

Chapter 36

The Impact of Experiential Learning Programme Towards Graduates' Career Capabilities

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Abstract The purpose of this paper was to examine an experiential learning technique (industry immersion module—IIM) and its impact on graduates' career capabilities. In IIM, a team of four students would work with a sponsoring client on a business project. It promotes high level of engagement, learning and development and provides students with an extended opportunity to apply academic and theoretical perspectives to a “real-world” setting. As more graduates flood the employment market, there is an ever-growing pressure on higher education industry to better prepare graduates for employment. Literatures indicate that experiential learning can positively affect student's absorption and understanding of knowledge. In order to find out the effectiveness of experiential learning, feedback survey designed to measure graduate career capabilities as well as to gather employers' responses/comments was carried out. Graduates reported that experiential learning via IIM enhanced their preparation for careers and helped them in transitioning from the role of being an undergraduate to an employee. In a practical sense, graduates are better prepared for employment. Hence, this will be an added advantage to fresh graduates in confronting the challenging market. In addition, feedbacks from industrial employers are being shared with the students for self-improvement and development.

Keywords Experiential learning · Higher education · Immersion project

36.1 Introduction

Experiential learning is a term used to describe the process of learning from experience. Experiential learning theory was first introduced in twentieth century. Since then, researchers had coined various terms to label it. Dewey (1938) first calls

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the learning from experience as "learning by doing", while Wolfe and Byrne (1975) define it as "experienced-based learning". Other researchers such as Hoover (1974) suggested the key point of experiential learning involves more than just the cognitive learning capability that basically emphasized by management education. As such, Hoover and Whitehead (1975) propose the following definition of experiential learning as "Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement". From the early research on experiential learning, we found that experiential learning had been adopted as a learning pedagogy that closely links to academic knowledge and practical skills.

Ever since then, more efforts have been made to improve the learning process from what has been called "the new science of learning" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Research in experiential learning and other kinds of "active" pedagogies are gaining greater influence in higher education, in the form of out-of-classroom instruction, service learning projects and first-year student programmes through experience-based courses (Densmore, 2000; Gaumer, Colleur, & Arnone, 2014; Kahne, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000; Sommers, 1997; Varlotta, 1996).

There is a move towards greater experiential learning on education highlighted experiential education as a best practice in higher education spanning multiple disciplines and contexts including technology (Ames, 2006; Chilton, 2012; Gaumer, Colleur, & Arnone, 2014), business (Devasagayam, Johns-Mastern, & McCollum, 2012), social work (Thompson, Bender, Cardoso, & Flynn, 2011) and recreation (Andrew, Fleming, Ferkins, Wierma, & Coll, 2010; Robinson, Barron, & Solnet, 2008).

Experiential learning technique (ELT) provides a complete model for the learning process. It is called ELT because there is an emphasis on experience which plays an important and crucial part to the learning process which distinguishes itself from other learning techniques such as cognitive learning. Cognitive learning emphasizes on cognition over affect. ELT is based on the term "experiential". Conley (2008) argued that experiential learning is the process of discovering, processing, applying information and reflection while others such as Ruhaneu (2005), Hawkins and Weiss (2004) have suggested experiential education as a method of linking "academic knowledge and practical skills" and "it stresses practical application of knowledge to real-world situations".

36.2 Research Question

This study looks at immersion as a form or methodology in experiential learning and how it contributes to the experiential learning as a whole. Thus, the following research question is put forwards.

“How the industry immersion project can maximize student learning experience and make them job ready by providing them with a real-business environment and experience in real time?”

36.3 Literature Review

Experiential learning is broadly defined as “the process by which a learner creates meaning from direct experience” (Bohn & Schmidt, 2008, p. 5). Experiential learning includes a variety of strategies that engross students in learning opportunities that go beyond traditional lectures and reading and writing assignments (Shapiro & Levine, 1999) and when implemented in a classroom setting, students participate in real-life activities, reflect on those activities and incorporate their new understanding of that activity into their lives (Bohn & Schmidt, 2008).

Experiential learning theory offers a dynamic theory based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action or reflection and experience or abstraction. It is defined as a holistic learning space wherein learning transactions take place. It is a useful framework to design and implement management education programmes in higher education, management and training and development (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). Experiential learning is a method used in transformational teaching that involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012).

Review from literatures indicated that experiential learning has gained popularity in higher education in the form of outside classroom activities, service learning projects and students’ final-year projects through experience-based courses. Many educators employed the use of experiential education as a teaching pedagogy. Experiential learning can have significant benefits to educators and students in their capacity of teaching and learning. For example, study by Benander (2009) reported how experiential learning is not just for students but can be a valuable tool to reflect on teaching and learning. The implication of experiential learning as a form of critical reflection for the scholarship of teaching and learning is that it adds another mode of inquiry. As for students, experiential learning has significantly benefited undergraduate students especially in key areas such as (i) personal, (ii) interpersonal, (iii) civic and (iv) professional development (Aldas et al., 2010; Simons et al., 2012; Sweitzer & King, 2009).

Hence, there is a rapid adoption of experiential learning strategies in university education with the idea that such constructivist method to teaching and learning practice will further improve students’ learning in various approaches. Either called it “constructivist” or “experiential”, these pedagogies depend on its fundamental strategy of learning through interconnected cycles of experience, reflection, experimentation and evaluation (Dorsey, 2001). The utility of constructivist learning in assisting students to connect conceptual and applied learning has been noted by numerous researchers (Kolb, 1984; Sommers, 1997; Walcott, 1999).

While some other researchers have identified the potential for certain kinds of experiential learning to promote social justice by fostering students' critical reflection upon their conceptual and applied learning about social, political and economic inequity (Cone & Harris, 1996; Densmore, 2000; Flint, 2002).

Kolb, Kolb, and Sharma (2014), studied on educator role profile, indicate that to some extent educators do tend to teach the way they learn. Findings indicated those with concrete learning styles are more learner-centred and preferred the facilitator role while those with abstract learning styles are more subject-centred and preferred the expert and evaluator roles. The researchers suggested a model for the practice of dynamic matching of educator roles, learner style and subject matter that can aid in the planning and implementation of educational experiences. With practice, both learners and educators can develop the flexibility to use all educator roles and learning styles to create a more powerful and effective process of experiential learning.

Clements and Cord (2012) explore an innovative experiential learning programme built on the principles of work-related learning that develops students to attain graduate qualities for competitiveness in the business sector. If such programmes continue to focus assessment and design around student learning, students will not only have the opportunity to apply their knowledge in a practical context, they will also be maximizing their personal learning outcomes with the added advantage of being better equipped to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Many educators have initiated to employ the use of experiential education as a teaching methodology because the technique stimulates a deeper approach to learning. Students are encouraged to make connections between theory and practice through lecture, discussion, learning activities, practical experience and reflection (Bethell & Morgam, 2011; Bower, 2013; Judge et al., 2011). Study by Bower (2014) reported experiential learning in relation to physical education and sport pedagogy emphasizes the value of experiential learning in the planning, organizing, leading and implementing a road race. The study highlighted the achievement of the learning outcomes as the experience allowed students to develop a strong ownership in their learning due to their active role and learning in developing the experience. Students learned in a meaningful and productive way to obtain vital skills in managing an event.

Aldas et al. (2010), Sweitzer and King (2009) in their study conclude that students' experiential learning has enhanced their understanding of content knowledge, ability to contribute to the welfare of the community and capacity to achieve their career goals. In addition to that, experiential learning promotes higher communication skills. The reason being is that students are forced to communicate and engage with their instructor and peers. Also reported in a study conducted by Koponen, Pyörälä and Isotalus (2012) stated that students' positive attitudes to learning communication skills increased significantly and their negative attitudes decreased significantly between the beginning and end of the course.

Yardley, Teunissen and Dornan (2012) in their study emphasize the importance of experiential learning in curriculum development. They found the ideas (theories)

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are relevant to educators ranging from those with responsibilities for curriculum design to “hands-on” teachers and workplace supervisors. The various experiential learning theories provide a conceptual grounding for promoting favourable learning conditions throughout the spectrum of medical education.

In the nutshell, these findings suggest that experiential learning is transformative in nature. Undergraduate students are put into a position that encourages them to use their discipline-related knowledge to practise and formulate new attitudes, knowledge and skills that lead to potential changes in their civic values, consistent with service learning research on personal, civic and professional development (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Unlike more traditional teaching techniques such as lecturing or tutoring, experiential learning involves the students and the lecturer in actively shaping the learning process (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). When teachers are beginning to adopt an experiential learning technique within the classroom, there needs to be a close relationship between lecturer and student and between the students themselves so as to create a learning environment that is conducive, open and honest. Most educators are used to being in charge in the classroom and represent the expert who knows anything and everything about that particular subject or field. This can be detrimental to the learning process because it creates an environment where the good ideas can only come from the educator as he or she is the expert and the less good or wrong ideas are those that are different. Emerson (1996) comments that it is important for educators to step back when implementing the experiential learning from their role as experts and adopt an attitude of humility. As such, the instructor's role is redefined that in the experiential classroom the relationship is seen more of as an alliance (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015), “fellow traveller” (Welker, 1991) or co-creators of teaching and learning (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005).

However, as noted by researchers the building of such an alliance between instructor and student can be difficult in teaching (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). This stems from the fact that genuine conversations in the traditional classroom setting is extremely restricted or non-existent. It is important that the teacher creates a space for good conversations as part of the educational process to enhance the students experiential learning (Keeton, Sheckley & Grigges, 2002). Significant learning through conversation can happen between the teacher and student although it may not be the learning the teacher intended. Baker (2010) explains that when an environment promotes conversational learning, students can transform their collective experiences and differences into new knowledge through the sense they make together.

36.4 Industry Immersion Module (IIM)

The module is designed to equip students with essential management skills and competences. It provides a capstone experience to students in integrating and applying everything they have learned in the bachelor's programme in analysing, researching, planning and devising business plan for the company.

The module is based on experiential learning, i.e. learning by doing. The module comprises of two stages: (i) preparation stage and (ii) experience stage. The first stage consists of series of workshops that address specific skills including communication skills, interpersonal skills, problem analysis and problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, project management and leadership skills. During the second stage (14 weeks), the students would work in teams (3–4 students) to understand the real-world, live business case. Client from the industry provides the project brief with relevant background along with the project assignment and criteria. Academic mentor and industry mentor are assigned to assist students during the experience stage.

The task is to develop and provide the following deliverables:

1. A comprehensive business plan for the sponsoring client.
2. Research insights, findings and other analysis in understanding the business issue/phenomenon.
3. Make a strategic and tactical recommendation and create an appropriate implementation plan.
4. A presentation to the sponsoring client, communicating in a convincing way the insights, strategies and recommended plan of action.

36.5 Methodology

Students who have completed and passed a minimum of 60 credits with minimum 2.67 CGPA are eligible to register for industry immersion module (IIM). The module was first introduced in 2014 and to date 2 batches of students have completed the module. For the August 2015 intake, thirty-three (33) students were selected and assigned to eight (8) companies. Table 36.1 below is the list of companies involved in the project:

In order to gauge the success of the module as well as students' learning experience, students were asked to fill up feedback survey questionnaire prior to completion of the module. The questionnaire design is as follows (Table 36.2):

Table 36.1 List of companies

1	Maybank
2	TEG
3	Price water coopers
4	Deloitte
5	Zuellig pharma
6	BDO (BizDO)
7	Shell
8	Schlumberger

Table 36.2 Questionnaire design

Section	Variables	Items
A	General information: student profile	5
B	Nature of the project	3
C	Support from industry supervisor	8
D	Working environment	5
E	Skills acquired	4
F	Learning experience	7
G	Support from industry supervisor	5
H	Overall evaluation and comments	Open-ended

4-point Likert scale
1 = Strongly agree to 4 = Strongly disagree

36.6 Discussion and Conclusion

For the purpose of this study, the analysis and conclusion focused only on the following sections of the survey:

Section B: Nature of the project,

Section E: Skills Acquired,

Section F: Learning Experience.

In addition, for **Section H: students' overall evaluation and comments** (open-ended), codes were assigned according to the themes from the survey (Table 36.3).

At least 70% of the students agreed that the project is appropriate and relevant to their studies. However, a few of these students indicated that the nature of the project is not suited to their field of study. They mentioned in their comments that they were not allowed to choose the company hence they were assigned to companies that are not related to their majors. A few of the accounting and finance

Table 36.3 Nature of the project

	Strongly agree 1		Agree 2		Disagree 3		Strongly disagree 4		Mean	Rank
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
The scope of the project is appropriate	10	30.30	15	45.45	7	21.21	1	3.03	1.97	1
The context of the project is relevant to my studies	8	24.24	17	51.52	5	15.15	3	9.09	2.09	2
The topic of the project is relevant to my studies	9	27.27	14	42.42	6	18.18	4	12.12	2.13	3

Table 36.4 Skills acquired

	Strongly agree 1		Agree 2		Disagree 3		Strongly disagree 4		Mean	Rank
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
I have developed first-hand experience of different aspects of the business operations	21	63.63	9	27.27	3	9.09	0	0	1.41	1
I have developed communication and collaborative skills through interpersonal interactions and group discussions	18	54.55	14	42.42	1	3.03	0	0	1.5	2
I have developed problem-solving and critical analysis abilities through examination and evaluation of the business issue	14	42.42	19	57.58	0	0	0	0	1.56	3
I have developed leadership skills through self-reflection and professional engagement	9	27.27	17	51.51	6	18.18	1	3.03	1.97	4

students voiced out that they were being placed in companies that are more suited for students majoring in marketing and management.

Result from Table 36.4 indicates that more than 90% of the students agreed that they have developed first-hand experience; communication and collaborative skills; and problem-solving and critical analysis abilities during their fourteen (14)-week group assignment with the companies. In addition, 79% of the students claimed that they have developed leadership skills through professional engagement.

This result strongly indicates that the experiential learning via the case study project has trained students with the necessary skills and competences to understand the real-world business issues/situations according to the case studies that were assigned to them. Students commented that working in a team from diverse academic background gives them the opportunity to learn from each other and share different ideas/views. They highlighted that working together in solving the "real" business case studies involves a lot of discussion, cooperation and communication. And since differences in opinions do exist among team members, they are required to think and evaluate the case studies critically and at the same time they have to fulfil the clients' requirement/demand. They also mentioned that they are able to

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Table 36.5 Learning experience

Mean	Rank		Strongly agree 1		Agree 2		Disagree 3		Strongly disagree 4		Mean	Rank	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
1.41	1	There were ample opportunities for learning	15	45.45	17	51.51	1	3.030	0	0	1.56	1	
		Would you recommend this IIM to other students?	17	51.52	13	39.39	3	9.090	0	0	1.59	2	
1.5	2	The tasks assigned to me were challenging and stimulating	12	36.36	19	57.58	2	6.060	0	0	1.69	3	
		I feel that I am better prepared to enter the working world after this experience	14	42.42	15	45.45	3	9.090	1	3.03	1.72	4	
1.56	3	This experience gave me a realistic preview of my future working career	14	42.42	14	42.42	3	9.090	2	6.06	1.78	5	
		I was given adequate training or explanation of the project	8	24.24	19	57.58	4	12.12	2	6.06	2	6	
3	1.97	4	I have a better understanding of concepts, theories and skills in my course of study	10	30.30	10	30.30	10	30.30	3	9.09	2.16	7

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observe and learn from the diverse leadership styles during meetings from different representatives of the respective companies.

Based on the result from Table 36.5, majority (more than 90%) agreed that the project provides them with the opportunity for learning and they would recommend the module (IIM) to their peers. Result also reveals that more than 80% of the students agreed that despite the challenges, they feel that they are better prepared to enter the working world as the experience gave them a realistic preview of the working environment.

The students commented that the experience is interesting and different from the traditional internship programme. The business case study project gave them the opportunity to be involved in a real work situation (industry exposure) and to familiarize themselves with a different culture. They claimed that they are able to understand and "bridge the gap" between university and working life. With the experience gained, they are able to appreciate the requirement of the industry.

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