

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR STUDENT ADVANCEMENT: A STATE-OF-THE-ART IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** When I stepped into teaching, I had a vision for teaching students to develop their learning skills and understand their learning capabilities. However, one of the most common questions students ask these days is “Which teacher gives more marks?” Despite, institutions and educators being responsible for developing students’ intellectual and interpersonal competences, the orthodox mode of memorizing for examinations and passing with the highest mark is a norm difficult to disentangle. Through this paper I am contemplating experiential learning as a state-of-the-art teaching and learning policy. Students, through such engagements, will become sensitized to the world around them, and especially the social, economic and environmental challenges that people face. Theoretical review was conducted in order to examine the need of experiential learning and how it is contributing to soft skills. The analysis revealed that experiential learning will reinforce the six outcomes: students will develop advanced learning skills; explore sustainable solutions; embrace diversity in their analytical thinking and lived practice; approach complex problems through an analysis of the interconnectedness of divergent sectors; foster creativity of thoughts and expressions through a critical appreciation of alternative practices; and display empathy and purpose through an examination of the ethical implications of their actions. Accordingly, experiential learning will help students become more analytical and skilled in solving complex problems through collaborative interventions. It will assist them in building confidence and develop a better understanding of themselves as part of a broader local and global community.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, education, students, development, traditional

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## Introduction

In the 2000s, American Freshman Survey reported that colleges are means of achieving financial success and securing a career than having a meaningful life. Many college graduates realized that their college education did not provide lessons for leading a meaningful intellectual and spiritual life, but rather focused only on traditional disciplines for learning (Haine, 2017). To secure a career and train for jobs, students often have to choose their disciplines from “strategic majors” such as engineering, technology, business and health instead of pursuing the “non-strategic majors” such as history, anthropology, sociology and philosophy (Marcus, 2013). Companies like Amazon.com launched a program to fund college tuitions for bachelor’s degrees or programs for their associates who are eligible only in in-demand fields. Besides, there are countries allowing vocational training and instructing pedagogical approaches to dominate the higher education sector which has the possibility to resolve through alternate offerings that will emphasis more on student-centered teaching. Often student-centered teaching creates citizen with proficiencies to actively participate in resolving the challenges of the contemporary civil society.

The future of higher education is a global challenge faced by policy makers and education leaders. While one of the challenges is financial, the other is to acclimatize to the changing circumstances that helps in the student’s development and improve their capacity to learn. To overcome these challenges, implementation of skills on critical thinking is needed which can be offered through a learning framework – experiential learning.

Experiential Learning, as described by Kolb, is an integral part of the modern education system. It is a learning framework of engaged learning where knowledge is created through transformation of experiences. The cycle of experiential learning by Kolb states that learning occurs when an individual experiences something and reflects upon it. The reflection is then analyzed and formulates an abstract concept – it's a rotation of feeling, watching, thinking and doing (Sims, 1983).

Experiential Learning has significant pedagogical advantages and is above any philosophy of education. The "Fifth Discipline" by Peter Senge in 1990 argued that people commit to learn continuously when they are motivated by the teaching of the educators. Therefore, teachers need to have a significant amount of investment in the process of learning where they create a balance between covering scholarly concepts, and teaching the concepts through engaged learning (Hawtrey, 2007). While such balancing requires us to (re)think about the educational processes, it also leaves us with questions such as: How to motivate students to engage with their courses or subjects? How to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity? Why are the students more concerned about their grades than what they are learning? Is there diversity of presentation modes in teaching and learning offered to the students?

There are certain characteristics that must predominate in an experiential learning's pedagogical approach such as interactive learning; students encouraged to raise questions, challenge assumptions and make their own discoveries. The teacher should not have the monopoly on knowledge; delving into books as the sole purpose of learning must be avoided and a significant amount of learning taking place outside of the classroom. According to the theory of experiential learning, when students relate and connect their learnings with real-life examples, they also measure their own commensurability in the job market because it fosters critical thinking, unfetters intellectual inquiry and encourage factbased research which also strengthens the foundations of higher education. Students remember only a fraction of what they hear but they mostly remember what they actively do (Bligh, 2000). Hence, it is crucial that students reflect on their learning, realize the self-development, and connect their learnings with real-life examples. Experiential learning, as a result, is creating a link between their studies and their goals in life too.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper is a reflection of my own experience in the field of education. I have been constantly looking at students these days who are failing to learn. Being an educator, this is not the scenario I was expecting to face when I started teaching<sup>1</sup>. They prefer hands-on experience on everything. Despite the traditional way of swallowing information is taking away their scope to be familiar with the skills needed to survive in this world, in the job market, and while we are trying to reform the traditional teaching; we also need students to understand that reading is a part of learning and uncovering the knowledge they are oblivious of.

A qualitative research was conducted to explore the placement of experiential learning in higher education. The paper is an auto ethnography and to clarify and illustrate the subjectivity position of the auto ethnography objective literatures have been provided and verified. With this purpose, the paper has focused on the following questions:

1. What are the applications of experiential learning in higher education?
2. How to integrate experiential learning in higher education?
3. Why is experiential learning called the *state-of-the-art* for teaching and learning in higher education and what will it reinforce?

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<sup>1</sup> By 'failing to learn' I refer to the lack of interest to read repertoire of pages just to memorize and throw up on exam papers.

### ***The Case from Personal Experience***

Being born in the 90s, I had the opportunity to see how the education system in Bangladesh has evolved. However, I have always found the entire system very old-fashioned and obsolete and have wanted to work in the reformation of the education system in Bangladesh. Unlike the most graduates from Bangladesh, my education training went differently. I had the opportunity to learn from experts who never believed in memorizing but provided with an enriching experience of discovering my learning capabilities.

Consequently, I am trying to build my teaching methods in similar ways as my teachers taught me. I try to teach my students using various learning tools and provide an engaged learning experience in the classroom. However, before every semester begins, I observe many students posting in different groups asking for reviews of faculty members for different courses. What disturbs me the most is what they are mostly concerned about. I always notice them asking a few common questions such as “Which faculty gives ‘A’ in their course easily?”, “Which course is easy to pass?”, “Which faculty provides less reading materials?”. Thinking that they are the next generations to graduate and rule the world, their learning capabilities frightens me. Nevertheless, my apprehension does not end there. I get more agitated when I find out that there are a few teachers who are unwilling to change their teaching method and prefers providing handouts that should be memorised by the students before exams.

I thought it was a challenge only to Bangladesh until I attended several pedagogical meetings by different universities worldwide. I realised that almost all students have atleast one teacher who prefers teaching in the oldfashioned way and there are students who are more interested in achieving grades for a better CGPA than learning. In light of this, training the faculty member to reform their teaching and learning policy could be a way to improved teaching. A better teaching and learning policy will also help students enjoy their courses and understand the contents better. However, most of the teachers hired in higher education institutions have a tenure and promotion policy that focuses mostly on published articles in reputed journals than the teaching aspect of their profession. Therefore, a few are interested in adapting to new teaching and learning methods.

### **Historical Realm of Education & Emerging Experiential Learning**

The history of education dates back to Ancient Greece where the Sophists used to teach the sons of the Athenian citizens. It flows through teaching the catechism in the orthodox Roman catholic. The epistemology deals with questions such as whether we know via our senses or our reason, or some combination of the two . Can we know that a non-tangible object, like love, or perhaps God, exists? Metaphysics is the study of the way the world is; for instance, why does time seem to speed up and slow down? Does the world change, or is the change an illusion?

Is there ever any novelty in the world? These are some of the issues in metaphysics, and clearly theories about how and what we learn about the world would have to entail certain things about that world itself. The mode of education substantially changes when Socrates asked learners about their own understanding or perceptions on particular contents because he always believed that students have opinions that makes differences in the learning.

When Plato and Aristotle’s era started ending, the Western intellectual world managed to develop the distinction between reality and sensible world, the differences between theory and practice. Following that when Kant’s thoughts were explored, it was understood his theory is about reasons and experiences (Robb, 1943).

Experiential educators have a keen interest in thinking about why they do what they do. This thinking has manifested itself in the Journal of Experiential Education. The Journal has been a steady source for putting ideas before the emerging profession of experiential education. The Journal of Experiential. Education continued to be published, and a wide variety of articles and authors. The field of experiential education also began to expand and

grow. There was some temptation to go back and improve earlier articles in terms of writing style, grammar, and punctuation. The Journal of Experiential Education has been published since 1994. This book shows the reflection of the experience of experiential educators. All articles have been re-keyed and the physical layout has been done with aesthetics and readability in mind. Errors of selection and omission lie with the editors, and in no way reflect on the writers. Experiential education is a philosophy of education that would include assumptions and value judgements.

### ***Experiential Learning: How it happens?***

In recent days, education is about learning through experiences, sharing the ideas, reflecting and analyzing to conceptualize the idea and proceed to integrate the new learning. Such education fosters, promotes, and explores the pedagogy of experiential learning by cultivating reciprocal partnerships and creating interdependence among higher educational institutions while expanding engaged learnings. Engaged learnings seeks to connect student's classroom experiences with their local communities to enrich learning and promote co-curricular engagement. They provide experiences that bring theory to practice by linking coursework, critical thinking, and engagement activities. Such forms of experiential learning allow students to learn how to learn and not what to learn. This helps students to test their ideas in the real world and develop creative methods to social, cultural, and scientific issues (Busteed, 2019).

A substantial share of experiential engaged learning can take place outside of the classroom or virtually such as students learning through engagement with different geographical locations, organizations, and programs in the surrounding communities or in collaboration with partners from surrounding communities such as non-profits, community groups, and government agencies whose goal is to serve the public good.

Experiential learning approaches are meaningful learning and adult learning is one of the fundamental considerations – prior based learning. Adult learning, which has been an unprecedented influx in higher education, has shaped experiential learning via the models of good practice where adults are using their experiences to foster and enhance their current and future learning. This is because, in today's globalised promptly changing world, the demand for flexibility and the capacity and autonomy to leverage previous knowledge and experience them in different ways has grown substantially. As the educators are being accountable for the knowledge they are providing to their learners, it is important that the educators make themselves competent and teach with immense knowledge on their topic of specialization.

Experiential learning occurs within any academic division and incorporate community-based research, field-work, public art, practical, internships, and policy research that are developed and shared with community organizations. The course pedagogy and development around experiential learning helps faculty members to plan, create and design courses within a framework; articulate context-specific student-centred pedagogies that are distinctively suitable to engaged learning; create community to acknowledge the power of collaboration and gather knowledge and tools needed to create sustainable programs; connect with the long term vision of experiential learning; and, foster a culture of learning and knowledge sharing amongst network partners.

There are many activities that carries the potential to be experiential, but the execution of the activities may not be effective enough. In light of that, Chapman et al. stated, "Simple participation in a prescribed set of learning experiences does not make something experiential. The experiential methodology is not linear, cyclical, or even patterned. It is a series of working principles, all of which are equally important or must be present to varying degrees at some time during experiential learning. These principles are required no matter what activity the student is engaged in or where the learning takes place"(Chapman et al., 1995).

In relation to this, it can be deduced that experiential learning is built on constructivist learning and basis of interdisciplinary studies. Unlike the compartmentalized learning, experiential learning differs from the conventional academic instruction aligning with the constructivist theory of learning.

### ***Why State-of-the-Art?***

Over the years experiential learning has moved from the periphery to the centre of the education. As an attempt to shift from the traditional form of education, the first theories of experiential learning developed in the midnineteenth century to move away from teaching using the abstract concepts. Experiential learning allows the learners to make mistakes and resolve them. One of the pedagogical approaches of modern education system comes from Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS). During the

Soviet era, academicians saw Liberal Arts and Sciences education as an antidote to the MarxistLeninist ideology that filtered out of the teaching process (Becker, 2015). Many considered experiential learning education as a foundation to introduce the interdisciplinary curricular approaches through engaged learning.

The National Research Council started to focus on improvisation of the learning process. Their focus was to engage experiential learning as a mode of learning process which needed a sound theory experience (National Research Council, 2009). This is because there is an incumbrance to prepare the next generation who will be the leaders, scientists, doctors, etc. for the challenges that the world around us brings in. Increase in globalization of businesses, markets, trades, constant advancement in technology, etc. with concerns facing climate change, increasing population, inflation, etc. is a platform that the generation will encounter, think critically and have to resolve. Therefore, every graduate entering the workforce is a human capital who needs to be prepared ahead of time to face the aforementioned issues (Estepp et al., 2012).

However, there are many who believes that today's graduates are not well prepared for future. For example: The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment reported in 2013 that students lack the capability of understanding simple challenges such as "differentiating the credit card offers by banks with different interest rates"(Marcus, 2014). The Wisconsin Technical College System requires its graduating students to give an exit exam to test their capacity to integrate in the job market, their adaptability to compete in the workforce because the grades received by their teachers fail to advocates for their capacities beyond books. The test remarkably shown that the graduates are not qualified for entry level jobs (Marcus, 2014). The National Research Council and the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education suggested that students are receiving substandard learning in their higher education, and cannot continue to be dependent on methods of teaching and learning that worked in the past (Bok, 2006).

A question now remains – what characterizes experiential learning as the new successful learning tool? First, the underlying principles that shapes the learning environment for both students and teachers. Second, the techniques that propels the principles of experiential learning as the new engaged teaching and learning practices. To understand what makes experiential learning as the stateof-the-art it is needed to explore both principles and techniques.

The common principles in the teaching practices could be: (a) to create critical learning environment, hold the attention of the students in the class, focus less on discipline, (b) commitment to learning from students, tutor students outside classroom, student engagement in critical thinking, (c) create diversity in learning. It is important to maintain and retain these principles to create an effective environment in experiential learning. Critical learning environment allows students to know how to tackle with issues given in the class. A few ways to create critical learning environment are discussions, debates, field work, case studies, etc. Any intriguing question raised by the

teacher will open a path to creating the critical learning environment. The teachers should guide the students to understand the significance of the question. It is often wise to relate the questions to some larger issues that connects to the world today. When teachers try to make students answer their own question, it builds a way for students to learn effectively. Answering their own questions allow the student to become a more sophisticated learner where the students learn by doing.

Students often lose their attention in class. It is important that they are focused throughout. This is a rather challenging cut of experiential learning. There are various blended tools used in the classroom that increases student engagement and holds the attention of the student. A few ways to achieve this could be dialectical note, debates, case studies or providing goal-based scenarios. Students, as a result, stay engaged and attentive.

As a result, the most to benefit from experiential learning are the learners. Experiential learning also helped learner groups such the minority students who never participated in internships, students completing their degrees in nonstrategic majors and aspiring to non-traditional professions. One of the core reasons why experiential learning is helping institutions to stay student-centred.

### **Integrating into Higher Education**

Experiential learning will help students become more analytical and skilled in solving complex problems through collaborative interventions. It will assist them in building confidence and develop a better understanding of themselves as part of a broader local and global community. Students, through such engagements, will become sensitized to the world around them, and especially the social, economic and environmental challenges that people face.

Experiential learning is classified into three types – prior learning, classroom based and field-based learning. Prior learning is about meaningful learning in informal settings. It is the learning that is acquired through life experience and professional experience. One of the main elements of prior learning is adult learning. Adult learning andragogy is the study of how adults are learning or absorbing knowledge (Knowles, 1989). Adult learning allows to implement their learning experiences in to the real world, hence, it is important that their orientation of learning must be applicable to their everyday lives. They have to be leaps and bounds ahead of their regular curriculum or syllabi and learn soft skills such as coding, editing, videography, musical theory, photography, graphic designing and many more.

Classroom based learning is crucial, has multitude forms and evolved over time. Classroom based learning includes role playing, debates, group work, presentations, mind mapping, dialectical notes, etc. A very important way to ensure that your classroom-based learning is experiential, the teachers should analyse their learning population and determine their needs and cross check if the course learning outcomes are manageable for them. Of all the forms, identifying the appropriate activity(ies) for the class is important. On the other hand, experiential learning is something the faculty members can conduct virtually through debates, engaged discussion and/or using the blended learning tools such as padlet, breakout sessions via zoom or Google Classroom, Jamboard, etc.

Field-based learning is one of the oldest forms of experiential learning happening since the 1930s. Students doing internships, project-based assignments, community service, service learning and practicums are embedding with experiential learning. Service learning is a variation of field-based learning that provides experience when service activities are linked with educational objectives. Faculty members using service learning as apart of experiential learning in their classroom discovers that students are more enthusiastic and learns quicker. Students learning by conducting community services is popular for a long time and one of the fundamentals of service learning.

Thus, integration of experiential learning proved to be a better tool for students to deal with the world through critical thinking and problem-solving experiences than teaching through traditional epistemologies.

## Conclusion

The analysis revealed that experiential learning will reinforce the six outcomes: students will develop advanced learning skills; explore sustainable solutions; embrace diversity in their analytical thinking and lived practice; approach complex problems through an analysis of the interconnectedness of divergent sectors; foster creativity of thoughts and expressions through a critical appreciation of alternative practices; and display empathy and purpose through an examination of the ethical implications of their actions.

This postmodernist teaching approach, which is learning by doing, not only benefits students but also educators and employers in the job market – a vital reason for experiential learning to be the state-of-the-art. It is helping students to become more analytical and they are being skilled in solving problems. All these are benefitting

because it is helping them to build confidence and develop a better understanding of themselves as a part of the broader local and global community.

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