

From Mustard Seeds to an Experiential (R)Evolution

Lora Reed
Grand Canyon University
CLO Peace Offerings, Inc.
Lreed409@Hotmail.com

Jordan Levy
CapSource Education
jordan@capstonesource.com

ABSTRACT

Ten years ago, 'Mustard Seeds' won Best Paper Experiential Learning at ABSEL (Reed, 2010). Experiential learning, like ABSEL and most everything, has continued to evolve in the past decade. For example, accreditation entities, such as American Association of Colleges & Schools of Business (AACSB), officially recognizing experiential learning as a pedagogy that adds value to business education. Business education has continued to change too; online education has become widely accepted in colleges and universities throughout the world. Higher education continues to reinvent programs, curriculum, and student services focusing on the changing needs of society and students who enter both these institutions and a quickly changing economic environment. This paper explores how experiential learning has changed since Mustard Seed as a "means for creative problem solving, ethical decision-making, stakeholder alliance, [and] leader development through experiential learning in management education" (Reed, 2010). The paper offers directions for future research on the [r]evolution of experiential learning and new key stakeholders like CapSource that are at the helm of that change.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2010, when *Mustard Seeds* was written, experiential learning was widely accepted across the US and some other parts of the world, but it was not widely accepted in Business Education. The ABSEL paper showcased grant-funded experiential learning projects that, like "Mustard seeds are minute beginnings that have often believed to grow into magnificent visions intended to satisfy the needs of numerous stakeholders" (Reed, 2010, p. 310). In addition, online education was not as profuse as it is in colleges and universities today. Consistently, educators/theorists/practitioners who sought to teach essential business topics/competencies, such as creative problem solving, ethical decision making, building and sustaining organizational stakeholder alliances, and developing leaders at all organizational levels often faced institutional resistance and a lack of support and incentives for their efforts. Even though experiential learning itself has been around for a long time, there was still much difficulty in systematically tracking institutional outcomes, much less other types of student success, such as graduate employment metrics. Some faculty did see evidence of student success, but it was often through anomalies, such as interaction with the occasional student[s] who published papers (see Hoover, Mitchell, & Wu, 2012; O'Shaughnessy, Joseph, Lodesto, & Metcalf, 2011; Reed, Baroudi, & Joseph, 2012; Reed, Aldridge, Smith, & Patrick, 2012; Robinson, Mitchell, & Hoover, 2013), communication with students through social media (e.g., *LinkedIn*, etc.), hearing from former students who had become entrepreneurial achievers, or requests for recommendations for employment, grad school in innovative programs, internships, or other unusual opportunities.

As doing business in an increasingly high-tech, global economic environment and society have changed, so has higher education. For example, in 2015, although the average undergraduate student age remained between 18-24, over 20% of undergrads in four-year institutions were over the age of 24 and often already in the workforce. In fact, about 20% of students were 30 years of age or older. And, in the for-profit higher education sector which, with over a million students, could no longer be ignored, over half of students are typically age 30 or older. During 2015, about 3.5 million adults over 30 were enrolled in higher education in the US. Clearly, higher education as an institution has been changing and so are reasons people to return to school to earn a degree (Hamilton Project, 2019). However, one fact that has not changed is that higher education can positively change lives, as well as the trajectory of a family's economic outlook. In fact, these days one of the most coveted of employee benefits is tuition reimbursement which is now superseded by employer repayment of an employee's previously incurred student loans (Friedman, 2018).

But what does all of this mean for the future of experiential learning? As noted previously, it means accreditors such as AACSB and IACBE have changed their perspectives on the value added by experiential learning in business schools (see Levy, 2018; IACBE Munevo Open Case, 2019). Further, it means that organizations, such as ABSEL continue to be on the cutting edge of research pertaining to virtual experiential learning, simulations, and games that move eager students/faculty/practitioners and proactive higher education institutions into the future of both business and education (see https://absel.org/?page_id=22).

A CHANGING SOCIETY: THE RAMIFICATIONS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The need for experiential learning has grown in recent years due to rising concerns about workforce preparedness and troubling statistics regarding underemployment, especially for recent college graduates. Data from the New York Fed reveals that more than 40% of recent graduates are underemployed, compared to roughly one-third of all college graduates. Not surprisingly, students themselves are also concerned about their job prospects and how prepared they are to enter the workforce. According to the Strada-Gallup 2017 College Student Survey, “only about one third of students (34 – 36%) think they will graduate with the skills and knowledge to be successful in the job marketplace and in the workplace.”

The disconnect between what students learn in the classroom and the knowledge they need to be successful company employees is commonly referred to as the “skills gap.” According to a 2013 Gallup Poll, only 11% of business leaders strongly believe that recent college graduates are properly equipped with job-ready skills. A 2018 study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers also shows that employers believe that students are overconfident about their skills and abilities, especially when it comes to professionalism and work ethic. Similarly, employers often note that students and new employees lack soft skills such as emotional intelligence, creativity, and communication (see Loretto, 2019). Interestingly, many of the skills listed in these studies are developed not by learning theory in the classroom, but through practice, further underscoring the need for students to have opportunities to apply what they are learning to the real world while they are still in school (Reed, 2010).

The critical issue to address is the lack of workforce preparedness and lack of work experience for young adults. Today’s young adults (between the ages of 15-21) are much less likely to have had a paid summer job or to have been employed within the last year compared to every previous generation for which data exists. To make matters worse, under 10% of active students are able to secure a formal internship each year while they’re in school. According to Ross Perlin’s Intern Nation, only 1.5 million internships are filled in the United States each year. However, there are more than 19 million students currently enrolled in higher education. We are in dire need to expand our “internship” market in order to provide students with the exposure and experience needed to make informed decisions about their career. Most traditional internships are only available during the summer months when students often have to prioritize other forms of work or family responsibilities, or cannot afford to take on an internship if it is unpaid.

At the end of the day, according to the Class of 2017 Student Survey Report, roughly 40% of all students do not get a single chance to engage with at least one real company directly through internships or co-ops before graduating. When students aren’t learning essential professional skills in the classroom or during internships and co-ops, they are left deserted, indebted, and without any preparation for the world that lies ahead upon graduation.

As a result, the onus is put on our 21st century postsecondary and professional education system to build and implement “internship-like experiences” as part of the student learning process. Academic institutions are being forced to deliver training and development for students preparing to enter the working world because in actuality, that makes up 70% of their consumers. Students are more than just consumers of higher-ed, they’re customers, often taking on significant debt in order to reap the benefits of the system. The monumental part is that those students are beginning to take notice that they’re being underserved by their institution and preferences are beginning to shift. Since 2016, declining enrollment has resulted in the closure or consolidation of thousands of colleges and campuses around the country and that may be just the start. According to a 2019 Pearson survey, half of Gen Z in the US and UK think they can do without a 4-year degree and 68% of learners worldwide think vocational training is more likely to land them a good job than a university degree.

Experiential learning presents a compelling opportunity for traditional higher education institutions to transition smoothly into an effective educational environment where students can chase their curiosity, build essential workforce skills, network and collaborate with peers, all while gaining experience and exposure to different job roles and industries while solving real problems for real-world organizations. Not only does the pedagogical approach much better serve the students, it also ties the institution more closely to their local community and alumni, it ensures programs and faculty are up-to-date with industry best practices and that institutional research is relevant, and in the most successful cases, it provides alternate routes for financing through an employer-pay model.

In addition, research from the Gallup-Purdue Index found that the experiences students have in college are a strong indicator of how engaged they will be as employees in the workforce. In a 2015 survey, Gallup contends that engaged employees impact a company’s bottom line because these employees are more productive, less likely to be absent, and ultimately less likely to leave. More specifically, the Gallup research indicates that college graduates who had the following “big six” key collegiate experiences are about three times more likely to be engaged in their work after college compared with graduates who did not have any of these experiences. Broken out individually, these experiences are:

1. had a professor who made them excited about learning (2x more likely to be engaged at work),
2. had professors who cared about them as a person (1.9x more likely to be engaged at work),
3. had a mentor (2.2x more likely to be engaged at work),
4. worked on a semester-long project (1.8x more likely to be engaged at work),
5. had an internship or job that allowed them to apply what they learned in the classroom (2x more likely to be engaged at work), and
6. participated in extracurricular activities (1.8x more likely to be engaged at work)

When organized properly, experiential learning engagements are hinged on almost all of the “big six” key collegiate experiences.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN THE EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM

As an undergraduate at Lehigh University, Co-Author Jordan Levy was a ‘straight-A’ student, but felt largely unprepared for his first day on the job as a KPMG Intern. He was confident that the issue was not at the institutional or instructional level, since his university provided him with the resources and guidance he needed to succeed in his classes and land his first job. He realized that the main issue was with the content they had been using in the classroom. From stagnant textbooks to stale cases and theoretical simulations, faculty didn’t have the resources they needed to truly challenge him and his peers in order to prepare them as emerging young business professionals.

In February 2014, Jordan started his first education company with two peers called Real Time Cases (now Curator Solutions). The hope was to make learning much more fun, interesting, and beneficial since it was designed to expose learners to new experiences and circumstances in our rapidly changing world. That educational model combined the age-old theory-based Harvard Business Case method with real challenges sourced from real companies around the world, presented in a highly engaging video-first format.

After spending nearly four years building that business, Jordan began to realize that there was a lot more work to be done when it came to connecting companies with institutions, their educators, and their students through meaningful collaboration. Many institutions and their key progressive administrators showed more interest in experiential education over using a case-based approach, which included little to no interaction between industry and classroom stakeholders.

Jordan started CapSource to address the institutional needs tied to building sustainable, scalable experiential learning programs that integrate companies and their leaders directly into the education process for students. CapSource’s first cohort of customers were all consistently struggling to find organizations willing to participate in these educational collaborations. The CapSource team also realized that structuring and designing the learning experience had to be a key part of their process. Not only did it become much more feasible to hand-off these experiential learning engagements to the university team leading the execution of the projects, these projects were also much easier to execute since everyone was on the same page from the get-go. CapSource’s original service focused on making meaningful matches between programs with narrow academic requirements (like timeline, topic, and format) with companies and other organizations willing to provide schools with time, resources, and structured projects that can serve as the curriculum.

According to CapSource’s Experiential Learning Framework, experiential learning is a form of active/applied learning that results in reference worthy work experience. These project-based learning engagements require students to practice using key universal skills like communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity in order to develop real outcomes for real stakeholders who provide meaningful and actionable feedback along the way. As a result, students gain reference-worthy experience that they can talk about in interviews and on their resume/LinkedIn while working with real companies, in real business functions, on real challenges that have real stakes.

Experiential learning enables students to apply their knowledge and course concepts to real-world situations. It’s one of the few instances where students are exposed to trial and error from the safety of the college classroom, giving them the opportunity to explore different career paths, gain practical knowledge, and work through common professional challenges before their first internship or entry-level job. In addition, experiential learning provides students with access to the critical professional mentors that they need to adequately launch their career. Whether they’re being leveraged for career advice, networking, or industry expertise, mentors are essential for working professionals at any age, especially recent graduates.

As both ABSEL and Jordan know, with experiential learning, students benefit from faculty mentorship, teamwork with fellow students, and access to critical feedback from company representatives who are hosting the engagement. These learning experiences also tend to be more emotional in nature since students are aware that there are real stakes and that their actions can make a real impact on a real company. In addition, students who participate in experiential learning projects are exposed to real work environments and have a clearer sense of what to expect when they finally enter the workforce. These engagements also foster positive relationships amongst students, professors, and real company stakeholders, many of which are often alumni of the school or companies in the local economy (see Reed & Jeremiah, 2017).

An essential part of CapSource’s model to-date has been their focus on standardizing the experiential learning process based on consistencies seen across academia for the past 30+ years and tens-of-thousands of private-public-partnerships. This includes the information companies need to know about the experience in order to commit, the key company details educators and students need to know in order to fully understand the scope, and of course, the key project goals, deliverables and timeline they must stick to in order to be successful.

In addition, CapSource’s team found that a key piece of this puzzle was defining a set of standard experiential learning engagement formats that work smoothly as a productive dynamic between company stakeholders, educators, and their students.

These higher learning experiential models include:

- CLASS PROJECTS: 7-200 students compete/collaborate on one/multiple projects with a single host company (See CapSource Live Cases)
- GROUP PROJECTS: 2-6 students work together as a consulting team on a single project from a single host company (See CapSource Capstones)
- INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS: 1 student works independently on a project for their host company (See CapSource Co-Ops)

In all of these models, students, typically guided by faculty, work with a real company professionals to solve real business challenges. These collaborations are usually executed mostly remote with weekly opportunities to check-in. Ideally, the projects should require students to get up-to-speed on the business environment before attempting to hone in and focus on adding value. This typically includes background research on the business model, product, competitors, and industry. These research-oriented project-based learning engagements, when designed correctly, should require little oversight and maintenance from company personnel and should feel like a cross between a consulting project and case study (see Bohlander, 2010)

Some universities have already implemented highly successful experiential learning programs for undergraduate and graduate students. For example, Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Business and Carnegie Mellon's Swartz Center for Entrepreneurship have integrated opportunities for students to work with real companies on business challenges through programs such as internships, capstone projects (see ABSEL, 2019), field studies, and fellowships. Brigham Young University describes its experiential learning programs as designed to "provide projects with relevant work experience for students; provide insightful, creative, and professional work products for companies; and create linkages between recruiting companies/organizations and students." Likewise, Carnegie Mellon's Swartz Center partners students with "real startup ventures and enterprises," with a focus on entrepreneurship development and strengthening relationships among students, faculty, alumni, and industry.

However, despite the promising power of this model, most universities still don't have an established experiential learning offices dedicated to managing the incredible lift of building and scaling experiential educational programs. The process of finding, structuring, launching, and managing industry-integrated projects is no small feat. We often find that most schools are still coordinating these engagements on an ad-hoc basis where faculty are forced to stick their neck out and use their own network to find projects. There's typically no formal system to manage partner relationships and project scopes, and there's often little to no infrastructure to track project progress and outcomes for students and companies.

After working to standardize the experiential learning design process, CapSource turned to systematizing the coordination process so that they could collaborate with school educators and administrators anywhere as they built industry-integrated learning experiences for students across diverse fields and experience levels. They've recently launched a white-label customizable software platform (CONNECT) for universities that want to centralize, formalize, and internally manage their experiential learning process.

The CapSource mission is to help schools increase the quality and scalability of their experiential learning program offerings. The CapSource model is to help educators integrate real-world business leaders and their company challenges directly into the education process through research-oriented, project-based experiential learning engagements. CapSource offers services such as company sourcing, instructional design, and faculty training in addition to their freemium software. Over the past three years, CapSource has successfully coordinated close to 200 collaborations with the help of 200+ company partners for over 50+ educational institutions around the globe. Some of their most notable clients include the University of Notre Dame, Montclair State University, and Long Island University.

While many experiential learning engagements take place locally/regionally with some in-person interaction, the advent of online education has further expanded opportunities for students to participate in experiential learning virtually. Not only are the students and companies remote from each other, but more often than not, the students are all completely remote from each other and their faculty, which adds several extra layers of complexity when it comes to communication and collaboration through this heavy project-based learning educational approach.

For example, in partnership with the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE), CapSource offers a Virtual Live Business Case Competition, a unique opportunity to get students in front of real-world executives as they compete to come up with the best insights based on real company challenges. Students got a chance to web conference with company contacts through webinars and special office hour sessions and ultimately submitted recorded final presentations and written memos for the company's business leaders to review. CapSource also created their first ever OpenCase, allowing students and companies from around the world to participate in an experiential learning opportunity for free.

Another great example of remote experiential learning is the International Consulting Network (ICON), a student-run, global non-profit consultancy that connects students with companies in various industries and countries. With over 150 students participating annually from leading universities around the world, ICON trains future leaders through student consulting engagements on a variety of industries, including biomedical startups and multinational telecommunications providers. The projects they design and execute each semester allow students to collaborate across time zones with colleagues from peer institutions. The students get a chance to hone critical digital-first collaboration capabilities, which are essential for our future increasingly remote and digital world.

Thus, we hope we have made it clear that students engaged in experiential education are likely to be:

1. much more prepared to enter the workforce,
2. more likely to have found a career path that aligns with their interests and goals,
3. more engaged as employees once they have entered the workforce,
4. better able to operate as part of a highly digital, global team environment,
5. better able to understand and resolve complex organizational challenges,
6. more likely to engage and financially support their alma mater as an employer, and
7. more likely to have the soft skills needed to succeed as a leader in the workforce
8. (see ABSEL, 2019; Levy, 2019).

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER-ED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As the skills gap between academia and the workforce becomes more and more apparent, colleges and universities plan to further expand their efforts around experiential learning initiatives and objectives. In part, this is because it is increasingly clear that higher education is charged with teaching students *how to learn* as well as what to learn. As Einstein said, “[teachers should] never teach [my] pupils...only attempt to improve the conditions in which they learn” (Einstein Quotes, 2019). As universities continue to launch new experiential learning programs, some of the major considerations will include scalability and sustainability so that experiential learning can reach more students and equip them with the skills they need for workforce success.

Change management is hard for an organization of any shape and size. Since experiential learning requires a fundamental shift in pedagogy, it requires new resources and buy-in from desperate stakeholders. Some of the key costs include sourcing companies, structuring projects, (re)training faculty, and specialized software tools to structure, manage, and measure outcomes.

The future of experiential learning requires that schools continuously prove that it “works” and is worthy of continued investment. Trackable outcomes, including employment, income, job satisfaction, and career and skill confidence, will prove to be more and more important in showing a solid ROI and how students/recent graduates are benefiting financially from an investment in these programs.

It’s also worth noting that students and employers are not the only ones who can derive financial benefits from experiential learning programs. In fact, some schools have been able to leverage experiential learning as a revenue-generating enterprise. For example, William & Mary and Carnegie Mellon generate hundreds of thousands of dollars for their institutions each year through their highly effective industry-focused learning programs. When students are successful in delivering valuable outcomes to alumni and/or local organizations, we see schools with the new-found power to encourage companies to pay small tax deductible fees to support the institution and participate in these programs. Universities can explore this “Employer Pay Model” to offer companies an additional incentive to better train students for the working world, ultimately providing universities with much needed diversified cash flow source. Not to mention, tying programs closely to industry allows schools to re-target alumni and working professionals through professional and continuing education programs, a massively underappreciated market opportunity for institutions. Alumni contributions can also be sourced through businesses, providing less stress on one-time, individual giving and more focus on a long-term, more sustainable quid pro quo relationship. We ultimately expect that many more institutions will develop high enough quality programs to shift the dynamics of higher-ed financing.

We anticipate that in order to best serve students, faculty, and employers, universities will consider formalizing and centralizing their experiential learning programs into a dedicated Experiential Learning Office. A few current examples include NYU Stern Solutions, University of Illinois, Magelli Office of Experiential Learning, and University of Maryland Office of Transformational Learning. Although schools are currently encountering issues trying to identify how these offices should be funded, who they report to, and where they sit within the institution, we expect to see experiential learning offices as frequent in 10 years as career services are now. Notably, coordinating experiential learning engagements often requires collaboration between multiple key entities within the school, including alumni engagement, instructional design, office of technology, economic development, entrepreneurship, career services and of course teaching faculty.

When considering the future of experiential learning, it’s important to remember that employers’ behavior and expectations are constantly evolving. For example, technological innovation has made it easier to work remotely, but also fosters workplace cultures that require more of their employees. For employers, experiential learning can serve as a pipeline for recruitment, as well as training and development for current and future employees.

Looking toward the specific skills that should be gained in experiential learning, it is clear that these types of engagements will need to evolve along with the broader economy. Andrew Porter, from the Association for Experiential Education, references three current trends when discussing the future outlook of jobs:

1. 85% of jobs in 2030 don’t exist today;
2. Nearly 50% of current work activities can be automated with existing technologies; and
3. By 2030, 375 million workers may need to change their occupation category.

In addition, other research on the future of work indicates that business executives and hiring managers are going to continue to prioritize “soft” skills and critical thinking capabilities in the hiring process. Since experiential learning engagements are a great way to foster these much needed soft and critical thinking skills, we anticipate employers will begin to focus more and more on recruiting directly from the pipeline of schools and students they’re collaborating with regularly.

Since the jobs of the future will be further refined by technological advancements, universities can plan to incorporate experiential learning into their continuing education and lifelong learning programs, especially those that re-engage alumni. This can be learning catered to the personalized needs of students, programs in which students can learn at their own pace, or programs that help students re-skill and up-skill to meet new workforce demands.

Ultimately, experiential learning programs will help academia eliminate wasteful academic program redundancy among peer institutions, encourage industry alignment, engage/support local communities, and build strong academic-industry partnerships between colleges and companies.

While some might argue that colleges are not merely training centers for the workforce, incorporating experiential learning into the college curriculum will enable students to draw connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they will be doing afterwards. It will teach students how to learn new skills quickly and solve complex problems using resources they have access to. Most importantly, experiential learning will focus on synthesizing information, not regurgitating it, further underscoring that students have truly absorbed the class material and know how to use it in a way that benefits real stakeholders.

CapSource hopes to continue to grow as the go-to resource for all things experiential learning. For universities looking to scale their existing experiential learning initiatives, we hope they consider CapSource CONNECT, our self service, customizable sourcing and design software platform. For schools that are interested in establishing new experiential programming, we hope you consider leveraging our process, expertise, and services that aim to help schools secure exciting organizations and develop highly valuable, transformative project-based learning experiences that allow students to expand their horizons and enter the working world with more connections, skills, and confidence.

CONCLUSION

CapSource’s Founder Jordan Levy teamed up with Co-Author Lora Reed, incoming ABSEL President and experiential learning expert and enthusiast because they’re on a mission to improve the effectiveness of the higher-education model in the 21st century. We believe experiential learning is the only way higher-ed institutions will survive beyond the 21st century because it requires them to align their skills, expertise, and resources with the needs of society. It’s the only way we can ensure equity and social mobility while also providing us with concrete opportunities to prepare our next generation to deal with increasingly complex issues that come from a quickly advancing, interconnected digital world. We are passionate about the turn-key products CapSource offers educators and their institutions that serve as a bridge between higher-education and the professional work environment. We are eager to empower institutions to best prepare students for the working world that lies ahead through high-quality experiential education programs.

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