

# **STUDENT PERCEPTIONS TOWARD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES: INPUTS FOR CLOSING THE LOOP AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

Engaging students in the learning process to facilitate deeper understanding and overall learning is the desire and challenge of all educators. Experiential learning activities are one such approach for stimulating engagement, but it is not clear if students perceive these activities or other approaches as contributing factors to their learning. This study evaluates the flow of learning sequences based on student reflections and responses to experiential activity embedded into the curriculum. Empirical results reveal a consolidation of experiential learning stages versus other prominent studies as well as significant evidence for the relationship between experiential learning stages, approaches to learning, and perceived learning.

## **Introduction**

More than ever, today's college students want to be engaged in and outside of the classroom. today's professors have to respond to this trend by providing opportunities for more engaging, experiential assignments and projects that not only increase the students' level of involvement in the material, but also contribute to the development of critical thinking skills (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, Munoz and Huser, 2008) and better performance on examinations (Hamer 2000; Yoder and Hochevar, 2005). In addition, experiential exercises used in marketing classes have been found to help create appreciation toward the subject even among students with different majors (Munoz and Huser, 2008). The importance of experiential learning is also highlighted by AACSB and their accreditation standards that require enhancement of experiential learning in higher business education. In varying degrees colleges have been integrating experiential learning into the business curriculum in particular, with inclusion ranging from in-class exercises to required activities outside of the classroom. A college in the Northeast has adopted the latter process and was studied to understand student perceptions of this major change to the curriculum which requires all regularly scheduled, four credit, undergraduate courses to incorporate experiential learning. Core to this policy entitled "Course Enrichment Component" (CEC) is a minimum of five hours of outside-the-classroom assignments and/or activities that enhance student in class learning. An assessment of this CEC was conducted in February, 2011 to monitor progress and evaluate changes made to the curriculum. Findings from the student survey were informative and led to the desire to understand specifically, how marketing

undergraduates perceive experiential learning. Focus of this nature will allow continuous improvement to the marketing curriculum and leverage the voice of the customer who, in this case, is the undergraduate marketing students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study reviews issues that arise from implementing a relative uniform experiential policy, specifically within the marketing curriculum and assesses related student attitudes and perceptions with regard to such policy and the associated experiential activities. Assessment was conducted via a survey administered only to marketing students. Major experiential learning frameworks were utilized in the assessment tool to replicate and compare findings with previous studies. Additionally, hypotheses regarding effectiveness were developed and tested to inform and ideally improve the marketing experiential components. Discussion on the tested hypotheses and assessment follows the next section which reviews experiential learning in general, within the service environment, and marketing education.

### **Experiential and Experiential Service Learning**

One of the leading frameworks that have been applied extensively in experiential education in general and in marketing education in particular is the experiential learning framework of Kolb (1984). The model involves four stages of experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As Kolb & Kolb (2005) point out, experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that uses the tension existing among the four diametrically opposed learning modes, which constantly change based on the context. It is also argued that in order for an experiential activity to be considered a successful learning tool, it has to be planned carefully to incorporate multiple aspects of the Kolb (1984) learning cycle (Young et al. 2008). These experiential learning processes extend to service learning as well (Tonkar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen, 2006; Petkus, 2000) and provide additional dimensions to a positive and enhanced experiential learning outcome.

### **Experiential Assessment with Business Students**

Marketing education literature suggests various projects such as business simulation, role playing, and field trips for example, have experiential value (Anselmi & Frankel, 2004; Daly, 2001; Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, & Mayo, 2000; Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000). The literature also posits use of Kolb's experiential learning cycle to aid in the development, implementation and assessment of experiential learning (Petkus, 2000) in addition to integration

of the learning cycle stages to increase student engagement and learning as a result (Wood & Suter, 2004). The basic question is, after careful planning, development, and assessment (Petkus, 2000) is several hours of outside of the classroom activity beneficial for students, and if so, in what way? The following research was designed to explore this question further, specifically among marketing students, and test the related hypotheses.

### **Research Design**

Young et al. (2008) developed an experiential learning evaluation approach using Kolb's experiential learning theory and student approaches to Learning theory. Based on the two theories, Young et al. examined experiential learning process by focusing on the relationships among experiential learning stages, deep approach to learning, surface approach to learning, and perceived learning. They argue that the difference between deep or surface approach to learning lies in the difference between the type of motivation students have when they complete the specific task and the strategy they employ in the process. This study examines the flow of learning sequences including experiential learning stages, approaches to learning, and perceived learning as a parsimonious approach. The following hypotheses were developed.

H1: Experiential learning stages are significantly related to approach to learning.

H2: Approach to learning is significantly related to perceived learning.

A survey questionnaire was created based on the Young et al. (2008) study and the Seleb scale (Toncar et al., 2006) and some items were modified to measure three steps (experiential learning stages, approach to learning, and perceived learning).

### **Findings and Discussion**

First, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was run to assess the measurement properties of the scales. Several items with factor loadings lower than 0.6 were deleted and a 3-factor solution of 16 items was identified. All measures demonstrate good reliability with alpha values of .88, .92, and .94. EFA analysis indicates that the four constructs are one factor and the findings are consistent with Young's study (2008). Thus, the findings indicate that experiential learning stages include three stages (concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization).

Next, the overall validity of the measurement model was tested using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The CFA results indicate an acceptable fit for the data with  $\chi^2 = 159.8$ ,  $df =$

101, CMIN = 1.58,  $p$ -value = .000, CFI= .96, RMSEA = .07, and TLI= .95. The CFI and TLI exceed the recommended cut-off value of 0.9 and the RMSEA is lower than the cut-off value of 0.08. Further, construct validity is evaluated based on the factor loading estimates, construct reliabilities, variance extracted percentages and inter-construct correlations (Hair et al., 2006). The results indicate that the convergent validity of the model is supported and good reliability is also established.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was also run to examine the overall theoretical model specification and the hypotheses. The SEM results indicate a satisfactory fit of data. The path of Hypothesis 1 indicates that experiential learning stages are significantly and positively related to approach to learning ( $\beta=.76$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The path of H2 indicates that approach to learning have a significant positive effect on perceived learning ( $\beta=.89$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Thus, all hypotheses are supported. The results also indicate that experiential learning explains 51% of approach to learning by the items and the approach to learning explains 63% of the perceived learning by the items.

### **Limitations and Conclusions**

This study examines three steps of learning process in experiential learning activities using previous research findings and learning theories. The findings explain several important factors. First, active experimentation is not included in experiential learning stages. Second, experiential learning stages significantly influence approach to learning and the approach to learning affects perceived learning. Thus, by increasing concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization, students can increase their motivation in approach to learning stage. When thinking of the best marketing CEC assignment, students perceive that it does provide them with an opportunity to go through all stages of Kolb's (1984) model and as a result they think that the assignment increased their knowledge and abilities including leadership, personal growth, communication, and people's skills. Kolb's (1984) introduced four stages of experiential learning. However, the data analysis indicates that the four stages are one factor loading. Thus, other factors should be considered to measure antecedents of approach to learning.

References available upon request