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Scope of experiential learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

Know about experiential learning and how it works. Read below.

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Neha is holding a handful of lettuce in her hand, facing the zoom screen while sharing her experience of growing the lettuce in her kitchen garden with her classmates. This is part of an ongoing project on food and farming that the entire class has been working on. They have spent several sessions with experts who have shared the know-how about farming like aerating the soil, sowing, watering, role of manures and fertilizers, and so on. Few students have even gone ahead to grow microgreens and explore hydroponics in their balconies instances of active learning happening during the lockdown.

This is an example of Experiential learning. Simply explained, it is learning that happens through carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.

It is based on Kolb's theory and emphasizes that mastering a new skill or gaining expertise is a continuous process and follows a learning cycle.

The very nature of experiential learning, with its roots in the sights, smell, textures, complexities, and contradiction of the real world, seems to go against teaching and learning in a virtual setting.

So, one might wonder whether experiential learning is a viable option for virtual instruction?

Going back to the Fundamental Principles of learning

To understand that, we have to go back to the fundamental principle of how students learn best. Learning should be active, challenging, relevant, public, and collaborative to create deeper engagement and meaning irrespective of whether it is in a face-to-face classroom or online.

At the beginning of this year, the pandemic initiated a sense of urgency in transitioning to virtual lesson plans. Educators had to redesign the curriculum to align to distance learning.

To make experiential learning work in online classes, we went back to the basics while designing the lessons, drawing from the rich social and environmental fabric that each of our students is a part of, and decided to use the home, the family, and the neighbourhood to create relevance.

We continued our focus on developing critical skills like literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, perseverance, social engagement, and mastery of the subject.

What was the main aim?

The aim was to maintain the same level of inquiry, reflection, and scaffolding to give room for productive student talk, build scope for students to share their narratives. There was an increased emphasis on setting virtual classroom expectations, norms, and protocols; it was an uncharted territory of navigating Google hangouts and Zoom both for teachers and students in the initial days.

The learning management system, coupled with synchronous sessions, provided increased options for differentiated learning, be it through individual guided reading or writing sessions or individualized attention in breakout rooms.

Designing Learning Experiences

When it came to designing learning experiences, we chose homebound or neighbourhood related projects, focused on what is available to students in their immediate surrounding. For example, a unit on maps was done by asking students to create 3-dimensional models of their rooms and houses.

It started with students learning the concept of scale; they had to make 1-meter scales using materials available around them, measure and apply while building the scaled models an excellent opportunity to simulate concrete experiences!

Remaining authentic to the tenets of Project-Based Learning or Expeditionary learning, we took up a history project where students analyzed family heirloom or artefacts and studied their legacy an innovative way to encourage students to write about a treasured inherited object and become curators of their family histories.

It helped build skills of historical perspective and contextualization, drawing the experience from their immediate context and thus establishing relevance seamlessly.

What is for young students?

For younger students, we incorporated kits with a parent facing instructional guide; and sent them home to continue the learning experience uninterrupted. Personalized learning sessions where students work on strengthening their academic skills and advance in their interest areas in a small group with the teachers have become more practical in the virtual setting.
It is easier for the teacher to allocate work in small groups, strike a balance between async and sync time, share text and video resources as pre-learning; while classes can focus on dialogues and building on each other's ideas. Moreover, these provide opportunities for increased student choice and voice by giving flexibility to the learner to master the topic at their own pace.

Another way of providing a simulation of concrete experiences is by using design thinking challenges. Through a carefully crafted design challenge or question, students engaged with the process of design thinking i.e. building empathy, defining the problem, designing a prototype, and ideating solutions.

Feedback and reflection are critical aspects of the experiential learning cycle

Following a simulated experience, reflective exercises can be initiated through the use of questions. Padlet, Jamboard, Kahoot, Quizlet, Mentimeter are some examples of Ed-tech tools which may be used for gathering learner responses.
Several mind mapping tools like MindMeister, Mindmomo, Lucidchart can work excellently during revision. Learning management systems allow teachers to plan formative and summative assessments and interact with students asynchronously. Google Slides, Canva, WordPress, Bulb Digital Portfolio encourages students to showcase their final work.

The possibilities are immense, online learning can be made rigorous and fun. At the heart of experiential and project-based learning albeit virtually, lies three key elements - the essential multidisciplinary question, the well-crafted learning experience, and reflection to synthesize the learning.

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