



## DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY – TIME TO MOVE BEYOND KOLB?

A fundamental part of coaching – for coach and client – is reflection. But are the most tried and tested reflective models fit for purpose in today's reeling, volatile world? Perhaps not, argues **Mike Ryder** – and makes the case for looking elsewhere.

Readers of *Coaching Perspectives* will be well familiar with the concept of 'reflective practice' – the idea that by reflecting on events, we can become better at what we do. Whether that be to become better students, teachers, workers or leaders, if we can only reflect better, so we can improve ourselves to become the best we can be.

But there's a problem.

Many of our most popular theories of reflective practice are not really fit for the modern world. They assume that events occur in isolation, and that reflection happens in a logical, structured way, often only after the event has occurred.

This is a major problem for us as educators and coaches. After all, the world is full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). How then do we adapt our models to meet the challenges of an uncertain and changeable world?

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In my view, it's time to drop Kolb, Gibbs, Driscoll and co, and turn our attention to other ways of thinking about learning instead.

## REASSESSING KOLB

The idea of 'reflective practice' has been around for many years, starting with Dewey and his work on reflective thinking in education.<sup>1</sup> However, it wasn't until the 1980s that the concept gained traction, with the works of Schön<sup>2</sup> and Kolb<sup>3</sup> among the two most prominent theories to arise in the period. These were then followed by a whole host of theories from the likes of Gibbs<sup>4</sup>, Driscoll<sup>5</sup>, Rolfe et al.<sup>6</sup>, and Jasper<sup>7</sup> – works that are all still actively taught in universities and used by leadership coaches across the globe.

Of all the many theories of reflective practice, the most famous is arguably Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle<sup>8</sup>. Even if you haven't used it in your own practice, you will most likely have encountered it at some point in your career, with its four simple and easy to remember stages that link concrete experience with observations and reflections, the formation of abstract concepts, and the testing of concepts in new situations.

While Kolb's theory certainly makes some sort of intuitive sense, I would argue that it is far too simplistic for our modern world. Firstly, it implies a certain linearity – that each event and action is related to the last. It also fails to include the role of external factors in shaping what happens, how we observe it, how we reflect on it, and how we take action. As such, Kolb's theory only really works in abstract isolation, and doesn't hold up to scrutiny in the face of a complex, uncertain and volatile world. It also risks instilling habits that favour hubris – the idea that 'Well, it worked before so why shouldn't it work again?' – a notion that all business leaders should be mindful of.

Kolb's isn't the only theory that suffers from these problems, and I talk about these in a recent paper published with my colleague Dr Carolyn Downs.<sup>9</sup> So, what's the alternative?

## INTRODUCING THE OODA LOOP

You may not have heard of Colonel John Boyd (1927–1997), and yet he is among the most important military strategists of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup>

His most important work, the OODA loop, is a means of understanding the world and the process of information feedback.<sup>11</sup> While the theory was initially devised to explain the decision-making process of fighter pilots, it can be applied far more broadly to think about teaching, learning and reflective practice.

At first glance, the OODA loop is a very simple concept. Its letters stand for: Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. However, it is far more nuanced than the acronym suggests (see Figure 1). This is because **Orientation** rests at the heart of the OODA loop, and exerts implicit guidance and control over Observation and Action, with feedback loops built into the OODA loop at every stage.

This is important as it puts the practitioner at the centre of the reflective process. This means that we cannot properly reflect until we first consider the context of our own situation. This includes our previous experiences, our cultural traditions and even our genetic heritage. New information that we learn further informs this process and has an impact on how we observe events, what we decide to do, and how we act.

In this way the OODA loop is a significant advance on the likes of Kolb, Gibbs, Driscoll and Jasper.

This is because it is a loop that never ends, with user Orientation shaped by, and shaping, interactions with the environment. Quite simply: it is an adaptive model that changes as the world around it changes too.

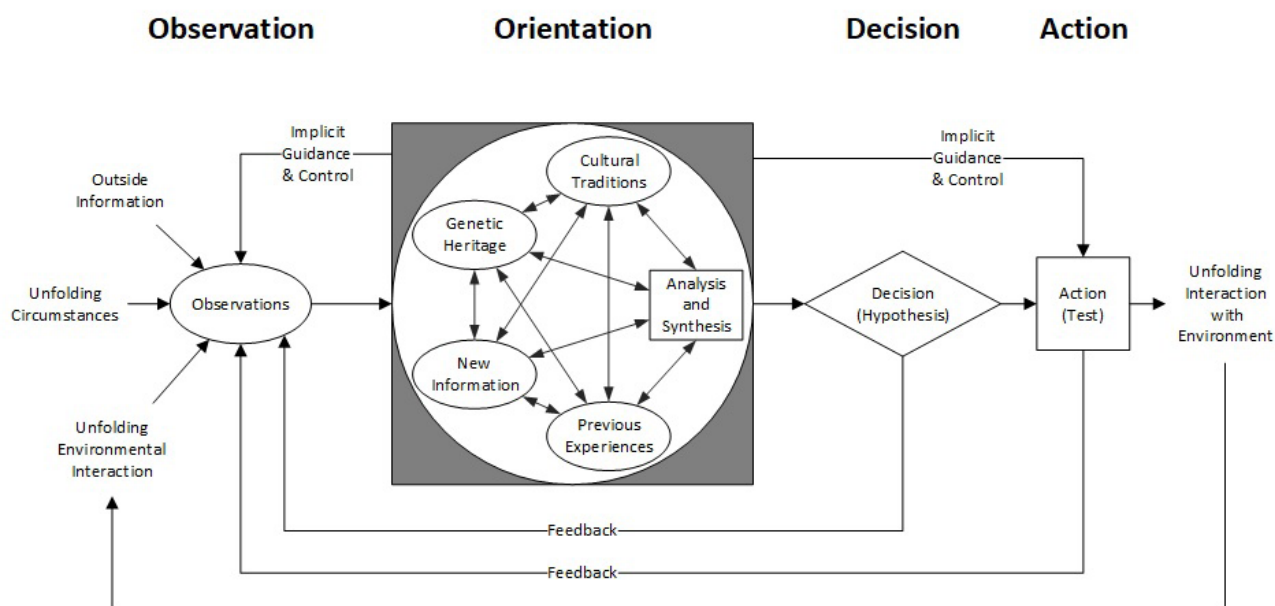


Figure 1: John Boyd's OODA loop, based on a sketch made in 'The Essence of Winning and Losing', a briefing made to members of the military in 1995 and 1996.



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## WHAT OODA IS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Change is at the heart of the OODA loop concept. However, it does come with a warning.

The danger is to oversimplify OODA and take the four stages in isolation, without the broader context around the feedback loops and the critical role of Orientation.

For Boyd, success is not to be found in simply completing the OODA loop faster than an opponent. Rather, it is in the ability to understand one's own Orientation and Observations to such a degree that one can respond much more quickly and in a more effective way.

Speed is a result of good practice: it is not a goal in and of itself.

## IMPORTANT LESSONS FOR COACHING AND LEADERSHIP

Boyd's philosophy has many implications for business coaching. The most important, perhaps, is the need to put the individual at the heart of any form of reflection. Rather than think of an event as simply 'something that happened', we can first seek to understand ourselves and our position relative to the event.

After all, anyone reading this article will experience the world in a completely different way to myself. We were all born to different parents, grew up in different places and have different experiences of education. We have different tastes, different interests, different personalities and so on. Before we can think critically about our relationship with the world then, first we need to think critically about ourselves. In other words: who we are, where we come from, what makes us 'tick'.

In my own teaching, I encourage students to map out some of the many things that shape who they are and why they see the world a certain way. I then give them exercises to help them think about how these factors might shape the way they respond to certain scenarios. This helps them to get a sense of how their own personal Orientation shapes the way they perceive events and how they respond in turn. They can then use this lesson to support their ongoing reflections.

To help them with this, I draw on examples from my own experience. For example, when I present at academic conferences, I often suffer from imposter syndrome – far more than I do when stood in front of a class of students. On reflection, I have discovered that this partly stems from my working-class background, and my own feeling of insecurity when faced with a room full of middle-class academics.

While I cannot change where I came from, I can at least recognise where this feeling comes from and so make real and significant changes to the way I respond to the event. By better understanding my own context – my 'Orientation' – I am better able to reflect on my interactions and respond in a more positive way.

This is the most important lesson from Boyd:

***change can be a positive force. We don't need to fear it. However, we do need to be prepared for it, and be ready and willing to adapt our Orientation as circumstances change.***

## ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The OODA loop can be applied on many different levels – from individual learners to group dynamics and even organisations. In this case, we could simply replace 'Orientation' with 'Organisational Culture' and the whole process would be the same.

As we know, many large organisations struggle with bureaucracy and resistance to change. Partly this is down to culture; partly it is having the right people in the right jobs – employing people who are not afraid to change their perspective and be open to new ideas. There are many other 'genetic factors' as Boyd might call them: like the company history; the location of the business; the connections it has with its suppliers; and its policies.

All these things would sit under Orientation and would frame the context for how the business perceives a new development (such as a new technology), and what it does about it. Those firms that are more agile and have a better understanding of their Orientation will be better able to respond in a more meaningful way than those that don't.

## AGILE THINKING

For Boyd, change shouldn't therefore come as a surprise, but rather as an expected step. It is therefore essential that practitioners adopt an agile mindset and prepare themselves to adapt to changing circumstances.

According to Boyd's former associate Chet Richards, 'The essence of agility [...] is to keep one's orientation well matched to the real world during times of ambiguity, confusion, and rapid change, when the natural tendency is to become disoriented'.<sup>12</sup> To do so requires a level of strategic oversight as to the end goal, or rather, the 'big picture'; it is not enough to treat events in isolation, but rather to adapt and change to unfolding circumstances while keeping the end goal in sight. The 'means' may change, but the end remains the same.

Again, this is something that we might consider as business coaches. Not only do we need to know who we are, where we come from and where we are going, but we also need to know why we are going there, to be ready and able to reorient ourselves should the context change.



Photo credit Yeshi Kangrang

## A THEORY FOR THE MODERN WORLD

Boyd's OODA loop theory is a fantastic tool for coaches. It offers a fresh, flexible way of thinking about learning and our relationship with the world – one that actively embraces change as a central driver of the system.

If we are to prepare our business leaders for an uncertain future then we need to drop the over-simplified, static and inflexible models of the past.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Mike Ryder is a lecturer in Marketing at Lancaster University Management School. A passionate researcher and educator, Mike has published on a range of topics including management education, reflective practice and work-based learning. His website is [www.mjryder.net](http://www.mjryder.net). You can also follow him on Twitter @RobotTheory or connect on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/drmikeryder/>

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