

The Theory that supports our work

A short introduction to our theoretical framework

'What we learn to do, we learn by doing' (Aristotle, 384-322 BC)

Here we provide a short summary of key academic theories that inform our work. Learning through simulation provides an immersive encounter where insights are gained through experience and in which learners can reflect, analyse and adjust their own behavior to successfully influence the outcome. New skills are acquired in a high challenge, low risk environment.

We'll look at examples of theory from three levels, from a 'big picture' overview of learning theory, through to a medium perspective of experiential learning ending on a 'close up' of one aspect of our work with a focus on interpersonal awareness and emotional intelligence.

The Big Picture: How we learn

Learning is both a psychological and a social process. The theory of **Constructivism** aims to explain the internal psychological aspects of how we as adults learn. It identifies how learning happens in two ways. It is either constructed through *assimilation* of new experiences that fit a learner's existing cognitive structures or through *accommodation* when the learner must adapt their thought processes when they encounter unexpected situations.

Social Constructivism develops this theory by emphasising the importance of the social context of learning. At its most straightforward this means learning happens most successfully when a facilitator provides a 'scaffold' for learning which is then withdrawn to promote independence. Simply put, the theory tells us that old fashioned passive 'chalk and talk' teaching methods are far less effective than when the learner is actively central to the process, as they are, for example, in facilitated role-play.

Methodology

Knowledge of theories of effective leadership and communication are of little use if the learner lacks the skills required to exercise them in the real world. For this reason, **Experiential learning** lies at the heart of our practice, where we can weave between theory and practice on demand. The structure of our methodology is supported most notably by Kolb's work that demonstrates that we 'learn by doing'. He provides the notion that understanding is not fixed, but that it evolves through experience. Kolb identifies four stages of experiential learning, which are:

- Concrete experience
- Reflective observation
- Abstract conceptualization
- Active experimentation

For learning to be effectively assimilated, all four stages of the process must be worked through. A flexible learner-centred approach is necessary; to account for an individual's preferred learning style and existing knowledge. Kolb's model provides a framework for our experiential work and with the addition of experienced trainers, facilitators and our skilled actors who are able to generate credible characters, it provides for a powerful learning encounter with long-lasting impact.

A key problem with any learning is to what extent the newly acquired knowledge and skills transfer to improved performance in the real world. Human beings and challenging social contexts are too complex to guarantee the outcome of any learning. That said, we can however increase the odds of success by placing the learner at the centre of the learning encounter and flexing to meet the unique needs of each individual we work with. The high fidelity and credibility of our simulations further closes the gap between the simulation and the real.

This process aims to build a high degree of confidence in the skills under review, an approach underpinned by Bandura's theories of **Self Efficacy**. This central and influential theory places an individual's confidence (or 'self efficacy') in their own abilities as key to the achievement of tasks and goals. His ideas are less concerned with an individual's skills, but more with their confidence as the key component to their successful execution. Bandura identifies four steps for building self-efficacy that can be worked through as a cycle and repeated:

- Rehearsal
- Incremental challenge
- Reflection
- Vicarious learning

We weave Bandura's methods for building self-efficacy into our work, thereby ensuring that delegates have the confidence to succeed in the real world, outside the supportive atmosphere of the training room.

Close up on practice

Expert facilitation supports 'eureka' moments and the conditions for learners to gain new insights. Luft and Ingham provide a graphical model of **interpersonal awareness** that identifies how we all have 'blind spots' which we are unaware of. Various tools for psychometric profiling such as Myers-Briggs, SDI, Insights, and 360 reviews can identify these theoretically; role-play can identify them through the concrete experience of the interaction. The structured feedback generated from the evidence of a role-play can provide a powerful stimulus for behavior change and help people to explore the way in which they work, potentially breaking limiting patterns of behavior, building emotional intelligence and awaken people to new possibilities without jeopardy.

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