

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: A CASE STUDY OF AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT IN ECONOMICS

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Abstract

Experiential learning makes learning more student centric and participatory. The paper examines the significance of experiential learning as a pedagogical tool in higher education. The aim is to examine the role of experiential learning in enabling problem solving and critical thinking among students.

Key words: *Experiential learning, Pedagogical tool, Critical thinking, Student-centric.*

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning requires a shift from teacher-centric to learner-centric pedagogies, from passive to participatory. Planning for teaching is therefore very important. Teaching methods may include various learner centric methodologies, including experiential learning.

David A. Kolb, an American educationist, provided the foundation for experiential learning theory. According to Kolb, 'there are two goals in the experiential learning process. One is to learn the specifics of a particular subject, and the other is to learn about one's own learning process' (McLeod, 2017). In the experiential learning method, the learner is not passive, but actively participates in the learning process, thus contributing to one's own learning and development. It is an ideal way of learning, as it envisions learning as a lifelong process, where the learner applies the knowledge to solve problems and make decisions. The basic philosophy of experiential learning is that as individuals one is naturally capable to learn, and experience plays the role of a catalyst in knowledge acquisition, construction, and application.

The traditional teaching- learning process consisted of memorizing and recollection of information. David Kolb advocates that learning by experience helps to bring about transformation in the learner, as the learner tries to integrate their knowledge to understand current situations. In this way value has been added to the learner and the learning process. It provides the foundation for enhanced learning.

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There is increasing emphasis in adopting experiential learning methodologies in higher education to keep students more engaged, active learners and contribute more fully to the society. This is also highlighted in the National Education Policy 2020.

The Association for Experiential Education defines Experiential Education as a teaching approach which involves several methods, through which educators engage with learners, encouraging the use of direct experiences to increase knowledge, develop skills, enhance reflection and expand the capacity of learners to contribute more meaningfully to the community. It leads to more involvement and learning.

Experiential learning shifts the focus to the learner. The faculty member is a ‘facilitator’ in this approach. Faculty-in-charge designs the instructions to engage the learner in direct experience related to the real world and situations, a methodology of particular interest in the study of social sciences where the ‘laboratory’ is the ‘field’ or society. The ‘experience’ is followed by reflection and application, critical analysis, discussion, and synthesis. The process ensures that learners learn to look at issues as ‘real world problems’ and not merely as a topic in the syllabus or a theory in the textbook. Integrating experiential learning in the teaching-learning process will develop skills of investigation, collaboration, evaluation, and self-reflection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning is useful as a pedagogical tool. It facilitates the development of skills required at the workplace through applied learning and real-world exposure. Students get prepared for challenges in their work fields. Well-designed experiential learning exercises will help in developing communication skills, ability to work in a team, problem-solving and application-oriented thinking, attributes that employers seek (Roberts, 2018).

In today’s digital world, technology has taken students more into audio-visual media and away from day-to-day realities. Recognizing that classroom size and digital exposure has affected student engagement, Peters and Stearns (2003) document an environmental learning community model that involved college students. This was designed with an experiment component that involves students to observe a local environmental issue, and an additional course that was designed to be an interactive course for reflection and discussion. The study analyzed the effectiveness of the learning community with and without the project. Results

showed that students' engagement was significantly more with the project, stimulating critical thinking and community engagement among students.

Sankaran and Sheldon (2022) present an outline of an experiential learning exercise for a course in sustainable development. The students collected data, analysed it and applied economic concepts to real world situations. The authors note that the students reported that they learned more when the class included the 'outside classroom' experience.

There is a need to modify the predominantly lecture approach of the 20th century to a pedagogy that involves students in the learning process as observed by Becker (2000). In the 21st century, deeper student engagement will contribute to a nuanced understanding and application of economic analysis, leading to a more meaningful learning experience.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the relevance, methods, strategies, and steps involved in experiential learning in academic institutions.
2. To evolve strategies to implement experiential learning as a pedagogical tool.
3. To explore implementation of the techniques of experiential learning into the curriculum.
4. To evaluate the response of students to the exercise.

METHODOLOGY

Experiential learning methods include internships, research projects, service learning, practicum and field work. This paper documents the experiment of introducing field work as a form of experiential learning for the first year and an academic research project for final year students of economics. A structured approach has been implemented which involved planning, preparation of materials, guiding students through the process, a session of discussion which helped in reinforcing the learning process and outcome followed by evaluation.

The experiential learning project was designed as follows:

1. Planning - Identifying a relevant topic that is suitable for students to undertake.
2. Identification- identifying a relevant strategy to undertake this exercise- a field survey for the first-year students and an academic research project for the third year students.

3. Guiding- helping the students through the process with relevant materials and questions.
4. Reinforcement of learning through discussion in the classroom under faculty guidance.
5. Assessment by faculty – field study report and academic research project.
6. Google form for self-assessment by students.

AIMS OF THE FIELD WORK AND PROJECT

1. To provide practical application of theoretical knowledge and make learning relatable to actual life experiences.
2. To facilitate analysing a problem in a real-life situation, stimulate introspection, critical thinking and problem solving.
3. To facilitate teamwork and collaborative approach towards problem solving.
4. To inculcate in students a feeling of empathy and identification when it comes to problem solving.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For understanding the effectiveness of this exercise, the following research questions were framed:

- Research question 1: How do students understand the economic effects of Covid 19 pandemic before the start of the field work?
- Research question 2: At the end of the field work how do they understand the economic effects?
- Research question 3: What self-reported experiences facilitated new understanding of the economic effects?

EXERCISE 1- FIELD SURVEY FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

First year students conducted a survey on ‘Impact of Covid -19 on formal and informal sector’, guided by faculty members. It was an individual survey project. The students subsequently submitted a report analyzing the responses which was then assessed by the faculty.

The description of the activity is as follows:

1. The data collection method was primary data collection.

2. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data, the framework of which was discussed by the faculty member.
3. The two target groups were the formal sector and the informal sector. Samples of the informal sector included daily wage earners, street vendors, and household help. The formal sector comprised the salaried group from private sector companies and government.
4. Information was collected by personally meeting the respondents.
5. The sample size was 20 from each sector.
6. The participants were informed about the objectives and confidentiality of personal information.

The students conducted the primary data collection and analysed the outcomes. Subsequently a report was submitted to the faculty.

1. For formal sector the following questions were considered:
 - a. To understand the changes in the saving pattern.
 - b. To find out the changes in the lifestyle, spending pattern for education, health.
 - c. To analyze work and personal life management during lockdown.
2. For Informal sector the questions taken up were:
 - a. To understand significant changes in the living standard during Covid -19 lockdown
 - b. To understand the basic problems with regard to education, food, and health.
 - c. To analyse financial management at the time of lockdown
 - d. To understand the challenges faced by the informal sector in accessing the daily essentials.

EXERCISE 2- ACADEMIC RESEARCH PROJECT FOR FINAL YEAR STUDENTS

The research project addressed to the final year students of Economics was- ‘The impact of Covid-19 on different sectors of the economy’. The students were provided a general framework to conduct the academic research project using the questionnaire method. They were formed into groups of 4-5 members to ensure teamwork, collaborative learning and to arrive at general consensus regarding the research problem. The student strength was 81 and 20 groups were created.

Description of the activity:

1. The students administered multiple choice questions using the Google forms platform.
2. Some of the questions were open-ended to elicit detailed responses.
3. The distribution of the questionnaire was through social media platforms, email and standard messaging services.
4. The sample size included a range of 40-60 respondents, random selection method was adopted.
5. The age group of the sample covered a broad spectrum, ranging between 18-20, 21-30, 31-40, and above 40 years.
6. The target group comprised of college students, working adults, housewives, senior citizens from different economic strata of the society.
7. The participants were informed about the objectives of this academic research project, confidentiality of results and findings.
8. A descriptive research method was used, pie diagrams, simple bar grams, tables were used for representation of data, averages and percentages were used for analysis of data.
9. The data was collected from primary sources.

From the study of the academic research projects submitted by the student groups, it is understood that the students have taken the initiative to examine and analyse the research problem from different perspectives. The following research questions were taken up by the student groups in consonance with the overall research problem. They are:

- a. To analyse and understand people's approach regarding various facets of life during Covid-19- financial, health, education and employment.
- b. To examine the changes in family expenditure, especially the middle and lower-income groups vis-a-vis basic necessities, medicine, technology-based products, hygiene products.
- c. To analyse household budget management through avenues like salary, withdrawal from savings or taking a loan.
- d. To analyse the impact of pandemic on different employment groups- manufacturing, services, domestic help, daily wage workers, private and public sector employees.

- e. To understand the challenges faced by self-employed individuals, small businesses, daily wage workers and migrant labour.
- f. To examine the impact of remote working on employee productivity and work-life balance.
- g. To study the mental well-being of employees in private sector companies and the facilities provided by the private sector companies during the pandemic like health insurance, health care facility, counselling etc.
- h. To understand whether facilities offered by the government-free vaccination through PHC, financial benefit schemes, were availed by the low-income groups.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the students submitted their reports, a Faculty guided discussion session was held for both the groups, to reflect upon their learning from experience, assimilate and understand their own learning. The discussions were focused on their personal learning, improvement in the understanding of the impact of Covid, its socio-economic effect, to name a few. This was undertaken to reinforce their learning. The students expressed the view that the exercise helped them to understand the reality more clearly, as the digital media perspective about the pandemic was impersonal. It made the students aware about real life concerns and problems, in a realistic perspective. The faculty assessed the field survey and the academic research project using the following benchmark:

1. Research related abilities
2. Analytical reasoning
3. Communication skill
4. Critical thinking

A Google form was circulated among the students with the aim of understanding the student perspective.

The table and figure given below are based on the google form questions given to first year and final year students of under graduation. Student's responses were analysed and the responses recorded for three questions are presented below.

Table 1. It has contributed to a better understanding of the topics taught in the classroom.

Year	Responses	Findings
First Year	 <p>A pie chart showing the distribution of responses for the First Year. The chart is divided into five segments: 'Strongly agree' (26.7%, blue), 'agree' (66.7%, orange), 'Neutral' (6.7%, grey), 'Disagree' (0%, yellow), and 'Strongly disagree' (0%, dark blue). A legend to the right of the chart identifies the colors for each response category.</p>	<p>93.3 % respondents expressed that the experience from the field survey helped them to understand the topics taught in class room better and 6.7% of respondents were neutral.</p>
Final Year	 <p>A pie chart showing the distribution of responses for the Final Year. The chart is divided into five segments: 'Strongly agree' (37.9%, blue), 'agree' (50.0%, orange), 'Neutral' (12.1%, grey), 'Disagree' (0%, yellow), and 'Strongly disagree' (0%, dark blue). A legend to the right of the chart identifies the colors for each response category.</p>	<p>87.9 % of the respondents agreed that the research project helped them to understand the topics taught in the classroom better.12.1% were neutral.</p>

Table 2. The project has increased the student’s understanding of people’s problems and current economic environment.

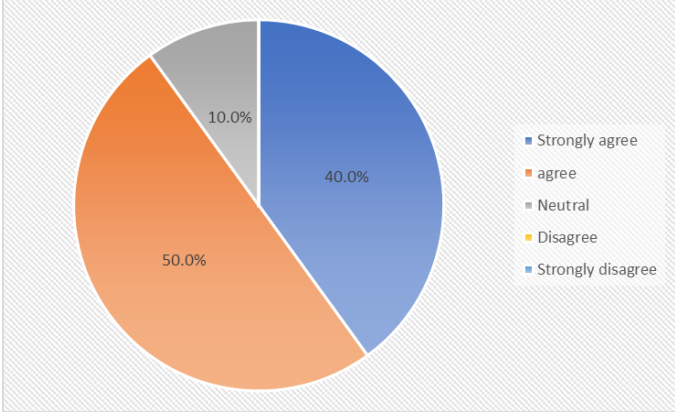
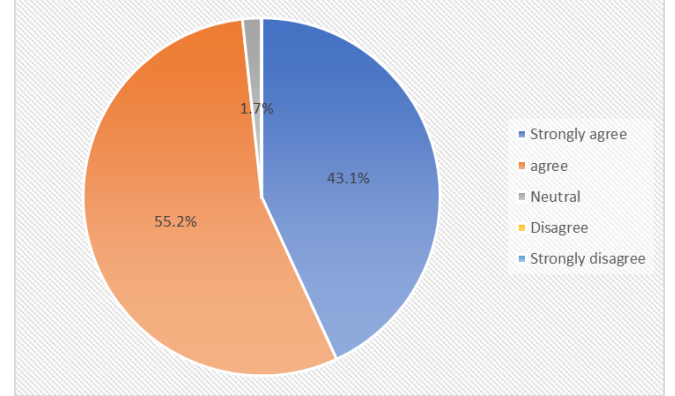
Year	Responses	Findings												
First Year	 <table border="1" data-bbox="384 600 1062 1010"> <caption>First Year Responses</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Strongly agree</td> <td>40.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>agree</td> <td>50.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neutral</td> <td>10.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strongly disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Strongly agree	40.0%	agree	50.0%	Neutral	10.0%	Disagree	0.0%	Strongly disagree	0.0%	<p>A large section (90%) of respondents expressed that they could understand people’s problems better. It provides a clear picture of the current economic environment.</p>
Response	Percentage													
Strongly agree	40.0%													
agree	50.0%													
Neutral	10.0%													
Disagree	0.0%													
Strongly disagree	0.0%													
Final Year	 <table border="1" data-bbox="384 1332 1062 1727"> <caption>Final Year Responses</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Strongly agree</td> <td>43.1%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>agree</td> <td>55.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neutral</td> <td>1.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strongly disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Strongly agree	43.1%	agree	55.2%	Neutral	1.7%	Disagree	0.0%	Strongly disagree	0.0%	<p>98.3 % respondents agreed on the view that the research gave a better picture of the current economic environment and people's problems.</p>
Response	Percentage													
Strongly agree	43.1%													
agree	55.2%													
Neutral	1.7%													
Disagree	0.0%													
Strongly disagree	0.0%													

Table 3. It has enabled the student to work independently and manage a project till completion [First year] / the project has helped the student to understand team dynamics and work in a team [Final year]

Year	Responses	Findings												
First Year	<table border="1"> <caption>Data for First Year Responses</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Strongly agree</td> <td>30.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>agree</td> <td>53.3%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neutral</td> <td>16.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strongly disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Strongly agree	30.0%	agree	53.3%	Neutral	16.7%	Disagree	0.0%	Strongly disagree	0.0%	<p>83.3% of the respondents agreed that they could work independently till the completion of the project. 16.7% of respondents were neutral.</p>
Response	Percentage													
Strongly agree	30.0%													
agree	53.3%													
Neutral	16.7%													
Disagree	0.0%													
Strongly disagree	0.0%													
Final Year	<table border="1"> <caption>Data for Final Year Responses</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Strongly agree</td> <td>41.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>agree</td> <td>55.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Neutral</td> <td>3.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strongly disagree</td> <td>0.0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Strongly agree	41.4%	agree	55.2%	Neutral	3.4%	Disagree	0.0%	Strongly disagree	0.0%	<p>96.6 % respondents were on the view that the project helped them to understand the team dynamics and team learning.</p>
Response	Percentage													
Strongly agree	41.4%													
agree	55.2%													
Neutral	3.4%													
Disagree	0.0%													
Strongly disagree	0.0%													

The students agreed on the view that the exercise helped to improve their communication skills, and that it contributed to better understanding of the topic taught in the classroom. The students were of the opinion that more projects could be taken up as an experiential learning exercise.

CONCLUSION

UG courses are taught in the traditional lecture pedagogy, which is important for students to understand concepts and lay a strong foundation. There is increasing literature that suggests

that experiential learning leads to more student engagement and contributes to an application-based learning.

As experiential learning is the process of learning from experience, it enables the student to connect classroom learning to real world experiences, as examined in the experiential learning project. It exposes the student to challenges, gives scope to think critically, reflect, develop ideas and take action.

It has brought to focus the necessity to prepare students to face real life situations, adapt and apply one's knowledge to such settings. As teachers it is necessary to introduce students to such processes, to improve the standard of instruction at higher education level. It is equally important to evaluate such adaptive learning strategies to assess students' level of flexibility in learning. It will help the teachers to explore various pedagogical tools to impart knowledge and improve upon it.

It is the need of the hour to promote student-centric learning. As students come from diverse socio- economic and cultural backgrounds, it is necessary to make the learning process engaging and suitable to current trends and concerns. Keeping in mind the interest of the students, curricula and pedagogical approaches have also changed over time. This analysis is one such experiment to focus on student centric learning and assessment by the faculty.

In the future, the faculty envisage incorporating an experiential learning component, asking students to apply economic ideas to answer questions, adopt a 'problem-solving' approach and arrive at solutions. Experiential learning projects can be framed using a problem, which becomes a problem-solving exercise with learning experience.

The above documented exercise has opened up opportunities for exploring more experiential learning methodology to make students more engaged learners and enhance learning outcomes along with better work and life skills.

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