EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is a philosophy of education based on the work of several 20th century scholars who gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development (e.g., John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers).

"People grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of challenge and support." (Kegan, 1994)

In the early 1980s, educators began to explore how Experiential Learning Theory, and its six principles, could be used to enhance learning in higher education (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005):

1. Learning is a process, not an outcome—learners should be engaged in a learning process, including feedback on the effectiveness of their efforts.

2. All learning is relearning—the learning process draws out learners' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined and refined or modified.

3. Conflict resolution—disagreement and differences drive the learning process.

4. Holistic process—learning is not just the result of cognition, but the functional integration of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.

5. Transactions between the individual and the environment—the learning process takes place in social and physical contexts.

6. Creating knowledge—learners actively construct their understanding and knowledge.

From this perspective, learning is an iterative process involving experience and reflection on that experience. According to Dewey, "Learning takes place when a

"Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience...the process and goal of education are one and the same thing." (Dewey, 1938)

person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity." An instructor can utilize this powerful process by incorporating specific and purposeful experiences in the classroom and prompting students with specific reflective exercises so they can draw meaning from course content.

An experience can take place at the level of exposure, participation, or immersion, and there are several different kinds of experiences an instructor can implement in a course. Some pedagogies and teaching approaches have been identified as particularly conducive to experiential learning as they address most or all of the principles of

"When learning is conceived as a holistic adaptive process, it provides conceptual bridges across life situations such as school and work, portraying learning as a continuous, lifelong process." (Kolb, 1984)

the Experiential Learning Theory. These include laboratory work, field trips, problem-based learning, reflective writing, content-creation, undergraduate research, events where students present their knowledge to the community, computer assisted instruction, community service, workplace learning, peer mentoring, and internships (Kolb & Kolb, 2015; Smart & Csapo, 2007).

Similarly, there are several different ways an instructor can support the iterative loop between experience and reflection

"Students remember only a fraction of what they hear but a majority of what they actively do." (Hawtrey, 2007)

on that experience for students, including facilitating debriefs or seminars, assigning reflective journaling, or introducing relevant or further content and prompting a synthesis between the experience and the new content. When choosing the experience, an instructor needs to think about what kinds of experiences their students

> *"Adult learners bring to the learning setting a wealth of prior experience and are eager to draw upon their background and previous learning in the classroom." (Lewis & Williams, 1994)*

might be ready for. The best learning will happen when the experience evokes just the right amount of tension or dissonance, which is then followed by a purposeful reflective exercise in the classroom. Across the many studies analyzed, mean failure rates dropped from 34% (traditional lecturing) to 22% (active learning), and learning gains showed significant improvement when looking at exam scores and concept inventory performance (Freeman et al., 2014).

The many existing literature reviews have also highlighted the variety in the methodological designs employed across individual studies, and it has been indicated that relatively few studies employ methodologies that permit generalization of results, or the establishment of a causal inference between events.

COURSES & STUDENT ENROLMENT:

Numerous studies on the effectiveness of experiential learning pedagogies have been conducted over the past decades. Because Experiential Learning Theory is a holistic theory of learning, research in this field is highly interdisciplinary and addresses learning and educational issues in virtually all education levels and disciplines. Research in higher education, in particular, spans, but is

> *"Methods and techniques that utilize learners' previous experiences, link conceptual foundations to practice, and encourage reflection are pivotal to the learning process." (Lewis & Williams, 1994)*

not restricted to, disciplines such as management, education, business, science and engineering, the arts, second language education, information sciences, psychology, health disciplines, accounting, law, agriculture, etc. Experiential learning has been implemented and studied in classes with varied student enrolments, from low (around 20 students) to high (500 plus students).

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT:

Different qualitative and quantitative meta-analysises of the existing literature have highlighted the following:

BENEFITS:

- Improved academic performance
- Increased student interest and focus on learning topics and tasks
- Improved oral and written communication
- Faster content knowledge acquisition
- Reduced gap between theory and practice
- Increased student engagement
- Higher retention of course materials
- Enables personalized learning opportunities
- Promotes critical thinking and problem solving skills

LIMITATIONS:

- Insufficient/inadequate educational spaces and equipment
- Class management challenges
- Lack of instructor training or experience
- Traditional assessment practices require revision

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

For a complete list of references and resources, please visit: **flexible.learning.ubc.ca/experiential-references**