

Experiential Learning: rationale, approaches and implications for practice in Events Management and Hospitality courses

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Keywords: *experiential learning, active learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, work-based learning*

Rationale and context

Experiential education is about linking real-life to learning through the process of reflection. It has been interpreted in a number of different ways over the years, however many of these interpretations come back to Confucius, who said 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand' (McDonald and McDonald, 2000; Feinstein et al, 2002; Bevan and Kipka, 2012; Kolb et al, 1974). It is a concept that is adopted by educators and trainers, and is represented at every level of education, from pre-school to high-school, tertiary and beyond (Fourcade and Go, 2011; Bevan and Kipka, 2012; Lashley, 1999). The many different contexts in which this type of learning can be found provides a rich tapestry of practice that can be considered.

Experiential learning is a well-established approach in higher education that is reflected in many existing hospitality and events management programmes (Chi and Gursoy, 2009; Busby and Fiedel, 2001); how well it is utilised and how it compares to other approaches is an issue that needs to be explored. The nature of higher education is changing. The drive for greater globalisation, along with the commoditisation of higher education in the UK is pushing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure they are meeting the needs of the market in new and innovative ways (Gibbs, 2001).

The requirements of today's graduates seems to be changing; employers and graduates are now more focused on the practical skills required to succeed in the workplace, which arguably requires a 'new type of knowledge' (Hager, 2000; Gibbs, 2001). This is equally recognisable in hospitality and events management (Lawrence and McCabe, 2001). The need for vocational skills is already reflected in the delivery of courses, with a strong focus on enabling practical experience (Busby and Fiedel, 2001). Employability skills, practical knowledge and contact with industry are now also reflected in the requirements of all UK Undergraduate courses (QAA, 2008).

Approaches to Experiential Learning

The roots and foundation of Experiential Learning come from the work of Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984). Both authors emphasise the important role that experience can bring to learning, especially in adult learning. Particular relevance is given to Kolb's Learning Cycle, which outlines the four stages that need to be considered for effective learning to take place: Concrete experience; Reflection; Abstract conceptualisation; Active experimentation.

Experiential Learning is interpreted in a variety of ways, which can sometimes make it difficult to interpret. Different authors have provided pervasive and wide ranging definitions that cover a huge variety of techniques (Henry, 1989). Many of these represent similar key themes, and so despite the different terminology, it is possible to consider the important aspects that need to be considered. Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) outline five approaches for experiential learning: Active Learning; Problem-based Learning; Project-Based Learning; Service-learning; Place-based Learning. These five approaches will be used as a framework with which to analyse and discuss the different aspects of experiential learning.

Experiential Learning in practice

There has to be a foundation of **active learning**, which facilitates a deep learning approach (Biggs and Tang, 2011). This approach consists of tasks that allow the student to interact with the subject, and therefore move away from passive learning where they simply see and hear information that is presented before them. This can be reflected in a variety of ways, in all areas of the curriculum, through such techniques as: role playing; article summaries; work sheets; "Think-Pair-Share"; debates; projects; and case studies (Wolfe, 2006). Active Learning is about adopting teaching strategies that require students to engage with the material. The first step involves generating an experience and/or facilitating reflection on that experience or prior experience.

There is an argument to support the use of role play (Ruhanen, 2005). In light of some of the risk that real-life experiences pose, not all students are always prepared for the task, leading to confusion, team conflict, communication breakdowns and apathy (McDonald and McDonald, 2000). The use of simulation becomes easier with the increased use of technology. Douglas et al. (2007) state how it is becoming increasingly possible to recreate real-world problems in a virtual environment. The study focused on hospitality business planning and found that students enjoyed the virtual 'games', but highlighted that they must still be linked to the real-world. While advocating greater use of simulation, they discuss how important it is that students be familiar with the virtual environment, otherwise there is the risk that these exercises can exclude some groups. Avramenko (2011) provides a discussion of the use of business simulation in management courses, and finds that it is an effective way to boost confidence in students, as well as the 'soft' employability skills so

desired by employers. As methods like role-plays and simulations are introduced, they begin to be more focused on specific problems, and therefore develop more and more into a problem-based learning approach.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an approach that involves the in-depth investigation of authentic problems. Rather than being content-focused, PBL allows students to construct their own knowledge, by focusing on a problem they need to solve. It therefore develops the skills of reasoning and observation as opposed to the recollection of facts. It has been widely adopted in other subject disciplines, medicine being a well-known example (Courneya, 2001). Studies that look at effective PBL consistently highlight the need for it to be focused on practical, real-life issues (Courneya, 2001; Farmer, 2001; Gilbert and Foster; 1997). The reliance on small groups means that a clear cost-benefit analysis is important in the implementation of a problem-based learning module, as it can often be perceived to be 'resource heavy' in its requirements. There is a risk that PBL activities can be perceived as being largely paper-based exercises, which can cause frustrations among students. This is why it is important to focus on real world problems. The case study undertaken by Gilbert and Foster (1997) found a successful way to make the activities feel more real - and therefore improve engagement with students - with the use of actors, trained to behave as a real patient, who is then followed through diagnosis and treatment by the class. In a study focused on hospitality management, Zwaal and Otting (2010) discuss the effect a structured process has on the problem-solving skills of students. Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) emphasise the need for a structured system to facilitate the process.

Project-based learning takes problem-based learning further, in that students work on either a directed project, or develop a project of their own. While usually undertaken alongside other learning activities or modules, projects will be more significant and as such, more time consuming. This may therefore involve the solution to multiple problems and take an even more realistic approach. Ball (1995) outlines an example used for a BA Hotel and Catering Business course, and emphasised the value of using real world projects, with the students addressing a genuine business need for a real client. Using real life projects can help maintain student interest and enjoyment, however it is not without risk. The danger is that, with real-life clients comes real responsibility, and so there is always the potential of real failure. It is this reality check that students respond to, as they feel like they are finally able to apply their existing knowledge, as well as explore new skills. In the author's own experience of using projects in an events management field, third-year undergraduate students propose, plan, execute and evaluate an event of their choosing in order to further the organisational aims of a real-life client from the Charitable sector. Students enjoy and appreciate the feeling of being 'out there' in the real world; although this is protected to some degree by a level of support provided by the tutor.

Service-based learning may seem to be a more unfamiliar term, as it is a concept largely constrained to the United States, however it uses familiar ideas. Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) go beyond defining it as simply volunteering, as they state there must be sufficient emphasis on the learning; it is seen as a way of enhancing student learning by providing them with activities within the community. Nandan (2010) highlights that projects should address both student and community needs.

Place-based learning is defined by Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) as ‘learning from particular places’; there is a focus on engaging students in the links between learning, place and sense of place. It is akin to work-based learning, in which the workplace itself is the arena for experiential learning. **Work-based learning** could be seen as a more economic or efficient solution when compared to project- or problem-based learning, given that some of the resources required to facilitate the experience are provided by the employer or placement provider. Littlejohn and Watson (2004) outline the desire of hospitality employers to see more work-based learning reflected in higher education curriculums, as it is seen to enhance the quality of graduates. This is supported by Lee (2007), who identifies some of the skills that reflect the employability requirements of courses, such as self-confidence; teamwork; communication; problem-solving and social skills. To be successful, it is important that learning projects encompass the course’s knowledge base and learning objectives (Papamarcos, 2002). There should also be an emphasis on activities that require involvement, energy, responsibility and student participation (McDonald and McDonald, 2000).

Implications for hospitality and events management

The vocational nature of Hospitality and Events Management lends itself very nicely to experiential components, and this is reflected in the already well-established approaches that are apparent in many hospitality and event management courses (Busby and Fiedel, 2001). However, these current approaches can sometimes be somewhat isolated, and so a more coherent approach is needed. This could be achieved by looking at course design in light of experiential learning approaches; ensuring that these are embedded throughout the curriculum. Where Experiential Learning is included, it needs to adopt certain principles. It should:

- Use a problem-solving process
- Address real world problems, using real people where possible
- Facilitate reflection
- Encourage student interaction with each other and the content
- Use an unfamiliar physical environment, but a structured social environment by utilising small groups.

Embedding experiential learning within course design holds implications for tutors, course designers and assessment. The traditional practices of education can largely be seen as ‘tutor centred’. Clearly, if this is to move towards a more student-centred approach, then the role of the tutor needs to change. The literature on

problem-based learning widely discusses the role of the tutor as one of a facilitator (Farmer, 2001). They should be there to guide and assist the students find their own way. In order to achieve this, tutors need training (Zwaal and Otting, 2010). Care must be taken in the development of case studies and the selection of problems that students will engage with. Problems or case studies need to be broad enough to allow for in-depth investigation, but also relevant enough to the topic at hand. They also need to be realistic, and relevant to the students existing knowledge. To ensure that students do not feel out of their depth, which can cause disengagement, activities need to be within the capability of the student; it may be that this capability needs to be ascertained before allowing students to embark on the experience (McDonald and McDonald, 2000). Partners or clients used for work-placements or projects must also be carefully considered. When developing a planned learning experience, the learning must hold at least equal importance as the activity; this may therefore make finding clients difficult, as they must have an understanding of the learning requirements, as well as what they can expect to get out of it. Finally, content and assessment need to be constructively aligned with intended learning outcomes, thus fully enabling the student to benefit from their learning experience.

Assessment of experiential learning should be about judging the extent to which students have progressed through the learning cycle (as conceived by Kolb). There is much scope to investigate more innovative forms of assessment, particularly ones that facilitate engagement in the 'concrete experience'. McDonald and McDonald (2000) discuss the development of grading criteria that measures the level of engagement with a project. As well as marks for attendance, there are also marks available for participation in certain activities. This combines with individual and group assignments, as well as reflective writing, to produce a portfolio of work that is marked. It is important that reflection play a central role. Toohey (1999) suggests that engagement with the learning tasks will likely generate the evidence used for assessment. She acknowledges that it is difficult to define acceptable results of reflection and therefore assessment criteria may need to concern the learning process. Grading criteria should look to acknowledge students' ability to take their reflections and use them to generate abstract concepts, or apply their understanding gained from experience in a new context. This would show progress through the learning cycle.

The demand on graduates, both from HEIs and employers, has a growing emphasis on 'soft skills' such as communication, team working, time management. The experiential learning approaches have been demonstrated to effectively enhance these skills in students. Therefore, greater adoption of these approaches is likely to further foster the employability of graduates on these courses.

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