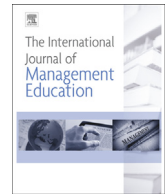




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Managing emotions: A case study exploring the relationship between experiential learning, emotions, and student performance



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ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that experiential education contributes to enhancing students' workplace readiness and employability. Business schools have responded by embedding experiential learning opportunities, ranging from work placements to live client projects, throughout curriculum. This case study synthesizes research and theory from education and psychology to conceptualize how experiential learning in management education facilitates emotional engagement and learning. We proceed to pilot a conceptual model through a content analysis of reflective journals from an experiential course at an undergraduate business school. This case study suggests that student-goal orientation plays an important role in predicting emotional response, regulation and, ultimately, performance within an experiential learning environment. In addition, this study identifies that interdependency inherent within team-based experiential learning is a critical trigger of negative emotions. This suggests that the educational value of experiential learning is focused on how students learn to regulate and adapt to negative emotions, while maintaining a focus on performance.

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"Experience is the most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my god do you learn"

C.S. Lewis

1. Introduction

Administrators, policy makers, and scholars have debated the value of experience in management education since the release of the [Gordon & Howell \(1959\)](#) and [Pierson \(1959\)](#) reports ([AACSB, 2013](#); [Koontz, 1961](#); [Vince, 1998](#)). In fact, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) contends that experience and relevance of management education are inextricably interlinked ([AACSB, 2002](#); [AACSB, 2013](#)). [Kolb's \(1984\) experiential learning theory \(ELT\)](#) has emerged as the leading theoretical framework to examine the transformation of experience into learning ([Kayes, 2002](#)). [Kayes](#)

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(2002) noted that over 1500 refereed articles, dissertations and papers have studied ELT to gain additional insight into the underlying processes of how experience contributes to student learning. Kolb asserted that experiential learning extends beyond mere cognition as it also incorporates feeling, observing, and behaving through “synergetic transactions between the person and the environment” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195). Similarly, numerous researchers have identified the critical role that emotions – positive or negative – play in the learning process (Fiske, 2002; Lindsay, 1992; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Petkus, 2000; Spelman, 2010; Vince, 1998). It is the exploration of interaction between experiential learning and emotion that is the central goal of our case study.

We synthesize research and theory from experiential education and psychology to conceptualize how experiential learning in management education facilitates emotional engagement and student performance. Specifically, we support the contention of Vince (1998) by conceptually extending Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning theory* to integrate the influence of emotions into the learning process. Specifically, we build on both *achievement-goal theory* (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999) and Pekrun et al.'s (2006) *control-value theory*. We chose to use case study method to explore the relationship between experiential learning and emotion because, as Gibbert, Ruigrok, and Wicki (2008) stated, “case studies seek to study phenomena in their contexts, rather than independent of context” (p. 1466). In this case study, we examine four associated hypotheses through an exploratory content analysis of reflective journals from a senior experiential course at an undergraduate business school. Our study concludes by discussing both the theoretical and practical implications of our contribution and direction for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Experiential learning

Management scholars have long contended that the acquisition of theory by management students is not a sufficient learning outcome (Koontz, 1961; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). Rather, it is the application of this theory through direct experience that leads to the development of crucial management competencies such as interpersonal skills (Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004; Chowdhury, Endres, & Lanis, 2002); critical thinking (Chonko, 2004; Young, 2005), workplace readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008) and professional confidence (Overton, Kelly, McCalister, Jones, & MacVicar, 2009). In fact, the AACSB has long identified the value of experiential learning, as “outward-facing curricula and experiential education can create the critical intersection between classroom and business learning that keeps faculty and students connected to rapidly changing business models” (AACSB, 2002, p. 20). Therefore, management educators must develop and deliver meaningful learning processes (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007) to enable students to engage in deeper learning that enhances their understanding of themselves and develops self-assurance that employers seek. To accomplish this, scholars contend that management education should provide students with opportunities to critically reflect on their experiences and emotions (Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011; Spelman, 2010; Vince, 1998).

Experiential learning is based on the perspective that learning is a holistic process that incorporates all our life experiences (Houle, 1980; Kolb, 1984). To learn, people should engage in higher-order thinking to personalize new information and encounters (Hamer, 2000; Kayes, 2002). It is this perspective that became the foundation of Kolb's highly influential experiential learning theory (Kayes, 2002). ELT is founded on the position that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). As such, people enter into any learning opportunity, whether formal or informal, with a vast array of experiences that influence how they will process new experiences (Boud & Walker, 1991; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Thus, Miettinen (1998) contended that the value of ELT is that it “combines spontaneity, feelings and deep individual insights with the possibility of rational thought and reflection” (p. 170). As such, experiential learning is an integrative process and not merely an outcome (Kayes, 2002; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Vince, 1998).

Experiential learning has the potential to lead to transformational learning. Thus, a central element to experiential learning is not simply the experience, but rather it is also reflecting about the experience and how to make meaning from it (Kolb, 1984). As a holistic process, Kolb asserted that transformational learning is an intersection of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 1984). Reflecting upon everyday experiences is the way that the majority of people enhance their knowledge (Smith, 2001) and critical evaluation about what one is experiencing, or has experienced, is therefore a pathway to learning. Crawford (2005) referred to this as attentive experience. As such, reflection is essential for transforming experience into learning and allows one to question the validity and usefulness of experiences (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Scott, 2010; Sheehan, McDonald, & Spence, 2009). Mezirow (1998) described this as a deeply personal process, as people need to question not only their understanding of an experience, but reflect upon their inner selves as well. Transforming experience into learning therefore requires a “critical reflection of assumptions” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185) which goes beyond merely thinking about what one has experienced and supports a level of deep analysis that allows a person to bring beliefs to a conscious level of awareness through meaningful self-reflection. Specific to management education, scholars contend that reflection supports a student's ability to integrate theory with practice in a personalized, meaningful way (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Scott, 2010; Sheehan et al., 2009; Varner & Peck, 2003). Therefore, “experience is often synonymous with emotions and their deeper meaning” (Kayes, 2002, p. 139). However, this interaction between experiential learning and emotions in the context of management education has had limited examination and therefore warrants further attention (Lindsay, 1992).

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