Chapter 13: Experiential Learning In Classrooms

Buhle S. Nhlumayo[1]
Ifeoma R. Eze[2]

AFFILIATIONS
[1] University of South Africa
[2] BA ISAGO University, Gaborone Campus, Botswana

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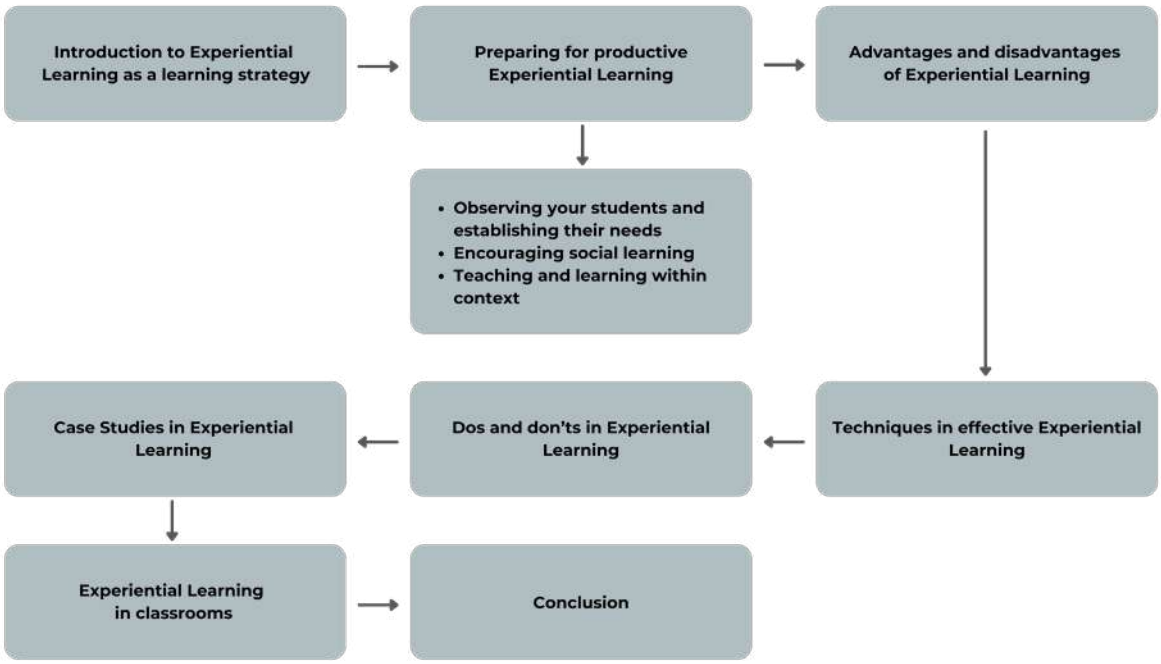
13.1. Concept Map



13.2. Learning Outcomes

This chapter aims to introduce teachers to the pedagogical strategy of experiential learning, as well as the advantages, disadvantages, and techniques to achieve the teaching and learning goals and objectives.
After reading the chapter, teachers are expected to be able to:

- Use experiential learning as a teaching strategy
- Identify the advantages and disadvantages of experiential learning
- Prepare for productive learning in experiential learning classrooms
- Employ the techniques of experiential learning for productive learning
- Recognise the 'dos' and 'don'ts' with respect to experiential learning

13.3. Clarification Of Key Terms

Experiential learning: An educational approach that emphasises personal or practical experience in the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes.
Concrete experience: Personal involvement in a particular experience.

13.4. Introduction To Experiential Learning As A Learning Strategy

Experiential learning, also referred to as involved or evidential learning, is a process in which new data is comprehended by the learner and transformed through experience (Kolb, 1984). It involves components such as skills, techniques, and the environment, which ensure that the learner gains relevant knowledge. In its simplest form, experiential learning refers to the construction of knowledge and meaning from real-life experiences (Yardley, Teunissen & Dornan, 2012). This type of learning also incorporates active and participatory elements, as the learner becomes an active participant in the lesson.

In the context of learning through experience, knowledge is activated by students' authentic experiences. Therefore, experiential learning is 'situated' in a context relevant to students' future careers. In this framework, the teacher creates a learning atmosphere that enhances the learner's capacity. It involves learning by doing, where students need to be personally involved in the learning process, making the content relatable to them. For knowledge to have substantial meaning and lead to changed behaviour, it must be discovered by the learner themselves.

In experiential learning, the strategy shifts from being teacher-centric to a model where the learner learns through experiences directly related to real-world problems (Bartle, 2015). This approach requires active participation from the learners. Hawtrey (2007) further describes experiential learning as participatory and situational learning. Dewey (1938) argued that without experience, something essential is missing in the learner's understanding, and that the starting point for all learning and education should be meaningful experiences.

For a type of learning to qualify as experiential learning, it must meet four characteristics: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, as illustrated in the Kolb learning model diagram below:

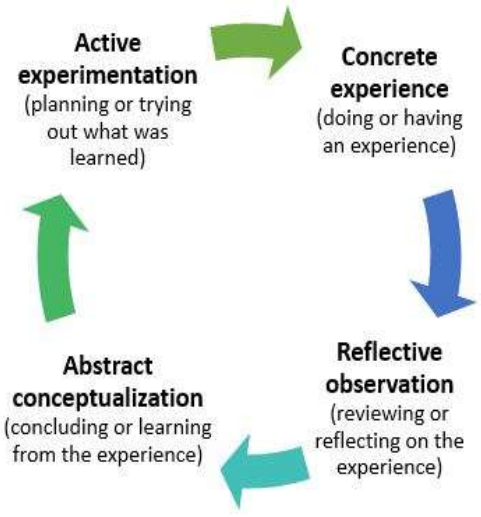


Figure 3.1 The Kolb Experiential Learning Model. Source: Kolb (1984)

As the cycle continues, the learner will have a new "concrete experience," and the process will begin anew, characterised by constant learning, reflection, and improvement. By learning in this practical manner, the teacher can expect to see higher retention of knowledge and a natural refinement of soft skills.

13.5. Preparing For Productive Experiential Learning

The best practices in instructional delivery require the teacher to prepare for the learning experience to ensure it yields the desired outcomes.

13.5.1. Observing your learners and establishing their needs

A teacher in an experiential classroom needs to observe their learners to establish their needs. Do the learners have any prior experience with the particular topic? At what level of maturity are they? What are the cultural variations among the learners? What types of diversity exist within the group? As the teacher prepares for a productive experiential learning experience, they must recognise that learners are different and have been raised in diverse environments, which will significantly impact their experiential learning outcomes.

13.5.2. Encouraging social learning

Social learning involves information sharing. When information is shared, it is repeated, and repetition enhances retention. Small group exercises, in-class mentoring, and learning networks—whether formal or informal—enable learners to exchange questions and ideas, creating memorable learning experiences.

13.5.3. Teaching and learning within context

A teacher seeks to create learning experiences that reflect the environment in which the learner will use the information. This means that the teacher presents information in a way that allows learners to construct meaning based on their own experiences. Sometimes referred to as contextual learning (Morris, 2020), this type of learning brings concrete experiences into the classroom, enabling the teacher to merge the learning content with the learners' experiences.

13.6. Advantages And Disadvantages Of Experiential Learning

13.6.1. Advantages of Experiential Learning

Each learning model has its strengths and weaknesses that often extend to its practical application. Some of these may have both positive and negative impacts on their application. Among the many advantages of experiential learning as a learning strategy, Krbec and Currie (2010) list the development of learners' interpersonal and communication skills, an understanding of course concepts, the promotion of a collaborative culture, the enhancement of listening skills, and the improvement of critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Experiential learning stimulates conversations, interactions, and engagements in class. For effective learning to take place, the teacher must foster the learner's desire to learn; therefore, the teacher needs to create a balance between the content to be taught and the strategy used when delivering that content. According to Senge (2006), learners only remember a fraction of what they are told. Thus, with experiential learning, learning becomes a real-world, subjective, reflective, and lived experience. With experiential learning, the learner becomes a participant in the process, which enhances the absorption and retention of knowledge. A significant advantage of experiential learning is that it assists learners in making connections between subjects, their knowledge and skills, and their personal goals (Hawtrey, 2007). Learners grasp concepts more easily, have the opportunity to become more creative, can reflect on their experiences, find value in their mistakes, and teachers often observe improved attitudes towards learning.

13.6.2. Disadvantages of Experiential Learning

One of the disadvantages of experiential learning is that it can be more time-consuming than a lecture. Spencer and Van Eynde (1986) indicate that experiential learning is more of a process than an event, involving sequences of activities in the classroom. The rationale behind this is that the entire learning process needs to begin with a concrete experience that other learners in the class may not possess. This calls upon the teacher or instructor to evaluate each learner's experience and connect it to the day's lesson or lecture. Experiential learning often requires patience and guidance from the teacher, as there may be more than one right answer to the questionsposed.

Another crucial disadvantage related to this form of instruction is that it is less applicable in subjects where students have little experience. In such cases, the teacher or instructor must use an example of structured experience and relate it to new content. On one hand, experiential learning is often excluded as an instructional delivery approach because many educators assume that what they need to impart will be entirely new to their students. On the other hand, Kolb (1984) points out that it is inadequate for teachers to assume that the learner's mind is as blank as the paper on which they design their lesson plans; every learner enters each learning situation with a more or less clear set of positions, views, and ideas about the topic at hand. Teachers need to develop the skill to

tap into those experiences for the experiential lesson to be effective. Furthermore, experiential learning may result in false conclusions based on learners' varied experiences.

13.7. Techniques In Effective Experiential Learning

There are several techniques that a teacher can use for effective experiential learning in the classroom. These techniques are grouped based on the following criteria:

13.7.1. Autobiographies

Lee and Caffarella (1994) suggest the use of autobiographies, where learners write down personal chronologies related to school and learning, as a way of creating their own experiences leading up to learning. Furthermore, teachers can adopt large group discussions, reflective journals, small group collaborations, and individual lifelines, where learners chronicle the history and development of their personal and professional viewpoints on critical issues.

13.7.2. Role plays and games

Lewis and Williams (1994) indicate that the following techniques of experiential learning are currently in use: role plays, games, case studies, critical events, socio-drama, and values clarification exercises. When these techniques are employed in class, learners find it easy to experiment with new behaviours and receive feedback in a secure learning environment. These experiential learning techniques help learners relate theory to practice and analyse their real-life experiences against the instructional content taught in class.

13.7.3. Field trips and interactive classroom games

In experiential learning, learners need to be engaged. Here are some activities that will ensure their involvement: field trips, art projects, science experiments, mock cities and trials, role-playing, reflection, internship opportunities, and interactive classroom games.

13.8. Dos And Don'ts In Experiential Learning

Experiential learning accelerates the learning process because a practical, hands-on approach is more effective and enduring than a theory-based one. Learners can comprehend the guiding ideas, practices, and processes, and they are able to experiment with and modify these practices to achieve the best results. However, experiential learning is constrained by the limitations imposed by those transferring knowledge. At times, rules can become restrictive, depriving learners of their free will and making them uncomfortable in their working environment. This can lead to hesitation when they attempt to implement their plans, ideas, and techniques in real-world situations. Experiential learning is beneficial only when material is applied in practical contexts. In other words, it enables students to engage in the learning process by exploring concepts and topics through real-world application and reflecting on the experiences gained. Thus, there is a need to highlight the "dos" and "don'ts" that should guide teaching and learning.

13.8.1. Dos

- **Emphasise understanding above rivalry:** Students should be encouraged to be empathetic rather than to see each other as rivals. Empathy is "the experience or understanding of another person's thoughts, feelings, and condition from his or her point of view, rather than from one's own." Practising empathy not only fosters kindness but also enables students to view the world from multiple perspectives.
- **Provide opportunities to investigate:** Students should be asked questions about life, such as "What does it mean to live a decent life?" or "What makes you happy?" in addition to history and maths studies. You may provide them with tools to better comprehend their internal states and feelings and give their education more purpose by engaging in open, reflective talks and involving them in other mind-searching exercises.
- **Set time for recreation and exercise:** Children are very energetic. Interactive play not only provides a variety of physical health benefits but also enhances attention span, memory, and interest in learning by activating and connecting various regions of the brain.

- **Make allowance for inquisitiveness:** Children naturally exhibit curiosity. If young people are to grow up to be useful, content adults, they must learn a great deal in a relatively short time. Be willing to answer seemingly foolish inquiries and handle all creative endeavours carefully and respectfully. Allow students the time to explore subjects and areas of their choosing to encourage curiosity, inventiveness, and a love of learning.
- **Build resilience by adopting a dynamic attitude:** Goals can be attained through diligence, commitment, and self-improvement, rather than being limited by one's current skills or knowledge. Teach your children how to set goals that are both realistic and challenging. Remember that maintaining a lively attitude as an adult also aids in your development as a teacher, enhancing the impact you have on your students (Lynch, 2019).

13.8.2. Don'ts

- **Do not create instability by changing rules and structure without cause:** Adaptability is critical, but it must be done in a thoughtful, intentional manner that doesn't undermine the sense of stability in the classroom. When making changes of any magnitude, make them clear to the class, provide specific reasoning, and stick to your changes for the sake of your students' feelings of security and consistency regarding academic standards and goals.
- **Do not harp on avoiding mistakes and failure:** Part of instilling a growth mindset involves addressing failure. Read more about what to do and what not to do when teaching students to overcome their fears of failure and making mistakes.
- **Do not confine learning to lesson plans or core curriculum:** Kids who don't want to learn won't learn. Sticking to the bare basics of lesson plans and curriculum may strip children of their natural passion for understanding and acquiring information. Foster excitement for learning by allowing kids to choose additional topics that they are most passionate about.
- **Do not take a one-size-fits-all approach:** Learning styles vary widely from child to child, from class to class, and from school year to school year. Take time to reflect on your teaching style and consider making necessary changes, such as finding new ways to use technology for your students' benefit.
- **Do not make rote memorization the only way to succeed:** While memorisation has a place in learning, it is far from the best method for succeeding in school and beyond. Relying too heavily on memorisation stunts creativity and the ability to integrate knowledge in innovative ways (Lynch, 2019).

13.9. Case Studies In Experiential Learning

Case study 1: Mrs Chat is a form 3 food and nutrition teacher at St Mary's Girls Grammar School.

The class consists of 10 students, and the topic for the next lesson was "How to Bake a Cake." She began by asking the following questions: How many of you like eating cake? Who among you has baked cakes or cookies before? She then assigned 5 students to create a list of the ingredients they would need, while the other 5 were tasked with making a list of the utensils and equipment required for baking. After that, the students were asked to nominate 5 of their peers to go and buy all the items they had listed, which included flour, eggs, sugar, fat (usually butter), salt, a form of liquid (usually milk), and leavening agents (such as baking soda), as well as measuring cups, wooden spoons, an egg whisk, and kitchen scissors.

Case study 2: How to Bake a Cake (Mrs. Chat took her students to the Cookery Laboratory, gave them all they needed, posted the instructions below, and asked the students to bake the cake in groups of two)

The first stage is to prepare the baking pans, followed by allowing the ingredients to reach room temperature and then preheating the oven. The second stage involves stirring together the dry ingredients while mixing the butter and sugar. Then, add the eggs bit by bit, alternating with the addition of dry and wet ingredients. Finally, pour the batter into the pans and bake.

13.10. Experiential Learning In Classrooms

Experiential learning is the process of education where students "learn by doing." It allows them to think critically about their assignments and fully understand the principles they are learning. This approach provides students with opportunities for practical learning that promotes their overall development. As they apply their newly acquired theoretical knowledge, experiential learning ensures their active involvement in the learning process. Retention of knowledge is likely to be higher when students actively participate. Moreover, through exposure to

real-world events, experiential learning equips students with the skills they need to tackle challenges as they arise. It is crucial for helping students develop their skills and increase their competency. With an enhanced ability to handle a variety of situations, students will have an advantage in their future endeavours. The concept of experiential learning is gaining popularity as schools move away from rote learning towards more practical approaches. Experiential learning, in contrast to traditional methods, fosters a practical learning ecosystem. We must incorporate experiential learning into our educational pedagogies. Below are some examples of experiential learning:

- You can learn about processes like photosynthesis by independently observing plants.
- Visit a zoo in person to observe animals and gain an understanding of their way of life.
- To gain a better understanding of how domesticated birds are raised, visit poultry farms.
- Visit an aviation hangar to learn about how specific airplanes operate (Bordia, 2022).

Experiential Learning can be integrated into pedagogical methodologies in the following ways:
Incorporating experiential learning into the learning process of students can significantly influence how they learn. Students often have a better understanding of the topics when experiential learning is incorporated since they are actively involved in the learning process. They are able to observe and feel multiple facets of a notion and apply those facets to their everyday life. Experiential learning can be applied in a variety of ways in the classroom; it can create a lasting effect on the students. As a teacher, you can have your students participate in several activities that aid in their understanding of concepts. To offer students a broader understanding of the issues you are covering, try to identify activities that revolve around them. After this, encourage them to come up with a creative way to apply the principle. This enables students to express their creativity while also allowing the teacher to understand how they have viewed the subject.

As was already mentioned, a key responsibility of teachers is to find situations that require students to think critically, cooperate, and solve problems. Decide what the pupils should discover or acquire because of the learning experience. Here are some key ideas to keep in mind when incorporating experiential learning into your instruction.

- **Plan:** Once the experiential learning activity has been chosen, plan it by connecting it to the course learning objectives and identifying the requirements for students to be successful, such as resources like readings, worksheets, research materials, rubrics, supplies, and directions to off-campus locations. Determine the logistics as well. How long will the students have to complete the experience? Will it be a full class period, a week, or longer? Do pupils have extracurricular obligations? What will happen at the end of the activity? Which assessment techniques will you use? Will you conduct ongoing evaluations through journals and observations (known as formative assessment), evaluations after the experience through written reports and projects, evaluations of oneself and/or others, or a combination of all three?
- **Prepare:** Prepare resources, rubrics, and assessment tools once the planning is complete, ensuring everything is ready before the experience begins.
- **Facilitate:** Like the majority of instructional techniques, the instructor should initiate the activity. Once instruction has begun, you shouldn't continue by providing students with all the course material, details, and comprehensive responses to their queries. Instead, assist students in the process of identifying and choosing **answers on their own.**
- **Evaluate:** Discussions, reflections, and a debriefing session can be used to evaluate the success of an experiential learning exercise. Debriefing can help prolong and reinforce learning by serving as a culminating experience. Additionally, utilise the previously planned assessment strategies (Northern Illinois University Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2012).

13.11. Conclusion

Experiential learning is a process that enables students and learners to acquire knowledge and experience by completing assignments. It involves taking notes, conducting analyses, creating summaries, and applying the knowledge gained. By fostering problem-solving, judgment, and critical thinking skills, experiential learning equips students for real-world situations. It takes many forms, including in-studio performances, community-based research, internships, and fieldwork. Through these diverse methods, experiential learning helps students prepare for opportunities in the real world, contributing to its growing popularity over the past several years.

13.12. Reflective Questions

1. Explain experiential learning in your own words.
2. What are the advantages of using experiential learning in the classroom?
3. List any three techniques you would employ in experiential learning.
4. What are the dos and don'ts in an experiential learning lesson?

13.13. Reflective Answers

1. This is the type of learning that occurs through experience and is more narrowly defined as learning through reflection or doing.
2. Learners can better grasp concepts that you teach and have the opportunity to be more creative and to reflect.
3. These can include outdoor group activities, team building, field trips, simulations, role-playing, case studies, and project-based learning activities.
4. Allow learners to ask questions and to investigate, and do not confine learning to lesson plans or core curriculum, but allow them to share their experiences.

13.14. Activity

Design an experiential lesson in your field or subject. Use the following as a guide to prepare your lesson plan: introduction, exploration (doing it), sharing (what happened?), processing (what is important?), generalising (so what?), application (now what?), assessment, and self-evaluation.

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