

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: HISTORY, THEORY, AND APPLICATIONS

ABSTRACT

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In the academic arena, there has been an increasing interest in experiential learning with faculty, administrators, and employers across disciplines considering experiential education a way to revitalize curricula and to cope with the challenges facing higher education today. Experiential learning emphasizes the importance of practical experience over more traditional instructional approaches. It provides "hands-on" learning where students apply what they learn in class to a real-world situation. Instructors assume the role of facilitators of learning rather than the role of dispensers of knowledge and wisdom. As such, teachers facilitate adult learners in the process of learning from their own experiences. Social interaction (teamwork) is seen as another important facilitator of learning. Proponents of experiential learning assert that experiential learning embodies the natural learning process of human beings and, consequently, may be more effective than traditional methods (lectures) in increasing basic achievement outcomes. Mounting evidence indicates that experiential learning can prove to be a valued and effective vehicle for learning, which makes it an indispensable learning tool today and in the future.

This paper provides an assessment of experiential learning in the field of business. First, a brief historical overview is given to show that higher education in the United States of America has a long-standing tradition with respect to experiential learning methods. A discussion of theories that underlie the concept of experiential learning follows (John Dewey 1938; Kurt Lewin 1951; Jean Piaget 1952; David Kolb 1984). Building on a very strong historical and theoretical tradition, the paper then provides an assessment of experiential learning as it is applied in the field of business today. This

overview includes studies that were conducted in the academic business environment as well as studies that were done in organizations and institutions in the U.S. and the international business world. These studies suggest that experiential learning may have positive effects on 1) conceptual understanding, 2) the application, integration, and retention of knowledge, 3) analytical and strategic thinking, 4) communication and interpersonal skills, 5) creative, independent and critical thinking, 6) involvement, participation, and interest, as well as on 7) self-understanding and personal development. Some studies report very tangible outcomes of experiential learning projects, such as jobs and portfolios that students can take with them to job interviews. Lastly, challenges to experiential learning are discussed.

For references and further information please contact the author at the above address.