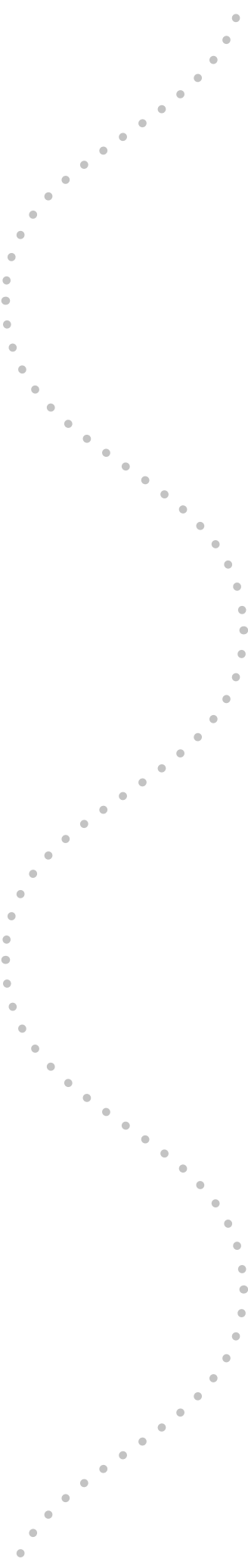# A Guide to Effective Education

— Through —

Experiential Learning

If you're reading this guide, chances are you're either a professor or administrator who is wondering about the effectiveness of the current instructional methods you're implementing.

Reflect on the time you spent in school. It's undeniable that the world around you has dramatically changed since then. However, you're likely still implementing the same instructional methods that your professors used on you. How is that possible?

The education industry has been slow to evolve, failing to incorporate techniques and technologies that better suit a new generation of students. While older generations were excellent at sitting through lectures and reading hundreds of book pages each and every night, those instructional methods only result in a disengaged and disinterested new generation of students.

How can you adapt to better fit the instructional needs of your current students? The answer is experiential learning. Experiential learning refers to the process of learning through experience, or learning by doing. The authors of a leading article that appears in The Theory of Experiential Learning speak to the point that many activities have the potential to be experiential but the execution of such activities lacks the set of characteristics that truly define experiential learning:

"Simple participation in a prescribed set of learning experiences does not make something experiential. The experiential methodology is not linear, cyclical, or even patterned. It is a series of working principles, all of which are equally important or must be present to varying degrees at some time during experiential learning. These principles are required no matter what activity the student is engaged in or where the learning takes place[1]."

This guide will introduce you to the seven characteristics of experiential learning that should be present in your instructional methods in order to ensure the meaningful development of this new generation of students.

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Characteristics of Experiential Learning

1. Moves from theory to application

According to a study of over 2600 students, an average of only 20% of the knowledge students acquire in the classroom can be skillfully applied[2]. This disconnect between what students know and how skillfully they can apply such knowledge has been called the "knowing-doing gap" in education.

Old-school instructional methods, such as lectures packed with note-taking, are completely adequate in enforcing the memorization of concepts and definitions. However, they do very little in teaching students how to apply those concepts and definitions in the real world. As educators, it's important to give students the opportunity to apply the knowledge and practice the skills that hiring organizations are looking for in recent graduates.

20%

2. Provides relevant content

There's a consistent battle between the needs of schools, obtaining metrics for learning outcomes assessment, and the needs of the student, developing relevant knowledge and skills that will lead to a successful career post-graduation.

As a result, schools often implement instructional and assessment methods that measure student learning outcomes but do little in preparing students for a career post-graduation. This problem contributes to the aforementioned disengagement of students in the classroom. Chances are students realize what they're learning isn't applicable to their chosen career path. In order allow students to take ownership of their development, there must be meaning for the student in the learning.

3. Excludes excessive judgement

It's the responsibility of the instructor to create a safe environment for students to practice the theory and work through struggles without worrying about the negative consequences that typically result from errors in the real world. The freedom to make decisions and face the consequences creates a process of self-discovery that leads to personal and professional development.

Furthermore, a safe environment that prioritizes constructive criticism encourages mistakes, which create opportunities for teachable moments. The exclusion of excessive judgement supports a "fail fast, fail often" mentality that highlights student development and its impact on long-term success. After all, the most effective way to learn how to do something is by first learning how not to do it.

4. Fosters professional development with actionable feedback

The majority of student feedback provided in higher education is in the form of grades. From A's to F's, students are told how well their performance ranks against an established set of guidelines. However, this type of feedback lacks the developmental aspect needed to guide and foster student and professional development.

Feedback that students can actually use to learn and improve, or strategic developmental feedback, is beneficial because it delves deeper into the reasoning behind a specific grade. This type of feedback allows students to reflect on their performance, guides them through the shortcomings, and provides actionable next-steps and recommendations for improvement. This not only identifies current levels of topic and skill proficiency, it also allows students to set a clear path toward meaningful development.

A

B

C

D

E

F
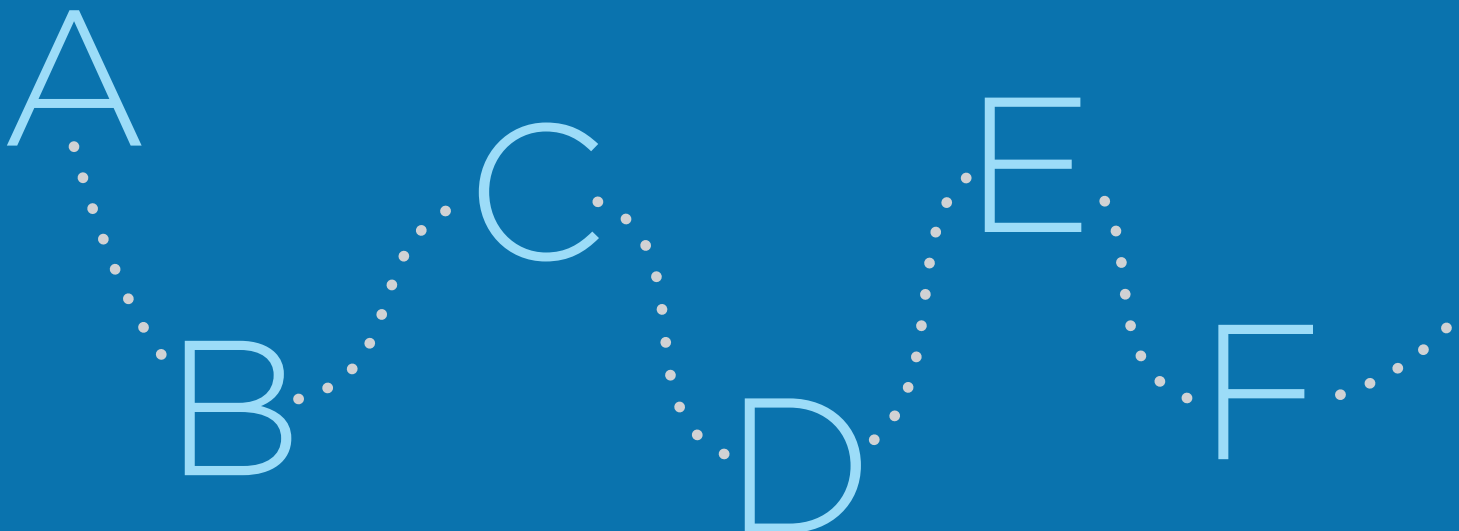
5. Encourages a real-world perspective

Experiential learning activities should allow students to connect learning in the classroom to the real world and their careers. Identifying relationships between concepts and skills being developed and their direct correlation to their future job performance increases student engagement, creates emotional investment, and leads to personalized learning.

Instructors should avoid creating a scenario where students feel they are simply doing what is required of them. As stated in the leading article referenced above, the "process needs to engage the learner to a point where what is being learned and experienced strikes a critical, central chord within the learner[1]."

6. Nurtures more than just professional development

An environment safe from excessive judgement encourages self-exploration within students and leads to far more development than just understanding concepts. This environment allows students to analyze and alter ethical and personal values.

7. Introduces students to areas outside their comfort zones

Experiential learning gives students the opportunity to develop more than just technical skills. Students can practice skills, such as teamwork and ethical decision-making, which impact their personal life outside of the office.

Typical education settings allow students to operate comfortably. If you think about it, students generally arrive to class, sit through lessons, and then leave the class. This routine creates a monotonous environment that leads to student disengagement and limits opportunities to operate outside student comfort zones.

Activities such as internships and consulting projects for real-life companies introduce students to new physical and social environments that mirror the professional world and their role within an organization.

INTERN

References

[1] Chapman, S., McPhee, P., & Proudman, B. (1995). What is Experiential Education?. In Warren, K. (Ed.), The Theory of Experiential Education (pp. 232-248). Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

[2] Baldwin, T. T., Pierce, J. R., Joines, R. C., & Farouk, S. (2011). The elusiveness of applied management knowledge: A critical challenge for management educators. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 10, 583–605.