

Enhancing Classroom Role-plays Through Experiential Learning Theory Application

By Terry W. Loe, Lukas P. Forbes, Scott Inks, and Stefan Sleep

Role-playing has been one of the most critical activities to prepare students for success in a sales career and is seen as an effective means for sales educators to engage in experiential learning. Experiential learning theory (ELT) indicates that there are four full stages of learning that should occur during experiential learning activities. Yet, they are often misunderstood and misapplied: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). CE is the initiating experience upon which learners engage in RO and then engage in AC, upon which students have an opportunity for AE. This research assesses the extent to which sales educators using role-play are incorporating all four stages of ELT in their classroom. Findings indicate that while all sales educators are using role-play as part of their sales curriculum, most instructors are using an abbreviated ELT cycle which suggests only surface learning. Examples on how to fully incorporate ELT into role-play activities are presented along with directions for future research.

Role-play is a commonly used technique in sales classes that has characteristics of experiential learning for sales educators (Lastner et al., 2021; Magnotta, 2018; Pelletier and Hopkins 2018; Chapman et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2016) and is considered one of the most vital activities to prepare students for success in a sales career (Deeter-Schmelz, 2015; Spiller et al., 2020). Magnotta et al. (2020) suggest that the simulation of real-world interactions (role-plays) is one of the most effective means of preparing individuals for a career in sales that introduces aspiring sales students to the “pressure” of a real sales call. These role-plays not only lead to enhanced sales skills, but within competitions can also lead to development of relationships with organizations that often lead to job offers and career opportunities (Drea et al., 2005; Loe, 2004; Widmier, Loe, and Selden, 2007).

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Gray et al. (2012) indicated in their review of literature for sales educators that “pedagogical tools” were one of the key research areas needing further investigation. Their study revealed that only 27 of the over 800 articles in the *Journal of Marketing Education* between 1979 to 2012 were devoted to sales education. A search in *Marketing Education Review* between 1991 to 2023 revealed 254 articles that included sales in their subject terms out of more than 5600 articles published, of which 29 were specific to sales or sales management courses. Only nine were specific to role-plays or included role-play in search terms.

While Cummins et al. (2020) reveal an increase in sales education research, they conclude that “researchers have only tapped the surface of how to improve sales education...” (p. 198). With the role-play activity being so ingrained in the curriculum of sales programs, efforts to refine and improve sales education pedagogy and its understanding and application of experiential learning are important (Cummins et al. 2013; Cummins et al. 2020; Lastner et al. 2021). Experiential learning theory (ELT) suggests that experiential learning is often misunderstood and misapplied to *any learning that involves activity* (Kolb 2015). Passarelli and Kolb (2021) explain that while experiential learning has grown in popularity and has been adopted extensively in education, the integration of experienced-based activities alone does not adequately provide for the application of experiential learning theory. They state that “in actuality,

it's a process that involves a 4-stage theoretical model developed by Kolb (1984)" (p. 796). Kolb (2015) explains that experience remains simply an activity unless it is reflected upon and conceptualized. The goal of ELT, therefore, is to explain and conceptualize how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge by using all 4 stages of the ELT theory.

If sales educators perceive that they are providing students with experiential learning activities through the use of role-plays, but are not incorporating all four stages of ELT to provide a true experiential experience, then we have an opportunity to improve sales student learning by more comprehensively incorporating each of the aspects of the ELT cycle into role-play assignments. These assignments could include all of the activities leading up to, during, and after role-play which aligns with a full cycle learning experience.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to probe Kolb's ELT theory to explore the extent to which university sales instructors perceive they are incorporating each of the four stages of ELT in their role-play assignments, and the extent to which they actually implement the full cycle ELT in role-play assignments to include pre and post-role-play activities. Further, this research offers guidance regarding best practice approaches to engaging in each of the four stages of learning as explicated by Kolb (2015) and other ELT theorists and suggests directions for future research.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY OVERVIEW

Kolb's experiential learning theory cycle is the most influential scholarly approach to implementing experiential learning (Morris 2020). The ELT learning model, according to Kolb (2015), should be a combination of "grasping and transforming" experiences. Grasping experience is the process of taking in information, and transforming experience is how people interpret and act on the information. The ELT learning model postulates two dialectically related modes of grasping experience (Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC)). It then proposes two dialectically related modes of transforming experience (Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE)). Learning occurs

from the resolution of creative tension among the four learning modes. In sum, these 4 experiences form the 4 stages of experiential learning.

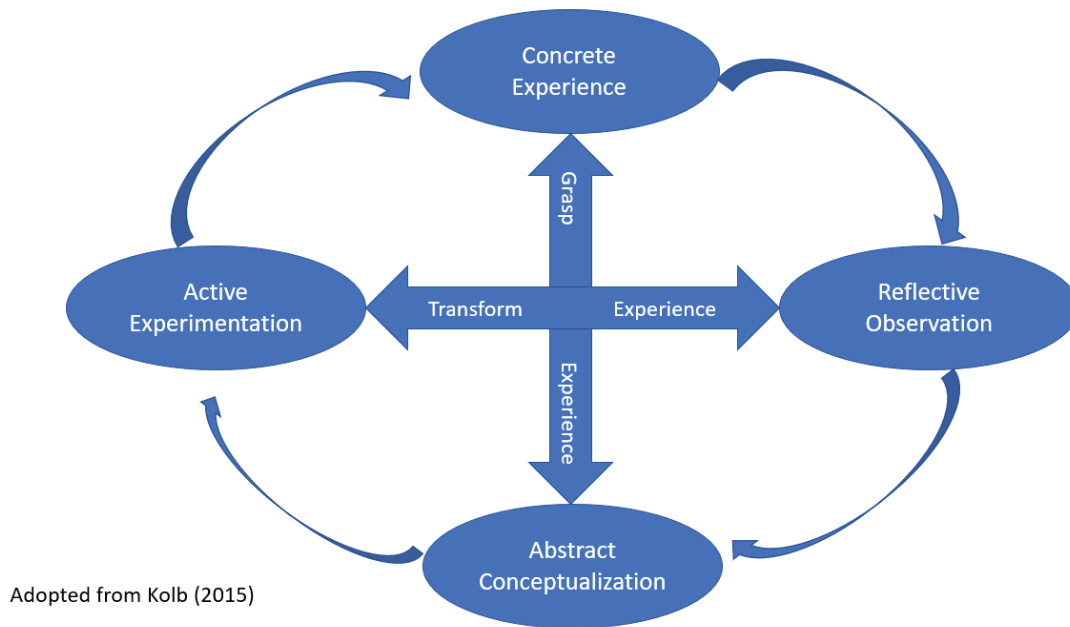
The process is depicted as an idealized learning cycle where the learner "touches all the bases" in a recursive process. Learners ideally will have an experience (Concrete Experience), then reflect on the experience (Reflective Observation), think about the experience, develop theoretical models while guided by objective information (Abstract Conceptualization), and then act on the experience by making corrections and experimenting with new approaches or techniques (Active Experimentation). Kolb states, "Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences" (Kolb, 2015, p. 51). Figure 1 represents this process. Young et al. (2008) suggest that utilizing the 4-stage ELT engenders "deeper learning" and is more effective in establishing a longer and more permanent grasping of concepts, ideas, attitudes, and behavior.

METHOD

A Qualtrics online survey was distributed to 204 instructors identified as teaching university sales courses listed in the Sales Education Foundation 2022 "Top Sales Universities." Responses were received from 114 instructors for a response rate of 56%, yet only 105 answered all the questions, yielding a 51% response rate. The intention of the survey was to assess sales educators' use of all 4 stages of the ELT cycle during their classroom role-play exercises. Respondents were provided a full explanation of each ELT stage and guidance regarding their meaning and intent.

The survey included a "global" item to capture the individual respondent's general perception of how they incorporate each of the individual stages in their role-play assignments for their classes. For example, "*I feel like I fully incorporate **\"Concrete Experience\"** in my role-play assignments. Activities designed to engage, motivate, and evoke the **affective (feeling)** aspect of experience.*" These were measured using a five-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (5).

Figure 1 - Experiential Learning Theory



Additionally, an open-ended question was asked to determine the activities utilized to incorporate each stage of the 4-stage ELT model. For example, *“Please identify or describe assignments or activities used to incorporate concrete experiences for students in your sales courses.”*

From a comprehensive search of Kolb (2015; 1984) and other related research and practical applications from industry of EL (e.g., Bertoni and Bertoni, 2020; Deeter-Schmelz, 2015; Innocent, 2021; Jones, 2018; Kolb and Kolb, 2017) a representative sample of activities was identified that engage learners with each aspect of the ELT stages. Based on these representative sets of activities, four coders then independently identified the activities reported by the respondents as those utilized to incorporate each CE, RO, AC, and AE.

RESULTS

The survey captured each respondent’s use of role-play within the classroom and experience teaching sales courses (see Table 1). Just less than 50% of the respondents have been teaching sales courses for ten or more years, more than 90% of the respondents currently teach sales courses, about 50% utilize four or more role-play assignments in their classes, and all respondents use role-play assignments in their courses.

Table 1 – Respondent Information

Demographics	Total	Percentage
How Many Years teaching	Total	%
1-3	16	14.3%
4-7	22	21.0%
8-10	18	17.1%
More than 10	50	47.6%
Total	105	100.0%
Currently, Teach Sales Course	Total	%
No	7	6.7%
Yes	98	93.3%
Total	105	100.0%
Use Role Play Assignment	Total	%
No	0	0.0%
Yes	105	100.0%
Total	114	100.0%
# of Role Plays / class	Total	%
1	2	1.9%
2	23	21.9%
3	26	24.8%
4 or more	54	51.4%
Total	105	100.0%

Concrete Experience (CE). Ninety-six (91.4%) of the respondents (n=105) somewhat or strongly agreed that they incorporated CE (pre-class experience) into their role-play assignments (Table 2). Eighty-eight (83.8%) of respondents reported activities that captured the CE stage of EL and no respondents misidentified activities considered to be CE activities according to the extant industry and research literature (Table 3).

Table 2 – Survey Responses by Experiential Learning Activity

I feel I incorporate:	Total	%
Concrete Experience		
1 Strongly Disagree	4	3.8%
2 Somewhat Disagree	0	0.0%
3 Neither	5	4.8%
4 Somewhat Agree	30	28.6%
5 Strongly Agree	66	62.9%
Total	105	100.0%
Reflective Observation		
1 Strongly Disagree	3	2.9%
2 Somewhat Disagree	3	2.9%
3 Neither	10	9.5%
4 Somewhat Agree	39	37.1%
5 Strongly Agree	50	47.6%
Total	105	100.0%
Abstract Conceptualization		
1 Strongly Disagree	1	1.0%
2 Somewhat Disagree	2	1.9%
3 Neither	18	17.1%
4 Somewhat Agree	47	44.8%
5 Strongly Agree	37	35.2%
Total	105	100.0%
Active Experimentation		
1 Strongly Disagree	4	3.8%
2 Somewhat Disagree	0	0.0%
3 Neither	10	9.5%
4 Somewhat Agree	28	26.7%
5 Strongly Agree	63	60.0%
Total	105	100.0%

Table 3 – Coded Short Answer Responses by Experiential Learning Activity

	Teachers Incorporate	Total	%	# with misidentified EL activities	%
Concrete Experience	88	105	83.8%	0	0.00%
Reflective Observation	64	105	61.0%	17	16.2%
Abstract Conceptualization	30	105	28.6%	29	27.6%
Active Experimentation	17	105	16.2%	45	42.9%

Examples of responses accurately identified as Concrete Experience activities include:

1. *Salesperson job shadow, Salesperson interviews, Sales role-plays*
2. *Role-plays, sale rep interviews, guest speaker experiences*
3. *ProSales: Students sell to professionals playing the role of the buyers. SalesMgt: Students perform a job evaluation for a sales employee (played by me/instructor) using made-up qualitative and quantitative performance data from previous year. Students also complete a separate exercise with a key account who has experienced a major service failure and the sales manager needs to recover the account and negotiate an acceptable outcome with the buyer (played by a professional).*

Reflective Observation (RO). Eighty-nine (84.7%) of the instructors (n =105) felt that they somewhat or strongly agreed that they incorporate RO experiences (feelings/thoughts regarding the concrete encounter) into their role-play assignments (Table 2). Only sixty-four (61.0%) reported activities that capture the RO stage of EL (Table 3). Additionally, seventeen (16.2%) of the respondents misidentified activities that, according to extant research and industry literature, meet the definition of the RO stage of EL (Table 3).

Examples of responses accurately identified as Reflective Observation activities include:

1. *Weekend reflections every Sunday*
2. *Peer-to-peer feedback and instructor feedback.*
3. *Students write reflections based on their role-plays, and also participate in a debrief at the end of the semester at which point they reflect on the experience.*

Examples of responses misidentified as Reflective Observation activities include:

1. *I know it sounds cliché, but we do a “sell me this pen” role-play on day 1 (set up like a course pretest) to see whether students simply draw from their own experiences and assumptions or if they have the instincts to actually ask a prospect what they want/need.*

2. *Students do assignment with buyer/seller teams using Social Style where they focus on adapting their communications technique according to the buyers social style.*
3. *Students complete the CliftonStrengths assessment prior to role-playing. This allows them to draw on their natural talents when selling.*

Abstract Conceptualization. Eighty-four (80.0%) instructors (n =105) indicated that they somewhat or strongly agree that they incorporate abstract conceptualization (theory, readings, lecture for best practices) in their sales role-plays (Table 2). Based on the reported activities, thirty (28.6%) of the instructors incorporated AC activities per existing research and industry literature and twenty-nine (27.6%) misidentified AC-related activities (Table 3).

Examples of responses accurately identified as Abstract Conceptualization activities include:

1. *Students must plan and prepare for role-plays using tools and techniques provided by the instructor that help them bring in past concepts and theories into their current role-play.*
2. *Again, as students complete the different role-play components, they have to integrate topics covered in the text (e.g., questioning, gaining commitment, overcoming objections, financial discussion, etc.)*
3. *The course is designed to build each week to utilize new learnings/applications each 3-4 weeks. We have multi call role-plays to use data from RPI for RP2, etc. Topics around SPIN, precall planning, and negotiation are presented and discussed and then used in the assignment.*

Examples of responses misidentified as Abstract Conceptualization activities include:

1. *Using randomly selected objections helps students think. Also, using an activity where students have to “sell” various items helps them conceptualize how to identify needs.*
2. *In all assignments, students are required to use the selling process, the concepts of adaptive personalities, body language, ethical behavior, and much more. They have to think and then formulate a selling plan. Then each student presents in front of the class. Performance standards are very high.*

3. *I don't have specific exercises - however, I feel like the role-plays do this.*

Active Experimentation. Ninety-one (86.7%) of the instructors (n =105) perceived that they somewhat or strongly agreed that they incorporated AE (second experiential activity) (Table 2). However, only seventeen (16.2%) instructors reported assignment activities that would be considered AE-related activities according to the industry and research literature (Table 3). Based on appropriate activities from existing research and Kolb's (1984; 2015) descriptions of AE activities, forty-five (42.9%) misidentified AE activities they utilize (Table 3).

Examples of responses accurately identified as Active Experimentation activities include:

1. *Exercises where the students try different techniques for overcoming sales resistance / objections.*
2. *I have them choose and develop their own approach, rapport building, discovery questions, common objections and closing statements they'll attempt.*
3. *In the role-play exercises that are completed prior to their LIVE role-play they are practicing skill sets after being provided some instruction on what to do. I encourage creativity as they are developing their own unique approach and voice.*

Examples of responses misidentified as Active Experimentation activities include: (Note: AE can only occur after exposure to and engagement in Abstract Conceptualization – otherwise role-play is a Concrete Experience – experiential activity)

1. *There is a live sales assignment where they get to meet with customers and try to sell sales scholarships. This is true active experimentation - going even beyond role-playing to give them a real life experience. (note: this reflects a concrete experience)*
2. *As part of the role-play, students are required to anticipate objections around need and price. Then wildcard objections are surfaced during the call - for example, interrupting the student to say "I'm sorry. Why are you here again?" or "What happened to our previous rep? We really like her." (note: this reflects abstract conceptualization)*

3. *Video and review (note: this describes/reflects reflective observation)*

DISCUSSION

These findings reveal that all 105 respondents utilize at least one role-play assignment in their courses. More than 98% incorporate two or more role-play assignments. However, this study found that while faculty are attempting to do experiential activity via role-plays, their reporting suggests that most are not incorporating all four ELT stages espoused by Kolb (1984; 2015) in their class role-play assignments. In other words, they are doing an abbreviated experiential activity. This failure to find any instructors reporting activities consistent with each of the ELT stages may be due to a lack of understanding or misunderstanding of each of the stages. Therefore, we hold that while some or several instructors might be fully incorporating ELT in role-play assignments, the findings strongly suggest that the majority of sales instructors are not. At the least, this research suggests that many sales instructors do not have a complete understanding of how to fully incorporate the 4-stage ELT learning cycle.

Passarelli and Kolb (2021) propose that the integration of experienced-based activities alone does not adequately provide for the application of experiential learning theory. The findings of this research support Kolb's (2015) assertion that experiential learning is often misunderstood and misapplied to *any learning that involves activity*. Kolb and Kolb (2017) put forth that the failure to encompass all four modes of the learning cycle reduces the effectiveness of learning. This is further supported by Young et al.'s (2008) findings that learners fail to gain a "deeper" approach to learning when the Experiential Learning cycle is abbreviated. The completion of all stages of the EL cycle allows the transformation of experience to knowledge to occur (Kolb 2015) and at a deeper more meaningful level (Young et al., 2008).

In order to assist sales faculty in the implementation of ELT across all four stages, the following will provide more specific definitions of each stage of ELT and then offer suggestions for a fuller treatment of each of the ELT stages in sales role-play assignments.

Implementing ELT Role-plays in Sales Curriculum

Implementation of Kolb's 4-stage learning cycle requires cycling through Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE) (Passarelli and Kolb, 2021). These are described as "adaptive learning modes" (Kolb, 2015). To better understand and incorporate the kinds of activities in which students might engage to experience each of the learning modes, a brief review and summary of what each mode/stage represents will follow. Therefore, table 4 below provides a representative summary of activities associated with a given ELT learning stage.

Table 4 – Representative ELT activities by Learning Stage for Sales Roleplay Assignments

Concrete Experience	Reflective Observation	Abstract Conceptualization	Active Experimentation
Description: Initial Activities or experiences students recall or engage in prior to exposure in class to sales theory, concepts, and/or techniques	Description: In or outside of class activities or assignments that require students to think about or reflect on their feelings and thoughts about the initial concrete experience. Occurs after the concrete experience	Description: Student exposure to theory, concepts, methods, and techniques from readings, instructor guidance, lectures, and student consideration of best approaches and practices	Description: A second (at a minimum) experiential activity that follows instruction and readings, that allows students to incorporate and experiment with ideas, concepts, and methods gained from RO and AC
Example Activities: Initial Individual Sales Roleplay Watch Sales Roleplay Video Recall Sales Experience Sales Case Studies	Example Activities: Directed Writing or Reflection Class/Small Group Discussion Self-Assessments Peer Assessments	Example Activities: Lectures and Readings Discussions and Readings Concept Maps Pre-Call Planning and Action Plans Sales Shadow Paper	Example Activities: Stage Roleplay (e.g., "approach") Combination Stage Roleplay (e.g., "needs id" and "approach") Full Roleplay

Incorporating Concrete Experience in Sales Role-plays

Concrete experiences (CE), are "grasping experiences." Concrete experiences, by necessity, are created or recalled experiences at the beginning of the learning cycle (Kolb 1984; 2015). CE and AE activities are very similar. However, there is a distinct difference. CE are "new or reimagined versions" of experience (Kolb, 2015). These experiences are accompanied by presuppositions of the experience upon which current knowledge and understanding are founded (Gray, 2007).

CE can be defined as an immediate personal experience (experiencing) gained through sensory perceptions

that is the focal point of learning that allows one to validate and test abstract concepts and should be designed to motivate, engage, and evoke an affective (feeling) aspect regarding the experience (Kolb 2015; Young et al., 2008). CE may be generated by exercises, simulations, in-class demonstrations, lectures with anecdotes, videos, discussions of past experiences, current news articles, business games, cases, and role-play (Kolb and Kolb 2017; Young et al. 2008). The scope of this research is specific to sales role-play, which is the topic for which practical suggestions will be provided. The majority (83.8%) of respondents in this study reported activities appropriately capturing CE and no respondents misidentified CE activities.

Practical Suggestions: Kolb (2015) states that an educator's role is to depose or modify old ideas/beliefs (stereotypes) and implant new ideas. The stereotypical view of sales as manipulative, dishonest, and self-serving is pervasive in society and is typical of the view of students enrolled in sales courses perhaps for the first time (Karakaya et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2007). ELT emphasizes the importance of learning objectives associated with effective EL and, therefore, any CE should be introduced in the first class or at least prior to introducing sales concepts. While utilization of sales cases in which the students are not personally involved may create a CE, Young et al. (2008) suggest the experience should be personally relevant to the students. Students engaging in role-play or recalling a personal experience can provide a more relevant experience to evoke an affective response. Each of the below suggested approaches to creating a CE should come prior to the introduction of sales concepts or instruction regarding sales theories and methodologies to align with the ELT notion that the CE is the initial experience upon which the other stages build. Please also note that this is not a comprehensive list of activities but may be utilized to create a CE.

Individual Sales Role-play - Sales instructors may have students (in groups or in front of the class) engage in a brief sales role-play (selling a pen or a more elaborate sales role-play case).

Watch sales role-play video – Have students watch a video sales role-play or a video of a real sales call.

Recall sales experience - Have students recall an experience where they were involved in some type of sales interaction with a salesperson (clothing, automobile, computer, apartment, etc....). This may also include experiences where the student was selling or attempting to persuade someone. These are excellent examples to recall as they may reflect on how they felt, how the experience unfolded, and the outcomes of the interactions.

Sales Case Studies - Case studies regarding sales interactions may be used, but it is important to identify cases to which students can relate in their own personal lives. Most appropriate for undergraduate students with little business experience would be

cases that involve retail sales interactions. Based on the experience of the students, business-to-business sales cases can also be utilized.

Incorporating Reflective Observation (RO) in Sales Role-plays

Reflective Observation (RO) is knowledge “transformation” and is a careful, objective observation (reflecting) from a variety of perspectives that helps the learner to separate the experience into facets that can be integrated (transformation) with other experiences and used within other stages of learning (Young, 2002). RO may take the form of personal journaling, directed writing, structured class discussions in groups or the entire class depending on class size, peer learning, and self-assessment techniques (Hatcher and Bringle 2000; Lastner et al. 2021; Young, 2002; Young et al., 2008). For example, Deeter-Schmelz (2015) recommended using “reflection papers” in a sales management class assignment.

While much of the research and the findings in this area reveal that many programs and instructors claim to engage in experiential learning, reflection is often missing from their learning approaches (Snow et al., 2019). Lastner et al. (2021), Chapman et al. (2021), and Torres and Rawal (2021) are a few researchers that focused on parsing out the experiential learning stages and sales role-play and found peer learning or coaching to be effective in promoting learning. A small majority (61%) of instructors from this study utilize activities that capture RO. However, 16.2% of the respondents misidentified activities associated with RO. Please also note that this is not a comprehensive list of activities but may be utilized to create a RO.

Practical Suggestions: RO can be effectively incorporated several times during the course where sales role-play is assigned. Immediately following the first CE students may be directed to consider or reflect on the case, role-play, or role-play video. As ELT emphasizes the importance that learning objectives be associated with learning activities, instructors may guide or direct students. For example, if the objective of the exercise (CE) is to dispel the sales stereotype, students may be guided to consider the differences they noticed in the video or case with what they have

experienced from salespeople with whom they have interacted in the past. If the objective of the CE is to teach a more effective skill, such as an approach for a sales interaction, the instructor may direct students to reflect on the effectiveness of the approach they used in selling a pen or that was used by the salesperson in the case or sales role-play video.

Directed writing/reflection – have students individually write a short paragraph or two during class or a longer paper (one to two pages) to hand in the following class.

Class/small group discussion – have the entire class or assign groups of three or more students to discuss and reflect on the CE together. Have each group report their conclusions to the class.

Self-assessment – have individual students evaluate their own role-play specific to the skill being taught or the entire role-play and turn it in. This may be done for each role-play, but each role-play conducted after the initial CE, RO, and Abstract Conceptualization is, by definition, Active Experimentation (and will be discussed in more detail following).

Peer assessment – instructors may have students evaluate their classmates' role-plays or other role-play and turn it in as an assignment. Instructors should provide this feedback to the students being evaluated.

Incorporating Abstract Conceptualization

Abstract Conceptualization (AC) is the "...manipulating of concepts and images to go beyond present knowledge to invent and chose new actions. This integration is a creative and active, rather than a reflective process" (Kolb 2015, p 90). This allows learners to discard previously held positions and beliefs that are found to be inaccurate or less effective (Zull, 2011). AC is a form of "grasping" the CE and "thinking" about and drawing conclusions. AC also takes the reflective process a step further by focusing on assimilating the reflections into concepts that allow learners "to choose, plan, problem solve and make decisions to accomplish a goal" (Kolb and Kolb, 2017). "Learners broaden their learning by integrating theories and concepts into the process" (Young et al., 2008 p. 30).

Many respondents (80%) reported engaging in AC, but based on the reported activities, only 28.6% incorporated AC activities. In addition, 27.6% misidentified AC related activities. Though not determined in this research, we suspect that most, if not all, instructors utilize sales textbooks or other sales-related texts that introduce theory and sales concepts. Students incorporating sales concepts in sales role-plays after an initial role-play (CE) are highly likely to signal AC has occurred at some point. However, if students are heavily relying on "scripts" or memorized roles, they have engaged in shallow or superficial learning and are not necessarily engaged in AC, at least at a "deep" level.

Educators rotate through various roles as students progress through the learning cycle. At times, educators are facilitators, subject experts, standard setters and evaluators, and coaches (Kolb and Kolb, 2017). It is beyond the scope of this research to fully explicate educator roles, but to understand the application of AC, a surface understanding of a select few is useful. In this stage, instructors operate as subject experts, standard setters, and evaluators to help students understand and apply knowledge (Kolb and Kolb, 2017). These should be self-explanatory in the context of AC as instructors introduce sales models and concepts to sales students.

Activities that allow students to understand the patterns and structure of the CE and further choose, plan, problem solve, or make decisions to accomplish sales goals during a given sales call or role-play would be more effective in incorporating AC. Activities related to AC may include readings, discussions, lectures, guest speakers, concept maps, action plans, pre-call planning, and sales shadow papers. To be most effective, these separate activities should be tied to the feelings or emotions of the CE.

Practical Suggestions: Various sales approaches, models, or methods are widely promoted by the sales training community and utilized by industry. Sales academes' approach to instruction, in most cases, is or should be based on well-documented theory, models, and empirical research if we are to continue to "professionalize" the sales profession and overcome the stereotypical approach and view of salespeople generally.

Lectures and readings – when lecturing, instructors introduce sales models specific to application in sales calls and sales role-play and should relate these concepts to the CE introduced at the beginning of the course. Specifically, instructors should draw on the reflections and emotional connections to the CE, and further discuss the relationship of the effectiveness of the original CE compared to the use of the models and concepts from the lecture, texts, and other readings.

Discussions and readings – at the beginning of class, assign students to groups to discuss the models and approaches introduced in the readings, specifically guiding them to compare those approaches to what they experienced in the CE. Ask them to brainstorm about why one or the other may be more effective and to develop their own models or approaches as a group to discuss with the entire class. To incorporate the affective aspect of the CE, instructors may ask the question, “How do you feel about the approach used by the salesperson selling to you? “How much do you feel the salesperson cares about the buyer?” When a consultative approach is introduced in the readings the instructor may also ask the follow-up question, “How much do you feel the salesperson cares about the buyer when the salesperson tries to find out the needs of the buyer before attempting to sell?” This may evolve into a debate as to the most effective approach, and as the “subject expert,” it is the instructor’s role to guide the debate and discussion. The group discussions may also occur after the instructor delivers the lecture.

Concept maps – Young et al. (2002) introduce a concept map for principles of marketing, which utilizes marketing concepts and provides a more detailed treatment of concept mapping than space is allowed in this study but is a good guide for sales instructors.

After the sales call process has been introduced, the instructor guides the class through drawing an initial concept map on the whiteboard. The concepts, terms, information, and decisions to be made during the sales call (or role-play) are student-generated based on the textbook and readings. The instructor may provide an initial example of a concept map to assist students in concept map development. For example, the concept of “approach” might draw on “verbal and nonverbal communication skills,” “buyer communication styles,”

“trust development,” “qualifying,” and “emotional intelligence” concepts. As explained by Young et al. (2002), the concept map is like planning a trip. Travelers need to know their objective or destination before beginning the trip. Concept mapping is also analogous to a sports team preparing for a game. Teams will determine the resources needed and contingencies based on the reactions and responses of their opponent.

Asking the class to consider the information and skills needed to accomplish the established goals in each stage of the sales call helps explain and initiate the concept map. Again, guiding students to utilize the concepts, terms, knowledge, and skills directs them to form effective conceptualization of best practices in the sales call.

Pre-call planning and action plans – like concept mapping, developing pre-call plans may be accomplished individually or in groups and may be completed with in-class or outside class assignments. Directing students to justify each aspect of their plan in light of the course concepts and utilizing course terminology will guide them to more carefully consider and conceptualize the ideas represented by the models and theories.

Sales Shadow Paper – students may be assigned to shadow salespeople from companies that partner with their sales program, or they may be allowed to choose a salesperson to shadow from an industry in which they may have an interest in pursuing a career. Students should be instructed to provide a full description of the salesperson’s process and encourage them to recall the CE and their reflective observations about the CE. The assignment should require students to specifically incorporate the concepts, terminology, and knowledge introduced in course readings in their description of the salesperson’s process and make critiques of the process based upon course concepts and readings.

Incorporating Active Experimentation in Sales Role-plays

Sales Role-play Active Experimentation: “Action closes the learning cycle and reconnects the processing inside the brain with the world. It generates consequences that create new experiences that begin the cycle anew” (Kolb

and Kolb, 2017, p. 10). Concrete experience (initial sales case, experience recall, or sales role-play), reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization provide the foundation for testing and applying concepts in the external environment and new circumstances (Young 2002; Young et al. 2008). While learners will and can engage in the learning cycle at any point (Young et al., 2002), AE activities by necessity follow CE experiences which are the "...the basis for the learning process..." (Young et al., 2002, p. 43).

Most respondents (86.7%) perceived that they incorporated AE. However, only 17 (16.2%) instructors fully articulated assignment activities that would be considered AE-related activities according to the extant research on EL. Also, 42.9% misidentified AE activities primarily because they reported all role-play activities as AE. The conclusion of this research is that sales instructors do not distinguish or fully comprehend the difference between CE and AE. According to Kolb (2015), CE begins the learning cycle and is the basis of subsequent stages of the learning process. Admittedly, all course-assigned role-play could certainly be considered AE if the CE involved only viewing role-play videos, recalling sales experiences, or sales case reviews.

Activities that would be considered AE are required to be action-oriented and, in the context and scope of this research, would involve some form of role-play. These could include role-playing individually each of the stages of a sales call, role-playing a combination of a sales call, or role-playing an entire sales call.

Practical Suggestions: Utilizing role-play as the CE may be most effective in eliciting the affective response suggested as important to ELT and deep learning. Learners who are required to focus on the purpose and meaning of concepts learn at a deep level and acquire the ability to understand and more effectively apply the information learned (Young et al., 2008).

Rote memorization and the use of scripts, while helpful in acquiring the ability to recall information and reproduce that information, represents a "surface" learning approach that fails to grasp concepts or produce a deeper level of understanding required for effective application of the concepts (Young et al., 2008). When engaging in AE role-play, students should

not rely on scripts. During each of the previous stages of EL, students have experienced or seen a sales call or role-play, reflected on that experience, conceptualized various models, and considered effective approaches to a sales call and a sales call role-play. Further, they may have mapped and modeled aspects of the sales call and been encouraged to develop notes or bullet points to guide them through the role-play. It has been the anecdotal experience of the authors that students relying on scripts for role-play assignments perform poorly and are easily shaken by variation of the role-play from the "expected" which is supported by Young et al.'s (2008) findings regarding "surface" approach learning versus "deep" learning.

Role-plays may be conducted for each of the sales call stages individually (approach, needs establishment, solution presentation, gaining commitment/close, and handling objections). AE role-play may be an in-class or out-of-class assignment. Assign students to groups of three and ask them to first discuss the specific stage or combination of stages (e.g., approach and needs establishment) in relation to course concepts and develop ideas regarding the most effective techniques for each stage. Deeter-Schmelz et al. (2020) suggest approaching role-play practice in stages or bite sizes and building on each previous stage of the role-play. One student should be asked to participate as the salesperson, and one is required to be the buyer. The third student should be the observer. The initial CE and circumstances about the CE can be used for the AE sales role-play. Students should be directed to refer to the CE that evokes the affective aspect of the experience. However, new sales cases may be used, but with direction to consider the initial CE. The emotional aspects of learning are as important as the mechanistic aspects (Zull, 2011).

Following each AE role-play, the student participating as the salesperson should discuss the use of the course concepts with the other two students and where the salesperson student might improve their skills. The buyer student and the observer student, in turn, should provide insights related to the skills exhibited and utilized based on the course concepts. Each student may then repeat the role-play or parts of the role-play experimenting and adjusting their approach and testing

new ways to perform the stage or entire role-play more effectively. The students should then rotate their roles as seller, buyer, and observer and repeat the process.

CONCLUSIONS

This research provided a brief overview of experiential learning theory (ELT) and explored the extent to which university sales instructors were attempting to incorporate each of the four stages of ELT. Further, we put forth practical suggestions for incorporating each of the four ELT stages of Concrete Experiences, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation in university sales role-play assignments.

Utilizing all four stages of experiential learning engenders a “deeper” approach to long-term learning while the use of abbreviated EL cycles only achieves short-term learning outcomes (Young et al., 2008). This research reveals that the majority of university sales instructors use only an abbreviated EL approach to course sales role-play assignments. While the efforts of the university sales community to improve the credibility of the sales profession and the preparedness of university graduates wishing to pursue a sales career have had great success (Bristow et al., 2019; Inks and Avila, 2018; Sales Education Foundation, 2014), the argument put forth in this research is that sales instructors can further improve university sales education by incorporating all four stages of ELT in sales role-play assignments.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Researchers should continue to explore avenues for improving sales education and especially sales role-play assignments. Anecdotal evidence indicates that sales role-play exercises are effective in improving sales performance. Graduates from university sales programs have markedly better ramp-up and turnover rates than graduates from universities with no sales programs (Sales Education Foundation, 2014). However, research has not empirically established the contributing factors to this success and without that knowledge, sales educators are left to utilize trial and error for curriculum improvement or anecdotal evidence from industry. Surprisingly, many in industry also use trial and error

to improve salesforces performance. What is the statistical significance of the use of sales role-play in sales performance? Anecdotally, industry indicates that an individual’s desire to pursue a sales career improves ramp-up and turnover rates. An analysis of those factors that significantly contribute to turnover and ramp-up times for college graduates should be undertaken.

Research needs to be pursued to validate the effectiveness of the comprehensive use of each of the four ELT stages in sales role-play assignments. In addition, comparative studies could look at the effectiveness of using the full ELT learning cycle versus the use of an abbreviated ELT learning cycle in role-play assignments. The “deep” learning espoused by Young et al. (2008) should be explored by examining the longer-term effects of utilizing the full ELT cycle in sales courses by examining graduates of university sales programs and their adherence to or use of concepts, skills, and methods learned at the “deeper” level in the university sales classes. A study of students who matriculate through lower-level sales courses that engage the full ELT cycle in sales role-play assignments can be examined to determine their effectiveness in role-play assignments in upper-level sales courses and perhaps intra- and intercollegiate sales role-play competitions. Finally, future studies could investigate what activities are most effective in creating “concrete experiences,” and those that best promote “reflective observation,” “abstract conceptualization,” and “active experimentation.”

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