Challenging Factors In The Practices Of Experiential Learning For Students' Professional Development At Higher Education

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Abstract

Learning is nurtured by the occurrence of experiences that enables the students to create new knowledge and apply it in new settings with the help of experiential learning. In the light of Kolb's experiential learning model (ELM), both teachers and students may avail a mechanism that enables them to nurture their experiences and overcome challenges. Learning develops through active participation and involvement in educational settings until a practicable learning environment would be provided. This exploratory single case-study endows the researcher to explore the vantages of faculty members about hindering facets in the practices of experiential learning for professional development of students at university premises. The semi-structured interviews consisted of 45-60 minutes duration were conducted from five participants who were teachers with relevant expertise in the field of education and were selected through purposive sampling technique. The interview protocol was prepared by the researchers and finalized after getting validated by five experts in the relevant field of interest. Trustworthiness (dependability) was considered in terms of ensuring reliability among instrumentation and analysis procedures of the research. The intensive data were analyzed through the coding and categorization process. Emergent themes of the study were: need of conducive environment, promote creative thinking, need of self-assessment, lack of communication, lack of research exposure, and discouraging attitudes. The study may be helpful for the students of higher education levels to keep experiential learning as their prior goal of education and utilize it in improving the essential skills needed for professionalism. This research may also be beneficial for the teachers in developing such activities and strategies in which the incorporation of experiential learning might be possible.

Key Words: Experiential Learning, higher education, professional skills, professional development, experiential learning practices.

Introduction

Experiential learning is best grounded in the latent work of John Dewey (1983) and later preceded in the work of Piaget (1950), Hahn (1957), Freire (1970), Vygotsky (1978), and Kolb (1984). Experiential learning plays a key role in the provision of opportunities that not only bring out potential abilities but also vibrantly enrich them so that students can avail benefits in terms of their academic, social and professional development. Experiential learning occurs in many forms i.e. internships,

service-learning, research experiences, study abroad, and other activities that engage students in some kind of work in the form of a task or project. It becomes far more important than the conventional or traditional learning process, however, most of the times these activities are taken as granted even in the developed countries like America (Moore, 2013).Traditional methods like lectures may focus on transformation of the information whereas experiential learning is concerned with the learning which is gained through lived experiences of the students and leads beyond the content to evolve the construction of new knowledge, attitude, belief, and transformation of learning (Kolb, 1984). In the views of the author (Chiu, 2019), experiential learning activities foster students to learn basic education toward arts and science subjects and also motivates them to develop professionally. Higher education plays an incontestable role in the professional development of the students. It refers to all post-secondary education, research experiences, and training at authorized educational institutes and provides all the activities like the degree programs, short-term courses, training, and workshops held by the local authority of the university (Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 2002). The JICA (2002) report highlighted three major functions of higher education institutions; firstly, to give education, secondly to develop research opportunities and environment, and thirdly contribute to society in terms of better human resources. Higher education plays its dynamic role in the development of human resources in the form of; a) training of leaders, b) vast- group of human resources, c) creation and transmission of knowledge, and d) promotion of a healthy society with social unity.

Chan (2016) shed light on the vigorous purpose of higher education at the public and private level through a comprehensive synthetic analysis of sixty journals and twenty-five books which depicted that students of higher education faced challenging situations in the global market and they have positive expectations from their degree towards instrumental and personal benefits. They have to meet the challenges of the ideal livelihood and changing circumstances of society. He recommended that all over the world, the ultimate aim of higher education may be towards the transformation of knowledge in terms of personal, intellectual, and professional development. In his view, higher education needs to develop some potential skills in the individuals have been misaligned in the past decades.

Wurdinger and Allison (2017) discussed that the students who get education experientially under the guidance of teachers and have some work experience before doing any job have more chances to be recruited into organizations than others who have no work experience. In their study, they explored the main obstacles in experiential learning in a university classroom as the classroom structure, insufficient time to cover all syllabus, and teachers' reaction towards it.

Similarly, Dernova (2015) focused on the important features of adult learning which are enhanced by the utilization of experiential learning. She claimed that experiential learning motivates the learners in terms of confronting real-world problems and finding solutions. It also enables them to reflect on the new situations based on their prior knowledge through obtaining new ideas, pedagogy skills, and improved communication skills. In short, she concluded that EL triggers self-instructed and life-long learning skills in the students. In line with this research, Leal-Rodriguez, and Albort-Morant (2017) investigated the relationship between experiential-based education and bachelor students' academic performance. In this regard, the results showed positive effects on the academic performance of

sampled 80 students of Spanish Business School after their participation in experience-based activities and practices.

Experiential Learning and Professional Development

Higher education and employment are strongly interlinked with each other. This relationship is strengthened by the utilization of two kinds of approaches; one is general employability and the other is to relate HE courses with professional structure or formation (West, 2000). Professional qualification emphasizes applying specific knowledge and skills in different disciplines to make learning flowing and vibrant. The positive influence on academic achievement would be depicted through the learner's accurate approach to professional knowledge and skills (Adeyemi, 2010).

Acai et al. (2014) discussed the distinction position of university students as experiential learners. In the voice of various students, while interviewing them, the authors explored the altruistic role of experiential learning that provides opportunities to students in developing skills like volunteerism, development-work, and service learning. They maintained that experiential learning fosters students' learning in terms of critical reflection, ethics, responsibility, and in generating logical discussions. In another qualitative study, Al-Majid et al. (2017) determined that the responsibility of faculty members is far more challenging than mere teaching in the 21st century. Their viewpoint was based on the comparison of three universities; two from America and one from the Saudi Arabia. The study indicated that these universities initiated skills training programs and included conferences and workshops which enabled the faculty members to provide needed knowledge to help them in competing confronted challenges.

Dobos (2014) carried out an influential study by which he indicated that the philosophy of training is predominated in the competency-based professional development in civil-service courses for the faculty members. The research findings showed that experiential learning facilitates learning in terms of active participation and skills developed through enhancement of knowledge and practical approach needed professionally that improves work- performance. Another main factor that can improve work performance and fosters skills essentially is the inclusion of provisional knowledge along with experiential learning. Provisional knowledge and experiential learning activities foster trainee-teachers emphasizing teaching practice with the application of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These skills are among the most essential skills for the professional development of teachers. The study showed that this type of knowledge and skills are developed through experiential learning linked with effective vigilance in the real-class environment (Amolloh et al., 2018). Moreover, Cleminson and Bradford (1996) used the term "professional education" in which they stated that academic coursework and work-based learning collectively form into professional education. Provisional knowledge and experiential learning activities foster the trainee-teachers who emphasize teaching practice with the application of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These skills are among the most essential skills for the professional development of teachers. The study showed that this type of knowledge and skills are developed through experiential learning linked with effective vigilance in a real-class environment (Amolloh et al., 2018). Moreover, Cleminson and Bradford (1996) used the term "professional education" in which they stated that academic coursework and work-

based learning collectively form into professional education.

The shreds of evidence showed the sound connection between EL and the development of professional skills. The following chart constituted some of the essential skills which are more relevant to experiential learning:

Figure 1: Interlink of Experiential Learning Model with Professional Skills (Source: Researcher)
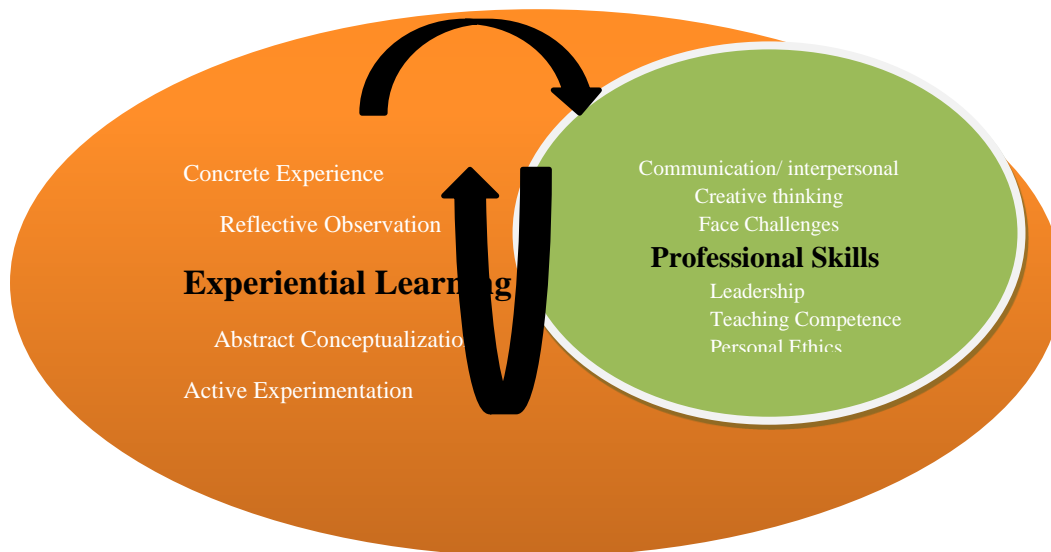
In a qualitative research on the students of the business program (BBA, MBA) at a private university in Pakistan, Akhtar et al. (2019) stated that experiential learning has positive effects on the students' abilities related to the business domains, especially for their oral and written communication. In their views, EL opportunities may help the students to overcome the lack of communication skills in a better way. It is also evidenced by another qualitative study conducted by Shokri et al. (2014). They stated that communication skills reflect better employment abilities in university students as it is assumed before going to the field that they should demonstrate a wide range of skills linked with teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and managerial skills.

Statement of the Problem

Individuals learn from experiences and these experiences lead to foster learning towards betterment in the particular field of education or work. Experiential learning develops the students of higher education in terms of their professional abilities. Higher education students may confront difficult situations and issues regarding fulfilling their academic goals and targets. The current study uncovered the standpoints of the participants about various situations or issues that hinder the prevailing practices regarding the role of experiential learning for the students' professional development.

Objective of the Study

The key objective of the study was to:

● Explore the perspectives of the faculty members about the Challenging factors

in the practices of experiential learning for the higher education students' professional development.

Research Question

- What are the perspectives of the faculty members about the challenging factors and practices of experiential learning for the higher education students' professional development?

Method

The current study is based upon interpretive paradigm that generally tends to describe and apprehend deeply the social build-up realities (Biel et al., 2008). The key objective of the interpretive school of thought is to make societal knowledge about some phenomenon. The interpretive paradigm leads the current study to the qualitative approach as Wisdom and Creswell (2013, p.3) specified that qualitative research "gives voice to study participants and ensures that those study findings are grounded in participants' experiences".

Within a qualitative approach, single exploratory case-study design was employed to understand the complicated social phenomenon that allows the researchers to highlight a 'case'

and retain a holistic real world opinions and perspectives such as small-group attitudes, organizational and managerial procedures (Yin, 2003). This exploratory case-study design enabled the researcher to discover the hindering facets in the practices of experiential learning for the students' professional development at university level.

By using purposive sampling technique, the five faculty members (target participants) who highlighted the challenging elements that intervene the practices of experiential learning in the professional development of students at university level, also taught the course Application of Computer in Research to the students of master degree program of educational assessment and evaluation. The semi-structured interviews comprised of ten open-ended questions where probing questions were also included accordingly.

Patton (1990) stated that the interviews not merely focus on the in-depth information but also get proper evidence through gestures and body language of the interviewees within and across the field. To proceed with the mentioned stance, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The following table depicts the major particulars of the participants of the study:

Table 1

Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching Experience	Expertise
T1	Female	5 years	Assessment and Measurement
T2	Female	1 year	Quantitative Research Analysis
T3	Male	10 years	Educational Philosophy
T4	Female	3 years	English Linguistics
T5	Male	2 years	Educational Administration

Main Particulars of the Participants

The interview protocol (See Appendix) was validated through two processes; for the validity process, the instrument got verified by five experts who have expertise in the relevant

field. Secondly, for the reliability process, mock interviews were conducted from two faculty members who belonged to another institution rather than the sampled one. The modification of

the interview questions was taken place during the validation process. The discussions of the participants based upon the interview questions, highlighted the problems and barriers, and challenging situations confronted by the students in the practices of experiential learning for their professional development. Creswell (2007) claimed that qualitative researchers are renowned for their vigorous and repetitive analyses of data for the construction of codes and themes that emerge from the comprehensive dialogues of the participants. In this case-study, the researcher accompanied data collection and analyses together.

Along with this, the valuable strength of memos was not overlooked, the researcher noted down their reflections side by side and coded them additionally in the emergent of themes. All the gathered data from the participants' stances were coded, categorized, and formed into thematic analysis. The researcher transcribed the conversations thoroughly and then developed codes. Trustworthiness is an undeniable element to enhance the comprehensive understandings of the qualitative studies, the researcher took this point into account during sampling and a rich description of the case report. The transferability was addressed to increase the dependability. Coding/ categorization process was used and credibility was sought by extensive field work.

Results

A vigorous analysis illustrated the findings that address the main research question of the study: What are the insights of faculty members about the hindering facets in the practices of experiential learning for the students' professional development at the public university of Lahore? The professional development of students remained incomplete without the sound teaching-learning process. A powerful association exists between experiential learning and professional development of the students (West, 2000). A foresighted behavior from the

faculty members is required for this development. Until the responsibility is taken by the teachers of higher education, the skills rarely instill into the students that prepare them for the world of challenges and competition. It was evidenced through the literature (Al-Majid et al., 2017) that practical tasks or activities may increase the involvement of the students and teacher may help them to develop skills for their career building. The following major themes emerged from the thick and intensive analysis of semi-structured interviews:

1. Need of Conducive Environment

One of the interviewees (T3) reported: "In my opinion, the environment in the exploration of experiential learning…..matters a lot (while thinking, she continued) because a healthy environment can make all students motivated towards learning".

On the other hand, two of the teachers (T1, T5) were of the view;

Games and curricular activities also provide a conducive environment in which students may learn mentally and physically, (T1 further responded) (um….) but it is the responsibility of the teacher to manage such activities in the classrooms that may help in fostering experiential learning at higher education.

Moreover, teachers described the role of celebrating success in the development of a conducive environment; T2 responded:

I always prefer the students' success and I announce it in the class enthusiastically because I think it is a sense of motivation which we provide in the form of celebration, and experiential learning plays its role in the development of confidence where students take part in activities, ultimately they celebrate the moments of success and teacher's feedback.

2. Promote Creative Thinking

One of the interviewees (T3) responded about the promotion of creative thinking through experiential learning: "(um…after thinking for a while) I think experiential learning is the best source to promote creative thinking in the students, however, we need to give them a way to think, and also appreciate the ideas coming from them". On the other hand, a teacher (T5) replied in the same way "we need to emphasize on new ideas". One of the teachers (T1) described further: "innovation comes when you give your students the flexible way of thinking".

While the researcher probed into the question to the interviewee what do you mean by a flexible way of thinking? The participant replied: "we should not bind our students to make limits in their thoughts, however, we may discuss with them what to do or what not…but we should provide them a way to climb and breathe in the air". On asking about the promotion of creative thinking, two of the interviewees (T3 & T5) were of the views: "through experiential learning, the students will be clear about what they want to do and how. T2 replied: "the important thing to promote creative thinking is that students should have clarity in their ideas".

3. Need of Self-Assessment

Two of the respondents (T2 and T5) commented: "I think…self-assessment can be better promoted through experiential learning, in this way students may know their reading abilities". One of the teachers (T3) was of the view: "experiential learning provides ways to think how to assess oneself for the betterment of learning".

Two of the teachers (T1 and T4) commented: "I think through the activities by experiential learning, students can evoke their insights about their strengths and weaknesses related to the specific situations". The respondent (T5) commented: "Students may improve themselves through reviewing….that is why

experiential learning should be the main source of improvement".

4. Lack of Communication

One of the interviewees (T2) expressed:

I felt that lack of communication exists in promoting experiential learning fully in the institutions. Sometimes while teaching, I observed that students hesitate to talk with the teachers to resolve any difficulty faced by them in the educational field, and sometimes teachers do not exhibit any concern with students' difficulties. It is due to the lack of communication. The respondents had strong opinions regarding financial support and constraints which can be a hurdle in the students' academic progress. One of the interviewees (T3) shared her personal experience: I, being a student, also faced a financial crisis while studying in higher education. Another interviewee (T3) responded "I think the major difference of thoughts vary community wise; like female students hesitate to interact with strict teachers, likewise some teachers hesitate to interact with over-confident students, this attitude simply leads towards communication barrier".

5. Lack of Research Exposure

One of the teachers (T5) expressed "(after thinking for a while…) As far as the research exposure is concerned, in my opinion, teachers need to change their attitude. They have to develop the expertise in their field so that new knowledge would be generated". The other participants (T2 & T3) shared the similar point of views: "I genuinely feel as a teacher that this is our responsibility to develop the interest of the students in the research by involving them in such activities to gain new knowledge". T1 explored "I think basic research knowledge is often less practiced in our classrooms. This is the biggest hurdle in knowing research fully".

6. Discouraging Attitudes

T1 proposed: "students need proper feedback then they will set their positions". T2 stated: "I think, sometimes, lacking in studies may cause students to become demotivated about improvement and they do not work hard". The participants pointed out that financial constraints can be a hurdle in the student's academic progress. One of the interviewees (T1) shared her personal experience that she had also faced a financial crisis while pursuing higher education. She said, "Scholarships may be the support for those students who had less financial support from family. Hence, the number of scholarships should be increased".

Discussion

There are limited evidences to determine if universities have truly achieved the slogan of learning by doing and professional development of students. Moore (2013) stated that experiential learning plays a spontaneous role in the professional development of higher education students. The major finding that was revealed through the current data is that the less focused area of students' learning was conceptual understanding. The study results seemed similar to the findings of a study by Pamungkas et al. (2019) that by employing an experiential learning model, students' conceptual understandings may lead to improvement. Keeping in view the sound relationship of experiential learning with professional skills, the results of the current study revealed that experiential learning (EL) brings up the learners in generating certain professional skills i.e. communication and interpersonal skills, creative thinking, enable them to face challenges, instill teaching styles, improve their personal conduct. In this regard, several studies encountered the reality that EL and professional development are strongly interrelated (Acai, Cowan, Doherty, Sharma & Thevathasan, 2014; Adeyemi, 2010; West, 2000).

The emphasis on creative thinking abilities was revealed through the dialogues of the teachers, however, the data depicted that it needs to be more emphasized (Amolloh, Lilian, & Wanjiru, 2018; Barak & Albert, 2017; Cropley, 1999; Dziedziewicz & Karwowksi, 2015).

Akhtar and Hussain (2019) discussed that lack of communication leads to a lack of interest which may affect the students in terms of acquiring a maximum level of attention. The conversations with the participants of the current study revealed that inadequate provision of feedback is one of the main challenging facets that hinder the promotion of experiential learning for the professional development of the students as stated by Fairclough, (1995) and Lea & Street, (2006) that feedback is a socially constructed process and influenced by the conditions in which it is produced, distributed and received.

Conclusion

Overall it is concluded through the shreds of evidence provided by the core findings of the study that:

1. Keeping in view the productive and professional position of the postgraduate students in the society, though the field-work for the limited-time in the form of practice teaching was exercised, however, the study concludes that workshops, seminars, projects and organizational visits should be organized.

2. Certain constraints such as financial barriers, lack of confidence, lack of communication, and discouraging attitudes may hinder the advancement of experiential learning among students so efforts should be made to overcome them.

3. The major part of the course may consist of experiential learning activities that may foster students to train themselves in terms of career and academic development.

4. Feedback is a perceptible area in higher education. The results showed that adequate and timely feedback is often less-considered by the teachers. The study concludes that maximum emphasis on the betterment and motivation of students is needed at higher education institutions.

5. The study concludes that teachers may increase the active participation of the students by proper channelizing their communication in which their interaction, access to teachers, and attention may be focused.

Recommendations

1. The learners having learning difficulties may be helped by involving them to work in groups that will not only make them realize their responsibility but also prepare them for their peers' appreciation.

2. There is a need to shape learning into practice. The more the learners practice the tasks given by their teachers the better they will be polished.

3. To inculcate professional skills in the students, it is crucial to create a conducive environment where students may get empowerment to explore, share and reflect upon what they experience and this cannot be possible without the adequate and on-time guidance of the teachers.

4. Based on the participants' assertions, it is recommended that students may provide their services in a better way if their assimilation to the profession would have begun with their academic session so that the gap between professional life and formal learning may be covered.

5. It is recommended to review the practices at higher education so that the teachers

and students may realize the undeniable worth about the feedback.

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