

The Integrative Processing Model

Pamela M. Kiser, Professor of Human Services Studies
Elon University

The Integrative Processing Model offers a tool to enhance student learning in experiential education. This model is a step-by-step method of learning from experience which guides students to think through their experiences carefully and systematically. The Integrative Processing Model is a six-step, cyclic process. Each step of the model is described briefly below:

Step 1: Gathering Objective Data from the Concrete Experience

In experiential education, learning begins with a specific, discrete experience. This experience may be one in which the student is an active participant or an observer. The experience yields information which, in subsequent steps of the model, becomes the focus for reflection and application of knowledge. While in the experience, as well as after the fact, students glean information about the situation and events as well as about the behaviors and actions of the various participants. The student's ability to be an objective observer of experience is developed through this step of the learning process as the student identifies the salient points from the experience itself.

Step 2: Reflecting

In Step 2, Reflecting, students assess their own personal reactions to the experience. In doing so, students ask such questions as, "How does this situation touch upon my own values? How does it relate to my personal history? What emotions and thoughts does this experience trigger in me? What assumptions am I making about the people involved in this situation? About myself? About the situation itself? How do I evaluate my own effectiveness in this experience? What behaviors (verbal and non-verbal) enhanced or diminished my effectiveness?"

Step 3: Identifying Relevant Knowledge

The information recorded in Step 1 may constitute only a set of meaningless, disjointed facts and observations if examined outside the context of relevant theory and knowledge. Students in Step 3 identify theoretical, conceptual, and/or factual information which can shed light on these facts. While previous classroom learning probably forms the foundation for this process, students might also need to engage in more extensive reading and research to expand their knowledge and to develop greater understanding of their experiences.

Against the backdrop of relevant knowledge, certain information identified in Step 1 rises to the foreground of attention, while other information becomes relatively less significant. Some facts may begin to cluster together, bearing some relationship to one another, forming a more cohesive picture, pattern, or theme. The application of knowledge (whether theoretical, conceptual, or factual) provides an organizing focus, a lens through which the student views and makes sense of experience. To use another analogy, knowledge provides a road map of sorts which helps the student identify his/her current location and develop ideas about what route to take next. In this step, students begin to learn the real value and power of knowledge as it can inform and direct their work as well as lend them a growing sense of confidence and competence.

Step 4: Examining Dissonance

Having examined the experience itself, relevant knowledge, and personal reactions, students are now in a position to explore points of dissonance in the situation. Dissonance may be defined as a lack of harmony, consistency, or agreement. Dissonance can exist on a number of levels. Intellectual dissonance might be present as competing theories offer divergent point of view (Step 2) or as conflicting data arise out of the concrete experience (Step 1). Students also might experience dissonance between the exposed theories of the profession and their own personal views. As the student examines dissonance, questions such as the following are raised:

- What, if anything, do I feel uncomfortable about in this situation?
- What disagreement is there between what I “should” do and what I “want” to do?
- What mismatch is there between what I “should” do and what I “must” do?
- What conflict is there between competing “shoulds” in the situation?
- What disagreement is there between my personal views of the situation and views offered by the theories and knowledge of the profession?
- What conflicts is there between what I “know” and what I “do”?

As various points of dissonance are examined and pondered, important questions may be:

- Can this point of dissonance be reconciled? If so, how? If not, why not?
- If this dissonance cannot be reconciled, how can I manage to live within it?

Step 5: Articulating Learning

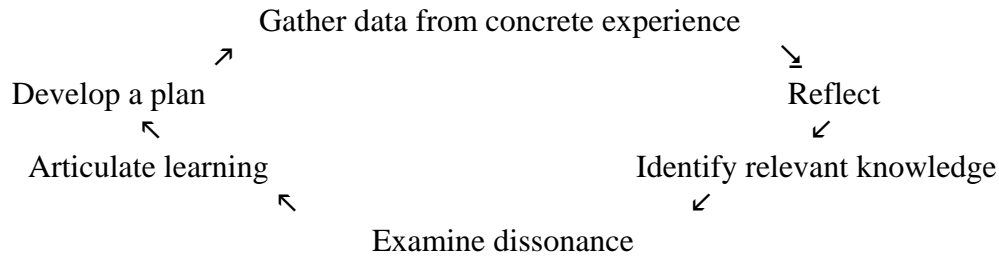
Students often report with excitement that they are learning “so much” from their field experience but when asked specifically what they have learned, they all too often fall silent. This scenario perhaps reflects the fact that, although they might indeed have learned a great deal, they have not thought carefully enough about this learning to be able to put it into words. Step 5, Articulating Learning, requires students to put their learning into words. Using words to explain and describe their learning pushes students to conceptualize that learning. What had perhaps been a dim awareness becomes clarified into a coherent statement through the written word. Having constructed this statement, students more clearly “possess” the knowledge, having greater command over it as a tangible, concrete, lasting entity which can be retrieved and used as needed.

The guiding question in this step of the model is straightforward, “What are the major lessons which I can take from the experience?” The lessons learned may have to do with skills developed, knowledge gained, insights developed into self or others, or deeper understanding acquired of an ethical principle. Whatever the lessons, students should be encouraged to approach this step of the process with the appreciation that all knowledge is tentative. The articulated lessons are not fixed and immutable; rather, students take these lessons and test them in subsequent experience.

Step 6: Developing a Plan

The final step, Developing a Plan, is a two-pronged step of the process in that it calls upon students to think through 1) how to proceed in their work and 2) how to proceed in their own learning. Students are now ready to make an informed choice as to how to proceed in their work. As students implement their plans the learning cycle re-enters Step 1, and the process is repeated.

The Integrative Processing Model



Step 1: Gathering Objective Data from the Concrete Experience

Describe the experience, focusing on such issues as:

- What did I observe in this experience?
- What were the key events and features of this experience?
- What did I observe about the physical surroundings?
- What did I observe about my behavior and actions? Those of others?

Step 2: Reflecting

React on a more personal level to the experience, focusing on such issues as:

- How does this situation touch upon my own values?
- How does it relate to my personal history?
- What emotions and thoughts does this experience trigger in me?
- What assumptions am I making about this situation?
- What assumptions am I making about the people involved in this experience, including myself?
- What does this experience point out to me about my own attitudes, biases, or preferences?
- How do I evaluate my own effectiveness in this experience?
- What behaviors (both verbal and non-verbal) enhanced or diminished my effectiveness?

Step 3: Identifying Relevant Knowledge

Examine academic knowledge which might be applicable to the experience, focusing on such questions:

- What course work or reading have I done that is relevant to this experience?
- What principles, concepts, theories, skills, or information have I learned which relate to this experience?
- How does this experience relate to what I have learned elsewhere?
- How is the experience consistent with my academic knowledge?
- How does the experience contradict or challenge my academic knowledge?
- How does my academic knowledge help me to organize, understand, make sense of, or develop hypotheses about this experience?

Step 4: Examining and Reconciling Dissonance

Examine more closely points of discomfort, disagreement, or inconsistency in the experience. As you reflect on points of dissonance in your experience, also explore ways in which this dissonance might be reconciled. At times, however, you will find that dissonance cannot be resolved. Learning to live within ambiguity, conflicting tensions, and paradox is sometimes required. Focus on such issues as:

- What, if anything, do I feel uncomfortable about in this situation?
- What conflicting information do I have?
- How does this experience contradict my previous assumptions or learning?
- What conflicting thought and feelings do I have about this experience?
- What disagreement is there between what I think I “should” think or feel and what I do think or feel?
- What conflict is there between competing “should” in the situation?
- What disagreement is there between my personal views and assumptions about the situation and the ideas put forth by the “experts” in the field?
- What conflict is there between what I “know” and what I “do”?
- Between what I “should” do and what I “want” to do?
- Between what I “should” do and what I “must” do?

Step 5: Articulating Learning:

Remembering that learning is tentative and need testing in subsequent experience, respond to such questions as:

- What are the major lessons I learned from this experience?
- What did I learn about myself? About others? About the world around me?
- What knowledge, wisdom, or insights did I gain?
- What skills did I acquire?

Step 6: Developing a Plan

Consider the question, “Where do I go from here both in my work and in my learning?” This line of thought calls upon you to respond to such questions as:

- Based upon what I have learned, how might I modify my own approach, methods, or behavior as I encounter similar experiences in the future?
- What alternative directions might I take as I proceed in my work?
- What are the likely consequences of each alternative?
- What alternative(s) seem to me to be most favorable?
- How should I proceed in my learning?
- What gaps do I recognize in my knowledge and/or skills related to this experience?

- Consequently, how will I fill these gaps?