadrant started with a brief introduction and a video clip of musical production. The purpose of this step was to ignite the individual’s motivation and create personal passion within

learners. The learners then engage in “Show Me More”, a large group activity to encouraged students sharing their personal interests and previous experiences in musical theatre. From the first activity, where the students analyzed themselves, the learners decided to join in either a production team or a management team, each team recieved the group assignment for producing musical performance.

“The teacher introduced us to the elements of musical theatre and how to create the production. We watched a behind the scenes video of Thai musical called “Lod Lai Mung Korn”, it was excited to see how many people involved in a musical. I have seen many musical theatres but haven’t been a part of producing so it was interesting to be a part of this performance...but I didn’t know which position suits me, so the teacher engaged us through a class activity called “Show Me More” ... when I sang a song, did some dance moves and expressed my passion about acting to my friends. It was also fun to watch the others show off. Then I realized that I want to be a part of production as an actress. After that our team starts to work on the schedule...”

– Female Year Musical Student, The Actress

In the second quadrant, the objective of independent learning task was to provide learners with the self-knowledge from reading, observing, interpreting and other learning paths according to their duties in the performance. The learners then reflected thier thoughts, feelings and individual goals through class discussion where the instructor boosting thier confidence. The Students should be able to identify: thier strenght and weakness, the process to achieve individual goal and the scale of confidence.

“I worked for a script writing team. I have written a few short stories, but the musical scripts are different, so I have read and watched many musical performances. Then I realized that the scripts writer also required a knowledge of linguistics and be creative, not just knowing the structure of a playscript. I must learn more about the choice of words because in this performance there were many characters from the ancient era. The dialogue should represent the period where they came from.”

– Female Musical Student, The Script Writer

“There were so many troubles in managing people, I asked myself many times whether this was just for a grade or else. I decided to consult with my senior, the 4th year student who was a producer, then I realized that all troubles from every single one in the team were my responsibility. I want a good grade but what I want more is to be proudly called a producer of this performance. It will elevate me to my dream career.”

– Female Year Musical Student, The Producer

The objective of quadrant 3 was to serve a pre-production process of the performance which the learners rehearsed 6 weeks before the first round of the performance. The students must been through 9 rehearsal practices for musical theatre: Reading Rehearsal, Blocking Rehearsal, Characterization and Motivation Rehearsal, Business Rehearsal, Memory Rehearsal, Running Rehearsal, Polishing rehearsal, Tech Rehearsal and Dress Rehearsal. Each rehearsal follwed by team reflection so the students could integrate thier experiences to improve the performance as a team so in this quadrant, the rehearsal and team reflection would go back an forth several times.

“As a stage manager, I had to arrange the schedule for many rehearsals. I had to cooperate with other team to make sure that they were ready for each rehearsal...the dress rehearsal relied on the costume team...the most complicated rehearsal was the tech rehearsal because we performed in the museum, unlike the theatre, there were 10 scenes with 10 area of performance. The stage manager needed to co-ordinate with the sound controller and runners to make sure each scene ran smoothly.

– Female Musical Student, The Stage Manger

“The most important thing was the post-rehearsal talk. Each team gathered after we finished our job or at the end of time, we discussed the problems and solved them by brainstorming the solutions. I think it is a good idea to have a group reflection because no one is abandoned or faces problems alone. It makes us more unit.”

– Male Musical Student, The Assistant Director

To continued the fourth quadrant of cycle, which is the production process, each students must perform as team to open the musical show called “One-Wan Musical in Museum”. This musical performance is a part of a museum tour at Banglumphu museum, Bangkok. There were 4 rounds of the performance, each round followed by the team reflection to adjust individual experience from doing musical production to the new knowledge of all because experiential educators believe that the best way to promote learning is by reflecting on experiences that reinforce previously taught concepts (King & Kitchener, 2004).

“There are 4 rounds of this musical...we perform on Saturday and Sunday, one round a day. Because the museum closes at 6 pm, we set the time of the performance at 3.30 pm. The length of the performance is approximately 1 hour so after the finale, we have about 1.30 hours to clean up the space and discuss in group before the museum closes. However, the first round takes us longer than we thought to clean up, so the instructor let us go home before it is too dark and set a reflection class via zoom at nighttime instead.”

– Male Musical Student, The Stage Manager

“I was so nervous before the first round but afterward I felt more confidence. The experience in each day of acting in this musical taught me a lot. Each round of the performance gave me different lessons...I made mistakes and learnt to improve it for the next round.”

– Female Musical Student, The Actress

2.3. The New Normal Teaching Strategies in COVID-19 Era

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, there are three teaching strategies added to the theatre practice by the instructor as follow:

1) Hybrid Learning platform. Hybrid or blended learning provide engaging learning opportunities to students by combining face-to-face medium of instruction with online learning opportunities via Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, Line and etc (Jitendra and et al., 2021). Becasue of the technology, the instructor has an opportunity to offer training in a flexible format and the students can access to vast amount of online knowledge via tech tools. In quadrant 1-3, the discussion and meeting can be arranged either online, in the classroom, at

the theatre or anywhere with internet. However, it is important to noted that these changes in theatre practice which traditionally a place-based learning, could increase psychosocial stress in the students who have limited knowledge of software and fear of technology. The instructor must gradually introduce the new learning technology to the learners and it is also important to encourage the interaction between student-student to prevent the loss of human connection as classes are now delivered both online and onsite.

“I take an online audition via Zoom due to the quarantine; it is good to have an opportunity to do so because if the audition only takes place in the class, I will lose a chance to become an actress for this musical.”

– Female Musical Student, The Actress

“At first, I am so stressed when I get COVID-19 infection because I am the producer. However, with the help of social media, I can manage things even when I stay at home. I can send messages and video call through Line...my co-producer is very helpful; he makes sure that I can update with the situation in the production via chatroom. So, I didn't feel much stress that I thought because I can still help my team to move forward.

– Female Musical Student, The Producer

“...after the finale, we have about 1.30 hour to clean up the space and discuss in group before the museum close. However, the first round takes us longer than we thought to clean up, so the instructor let us go home before it gets too dark and set a reflection class via zoom at nighttime instead.”

– Male Musical Student, The Stage Manager

2) Double-casting techniques. Double-casting, in the theatrical term, is when two actors are both cast in the same roles and share responsibility that the roles entail. For actors, double-casting can be a prevention of roles that are physically or vocally demanding. In this case, the instructor complied with double-casting techniques for every team in the production. The advantage of double-casting is that students will have an opportunity to explore the work of their classmates and learn to help one another. In each team the students will pair up with thier double-casting so when there is a case of emergency, there will be someone who can replace the missing position. This might be more challenging but also essential for the COVID-19 era, which has proven to be worthwhile.

“A few days before the first round of the performance, the telephone-booth girl, one of our main characters tests positive for COVID-19. Due to the heath measure at that time, she needs at least 9 days off, so she would miss the first two rounds of the performance. The show would have been cancelled if we didn't have a double casting of this character, who were an assistant director, and she is aware of being a substitute for this character...”

– Male Musical Student, The Actor

“I am an art director but also a double casting for a make-up artist. I must observe how to do the make up for Maneechan and her servants from a friend who is responsible for these three characters' make up. On the third round of the performance, she (the make-up artist) is dismissed due to the infection of COVID-19. I am confidence to replace her because we have been prepared for this kind of emergency, so our team have no worries of the change.”

– Female Musical Student, The Art Director

3) Student-to-Student Interaction. As a result of quarantine and isolation, fear of contracting the virus and etc., the students have experienced the psychological impact of the pandemic. The student-to-student strategies affect the learning process as students have more positive attitudes when they work together collaboratively. The instructor needs to introduce the collaborative skills, such as active listening, open-mindedness, empathy etc., to the students and inspire the student to interact with their team. Besides, this strategy encourages students to be communicative, collaborative and cooperative. The students can share responsibility for learning with each other and generate deeper thinking processes while explore a new experiential learning cycle for theatre practice.

“The instructor often made us discuss in pair and in group...I get a chance to talk to some classmates who are not my close friends, they motivate me to keep doing my job. Sometimes, working as a leader can be pressured...my teammates are the best supporters. We encourage each other to keep fighting.”

– Male Musical Student, Choreographer

“ I feel lonely during the pandemic, I can't go back to see my family because my grandparents fear of contracting coronavirus from the outsider...I feel relieve to have someone to talk to not just about the work stuff but also about my feelings, my worries.”

– Female Musical Student, The House Manager

These teaching strategies have proved to be significant for emergency crises. Each strategy supports students to complete a new experiential learning cycle for theatre practice and encourage students to achieve their full education and learning potential, which is a critical issue during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Conclusion

The experiential learning theory is the most widely recognized for its effectiveness and usefulness in educational programs. The four-stage cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and doing is an adaptable template for the creation of alternative learning processes as such during the COVID-19 pandemic. *One-Wan Musical in Museum* is the outcome of adapting ELC and LSI by Kolb for theatre practice. There are seven components in A New Experiential Learning Cycle for Theatre Practice as follows: 1) Large Group Activity 2) Group Assignment 3) Independence Learning Task 4) Self-Reflective Class 5) Rehearsal Practice 6) Team Reflective Class 7) Theatre Performance. According to Kolb and Kolb (2018), Learning is an endlessly recurring cycle not a linear process, full cycle learning also increases learning flexibility and development. The learning receives information through large group activity and group assignment then transform it through Independence Learning Task and Self-Reflective Class. Then the transformation begins again through the Rehearsal Practice and Team Reflective Class. In this process, the learner can revisit the Team Reflective Class until the last rehearsal, then the learners process to Theatre Performance, which each round will revisit to Team Reflective Class. The reflective session needs to be repeated before transforming to the next process of learning. It generates new experiences which become the internalization of knowledge that begin the cycle anew. Consequently, A New Experiential Learning Cycle for Theatre Practice, designed by the instructor, allows musical students to achieve the necessary skills for theatre production and management during the crisis of health.

The challenge to quickly adapt to the “new normal” in a higher education setting requires teaching strategies. There are three strategies of The New Normal Teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) Hybrid Learning Platform: The blend of online and onsite learning strategy is deemed to be the practical method that combines the advantages of both learning platforms (Nielsen, 2008). It conveys the balance and harmony associated with “face-to-face instruction” and “computer mediated instruction”. 2) Double-casting Technique: It refers to 2 people sharing one role in case of an emergency, having a double-casting technique alleviates much of the stress of absenteeism. In this case, not only the main character should have a double cast, but also in other main roles of production and management team, those needed to be present at the time of the performance, such as stage managers, house managers, make-up artists etc. 3) Student-to-student Interaction: It proved to have positive impact when the pandemic affects everyone when students comfort each other whether in class or online. Pair and group discussions can help students develop their communication skills, so it is important for instructors to provide guidelines and collaborative skills to shape the interaction (Spark School, 2022).

The ELT of Kolb encourages the personal input of 38 musical students. Their achievement in producing the musical production called “One-Wan Musical in Museum” has proven that the experiential learning method is adaptable for theatre practice. Through adapting experiential learning method to COVID-19 teaching situation, the instructor not only helps learners to succeed in the education goal, thus perhaps ease the mental health of going through the pandemic. The implications of A New Experiential Learning Cycle are profound for theatre practice that must be done continuously in a circle with addition of The New Normal Teaching Strategies. The future research could add quantitative data to confirm the findings with statistical information.

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