

PROVIDING UNPARALLELED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE WITHIN LEADERSHIP COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper details experience of developing and conducting Experiential Learning component as a part of Leadership course. Designed to help the students understand the real meaning of “Entrepreneurial Leadership”, the course has a component wherein the students carry out research to figure out feasible business idea, prepare the business plan and practically run it over ten weeks. The overall benefits of the course aside, this component helps the students get a first-hand feel of business decisions, challenges and also ways to overcome them. Not only this, the students practically understand the meaning of “Understanding Self”, “Understanding Others” and “Working together for excellence”. With many of the students in Indian B-Schools without any previous work experience, this assignment also gives them first-hand experience of workplace, and makes them ready for the workplace challenges and opportunities. This paper provides a rich description of the abovementioned learning component structure, as well as the description of various issues to be kept in mind to ensure a holistic learning for the students.

INTRODUCTION

INSTITUTE

International Management Institute (IMI)-Delhi is an AMBA-accredited Business School which is one of the top-ranked B-School in the country (Ranked within top 10 by prestigious NHRDN Business School ranking survey for three consecutive years) and has been constantly also been ranked among the top 10 for its intellectual capital. It is also one of the very few Business schools in India, which has a specific course for Human Resources specialization wherein the students are groomed differently from the very first term. The institute also stands out in terms of its faculty profile with a significant number of its faculty having corporate experience at senior level or having consulted and trained extensively at Board levels. This results in many pedagogical experiments and innovations, and continuous efforts to ensure better learning experience for the students.

This course and the experiential learning assignment is being offered over last five years and more than 200 students have already been part of it.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The Oxford Dictionary describes experience as- *“The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition; of being consciously affected by an event; a state or condition viewed subjectively; an event by which one is affected; and, knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone.”* (Beard and Wilson, 2006). The definitions provided in the Oxford Dictionary “connect both the action and the thinking or sensing about the action.” (Beard and Wilson, 2005, Page No 15).

The simplest definition of Experiential Learning is *“Experiential Learning is learning by doing”* (Greene, 2011). The same essence is also captured in the often cited quotation of Confucius *“I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand”* which stresses on *“hands-on experience”* in the learning process. Gentry defines Experiential Learning strategy as *“combining the learning from the “real-world situation with the necessary condition of the application of concepts, ideas, and theories to the interactive setting”* (1990, Page 9). Hawtrely (2007) also called Experiential Learning as situational learning.

Dewey (1938) defined experience as an individual’s interaction with his/ her external environment. Based on this and other pioneering works done by Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget, Kolb defined Experiential Learning as *“Experiential Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”* Kolb & Kolb (2005) also said that having an experience without doing anything about it is not sufficient and hence propagated four step process (Experiencing, Reflecting, thinking and acting) known as Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which the learner must undergo in order to transform an experience into learning. Till date, ELT theory (Kolb, 1984) is considered the most authentic theory and has received widespread acceptance in the Management Development literature (Kayes 2002; Kayes, Kayes & Yamazaki, 2005a, b; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Yamakazi and Kayes, 2004).

Kolb Experiential Learning Model describes the Experiential Learning as four interdependent processes namely

1. Concrete Experience (CE)
2. Observation and Reflection (RO)
3. Formation of Abstract Concepts (AC)
4. Generalization of Abstract Concepts and testing its application to new situations. (AE)

Kolb (1984) considers learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience, requiring interaction rather than one-way communication for

learning to occur. This definition rests on six basic assumptions: Learning is a process, not an outcome; derives from experience; requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposite demands of grasping and transmitting experience; is holistic and integrative; requires interaction between person and his involvement; and results in knowledge creation (Kayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model further suggests that people learn in primarily four ways: affectively, perceptually, symbolically, and behaviorally.

Table 1 summarizes the four processes, various abilities as well as various skill development associated with each of the processes.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP

Today’s world is experiencing an entrepreneurial revolution, which is more intense than the industrial revolution of the twentieth century. Entrepreneurs are now described as aggressive catalysts for change in the world of business; individuals who recognize opportunities where others see chaos, contradiction, or confusion. They have been compared to Olympic athletes challenging themselves to break new barriers, to long distance runners dealing with the agony of the miles, to symphony orchestra conductors who balance the different skills and sounds into a cohesive whole, or to top-gun pilots who continually push the envelope of speed and daring. Over the last two decades entrepreneurship has become much more important. According to Kuratko (2007) the world economy has achieved its highest economic performance during the last ten years by fostering and promoting entrepreneurial activity, therefore 95% of new wealth have been created by entrepreneurship and innovators (Timmons, 1999). Further, Entrepreneurs will continue to be critical contributors to economic growth through their leadership, management, innovation, research and development effectiveness, job creation, competitiveness, productivity, and formation of new industry (Kuratko and Hodgetts, 2007).

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In the 1800s, French economist Jean Baptiste Say coined the term ‘entrepreneur’ to define an individual ‘who undertakes an enterprise, especially a contractor acting as the intermediary between capital and labour.’ More recently as per Dykes, C. (2008) an entrepreneur is a person who sees a need in the marketplace and sets out to fill that need with a product or service. An entrepreneur is also a manager, and an important category of theories on managing the people is based on ‘managing motivation to expand human freedom’—as described by McClelland (1978). Schumpeter (1934, retrieved from Cogliser, 2004, p.774) was the first who distinguished managers

from entrepreneurs. He suggested that entrepreneurship is a special case of leadership; another style of leadership.

Kuratko & Hodgetts (2007) developed an integrated definition that acknowledges the critical factors needed for this phenomenon.

“Entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of vision, change, and creation. It requires an application of energy and passion towards the creation and implementation of new ideas and creative solutions. Essential ingredients include the willingness to take calculated risks—in terms of time, equity, or career; the ability to formulate an effective venture team; the creative skill to marshal the needed resources; the fundamental skill of building a solid business plan; and, finally, the vision to recognize opportunity where others see chaos, contradiction, and confusion”.

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP

The literature on entrepreneurial leadership is diffuse and , probably because of the definitional challenge of the construct itself. As per Kuratko(2007), the approaches can be grouped into several categories, those that:

- 1) Examine the intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership,
- 2) Take a psychological approach,
- 3) Emphasize the context within which leadership is required, and
- 4) Attempt a more holistic overview of the construct without really defining it.

For the present paper and also as far as the expectations from the experiential learning assignment of students is concerned, our definition primarily revolves around first category.

In this approach, Entrepreneurship and Leadership are looked as two separate constructs and then try to figure out the conceptual overlaps of the two constructs. Cogliser and Brigham (2004) elaborate this overlap in schematic detail and point to four specific areas that are most relevant to both: vision, influence (on both followers and a larger constituency), leadership of innovative/creative people, and planning.

Fernald et al. (2005) take a similar approach, examining the separate literatures of entrepreneurship and leadership, from which they derive a set of similar “characteristics” common to both leaders and entrepreneurs: vision, problem-solving, decision-making, risk-taking, and strategic initiatives.

COMPLEXITY PARADOX IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In his 1995 article on the “Dealing with the Complexity Paradox in Business Simulations,” Cannon suggested that the

TABLE 1

PROCESS	EXPECTED PARTICIPANT BEHAVIOR	INNATE ABILITIES REQUIRED	SKILL DEVELOPMENT
Concrete Experience	Immersing in the immediacy of the environment	Intuitive and Affective Responses to the situation	Affective (Sensing-Feeling)
Reflection Observation	Tentative and Impartial Perspective towards Learning Situation	Willingness to patiently consider many possible alternatives	Perceptual (Observing)
Abstract Conceptualization	Remaining focused and avoiding distractions	Logical Thinking and Rational Evaluation	Symbolic (Thinking)
Active Experimentation	Willingness to experiment and thinking beyond the obvious	Action orientation and risk taking behavior	Behavioral (Acting)

more accurately simulations model the kinds of situations participants would encounter in a real business organization, the more complex the simulation would be. While moderate amounts of complexity can be helpful to learning, too much can create information overload, and actually decrease the amount of learning achieved by simulation participants (Fritzsche and Cotter 1990). Burns, Gentry, and Wolfe (1990), who see complexity as the number of decisions, the number of functions, and the abstraction of the concepts embedded in the game. An increase in the number of decisions and functions results in greater complexity. However, these definitions of Complexity are primarily centered on Information overload. Canon, Friesen and Lawrence (2009) bring out another dimension of Complexity when they talk about uncertainty. Gosen and Washbush (2005) point to the need for reflection on the meaning of the game for abstraction to have its simplifying benefit. Simplifying mechanisms notwithstanding, there appears to be a better learning effect in moving from a less complex to a more complex simulations (Wellington, Faria and Hutchinson 2007).

The Researchers have been divided about the Complexity v/s Simplicity debate in Experiential Learning for Management students as on one hand, the students need to be prepared for the Corporate world where the situations are generally complex, and on the other hand, if the simulation activity is too complex for the students to understand and comprehend, the entire purpose of the activity gets defeated.

STRUCTURE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is spread over ten weeks (the average duration of the course). In the very first class, the students are briefed about the assignment and the expectations from them. The tentative time-line shared with them is captured in Table 2.

- 1) The assignment is done in groups of 5-6 as they have to practically run the entire business and so different people have to handle different functions. Not only this, in any venture-the work is not done in silos and so the students must have a first-hand experience of working in teams. During the formation of teams, they are expected to have members having different competencies to ensure formation of effective teams. This also ensures that the students ensure their acceptability across the groups and put their best foot forward. Also, there is a broad consensus within the teams at the very outset about the roles various members are expected to play.
- 2) After the formation of the teams, the teams get one week to do their Research work to come up with a business idea. Keeping in mind the various constraints, their scope of business idea is expected to be within the campus of the

college only. As a result, they conduct primary survey on the target customers (students, staff and faculty), and then zero down on the business idea they will like to pursue. They are also expected to conduct the feasibility analysis for their business idea (raw material, logistics, finance constraints) and share the same in form of a write-up.

- 3) In the third week, they are expected to share the business plan, their initial investment plans, expected cash flows as well as the targeted profit of the venture. They present it before the entire class, which leads to further refining of ideas. Not only this, in case two or more groups are planning to work on same idea, this gives them an opportunity to discuss and come up with the win-win approach. In entire process, the instructor deliberately does not intervene to help them learn the art of negotiation and problem-solving.
- 4) Thereafter, the venture continues till the end of tenth week. In between, in sixth week, they are expected to share their mid-course evaluation and share the changes brought in, if any. Further, at the end of the course- they share their Profit & Loss Statement, and share the learning from the entire activity.
- 5) The evaluation has two components: Instructor Evaluation and Peer evaluation. The instructor evaluation is based on operational effectiveness of the venture as well as the learnings shared by the group members. In peer evaluation, every member of the group rates other members on a scale of 10, which is averaged and added to the final score of the students.

UNDERLYING THEORETICAL CONTOURS

The assignment is expected to help the students understand many theoretical contours as outlined below

- 1) Understanding Self: During team formation, with everyone expected to share the competencies he or she brings to the table, it serves as a good reflection exercise for each individual of his/her strengths. Also at the end of the project, when review and evaluation takes place- it acts as the reality check of the degree of similarity or difference between self and peer evaluation.
- 2) Understanding Others: With the assignment being a live venture, the participants need to understand the strength and weakness of other members and at the same time, ensure how to utilize the strengths of the other members of the group.
- 3) Effective Communication and negotiation: Every group has its own share of disagreements and hard-times. This is where the members need to communicate effectively to ensure the group momentum is high. Further, they need to negotiate with other groups if the Business ideas are same

TABLE 2

AGENDA	TENTATIVE TIME-FRAME
Team formation	1 st Week
Research for Business Idea	2 nd Week
Submission of Business plan and going live	3 rd Week
Duration of Venture	3 rd -10 th Week
Mid-Course Review	6 th Week
Submission and Presentation	11 th Week

or the resources which they intend to use are limited. The groups involved generally come up with a Win-Win outcome though the negotiation process sees hard-knuckled bargaining as well.

- 4) Working together for excellence: As expected, every group has its share of leaders, followers, social loafers and distractors. However, with the entire team having a common goal- all the members need to be taken together using positive and negative reinforcements as well as exerting peer pressure to ensure that the group objective is achieved.
- 5) Entrepreneurial Leadership: As shared earlier, the key characteristics of Entrepreneurial Leadership (vision, influence, leadership of innovative/creative people, and planning) are also on display and provide a great learning opportunity for the participants.

SHARING BRIEF SNIPPETS AND KEY OBSERVATIONS FOR THE PRESENT ACADEMIC BATCH (2016-17)

This batch had got 30 participants for the course, who were divided into five groups. Each group came up with different ventures, with their names and area of operation mentioned in Table 3.

Financial Performance of the Ventures in captured in the Table 4.

LEARNING THEMES AS SHARED BY THE PARTICIPANTS

Each participant was expected to submit and share individual learnings, and the broad themes emerging from the content analysis are as below

- 1) **Understanding Self:** As shared by them, the open and candid discussion between the group participants as well as the feedback sessions helped everyone understand oneself better.
- 2) **Understanding Others:** Realizing that each individual is different and hence needs to be treated differently was a common learning thread. The participants also shared that

during the venture, they learnt the art of how to do the work together as the success or failure of the venture was directly dependent on contribution of all participants.

- 3) **Adapting and modifying as per environmental conditions:** Every group shared that the venture didn't go as per the initial plans and the environmental conditions necessitated constant adapting and modification to remain relevant and profitable.
- 4) **Conflict Management:** Every group had its share of disagreements and conflicts. The participants unanimously agreed that one of the biggest learnings was how to handle conflict and ensure that the task at hand is not affected.
- 5) **Taking from planning to implementation:** The group had to take the entrepreneurial venture from ideation phase to implementation to closure phase. The participants shared the real hands-on learning across different phases.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In the five years of experience of conducting this assignment with students, the lead author has seen tremendous involvement of students and lots of creative ideas being tried and implemented. Almost 90% of the groups end up the venture profitably and there is rightfully a sense of achievement in them. With the assessment being completely objective and laced with instructor and peer feedback, the feedback for this assignment has been highly encouraging, and has seen high number of students registering for this elective course year after year. The student feedback about the course and this assignment has always been quite encouraging. The success of this assignment truly reflects the effectiveness of Experiential learning in Business Education.

The assignment itself may have limitation of all groups working in the same space and targeting the same customer group- but due to the constraints of academic pressure and security concerns, the ventures can't be allowed to be conducted outside the premises. Moreover, due to the large demographic differences among the target customers, every year the teams are able to come up with good business ideas and ensure effective learning.

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TABLE 3

S.No.	VENTURE NAME	AREA OF OPERATION
1	Gourmet Fitness Solution	Providing fitness classes and healthy food/drinks
2	The Maestros	Providing Indian snacks and palmistry solutions
3	The Bohemian Life	Providing Chinese Cuisine and Paper Craft gift items
4	Fit & Naturals	Providing Zumba classes and healthy food items
5	Knight Chef	Providing European Cuisine (for late night munching)

TABLE 4

S. NO.	VENTURE NAME	INVESTMENT	EARNINGS	PROFIT	%AGE PROFIT
1	Gourmet Fitness Solution	3000	6880	3880	129.33%
2	The Maestros	5435	9975	4540	83.53%
3	The Bohemian Life	4535	12195	7660	168.91%
4	Fit & Naturals	4004	7520	3516	87.81%
5	Knight Chef	12806	17205	4399	34.35%

EXHIBITS

EXHIBIT 1:

Format Used for Evaluation (80 Marks)

Venture Name:

Name	Contribution to Task (20)	Financial Success (20)	Application of Concepts (10)	Learnings across phases of venture (10)	Ability to Connect the Dots (10)	Pro-Activeness (10)

EXHIBIT 2:

Format Used for Peer Evaluation (20 Marks)

Venture Name:

Participant Name:

Name of Team Member	Overall Contribution to Project

The net Score for every participant is the average of the scores given by all team members.

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