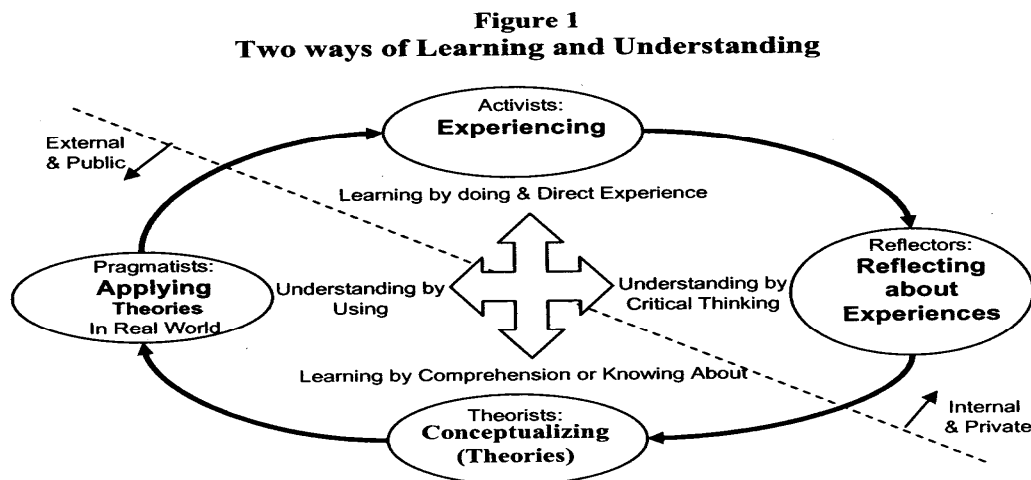


Experiential Learning Philosophy

It is a well-established fact that learning is facilitated when students participate completely in the learning process, and when they are confronted with practical and real-life problems. In recent years, the discipline of business administration has received a lot of criticisms. Much of the criticism has focused on dissatisfaction within the business community of business education delivered to undergraduate students. The lack of necessary skills to apply the theoretical concepts and abstract knowledge in practical situations; and too much weight placed on theory and not on practical skills are two examples of such criticisms.

Experiential learning is an approach to education that has grown in popularity over the past twenty years. This type of learning occurs when students participate in some activity, reflect upon the activity, and use their analytical skills to derive some useful insight from the experience. What experiential learning does best is to capture the interest and involvement of the students, but most importantly, it contributes significantly to the transfer of learning. David Kolb (1984) has developed the most established model of experiential learning. In his model the process begins with “Experiencing”, followed by “Reflecting”, which concentrates on what the experience means to the experienter. The reflection then leads to “Conceptualizing”, which corresponds to “knowledge about” which is theoretical and is represented by abstract concepts, and finally, if applicable, “Applying the New Knowledge” in real situations. Because “Experiential Learning” engages students, its benefits include: increased learning, increased motivation, and increased connection to reality. Kolb (1984) has summarized the most important characteristics of experiential learning in the following diagram:



Illustrative Examples of Class Activities using Experiential Learning Framework:

Example # 1: “Packing the Powerful P!”

Most students in an introduction marketing course can easily visualize the role packaging plays in protecting and facilitating the storage of products, it is not as clear to them the powerful role packing can play in determining how a consumer views and classifies a product (the promotion aspect). This taste test experiment is designed to graphically demonstrate how packaging makes us see three very similar products as completely different items. Three products are used in this taste test: KitKat Candy Bars, Sweet Escapes, and Keebler Fudge Sticks. The items should be cut up into bit size pieces. Each product is placed in separate bags labeled A, B, and C. Students are divided into groups of 3 to 5 depending on class size. The groups are given taste test sheets to fill out as a team. These sheets include the following items: which product did you prefer and why did you prefer it, who is the target market for the product, what is the name of each product, what price does each sell for (or list most the expensive to least). Once these are completed, they are collected and reviewed with the class and the identity of the products is revealed. Next the groups are given the ingredient lists for the three products labeled 1, 2, and 3 and are asked to match the product with its ingredients. These sheets are collected and reviewed. Finally students are given the nutritional breakdown for each product—standardized—so that each product’s nutritional breakdown is for the identical serving portion and asked to identify which product goes to which nutritional breakdown. These are collected and reviewed and how each team fared on the three tasks is reviewed. After the taste test is completed the results are discussed as a class.

What the students discover is that the three products are all basically chocolate covered wafers are viewed very differently and sell for very different prices based on packaging. KitKat is packaged individually as a candy bar, while fudge sticks are packaged in a group as cookies, and Sweet Escapes are packaged as a group but individually--a cross between a cookie and a candy bar. Students tend to be surprised at the fact that they cannot identify the candy bar, which they perceive as a chocolate bar, by its ingredients.

The taste test allows students to immediately begin to understand the relevance of packaging in determining how one perceives a product. It also demonstrates how packaging interacts with the price, promotion, and positioning of a product. Additionally, it allows them to apply their own experience to the material presented in class lectures. This exercise has a side benefit as it exposes students to taste tests as a form of marketing research. Most importantly it forces students from a passive state of learning to participatory learning. A good follow-up is to ask them to try and find their own examples.

Example #2: Pepsi/Coke Blind Taste Test

How did the Pepsi/Coke taste test evolve? In the late 1970s, Pepsi was looking for a creative promotion for its big problem area: the southwestern United States. Pepsi's national market share was 17 percent at the time but only 8 percent in the Southwest. Pepsi decided to stage a blind taste test using a sample of loyal Coke drinkers in the southwest. Pepsi had the volunteers taste test two colas - one labeled M (Pepsi) and one labeled Q (Coke) and states their preference. In this test, more than half the Coke drinkers chose the product labeled M, Pepsi.

Pepsi advertised the results in a promotion in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and sales of Pepsi doubled. The promotion was so successful that Pepsi introduced it into seven other market areas. At this point, Coca-Cola announced that Pepsi's taste test was biased and unfair. Coca-Cola pointed out that variables other than taste were affecting volunteers' choices. One extraneous variable is that people have a natural preference for the letter M over the letter Q. As a result, the preference for product M could be based on taste or could be a subconscious preference for the letter.

In extensive testing, when people were asked to pick either Q or M, 78 percent chose M and 22 percent preferred Q. When people were asked to choose a number from 1 to 4, 70 percent chose 2 or 3, and only 30 percent chose 1 or 4. How do your class results compare?

Before Coke introduced its reformulated "New Coke" in 1985, it conducted almost 200,000 blind taste tests with consumers. The results: New Coke (55 percent) chosen over original Coke (45 percent) New Coke (52 percent) chosen over Pepsi (48 percent). However, after New Coke was introduced, it failed miserably in the market. The original formula was reintroduced a few months later as "Coca-Cola Classic."

We can replicate the taste test comparing New Coke, Coca-Cola Classic, and Pepsi as follows:

1. First, ask each student to select either the letter M or Q. Next, ask them to select a number from 1 to 4. Tally the results.
2. Get forty small paper cups and label ten with the letter R, ten with S, ten with T, and ten with the letter W.
3. Outside the room have a student volunteer randomly assign New Coke, Coca-Cola Classic, and Pepsi to the letters R, S, and T. Write down which soft drink goes with which letter.
4. At the start of class, select ten students as taste testers. The subjects should be regular consumers of non-diet cola (at least six 12-ounce bottles in the last month). Place the students at the front of the classroom.
5. Outside the room, the student volunteer should be filling each cup with the appropriate soda. Fill the W cups with water.
6. Put an R, S, T, and W cup in front of each student, and hand each student a copy of the Cola Taste Test Form provided.
7. To eliminate order bias, have three of the students begin the taste test with cup R, three with cup S, and four with cup T. Have them take a sip of water between colas and continue to sample and test in any order they wish. They can resample as needed to fill out the questionnaire.
8. Have a student tabulate the answers during class and share the results at the end of class. The form could even lend itself to cross-tabulations (between preferences and answers to questions 5 or 6) if the sample were larger.

Example 3: A Peek at Packaging: Students' Observations of Their Own Use of Packaging

The purpose of this assignment is to cultivate students' awareness of product packaging and related strategic issues. Each student records all packages handled over the course of four days, reports observations about the packaging used, and reflects on several strategic issues. An in-class activity conducted on the project's due date reinforces potential competitive advantages offered by strategic packaging and provides salient evidence of the challenges that marketers continue to face.

The project is comprised of three components:

1. **Record.** Students observe and record (i.e., list) all packaging they handle over the course of four days. For example, a peanut butter jar, jelly jar, and bread wrapper are all handled when a sandwich is made. An asterisk (*) is placed on the list next to any package which is disposed of. Students are instructed to watch for miscellaneous or non-traditional types of packaging that they use, e.g., groceries are packaged in either "paper or plastic". Part of the learning experience is determining whether something should be considered "packaging", based on the definition and functions discussed in class. Students are asked to divide the days into four time periods. Students are *strongly* encouraged to record their package use throughout the day. Of the four days, two must be "weekdays" (Monday - Thursday) and two must be "weekend days" (Friday - Sunday). The days do not have to be consecutive.
2. **Report.** Students discuss their observations in a two-page paper about the packaging handled. Discussion guidelines are provided:
 - Discuss observations about the amount (sheer quantity) of packaging handled on the weekdays vs. the weekend days.
 - Discuss the *types* of packaging handled on the weekdays vs. the weekend days. Were different types of products used? Discuss any patterns observed (portion sizes, disposed of more packaging on certain days, etc.).
 - Discuss observations relating to environmental issues. Based on these observations, discuss whether or not most packaging is environmentally friendly. Identify the package that was the worst environmental offender. Identify the package that offered the most positive example of environmental responsibility.
 - Discuss one other issue/observation about the packaging used over the course of these four days. (*NOTE: Although suggestions for potential issues can be provided, requiring students to identify a salient issue based on their own observations contributes to the learning experience.*)
3. **Reflect.** Based on the packaging handled over the course of the four days, identify the very best package and the very worst package. Specify why these particular packages were selected. Bring these two packages to class on the due date.

In-Class Activity

On the due date, form five-member groups. Each group member shows his/her best and worst package and explains why it was selected. Each group chooses their best and worst package. Then, each group's best package is presented to the class by the student who brought it, who again emphasizes the package's attributes. This is followed by a vote for the Grand Champion Package. This process is repeated for the worst package which culminates in the selection of the Very Worst Package. The students who brought these packages are each awarded a small prize.

The in-class activity reinforces the functions, attributes, and competitive advantages achievable via excellent strategic packaging. The poor packages provide salient examples of the criticisms and challenges facing the marketers of packaged-goods. A number of students are appalled at the quantity of packaging they personally use. Some rue obvious excess packaging while others point out that the level of product quality demanded by customers (e.g., unbroken cookies) requires product protection. A discussion of these issues can be used to [re]emphasize the challenges marketers face regarding customer expectations, social responsibility, and/or the marketing environment. When the projects have been graded and are returned to the students, a list of packages documented by especially observant students is read to the class, e.g., envelopes, banana labels, rubber bands around newspapers. This provides an opportunity to recap the qualifications, functions, and benefits of packaging.

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