
Experiential Learning in Higher Education Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Experiential learning is also referred to as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration. Experiential learning emphasizes learning through direct, hands-on experiences. It goes beyond simply repetitive memorization and passive absorption of knowledge, encouraging learners to actively engage with the material. This approach is built on the idea that people learn best by doing, reflecting, and applying their knowledge in real-world situations. Unlike traditional classroom situations where students may compete with one another or remain uninvolved or unmotivated and where the instruction is highly structured, students in experiential learning situations cooperate and learn from one another in a more semi-structured approach. Instruction is designed to engage students in direct experiences that are tied to real-world problems and situations, which the instructor facilitates rather than directs student progress. As the higher education landscape continues to evolve, experiential learning is well-evidenced and very well-placed to be a powerful vehicle for preparing learners to thrive in a complex and dynamic society. By emphasising active engagement, real-world relevance, and personal growth, this tried and tested educational approach is shaping the future of learning and development.

Key words: experiential learning, simulations, internships, real-time projects

Introduction

Tell me, and I forget; teach me, and I remember; involve me, and I will learn.
~ Benjamin Franklin, 1750.

The philosophy of John Dewey, one of the most significant educational theorists of the twentieth century, best explained the guiding principles for programmes of experiential learning in higher education. He outlined his directions for change by stating, “The fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education.”

In today’s rapidly changing world, traditional classroom-based learning alone may not be enough in isolation to prepare students and professionals for the challenges they will face in the workplace. Experiential learning is a dynamic approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, enriching the educational experience and fostering a deeper understanding of subjects. The World Economic Forum (WEF) reported in 2020 that “40% of current workers’ core skills are expected to change in the next 5 years,” with 50% of all employees needing to be reskilled by 2025. Higher education will play a vital role in addressing this evolution.

Though there are advantages to traditional learning methods, there are many evidence-based problems. Some of them are lack of engagement, workforce resistance, not always being relevant, lack of contextual feedback, and information overload. Ebbinghaus’s (1885) study focused on voluntary and involuntary memory, revealing that if you are learning something in a traditional way on day zero, within 30 days you’re down to about 20% retention unless you’ve gone back and revisited it several times, in which case you can get the retention up to about 80%. Many people, of course, do not have the time to revisit those learnings to be able to achieve this, and that in itself renders many traditional learning methods at a disadvantage from an efficacy perspective.

Experiential Learning

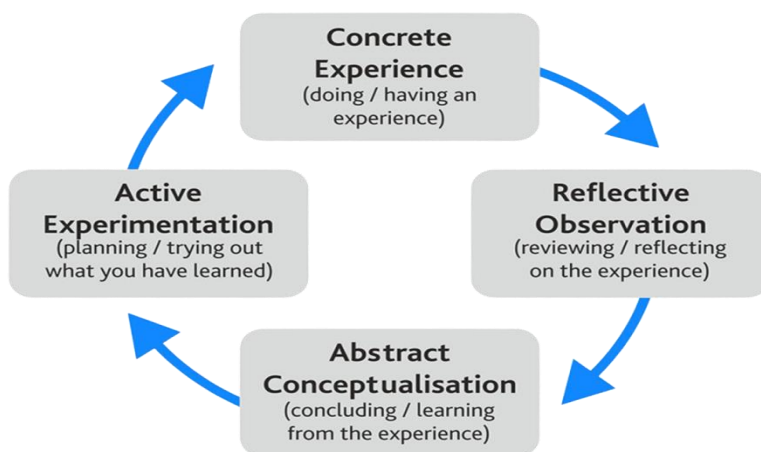
Experiential learning is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused

reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education, para. 2). Experiential learning is also referred to as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration. Experiential learning emphasizes learning through direct, hands-on experiences. It goes beyond simply repetitive memorization and passive absorption of knowledge, encouraging learners to actively engage with the material. This approach is built on the idea that people learn best by doing, reflecting, and applying their knowledge in real-world situations.

In their book, *Teaching for Experiential Learning*, Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) found that most college faculty teach by lecturing because few of them learned how to teach otherwise. Although good lecturing should be part of an educator’s teaching repertoire, faculty should also actively involve their students “in the learning process through discussion, group work, hands-on participation, and applying information outside the classroom” (p. 2). This process defines experiential learning, where students are involved in learning content in which they have a personal interest, need, or want.

Notable educational psychologists such as John Dewey (1859–1952), Carl Rogers (1902–1987), and David Kolb (b. 1939) have laid the groundwork for learning theories that focus on “learning through experience or “learning by doing.” Dewey popularised the concept of experiential education, which focuses on problem solving and critical thinking rather than memorization and rote learning. Rogers considered experiential learning “significant” as compared to what he called “meaningless” cognitive learning. Kolb also noted that concrete learning experiences are critical to meaningful learning and is well known for his Learning Style Inventory (LSI), which is widely used in many disciplines today to help identify preferred ways of learning. A key element of experiential learning, therefore, is the student, and that learning takes place (the knowledge gained) as a result of being personally involved in this pedagogical approach.

In the 1980s, David Kolb (Harvard University) wrote down the experiential learning cycle as:



Experiential learning adds many values to student learning. One of these is that experiential learning promotes active involvement by challenging participants to take on tasks, make decisions, and solve problems, enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The other aspect is that, after any hands-on experience, learners reflect on what they've encountered and learned. This self-assessment deepens understanding and connects theory to practice. Moreover, experiential learning emphasises the active application of acquired knowledge and skills in real-life situations. This encourages the development of practical skills that are immediately relevant. Similarly, constructive feedback is integral to the process. Learners receive guidance on their performance, which helps them improve and refine their abilities. Learners retain information for longer and understand concepts more deeply when they actively engage with the material. Individuals are prepared for the complexities and challenges of the real world, bridging the gap between academia and practical workplace application. Participants experience personal growth and increased self-confidence as they overcome challenges and learn from their experiences. Finally, experiential learning equips individuals with skills and knowledge they can immediately apply in their careers, fostering adaptability and readiness for an ever-changing world.

Principles of Experiential Learning

Unlike traditional classroom situations where students may compete with one another or remain uninvolved or unmotivated and where the instruction is highly structured, students in experiential learning situations cooperate and learn from one another in a more semi-structured approach. Instruction is designed to engage students in direct experiences that are tied to real-world problems and situations in which the instructor facilitates rather than directs student progress (UC Davis, 2011, para 6).

Proponents of experiential learning assert that students will be more motivated to learn when they have a personal stake in the subject rather than being assigned to review a topic or read a textbook chapter. Some of the experiential learning principles noted in the Association for Experiential Education (AEE 2011, para. 4) are:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the student to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the student is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Students are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically. This involvement produces the perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: student to self, student to others, and student to the world at large.
- The instructor and student may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking, and uncertainty because the outcomes of the experience cannot be totally predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for students and instructors to explore and examine their own values.
- The instructor's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting students, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The instructor recognises and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.

- Instructors strive to be aware of their biases, judgements, and preconceptions and how these influence the student.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.

The experiential learning processes

Experiential learning involves a number of steps that offer students a hands-on, collaborative, and reflective learning experience that helps them “fully learn new skills and knowledge” (Haynes, 2007). Although learning content is important, learning from the process is at the heart of experiential learning. During each step of the experience, students will engage with the content, the instructor, and each other, as well as self-reflect and apply what they have learned in another situation.

Although learning content is important, learning from the process is at the heart of experiential learning. Some of the steps that comprise experiential learning are (Haynes, 2007, para. 6; UC Davis, 2011):

Step 1: Experiencing or Exploring: Students will perform or do a hands-on, mind-on experience with little or no help from the instructor. Examples might include: making products or models; role-playing; giving a presentation; problem-solving; and playing a game. A key facet of experiential learning is what the student learns from the experience rather than the quantity or quality of the experience.

Step 2: Sharing/Reflecting: Students will share the results, reactions, and observations with their peers. Students will also get other peers to talk about their own experience, share their reactions and observations, and discuss feelings generated by the experience. The sharing equates to reflecting on what they discovered and relating it to past experiences, which can be used for future use.

Step 3: Processing/Analysing: Students will discuss, analyse, and reflect upon the experience. Describing and analysing their experiences allows students to relate them to future learning experiences. Students will also discuss how the experience was carried out and how themes, problems, and issues emerged as a result of the experience. Students will discuss how specific problems or issues were addressed and identify recurring themes.

Step 4: Generalising: Students will connect the experience with real-world examples, find trends or common truths in the experience, and identify “real-life” principles that emerged.

Step 5: Application: Students will apply what they learned from the experience (and what they learned from past experiences and practice) to a similar or different situation. Also, students will discuss how the newly learned process can be applied to other situations. Students will discuss how issues raised can be useful in future situations and how more effective behaviours can develop from what they learn. The instructor should help each student feel a sense of ownership for what was learned.

Instructor Roles in Experiential Learning

In experiential learning, the instructor guides rather than directs the learning process, where students are naturally interested in learning. The instructor assumes the role of facilitator and is guided by a number of steps crucial to experiential learning. Instructors should be willing to accept a less teacher-centric role in the classroom. They should approach the learning experience in a positive, non-dominating way. They should identify an experience in which students will find interest and be personally committed. They should explain the purpose of the experiential learning situation to the students. They should share their feelings and thoughts with students and let them know that they are learning from the experience too (Wurdinger and Carlson 2010). They should also:

1. Tie the course learning objectives to course activities and direct experiences so students know what they are supposed to do.
2. Provide relevant and meaningful resources to help students succeed.
3. Allow students to experiment and discover solutions on their own.
4. Find a sense of balance between the academic and nurturing aspects of teaching.
5. Clarify students' and instructor roles.

Student Roles in Experiential Learning

Qualities of experiential learning are those in which students decide to be personally involved in the learning experience. Students are not completely left to teach themselves; however, the instructor assumes the role of guide and facilitates the learning process. The role of the student in experiential learning encompasses:

1. Students decide to be personally involved in the learning experience.

2. Students will be involved in problems that are practical, social, and personal.
3. Students will be allowed freedom in the classroom as long as they make headway in the learning process.
4. Students will often need to be involved in difficult and challenging situations while discovering.
5. Students will self-evaluate their own progress or success in the learning process, which becomes the primary means of assessment.
6. Students will learn from the learning process and become open to change. This change includes less reliance on the instructor and more on fellow peers, the development of skills to investigate (research) and learn from an authentic experience, and the ability to objectively self-evaluate one's performance (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

Integrating experiential learning into teaching

While integrating experiential learning into teaching, instructors can consider the following primary issues:

1. **Plan:** The instructor should plan the course learning objectives and determine what students will need to successfully complete the exercise, what resources, such as readings and worksheets, research, rubrics, supplies, and directions to off-campus locations, etc., are needed, and the logistics—how much time will be allotted for the students to complete the experience. They should also plan the work to be done by students outside of class, the forms of assessment to be employed, formative assessments, experience assessments such as written reports and projects, self and/or peer assessments, etc.
2. **Prepare:** After the planning has been completed, the instructor should prepare materials, rubrics, and assessment tools and ensure that everything is ready before the experience begins.
3. **Facilitate:** As with most instructional strategies, the instructor should commence the experience. They should refrain from providing students with all of the content and information and complete answers to their questions and instead guide students through the process of finding and determining solutions for themselves.
4. **Evaluate:** The success of an experiential learning activity can be determined during discussions, reflections, and a debriefing session. Debriefing, as a culminating experience, can help to reinforce and extend the learning process.

Experiential Learning Opportunities in Higher Education

Experiential Learning in Higher Education The setting has many benefits and creates many opportunities for the learners. Some of them are: supporting student employability; soft skills development; preparing '*oven-ready*' graduates; project-based learning to help students collaborate, problem-solve, and apply subject matter knowledge; and developing sustainable thinking.

There are numerous experiential learning opportunities in higher education that can be found in most disciplines (George Mason University, 2011; Loretto, 2011; Northern Illinois University OTC, 2011).

1. **Apprenticeship experiences** provide students with an opportunity to try out a job, usually with an experienced professional in the field to act as a mentor. Apprenticeships are a type of on-the-job training that may lead to certification. Many skilled labourers learn their trade by doing an apprenticeship.
2. **Clinical experiences** are hands-on experiences of a predetermined duration directly tied to an area of study, such as nursing students participating in a hospital-based experience or child development and teacher education students participating in daycare and classroom settings.
3. **Cooperative education experiences** are more extensive than internships and will usually span two or more semesters of work. Co-ops are paid professional work experiences that are tied very closely to the student's academic work. During the co-op experience, students will receive ongoing advice, and the co-op will be structured to meet the student's academic and/or career goals. Co-op experience is usually included on a student's transcript in addition to being awarded designated credit hours for its completion.
4. **Fellowship experiences provide** tuition or aid to support the training of students for a period of time, usually between six months and one year. They are usually made by educational institutions, corporations, or foundations to assist individuals pursuing a course of study or research. Post-graduate fellowships assist students at the graduate level, while post-doctorate fellowships provide funds for those who have already achieved their doctorate degree.
5. **Fieldwork experiences** allow students to explore and apply content learned in the classroom in a specified field experience away from the classroom. Fieldwork experiences bridge educational experiences with an outside

community, which can range from neighbourhoods and schools to anthropological dig sites and laboratory settings.

6. **Internship experiences** are job-related and provide students and job changers with an opportunity to test the waters in a career field and also gain some valuable work experience. Internships can be for credit, not for credit, paid or unpaid.
7. **Practicum experiences** are often a required component of a course of study and place students in a supervised and often paid situation. Students develop competencies and apply previously studied theory and content, such as school library media students working in a high school library or marketing majors working in a marketing research firm. Practicum experiences also allow students to design and develop a project in which they apply knowledge and develop skills, such as a doctoral student preparing the components of an online course.
8. **Service learning experiences** are distinguished by being mutually beneficial for both students and the community. Service learning is growing rapidly and is considered a part of experiential education by its very nature of learning, performing a job within the community, and serious reflection by the student. Service learning involves solving some of society's issues, such as homelessness, poverty, a lack of quality education, pollution, etc. One of the goals of service learning is to help students become aware of these issues and develop good citizenship by learning how to help solve some of them. Service learning experiences are distinguished by being mutually beneficial for both students and the community.
9. **Student Teaching Experiences** provides student candidates with an opportunity to put into practice the knowledge and skills they have been developing in the preparation program. Student teaching typically involves an on-site experience in a partner school and opportunities for formal and informal candidate reflection on their teaching experience.
10. **Study Abroad Experiences** offer students a unique opportunity to learn in another culture within the security of a host family and a host institution carefully chosen to allow the transfer of credit to a student's degree program. Students studying a foreign language will perfect their accent and greatly expand their vocabulary—a skill they will retain for life. Making new friends and travelling and making decisions are also key parts of the study abroad experience.

11. **Volunteer experiences** allow students to serve in a community primarily because they choose to do so. Many serve through a non-profit organisation, sometimes referred to as formal volunteering, but a significant number also serve less formally, either individually or as part of a group. Because these informal volunteers are much harder to identify, they may not be included in research and statistics on volunteering.

Conclusion

The teaching method of experiential learning may be done by using games, assistive devices, and creating learning situations so that students personally operate themselves, more clearly understand the actual construction and operation, and then transfer it into memory. Experiential learning experiences help to complete students' preparation for their chosen careers, which reinforces course content and theory. Students learn through student-rather than instructor-centred experiences by doing, discovering, reflecting, and applying. Through these experiences, students develop communication skills and self-confidence and gain and strengthen decision-making skills by responding to and solving real-world problems and processes. It can also work as a powerful tool for young learners because they have the life experience and cognitive ability to reflect, develop new ideas, and take positive action. It also provides adults with the real-world experience they need to place their new skills in context and to develop new ideas about how to implement their skills. This is particularly true when real-world skills are taught in a classroom context. On the other hand, experiential learning has very specific limits. It is only useful when the content being taught is content that will be used in a real-world setting. For students, experiential learning constitutes a challenging activity that demands time and effort. It requires working in a team, carrying out work outside the classroom, learning and integrating subject content to make decisions, adapting procedures, and contrasting different sources of information to identify a problem and apply them to create a product that seeks to solve it. All this makes experiential learning a valuable tool to teach complex learning that involves cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal aspects. It allows students to contextualise disciplinary knowledge and approach the professional role. It also allows teachers to assess competencies in an authentic situation. What aspects contributed to this experiential learning activity being successful and achieving the desired learning outcomes? Along with the aspects already

mentioned in this study, it is relevant to highlight the rigour with which the teachers implemented the activity, following each of the stages and ways of working with knowledge. It is not about implementing any type of work or practice in the field, but precisely promoting the questioning and transformation of knowledge by giving an active role to the student and providing her with agency and autonomy. On the other hand, the selection of the subject, the undergraduate programme, the context of application, and the teaching work of mediation and guidance are fundamental.

As the higher education landscape continues to evolve, experiential learning is well-evidenced and very well-placed to be a powerful vehicle for preparing learners to thrive in a complex and dynamic society. By emphasising active engagement, real-world relevance, and personal growth, this tried and tested educational approach is shaping the future of learning and development.

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