

# Experiential Applications for Reviving Adolescents' Psychological and Cultural Values

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** Most of the research in the experiential learning area did not focus on cultural and moral values, especially in teenagers. Human and cultural values are forgotten in this age of continuous change and our youngsters think that everything that is old is also worthless.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to explore and measure the effects of experiential learning in increasing emotional intelligence and cultural values in adolescents. At the same time, the general objective was to study the way in which experiential group activities can change the way they see themselves as a part of the culture and find a place in the community (Tasting ARTS Project is the initiative of prof. Monica Pleșca from The Technological Alimentation Industry High school, along with professors from „Socrates” Theoretical High-School and „Henri Coandă” Technical High-School, Timisoara, Romania. I salute this fruitful idea, which proved to be extremely liked by the students and as they stated, even life-changing).

**Methods:** A total of 20 subjects were tested with the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and also with the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Roco, 2001) before and after several sessions of experiential training, as part of a larger project of recovering human and cultural values.

**Results:** The discussions of the results obtained in this study can be concluded with the statement that adolescents are eager for experiential activities. They enjoy interacting with each other and expressing their ideas and their own values regarding culture and society.

**Conclusions:** Considering that after all, teenagers are the adults of tomorrow, we should take into account that leading them to self-discover values and culture could be a path into reviving our society.

**Keywords:** *experiential techniques, social values, psychological values, teenagers*

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## I. Introduction

Over the last years, the interest for experiential learning has been increasing. The main reason has been the search for new ways to captivate and motivate students for learning. Because of the great evolution of technology and information, the need for learning has changed its meaning. Therefore, learning opportunities are an essential component in human resources development. The main questions for educators and psychologists are how to re-make learning an attractive process for students and how to keep their interest in learning at a high level? To this end, we considered that experiential learning is a possible solution, because according to Hobbs (1992), it is after all based on the notion that all experiences are learning experiences.

### Experiential learning

Learning is the process by which skills, knowledge and attributes are acquired and translated into habitual forms of behavior and performance, whether by design or through the natural passage of time. C. Rogers distinguished two types of learning: cognitive (meaningless) and experiential (significant). The key to the distinction is that experiential learning deals with the learner's needs and desires (Razzaq et al. 2013).

However, the concept of experiential learning is not a new one. John Dewey (Dewey and Dewey, 1915) discussed „learning by doing,” while Wolfe and Byrne (1975) used the term „experience-based learning.” Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement (J. Gentry, 1990). This process of learning by doing has been interpreted in many different ways in different parts of the world within many different professions. Learning occurs at intellectual, emotional and behavioral levels in an integrated manner, resulting in real attitude and behavioral change as influential early learning is effectively re-evaluated.

David Kolb's learning cycle (1984) is the most famous model for experiential learning. Kolb created a four-stage model, known as the learning cycle: the concrete experience, followed by reflection on the experience, followed by abstraction and application. Even more, any rich experiences can bring along significant change, and deep forms of change are referred to as transformational. A learning experience can be both positive and negative (Beard, 2010).

Further on, we present a list of experiential learning principles as noted from the Association for Experiential Education (2011):

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured in a manner that requires the student to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the student is actively engaged in asking questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, taking responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning.
- Students are intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically engaged. This involvement generates a perception according to which the learning task is authentic.
- The results of learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: student to self, student to others and student to the world.
- The instructor and the student may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of the experience cannot be totally predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured in order for students and instructors to explore and examine their own values.
- The instructor's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting students, insuring physical and emotional safety and facilitating the learning process.
- The instructor recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Instructors strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions and how these influence the student.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

Hobbs (2001), another expert in experiential learning research, presented four principles that have to be respected by trainers in order to have a good group experience. As a follow-up from these principles, Hobbs also talks about some very important implications for the trainer:

- Control of the nature and content of learning is shifted away from the trainer towards the student. This may involve the tutor in feelings of personal and professional risk and uncertainty, with which he or she may not be familiar.

- The trainer has to allow students to make mistakes. Making mistakes is traditionally perceived as providing feedback about the tutor's skills and competence as well as about the student's performance. Experiential learning, however, is based on the notion that all experiences are learning experiences. Therefore, the tutor must be clear about who is responsible for the students' learning and what taking or accepting responsibility means. Some tutors hardly accept any responsibility for the student – certainly not the lecturer who walks in, talks and walks out.

The facilitator does take responsibility in so far as he or she works to develop an awareness of when there is an apparent lack of understanding and, as far as possible, seeks to provide a variety of opportunities for students to remedy their lack of understanding, if they wish. The tutor assumes that different people have different ways of learning and, therefore, need different types of opportunities. To this extent, the tutor can be said to accept responsibility. But in the final resort, responsibility lies within each individual student for the success or failure of the learning enterprise in which they are engaged. Unless the tutor is able to accept this fact and to let go, the student is maintained in a position of dependency. This is as unhelpful for the student as the abrogation of all responsibility.

- Groups need structure, but in experiential learning many boundaries may have to be negotiated with the participants. These may refer to time, the nature of activities, agenda items or the relationship between tutor and students. Negotiation is not a greatly used skill in more conventional didactic methods, but in experiential learning it becomes crucial.

- The trainer has to be prepared to become redundant. This may involve learning how to cope with feelings of being unwanted.

- Sometimes, groups coalesce and form an identity through the process of identifying an outsider, against whom they can react. This outsider is frequently the facilitative leader. The trainer has to be able to work through this process and to be sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge that the rejection may have more to do with the needs of the group members than with any personal inadequacies.

### **Emotional intelligence**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a frequently used concept in nowadays research, being defined as

the ability to identify, assess and control one's own emotions and the emotions of the others. It was introduced by Payne (1985) and then developed by Salovey and Mayer (1997), but made really famous by D. Goleman (1998), who considered it more than a mere ability – a personality trait.

Numerous studies were conducted on emotional intelligence. Various dimensions of EI have also been associated with self-reports of interpersonal sensitivity and positive relationships with others as well as peer and observer ratings of social competence (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006; Lopes, Salovey, Cote, & Beers, 2005). Perhaps the most important, emotional intelligence has been associated with some important real world outcomes. Many studies have reported robust relations between EI and various measures of work performance, including supervisors' ratings of productivity, personal integrity and leadership (Mayer et al., 2008).

Other studies have shown that EI is associated with higher retention rates, academic success and positive coping among college students (Austin, Saklofske, & Mastoras, 2010; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). Both positive emotions and emotional intelligence are likely to play a central role in successful experiential learning for several reasons.

First, as the foregoing literature has shown, both emotion variables are associated with adaptive intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning, which are likely to facilitate the experiential learning process (Abe, 2011). Second, positive emotions and emotional intelligence are both likely to serve as valuable psychological and social resources for coping with the various challenges associated with each of the developmental stages of the internship experience (Sweitzer & King, 2008).

According to the literature on experiential learning, learning also occurs through positive emotions. Emotional intelligence is very likely to play an important role during all phases of the learning cycle; positive emotions could facilitate experiential learning mainly by expanding a person's thought-action repertoire, whereas emotional intelligence is likely to facilitate experiential learning mainly by fostering reflective abilities (Abe, 2009).

Displays of pleasant emotions tend to elicit favorable responses from others instead of negative expression. Studies also show that emotions often drive other people away (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Furr & Funder, 1998) and that emotions are contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994).

### **Social values**

The context of the socialization process can affect the individuals' learning outcomes (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Social values are a very abstract concept, in this case defined as everything that is coming from the social and cultural environment, which has a value for the individual and is seen with respect.

As stated by Illeris (2002), the social and societal dimensions are keys in the external world and they work along with the emotions and cognition keys in the inner-world dimension of learning. The experience has an outer-world dimension to it, as well as an inner-world dimension.

Moreover, the individual context results not only in experiential learning through participative rehearsal, where the consequences of decisions and actions are immediately perceived, but it also enables vicarious observational learning, where cultural immersion allows the study and imitation of complex behavioral patterns by others (Davis & Luthans, 1980). Immersion in an unfamiliar foreign environment involves uncertainty concerning the role the individual is expected to play (Black et al., 1991).

As some researches show, emotion regulation is probably the most important for social interaction, because it directly influences emotional expression and behavior. One inappropriate outburst of anger can destroy a relationship forever. In contrast, the ability to perceive and understand emotions influences social interaction more indirectly, by helping people interpret internal and social cues and thereby guiding emotional self-regulation and social behavior (Lopes et al., 2005).

Most of the researches investigating the learning styles (Barmeyer, 2004; Fridland, 2002; Jackson, 1995), did not focus on cultural values. They investigated only differences among countries or ethnic groups. Some of the studies investigated the relationship between cultural values and learning styles. However, they both considered culture as linked to the country of origin rather than investigating the direct impact of cultural value on the learning style dimension (Hoppe, 1990).

In the social values area we can also include attitudes that involve cooperating with others, working for the well-being of others, sacrificing for others and fostering self-development (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Wilson, 2007). Prosociality has numerous benefits for individuals - as long as they are within environments in which most other people are prosocial (Wilson & Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Some authors state that a science of cultural change that contributes to the improvement of all people's wellbeing is needed (Biglan, 2013).

### **Describing the Tasting ARTS experiential program**

Tasting Arts is a project for cultural and artistic education, proposed by several high-school teachers from Timisoara, Romania. The entire program was developed over a period of one semester and included a variety of activities, like experiential learning workshops, photography classes, acting classes, meeting with artists, visiting museums and others.

Teachers who initiated this project considered that cultural-artistic education was essential in developing identity and in personal growing. They identified this need in young high-school students, who did not value art or culture anymore, considering it was something old or something for what one did not need to waste time. Regarding young students from the high-school level, this kind of education and experiential approach are very weakly developed, because there are few strategies in school curricula. This specific kind of education (cultural-artistic) can mostly be done by exploration and experimentation.

Also, the team of teachers considered that, in order to make a more clear difference between school activities and this extra project, the experiential workshops should be held by a psychologist, trained in experiential work with young students. Because students were used to their teachers as evaluators and examiners of their knowledge, the teachers decided it was more useful to work along with the students during this program, taking part in activities as equals. Therefore, activities in the project were organized by the teachers' team and held by other specialists, who did not interact with the students in the school.

By experiencing artistic and cultural activities for over six months, students can develop their emotional intelligence, their communication skills, their cultural values could be better defined and they could also discover several talents to cultivate further on.

#### **The group**

In this great initiative, 20 students from 3 high-schools from Timisoara were involved. Children are both from urban and rural area of the western part of Romania. In the group there were 3 boys and 17 girls, with a mean age of 17.2 years old (10th and 11th grade). There were also 4 teachers who participated in the activities (all of them women).

Even if, usually, groups need structure, in experiential learning many boundaries may have to be negotiated with the participants. Negotiation is not a greatly used skill in more conventional didactic methods, but in experiential learning it becomes crucial (Hobbs, 1992). So, for starters, I have negotiated 3

experiential trainings during one week, for the students to know themselves better and also to know each other. Afterwards they had weekly cultural and artistic activities (16 programmed meetings with artists and specialists).

### **Training space**

The design of the learning space is a subject that is gaining interest. In this case, the first 3 experiential trainings took place in a classroom, set especially for this, without tables or a lot of furniture. Students were placed in a circle, so they could all see each other and work in teams or pairs. The learning environment also affects the mood and sets the ambience. Therefore, this aspect was important for the learning process. Next, activities took place in a theatre, a photo studio, an art museum, a house of artists and so on.

Learning experiences can also be influenced by nature and environmental features: for example, involving the participants in a team orienteering or treasure-hunt exercise over windswept moorland in winter will produce a very different experience from the one that involves people sitting indoors and filling in a questionnaire. Therefore, our students had both kinds of activities. First of all, they had to fill in some questionnaires and afterwards students had activities (like visiting special places from the city they talked about) outside the school.

Adventure, whether indoor or outdoor, requires an element of real or perceived risk, to which the participant is exposed through engagement in an activity. Because it is important for the learners to be open to the spirit of this learning adventure and this new form of learning, it was important at first to explain that the activities from the project have nothing to do with traditional school and evaluation (grades).

### **Exercises**

The experiences connect the inner spaces of the mind to the outer environment, develop a sort of stillness for deep self-reflection in the here and now moment. This learning experience is about cultivating a degree of inner presence and the ability to creatively work with „no mind” states (Beard, 2006).

The first module was focused on getting to know each other's name, the rules of the group, on expectations, fears and personal contribution. The information was obtained through a number of experiential activities and group games and the students were allowed to express themselves in their own way. The second module was focused on identity, starting with the world, country, city, house and family.

Finding our place in the world, seeing the connections between us and the others and discovering

common roots are good approaches in order to explore and bind a group. In this area of exercises, we aimed to focus on the world's common values, up to the personal ones. This kind of experiential workshop is concerned with the ability to think about thinking and to become aware about being aware.

The main theme of the third module was art and the forms in which we can think about art. This activity illustrates development by stimulating our senses, sensibilities and by awakening the creative and expressive aspects of our being. The data mapping in these directions lead to the generation of different ways of seeing and knowing the world around us.

At the end of these modules, each participant received a marble with the task of transforming it, like part of an art object, to represent their own personality and their own view about this program.

## **II. Methods**

The general objective is to study the effects of experiential learning in increasing the adolescents' emotional intelligence and cultural values, by exploring the way in which experiential group activities can change the way adolescents see themselves as a part of the culture and find a place in the community.

Considering all the previously presented information, the subjects were tested with the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Roco, 2001), before and after the sessions of experiential training, as part of a larger project of recovering human and cultural values.

The tested subjects are 20 students from 3 high-schools from Timisoara. Children are both from urban and rural area of western part of Romania. In the group there were 3 boys and 17 girls, with a mean age of 17.2 years old (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade). Because all students were under 18 years old, their parents' consent regarding the participation in the study was asked in writing.

According to our purpose and objective, two hypotheses were developed, in order to give a coherent path to the study. So, as a first hypothesis, we aimed to explore the potential differences in the constellation of personal values in high-school students, before and after the experiential trainings.

Our second hypothesis was to investigate the difference between the levels of Emotional Intelligence before and after the experiential workshops.

## **III. Results**

All variables were standardized prior the

analyses. Because this is a pre-experimental design (one group pre-test/post-test analysis), the obtained numeric data were involved in a statistic analysis (t test) and the results will be discussed below.

When studying the values of the results, we notice that there are meaningful differences between pre and post experiential workshops, regarding some personal values (competition  $t=-6.420$ ,  $p<.01$ , academic competence  $t= 8.186$ ,  $p<.05$  and approval from the others  $t=7.963$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Also, there are values that do not record any meaningful differences, like: virtue ( $t= -1.776$ ,  $p>.05$ ), divine love ( $t=-.708$ ,  $p>.05$ ), family support ( $t=.809$ ,  $p>.05$ ) and physical appearance ( $t=.905$ ,  $p>.05$ ). While the level of academic competence and the one of approval from the others increased during the experiential workshops, the level of competition decreased. Regarding the competition decrease, it is one of the main desiderates of the experiential learning, where cooperation and collaboration are encouraged (Haddara & Skanes, 2007).

Our second hypothesis investigates the difference between the levels of Emotional Intelligence before and after the experiential workshops and the results were statistically meaningful ( $t=3.684$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Regarding the increased level of emotional intelligence, experiential learning is seen as actively challenging people at an emotional level. Without challenging young students through experience, no change is possible (Hobbs, 2001).

#### **IV. Discussions**

The results obtained from the presented study show mainly that experiential courses are associated with a boost of positive intrapersonal skills, as well as interpersonal outcomes including moral development, personal values, and appreciation of diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Learning is multifaceted, requiring a great deal of knowledge exchange and it is naive to assume that all individuals will necessarily be positive about being part of a learning journey, both in terms of attitude and actual behavior (Michailova, 2008).

The main limitation of the study is that there is no control group. Another aspect is that the research group only consisted of 20 students, but in experiential learning there are certain limitations regarding the number of participants in the group. As Hobbs (2001) stated, it would be advisable not to have more than fifteen trainees in the experiential group. Considering that our group consisted of 20 participants, who have constantly participated for the whole period of time, it was an act of bravery to try to have more students

benefitting from this project. Of course, the project can be extended in order to create more experiential groups of high-school students.

There are also some secondary benefits from this kind of projects, like making life-lasting friendships between participants, who became very close and helped each other when needed. Further studies show that commitment is a very powerful thing and without it, the team work would not have been so successful (Eikenberry, 2007). This commitment to the group is build in time, by understanding the responsibility for the group members. Because the students received several applications where they needed to cooperate in order to achieve a common goal, they understood how to work with each other. No conflicts occurred during the program, even if there were some different opinions about several aspects. The students found a way to negotiate (for example, the scheduled time of some meetings) or to give some space (in case someone had a bad week or a personal problem). This kind of social skills, empathy and assertive behavior are important aspects that can be developed. Even if these skills were not monitored in the current research, it could be a good direction for a further project.

Silberman (2007) considers that most of the experiential learning theory is clear about what learners do after their „experience”: they reflect, interpret, and experiment. But what is really important is to encourage students to consider how they could use, in their everyday life, in various aspects, what they have experienced and learned. Seeing the applicability of the things they learn is the key for increasing interest in school and the learning process.

#### **V. Conclusions**

In conclusion, this study is only opening a whole new field to explore. Taking into consideration the results presented above, the interest in experiential learning exists in high-school students. Not only that they were present to all modules, but students also enjoyed being there and working with their peers. This is a great achievement for Romanian teenagers, who tend to run from anything associated with school and learning. The tendency among high-school students is to think that school itself is not useful, just mandatory. Finding out that this sort of activities are welcomed and considered useful is a great step, which can be extended further on.

Therefore, the education in this direction is a must, especially if we consider the abundance of methods present nowadays on the market and the risks

of uninformed people. Experiential learning is not likely to be an easy option, either for the learner or for the trainer (Hobbs, 2001). Even so, experiential learning is a way of increasing motivation for school and the learning process, which is worth trying, despite all the difficulties. Maybe the students were extremely opened to this project because they knew from the beginning they would not be evaluated with grades as in the traditional school. Even if they had small parts of social projects to fulfill, they enjoyed it. Deadlines were met and everybody took responsibility for their part of work.

Considering that, after all, experiential learning is a useful tool that in this case generated good results, it can be concluded that similar learning strategies should be included even in school curricula. It is true that an experiential learning activity takes more time to prepare or to think over, but the results are equal, easier to see and helpful for students. If students see the applicability in their life of the things they learn, they will be happy to become involved in the proposed activities.

To experience learning is to feel it, to reflect upon it, to understand it and to immerse in its richness, by doing it regularly, in order to develop some useful skills for the everyday life.

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