

Nurturing Students' Academic Research writing through Experiential Learning: Work-based Teaching for Research Skill Development

* Dr. Amna Yousaf, Assistant Professor (Corresponding Author)

*** Dr. Fariha Gul, Associate Professor

** Dr. Sajid Masood, Associate Professor

Abstract



Experiential or work-based learning is deemed essential for the completion of formal higher education qualifications, in particular postgraduate degrees. The aim of these research degrees is to develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to become independent researchers. This target is achieved by teaching courses on research methods. The current study is exploratory in nature that aims to explore change in the knowledge and skills of students through the experiential instruction method. Thirty students from a doctoral program were included as a sample of the study. Continuous feedback was taken from students through social media tools. The focus of feedback was targeting the dimensions of engagement of students in the research course. The discourse analysis of WhatsApp chat was used to analyze the data. In addition to this, further interviews were carried out to understand the progression and improvement in research skills.

Keywords: Professional Skills, Experiential Learning, Teaching and Learning.

Introduction

Academic writing skill is considered very crucial not only in the research degree (MPhil/Ph.D.) but also as a key skill in many employments where they are supposed to write reports and papers. It is the key requirement of competitive global marketing, e.g., academic, corporate, and government sector jobs with the expectations of good writing skills. (Careers Research and Advisory Centre U.K., 2012).

This paper draws on the perceptions of MPhil and Ph.D. students about their research writing capacities as a result of an academic writing course.

This course is hoped to prepare students for their thesis writing more effectively. Learning writing process needs two areas to be proficient (McAlpine & Asghar 2010; Lillis & Scott 2007; Harrison 2014; Wingate 2012, 2015; Wingate & Tribble 2012), which are:

1. Information literacy
2. Research education

This current article argues about the interaction between research practice and research thesis writing. Educators are encouraged to question the implications of teaching research while considering learning and the implication of learning for students. The previous research studies from the literature emphasize support the notion of a strong and positive relationship between research and daily practices. Experiential learning can be a possible educational approach to enhance student learning and inquiry. "Experiential learning is a means of acquiring knowledge through action and emotion. It creates emotional understanding and changes attitudes" (Warren et al., 2012). It also includes real challenges and prospects for students to talk about, think about, and use what they have learned in their own experiences (Doyle, 2011).

Much of the science of teaching and learning is concerned with observing learning and criticism. Reflections on Teaching by Teachers (Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, Trigwell, 1999). Another research method underlying this strategy/competence is an experiment or adaptation of this approach to the learning environment. Experiential learning gives an opportunity for An observational and experimental research method that extends introspection teaching and learning from the teacher's perspective to the learner's perspective. displacement of This perspective allows observers to see the

* Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore
Email: amna.yousaf@umt.edu.pk

** Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore
Email: fariha.gul@umt.edu.pk

*** Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore Email: sajid@umt.edu.pk

learning process through new communities Practice, that of beginners. As defined by Shon (1983) experiential learning includes contribution and critical expression in this activity. The idea was also supported by Kolb (1984). Experiential learning is most used among adults in the workplace and extends beyond learning to more formal educational settings (Fenwick, 2000; Silverman, 2007). In general, experiential learning understands adult learners as: Participating in some activity, then thinking about it and generalizing about themselves. It can then be used in different situations, known or unknown. Critics have also extended this concept of learning to influential and mutual relations, personal needs, and involvement in social processes (Michelson, 1996; Ellsworth, 1997). Immersed activities or learning is one of the tangible aspects of experiential learning. It recognizes the participants in social configurations and cultural prospects specific to experience (Lave & Wegner, 1991).

Plato believed in the parallel world of pre-existing ideas above this material world. He strongly believed that everything we see around us already existed and this obvious world is merely a shadow world. Knowledge is already existed and needs to uncover. Aristotle believed we construct our knowledge via the sensory register; we learn and know whatever we observe through our senses. Rene Descartes examined the nature of knowledge, and he believed there are absolute foundations of knowledge and human can reach the peak of it. For him, knowledge is everything that cannot be doubted. Khun (1970) argues that he differs from these conventional epistemological concepts and denies the notion that knowledge is a picture of the world without an observer. He argued knowledge is flexible in the observer's practical world.

Experiential learning is the famous work of Kolb (1984) which really brought the experiences of learners to the forefront of educational literature. Kolb claims that: Knowledge is the transformative idea of experience. Kolb theorizes individuals learn when they interact with new contexts, experiences, and situations. Test its credibility by conceptualizing it and later using this knowledge to solve problems in the future. Corvus's Learning theory is of particular interest because it integrates learning styles with periodicity. A stage arises speculating the real proposition of the idea of experiential learning. Boulding (2000) is known for his broad undergraduate and graduate scholarly work. She appreciates experiential Teaching for the capability to link students to their real-life scenarios and expand their opportunities for "self and cognitive development." Such activities are part of all accessible learning systems. Bolding characterizes it as social and mutual relationships within.

Current work by Fenwick (2000, 2001, 2003) expands the idea that: Experiential learning is associated with five viewpoints, especially constructivism. Psychoanalysis; situational; important cultural and activist ecological. Fenwick's experiential education assumes that learners think about concrete experiences in order to construct something new. Understanding. In Fenwick's Constructivist Perspective, Learners Reflect on Their Lives Experiences; these experiences are used to create cognitive structures. These created structures are used as Knowledge storage and can be retrieved/reused later whenever needed. After retrieval, they move into new situations and influence how learners perceive and interpret information. Fenwick's situational perspective recognizes that learning is contextual. Where individuals involve in real-life environments or social contexts, they belong. or A psychoanalytic perspective emphasizes the need for an individual to process internal misunderstandings and work on learning readiness which will enable them to participate completely in this learning process. Inequality between power and various social segments is highlighted by the cultural perspective of learning. The direct impact of experiential learning on social transformation. Finally, Enactivist Ecology Perspectives suggest that learning is best understood through the co-creation of knowledge within a group of individuals. During this investigation, researchers The interview data reflects Fenwick's perspective.

Kolb (1984) believes learning "includes the holistic functioning of the whole body, such as belief/thoughts, feeling, perception and behavior." A theory constructed from experiential learning can build on the student's previous understanding and take into account all the factors mentioned in processing the information into meaningful channels. Furthermore, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), emphasizes that the learning transformation is a long-term process, and this assumption demonstrates the importance of knowledge imparted in the classrooms. Daily life outside the educational setting. Various researchers have also added to Kolb's statement a legitimate stance that classroom learning cannot be relied upon solely. Indeed, several theories of student development suggest that opportunities available outside the classroom enrich learning (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2001;

Tinto, 1993). Changes in progress between individuals and atmospheres depend on learning (Kolb, 1984). In fact, in experiential learning theory, the term experience has two meanings. One relates to purely subjective things, the other to objective things, the former to personal representations, and the latter to environmental and physical characteristics. "These two kinds of experience are interpenetrating, interrelated in very complicated ways" (Kolb, 1984). He also found out that both individuals and environments are interconnected and that their interactions can produce admirable differences in behavior and learning. "Learning in this perception is a self-directed and dynamic process that can be used not only in collaborative settings but also in daily routine life" (Kolb, 1984)

Experimental learning theory (ELT) has two main considerations. Emphasizing how experience is brought into a concrete state (concrete experience) through ideas and concepts (abstract conceptualization), Kolb focuses on feelings and emotions rather than thoughts on concrete experience. Identify "People with this orientation value contact and involvement in real situations and are open to life" (Kolb, 1984). He went on to say that in abstract conceptualization (A.C.) processes, students emphasize reasoning and ideas, and these students typically exhibit organized planning structures and attempt to use quantitative techniques, but other Students reflect on how experience translates into reflection. This Reflective Observation (termed as R.O.) emphasizes that the learner track events that might improve performance through active experimentation (A.E.). Students who choose the Reflexive Observation (R.O.) orientation emphasize "making sense of ideas and situations through careful observation and unbiased explanation" (Kolb, 1984). Reflective Observation (R.O.) students are able to assess their knowledge situation according to a variety of attributes. The legitimacy of active experimentation (A.E.) is based on student's active participation in activities consisting of the observation that they complete a task and that they also "see value in influencing their surroundings and like to see the results" participation (Kolb, 1984). . However, although each orientation can occur in a variety of contexts and situations, we also encourage students to change the location where they study inconveniently. (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2004) "Experiential learning is a process of knowledge construction involving creative tensions between four modes of learning requirements" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the words of Loo (2004), the learning stage begins with concrete events and experiences, reflection based on observations, and reflection is then connected to new concepts and ideas that influence one's perspective and subsequent events. Active participation, and these stages of learning, are designed by Kolb (1984) in her response to student choice needs. These learning stages consist of adaptation, fusion, absorption, and similarity. "It is suggested that the main cause of patterns and consistency in individual learning styles using the analytical holistic of two -dimensional learning style maps is the underlying structure of the learning process" (Kolb, 1984). These stages of learning help to adjust how learning occurs and how learning is transcended through the above four alignments. The performance of each learning stage depends on the continuation of experiential learning theory (ELT).

Basic principles of design

Experiential learning concentrates on learners displaying the understanding of performing something to achieve both conceptual understanding and practical proficiency. Four basic dimensions have been suggested by the experiential learning model presented by Kolbs, these include;

- dynamic investigation
- experience in a real-time situation
- examination through reflection
- Conceptual understanding

Problem-based experiential learning

The concept of structured problem-based learning (PBL) was first presented by Burroughs (1969) and his colleagues at McMaster University School of Medicine, Canada. This idea was later opted for by several other educational institutions of secondary and tertiary education. With the passage of time, the popularity of the model is spreading in the fields where a body of knowledge is flourishing, thus making it difficult to limit the learning to a specific period of time allocated for the learning year. This model follows step by step approach of identifying previous knowledge, the further knowledge that is required to be learned as part of that particular learning process, the identification of essential learning concepts, and then finding and approaching the resources that are required to collect the information to accomplish the learning or solve the problem in hand. All these steps make the role of the instructor a key person for the facilitation and guidance of learning.

The research study carried out by Thomas and Quinlan (2014) presented a positive relationship between the theory and practice of students in a research course on quantitative methods. This study aimed to identify the impact of experiential learning on an understanding of the students and their ability to apply the gained knowledge for problem-solving.

Concept of planned behavior

When it comes to researching human behavior, the theory of planned behavior has become a popular and influential conceptual framework (Ajzen, 2002). The first component of the theory is Behavioral beliefs (these can be understood as beliefs about consequences or qualities that are likely to affect the conduct). The second component of the theory is normative beliefs that are concerned with normative standards. Contrary to this, the control beliefs are the three types of considerations that guide human behavior, according to the theory (these beliefs focus more on factors that influence the frequency of occurrence of that particular behavior). Behavioral beliefs produce a positive or negative attitude toward the behavior, whereas normative beliefs produce a subjective standard or a sense of societal pressure. Control beliefs lead to a perception of behavioral control that evaluates how easy or difficult it is to conduct the behavior (Ajzen, 2002).

There are multiple other pieces of evidence in the literature supporting the idea of combining experiential learning with demonstrable work influence on the environment of learning, thus increasing the likelihood of generating new knowledge about educational content. For example, the research carried out by Kiener et al. (2013) supports the same idea. The only exception added by another research carried out by Warren et al. (2012) is the amount of considerable effort that a teacher has to put in to produce a conducive environment for learning. The use of experiential learning and the creation of comfy learning environments can create desirable educational conditions not only for students to learn knowledge and theory of research but also to influence students' perceptions about the usefulness of the course. Another research study carried out by Kiener et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between emotional learning and the role of a conducive learning environment with reference to improvement in the learning of the students. In this study, the conducive learning environment was operationalized as the satisfaction of students with the course content and their relationship with peers and teachers. Emotional learning, on the other hand, deals with the student's ability to receive responses and understand information. Researchers surveyed 46 undergraduates across five courses and found a significantly positive relationship between happiness and a conducive learning environment, thus predicting emotional learning. Another research study carried out by McKinney et al. (2006) examined the role of the classroom community on research attitudes, perceptions of learning, and test performance. The authors' findings were that class groups significantly anticipated positive insights into the study course and their learning. Serious problems remain. If the study and application of research methods are important (Kosciulek, 2010), why isn't there more research that teaches research methods? It was to implement and determine if it impacted the value and comfort of students in their studies.

Research Objectives

The present article intends to find out the

- 1) Students' competency in research writing.
- 2) Students' capacity to use research knowledge gained through research courses.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach was used to collect data. This study was exploratory in nature and aims to identify the effectiveness of experiential learning strategy with knowledge and expertise of students. This aspect could better be explored through qualitative data collection by asking respondents to give their opinion of the process.

Sample and Sampling

As the focus of study was to examine the link between experiential learning and change in knowledge and behaviour of students. The students from the postgraduate program of a private sector university were selected as participants of the study. The participation was completely volunteer so the convenient sampling strategy was used. Two classes one from academic writing course from the program of Masters of Philosophy, and second from same course from the program of Doctor of philosophy were approached on basis on convenience and permission from the department. The total number of respondents were 35 (25= MPHil program; 10= PhD program).

Instrument of the study

The instrument of the study was an open ended questionnaire focusing on understanding of the impact experiential learning had on students in a research methods course. These statements include;

- 1) Does experiential learning increase students' understanding in research?
- 2) Does experiential learning increase student comfortability in research?
- 3) What are the experiences of students completing a research methods course using experiential learning?

Results

The following section present opinion of respondents under each theme that was drawn through content analysis of the responses of open ended survey instrument.

Purpose of doing PhD

Most of the participants expressed the purpose of PhD to enhance the subject knowledge of professionals. Therefore some expressed it to get title of doctor and for promotion. Many participants think PhD can enable them to develop an academic identity. Some thought helpful in promotion while some see it as an opportunity to transform their knowledge and experiences to others.

Challenges faced by Scholars

Majority found PhD as tough challenge. Mostly found university's academic culture a big challenge to understand. Appropriate communication and relationship management with their research supervisor was big challenge for them. Most of the scholars thought they want to contribute in the body of knowledge and their research can help them in doing so.

Lack of ability to recognize authentic information is big hurdle in writing good research papers. For some avoid plagiarism is big issue while for few developing theme is big challenge. Few expressed they get stuck in explaining ideas and they proceed it by writing down their much deliberated idea, Seeking support and validation from their idea.

Research Activities

Research scholars were asked how they tackle and feel about research activities. Research writing is not a problem for most of the scholars but finding time for research is a big issue for some of the participants other thought it as enriched learning experience.

Improving research productivity

According to many scholars research productivity can be increased by participating academic writing courses and workshops. It can also be improved through collaborated discussion and continuous feedback from experts. Many have expressed that conducting constructive research rigorously can contribute in betterment.

Discussion

The results of the study are in support of the literature, presenting effectiveness of experiential learning in improving knowledge and application skill of students. The results are supported by the research studies carried out by Lillis and Scott 2007; Wingate 2012, 2015; Wingate and Tribble 2012,

Peer and group work was another helping activity for the research learning as McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, and Schweitzer (2006) also confirmed it in their study. Discussion and feedback of the teacher was major activity to enhance their research capacity. Moreover, personally attending to their weakness and working hard in isolation helped them to increase their research productivity.

Research collaboration demonstrated a potential in developing social relation but also enhanced research skills. This was described in the form of 'association mechanism' between the researcher and contexts, formal and informal contacts during studies, and involvement of participants during data collection, and interim feedback. (Huberman M. 1994) Lomas J. (2007) described it as facilitation in research decision making.

Recommendations

- Research collaborations and networking can be helpful to enhance the research capacity of students.
- Careful examination of pedagogical content and knowledge is needed to bridge the gap between theoretical research knowledge and practical writing.
- Studying experiential learning and comfortable learning environments over multiple semesters and/or at the program level will provide more detailed information about their effects and also allow for generalizations.

- Most course content can be introduced into experiential learning, opening new doors of learning for students entering higher education. Teachers can give their students proper instruction and get permission to achieve excellent grades.
- Creating opportunities for students to write research papers more often and provide feedback on the quality of their research work.

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