

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education and business continue to change at unprecedented rates in response to the demands of the competitive global market. Amidst the changes, experiential learning continues to change too, so students can gain the benefits of this enduring and pragmatic pedagogy. But, we might ask, is it changing fast enough? This paper reviews the current contemporary and scholarly literature pertaining to experiential learning in business schools. First, the researchers examine why experiential learning is still important in times of online learning and virtual organizations. Then the literature on virtual service-learning, case studies, simulations, organizational consultation, scholarly research, and virtual internships is surveyed in the context of the online learning environment. Finally, conclusions are drawn and future directions for research are considered.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional workplace has endured consistent and revolutionary changes as technology pushes the landscape toward a more distributed workforce. As early as 2010, one study revealed that 75% of the companies surveyed stated that they employed virtual workers in some form or another (Elance, 2011). An additional study by Elance (2011) found that the number of businesses

hiring remote, independent employees doubled in 2011, and that 83% of small business surveyed stated that they had planned to hire up to 50% of their workforce as virtual employees. Truly, organizations today look very different from the hierarchical structure of years past. The structure within organizations today is rarely the traditional pointed triangle with the boss sitting at the top and the followers forever lingering at the base (Rishpal, 2014). Trending today is a broader, flatter, boundary-less form that is inclusive of all stakeholders, internal and external to the organization itself. While this holistic variant appears all-encompassing, this amoeba brings with it a new dynamic requiring a continuous learning process to prepare the participant for the experience, no easy task as the existing and newly entering workforce participants have self-designed expectations and preconceived notions of what should take place during their career. Those notions are often grounded in antiquated perceptions, especially when students are educated in institutions that are non-responsive to the needs of organizations and a changing society. This paper explores how experiential learning has adapted to assist learners in becoming successful in their education and as employees of the organizations of tomorrow. The research explores the existing literature pertaining to business school (B-School) experiential learning through virtual service-learning, case studies, simulations, organizational consultation, scholarly research, and virtual internships.

BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE

As the job market becomes increasingly competitive for college alumni, graduates find themselves needing to have an advantage that sets them apart from their peers. In many cases, an internship or other experiential learning, can be parlayed into such an advantage. According to a survey conducted by Internships.com, which polled more than 7,300 recent graduates and alumni, and more than 300 human resources professionals, “internships truly have become the ‘new interview’ in the job search process for students and employers alike,” (Smith, 2012). Additionally, a 2012 study reported that 69% of companies with more than 100 employees hired their interns into full-time positions upon graduation (Worthum, 2013).

Throughout the past several decades, numerous studies have demonstrated ways in which experiential learning enhances student learning and education both inside and beyond the classroom (Center for Digital Civic Engagement, 2013). When it comes to student retention (leading to more graduates), Tinto (1998) asserted that, “Students who are actively involved in learning activities and spend more time on task, especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay [in school].”

In fact, in 2013, the American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business (AACSB) was so intrigued with ways in which experiential learning enhanced learning for B-School learners that they changed their standards to encourage curricula facilitation and encouragement of “active student engagement in...”knowledge development, projects, and assignments”...”experiential and active learning designed to be inclusive for diverse students and to improve skills and the application of knowledge in practice” (AACSB, 2017, p 32). However, at the same time, the ways in which higher education is reaching learners is changing dramatically. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2014 28.5% of all US college and university students were engaged in distance learning with 14% of all learners and 24.9% of post baccalaureate learners were exclusively distance learners (NCES, 2017). This dynamic contributes to the changing landscape for experiential learning in higher education.

The Center for Digital Civic Engagement (2013) reported,

Few online learners are benefiting from civic and community engagement opportunities connected to the curriculum. As online course delivery increases as a percentage of all higher education courses there will be fewer and fewer service-learners each year – unless we act now!

One might ask why experiential learning is important for online learners and other stakeholders as higher education is changing. The pedagogy can “engage [students] in experiential and active learning designed to be inclusive for diverse students and to improve skills and the application of knowledge in practice” (AACSB Accreditation Standards, 2017, p. 32). Experiential learning can be custom designed to fit the needs of students’ career trajectory, in collaboration with Faculty/Practitioners (aka, Pracademics), thereby creating a valuable experience for students and faculty to collaborate in scholarship intended to foster greater understanding of the curriculum and workplace competencies.

VIRTUAL SERVICE-LEARNING FOR ONLINE LEARNERS

Just as physical college campuses served as incubators for the creation of service-learning projects, now colleges and universities that deliver education in the online setting can, and are, participating in online service-learning (see various articles available at Center for Digital Civic Engagement, 2013).

One impetus for creating a service learning component in B-School courses is to provide an educational experience that better prepares students for successful careers. The idea of a service learning component is grounded in constructivism or constructivist learning theory, an epistemology, learning, or meaning-making theory. Constructivism or meaning-making “maintains that individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come in contact (Abdal-Haqq, 1998, para 2). New learning occurs through engagement with actual scenarios or real-world work-like experiences that promote “active engagement, inquiry, problem solving, and collaboration with others” (Abdal-Haqq, 1998, para. 2).

When considering virtual service-learning it is important to realize that learners participate in online learning for a variety of

reasons, many of which pertain to time management and geographic location. Thus, service-learning, defined here as becoming proficient in course material through serving others, must be considered in a virtual setting and often, asynchronously. Virtual service learning is also referred to as E-Service Learning (Waldner, McGorry & Widener, 2012). Virtual service learning students can participate in asynchronous learning environments and service projects without limitation of geographic location or time clock as they practice theory and move beyond textbooks to applied settings that facilitate learning through involvement with organizations. According to AACSB (2017), experiential learning for B-School students can also teach the importance of ethics, compassion, and understanding of others in the workplace. In addition, research by McGorry (2012) concluded that the difference in online students' service learning project and the traditional face-to-face service-learning project experience was not significant, thereby determining that it is beneficial to schools and instructors to incorporate a service learning component into courses that are delivered online too.

Online faculty and other stakeholders must work to properly design service learning projects that can be implemented with the student working with organizations toward completing the project online. Burns (as cited in Helms, Rutti, Hervani, & LaBonte, 2015) advocated for a service project design that includes "preparation, action, reflection, and evaluation" (p. 370). Such a model requires the student to carefully consider what occurred during planning, creation and implementation phases of a service project. Learning is demonstrated through written reflection on the project. As student learning occurs, the professor can learn too: (1) from the reflection of the student; (2) from monitoring the students' project participation; (3) from reflecting on the service learning project design, and (4) from the site administrator's feedback. Clearly, relationships must be built and sustained during project administration. This is an important consideration before, during, and after the service-learning course.

Online education can provide flexibility and freedom for students because it removes the barriers of physical space and reliance on the time limitations on of classes delivered in any given 24-hour period. However, the same freedom can occur with service learning projects that target organizations that have websites or some service that is dependent upon online delivery or other communication technologies. This could include, but is not limited to, the design of websites for small businesses, mentoring of students, running blogs for organizations, and 24 hour answering services.

Bossaller (2016) created a service learning course that helped to facilitate community involvement for online students. Bossaller also advocated for the development of a network of organizations that would accept online students wishing to complete service learning projects. Such a network would be helpful nationwide because of the geographic distance between online schools and their students. Further, navigating the regulatory landscape for such projects can be ambiguous. Thus, it would be wise to seek out expert services for administration of such projects. These relationships, across states, region or countries, would greatly aid in determining the type of projects that faculty and students could engage in, as well as be directly associated with course learning outcomes, the student's major and the student's overall service learning experience.

There is little research on specific virtual service learning opportunities in business or business development, including human resources management (Sawyer, 2017). Sawyer (2017) researched human resources development professionals who participated in internships during their undergraduate education to determine the effectiveness of those internships, either virtual or non-virtual, in students' development of relevant real-world competencies and future success as professionals. Sawyer (2017) found that the design and features of service learning programs had varying degrees of influence on positive or successful transitions on students entering the human resources management profession, and Sawyer's study required further research.

CASE STUDIES AND SIMULATIONS

Although case studies and simulations are too large a topic for this research, it is notable that one entrepreneurial company is making its mark through building custom case study learning experiences for colleges and universities. The company's founders consist, in part, of two college graduates that were bored with outdated case studies in their undergraduate courses. Thus, they have made their mark by developing 'real time' business cases with organizations that are changing the ways in which business is conducted. RealTime Cases (2017) has become one of *Forbes 30 Under 30* companies by creating experiential learning business cases for colleges and universities around the US.

Utilization of the experiential learning process within the organizational setting can be seen in several forms and provides the individual with a learning environment that closes the gap between theory and practice (Jayaraman, 2014). The internal aspect of learning involves the development of personnel within the organization. There is the external learner aspect where the organization is the catalyst for external student learning, generally in a virtual intern format. Whatever the role, a dynamic learning organization recognizes the need to offer growth opportunities as a training opportunity and as an applied opportunity for strong professional development and organizational sustainability.

Baden and Parkes (2013) found that when the student is offered the opportunity to work with responsible business professionals the outcome embeds a strong philosophy of ethical and social responsibility. Organizations are abiding by the assumption that training by 'doing' establishes a more efficient strategy to understanding and an ability to accomplish that task (Androit, 2017). This hands-on type of activity coupled with the demand for social media/video interaction has the potential to develop skill sets when properly deployed. The challenge is to have quality material that grows the individual and does not waste organizational/institutional time and resources.

The challenge for the institution and organization alike is that the new advances in simulated learning becomes more of a game and not a learning and application process. Wharton and Parry's (2003) case study found that the experience and maturity

levels the individual brings to the learning process has the potential to diminish the actual learning outcomes. If the experience and knowledge level is not adequate for a limited guidance learning platform, the outcome in both the training room and the classroom may not develop the application abilities as intended (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).

As with any other type of learning approach, experiential learning has the greatest potential for success when the proper onboarding training and preparation accompanies the task. Of the over 250 vendors sponsoring the 2017 Association for Talent Development (ATD) Conference approximately one quarter of those exhibitors were devoted specifically to virtual/simulated/experiential types of development (ATD, 2017). Choosing the proper learning format becomes yet one more responsibility for the facilitator. Maintaining a clear vision that supports the desired outcome helps in the selection process.

Research suggests that there are explicit reasons for embracing the experiential process for learning and training. A safe learning environment is important, along with the ability to accelerate the learning process and when properly structured, accurately assess results to grow the practice. Jayaraman (2014) said that the ability to tailor the training to the individual helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice with a measurable return on investment. Recognizing the challenges and developing a practice that meets the need is critical to success for all stakeholders.

VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

With the increase of the virtual workplace and the importance of internships as a competitive advantage for the job market, it is only logical that virtual internships would be on the rise. “Remote internships often entail working on research projects or social media efforts, for which only a laptop and an Internet connection are needed. They make sense in a world of global companies and virtual work forces laboring from afar” (Worthum, 2013).

A 2012 survey reported that 33 percent of employers hired virtual internships in 2011, while 71% of students stated that they have interest in a virtual internship (Smith, 2012). Internships.com, an organization that list more than 8,000 virtual job openings per year, reported a 20 percent increase of virtual internships from 2011 to 2012. Additionally, the company’s survey of over 300 employers discovered that about a third of participant companies offered remote internships in 2013 (Worthum, 2013).

International Virtual Internships

While virtual work has allowed for people to participate in the globalized workplace, virtual internships will follow suit. According to Kåtröm ,Kristensen & Svenkerud, 2007, “Learning mobility, i.e. transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills is one of the fundamental ways in which individuals, particularly young people, can strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development”. With this in mind, international internships can be a value added for resumes. However, the challenge of such endeavors is plagued with financial and location issues. Virtual mobility in this “context realizes cross-border, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning. These activities can take place in wholly as virtual or as a complement to physically mobility” (Kåtröm ,Kristensen & Svenkerud, 2007.)

Virtual Accounting Internships

By developing a virtual internship program as part of an undergraduate accounting program, Bayerlein (2015) hoped to overcome an obstacle encountered by graduates with baccalaureate in accounting as well as other professional degrees, a lack of practical experience. Prospective employers of accountants prefer candidates who have developed necessary soft skills in addition to the technical skills and knowledge taught in classrooms. These soft skills are inherent to effective problem-solving, analytical assessment, teamwork, communication, and the ability to respond to changing business environments. The combination of technical and soft skills is necessary for contemporary accountants to think critically and solve complex non-routine problems successfully.

The desire of employers for competent employees, along with concerns within the accounting profession about a dearth of work-ready accounting school graduates, place added pressure on academics designing accounting programs. Requirements to produce graduates who possess hard (i.e., technical) and soft skills, and have the ability to apply technical knowledge in a practical environment, create a basis for more thorough education (Bayerlein, 2015). Bayerlein (2015) introduced a “virtual internship model [that] builds on the technical strength of traditional accounting [programs while] concurrently fostering the development of well-contextualized workplace-related soft-skills in an immersive virtual workplace setting” (p. 674).

Bayerlein (2015) based his model on Guile’s and Griffiths’ (2001) connective learning model that replicates an actual work environment by combining vertical and horizontal development opportunities within the context of a single learning environment. Vertical development occurs as interns progress through a program focused on hierarchical skill development most associated with classroom education. Traditional accounting courses aid in the development of technical skills that become increasingly more sophisticated and complex as students complete the curriculum. Horizontal development occurs when students have the opportunity to develop skills (i.e., soft skills) through experience in a contextualized work-like environment (e.g., virtual business setting). Integrating horizontal development or experiential learning with vertical development or classroom instruction provided students with a more well-rounded education that prepares them for successful entry into their careers (Bayerlein, 2015).

The design of Bayerlein’s (2015) internship program integrated faculty mentorship and peer support components as students were immersed in virtual business environments. The shifting role of faculty from academics to mentors resulted in student interns

becoming responsible for their own learning as the faculty members were no longer a primary source for obtaining knowledge. Making interns responsible for their own learning replicates real-world experiences where employees' "tasks become output oriented (focused on problem solving, rather than input oriented (focused on content comprehension)" (Bayerlein, 2015), p. 676), preparing students for self-driven lifelong learning. Bayerlein (2015) found that the benefits his students derived from the internship program were consistent with the advantages associated with virtual internships found in the literature. These benefits included increased student engagement, improved learning outcomes, lower levels of attrition, and better preparation for future work.

VIRTUAL CONSULTING AND SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

As the U. S. moves further towards a service-based economy, jobs for telecommuters, also known as digital nomads, become more prevalent. A simple internet search reveals that virtual consultant positions are readily available in nearly any industry. Job boards such as Indeed and FlexJobs offer a wide variety of virtual consulting jobs daily. Jobs such as business development managers, medical jobs, program managers, IT consultants, and many other positions in nearly any career field (FlexJobs, 2017). These are just a few of the thousands of jobs offered daily in the realm of virtual consulting. These jobs can be fulltime, flexible, freelance, or part-time. With so many different virtual consulting jobs available, the need for e-mentoring by a skilled professional, such as a professor is needed to guide the student towards a successful future (Martin, Platis, Malita, & Ardeleanu, 2011).

Virtual consultants tend to be self-employed contractors, selling specialized services to different clientele. They are not employees of the organization. The consultants are hired to do short-term projects and tend to work remotely over the internet, allowing them to work from anywhere. Gig-based jobs save organizations time and money by hiring full time employees to do a one-off project (Marzec, 2017). Clearly, preparing college and university students to face and thrive in this economic reality is part of the responsibility of higher education.

However, the scholarly literature shows little about the topic of virtual consulting. Since the career field is often considered a small business topic, the lack of solid research is not surprising. Small business scholarly research is often sparse at best (Swank, 2010). However, the contemporary literature is filled with blogs and contemporary articles giving about the topic. The hot job category is part of the current gig economy (Horney, 2016). Students working on virtual service learning projects develop consulting skills, allowing them to successfully contribute and compete in today's virtual gig economy.

One way to achieve student-centered learning or experiential learning is for students to conduct scholarly research to serve organizational needs. Scholarly research is the process whereby student conduct research for assignment using scholarly or peer reviewed journal articles. Scholarly or peer reviewed journal articles of those written by scholars or professionals who are experts in the respective fields. The important of such research is to allow students to research current practices as well as shows the student theories and models along with demonstrate application of said theories (Story, 2012). It is with scholarly research that students can see the application of materials that provides a knowledge that may not be accomplished via exams or classroom discussions (Story, 2012).

By conducting useable scholarly research students also learn how to use basic research tools which are often lost in today's technology-driven world. Students may learn the simple tools of a University or College library to conduct their research. However, that is not to say scholarly research cannot be conduct with technology. The tools available to today's students allows them to conduct research anywhere via tablets, cell phones, and laptops with electronic academic databases.

Research experience allows students to better "understand published works, learn to balance collaborative and individual work, determine an area of interest, and jump start their careers as researchers" (Madan & Teitge, 2013). Research can enhance a student's learning both in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. Conducting research for others can also provide skills and learning for opportunities after graduation. Students learn how to look at an issue from multiple viewpoints when conducting research as well as understand the application of theories. The benefits of scholarly research to a student are plentiful as set forth above.

CONCLUSION

After conducting a literature review on experiential learning opportunities for B-School learners in a changing competitive global environment, the researchers have realized there is much room for both qualitative and quantitative studies on any and all of the pedagogies that were surveyed. Virtual service-learning, case studies, simulations, organizational consultation, scholarly research, and virtual internships can clearly be used as means to educate undergrads and post-baccalaureate students alike. And, now that accrediting bodies as prestigious as the AACSB are supportive of such curriculum design, it is likely that the body of literature on virtual experiential learning will continue to increase. This is good news as it does not appear that the unprecedented rates at which business and higher education are changing will subside any time in the near future. In fact, it appears that strategic alliances and partnerships among such stakeholders in education will continue and increase as a stream of research of its own. Therefore, this story is likely one "to be continued".

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