

Dismantling some of the typical myths associated with experiential learning



Experiential learning is backed by research and testing by educators

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There are few other pedagogical descriptors that have caught the popular imagination of schools and parents alike. Experiential Learning is a term that has found its place in the brochures, websites, and the campaigns of most schools that want to lay claim to being progressive. But does everyone truly understand what it is and what it takes to be true to this promise of delivering Experiential Learning?

To best understand what Experiential Learning is, let us first bust the 7 myths that surround it.

Myth 1: It is the same as having projects or merely doing an activity

Projects or activities are found to be an interesting pedagogical tool to keep the students engaged for a brief period of time. They are however limited in scale, scope, and time.

The concept of experiential learning was first explored by John Dewey and Jean Piaget, among others. It was made popular by education theorist David A. Kolb, who, along with Ron Fry, developed the experiential learning theory – ‘learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ This is achieved when the child goes through the experiential learning cycle that includes concrete experience, observation, thinking and conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Students learn through projects that address a real-life problem and have guiding questions that have no single right answer.

The students have more ownership in the entire process of experiential learning as they inquire and seek information about the various aspects of the project which has multiple stages and facets.

They reflect on their learning which is a critical part of the experiential learning cycle that differentiates it from just doing an activity or experiment and leaving it at that.

Self-assessments and critiques of peer work and gathering information from secondary sources are also integral to experiential learning. There is an end goal or a final product that addresses the need of an authentic audience.

They learn from the experts in real life and apply the skills learned in finding a solution for a real problem.

Since experiential learning based in the real-life context addresses real issues, the students find the

learning more meaningful. Experiential Learning designed well is shown to have far higher levels of engagement and leads to deeper learning.

Myth 2: It is a fad and will pass soon

Experiential Learning is backed by years of research and testing by educators, curriculum experts, and cognitive neuroscientists across the world and is only finding more evidence to back its efficacy every year. Thus, it is definitely not a fad as it has sustained itself over time and has been proven over and over again to have far-reaching benefits for students beyond just acquiring content.

And going forward the relevance of this type of teaching and learning practice will only increase manifold as information will be available at the click of a button.

Having stacks of information stored away in the brain without being able to make use of it at the appropriate time and in an unfamiliar or unexpected situation would have limited value in the future.

What would be required would be thinking and transfer skills that allow information to be processed in unique and useful ways to solve the problems of the world and that is what experiential learning tries to promote.

Myth 3: It is relevant only for the early years of learning

Of course, the benefits of experiential learning are maximised when students are exposed to it early on as they build a more holistic relationship with learning right from the beginning. But the fundamentals of this approach remain as relevant for middle and high schoolers as they are for primary school students.

There is a progression in the nature and complexity of

problems that students address and the theoretical concepts and skill sets required to come up with solutions to the problems, as students move from lower to higher grades.

For students to become global citizens, they ought to learn the skills of critical thinking, empathy, problem-solving, and communication. The idea is to connect the student with their environment and apply the domain knowledge and skills they learn in different subjects to become active global citizens who will continue to make the world a better place.

Building experiential learning units that engage and motivate the child to acquire and apply content knowledge and use problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration skills requires facilitator expertise across domains and the ability to think laterally.

This kind of expertise requires years of intentional and focused professional development for facilitators.

It also requires an institutional ecosystem that has unflinching faith in this kind of pedagogy and is willing to invest and take on the challenges that come along with implementing something so different from the existing one.

Myth 4: It takes away from the core abilities to read and write or use books

Experiential learning instead of taking away from the core abilities to read and write intends to help students read with purpose and with meaning and write with a voice. It believes in activating all the senses that humans have been gifted with to perceive the world and involving the hands, heart and head in the process of learning.

As a pedagogy, it discourages over-dependence on one textbook for gaining knowledge about a subject as that has the risk of students developing a narrow and restricted worldview.

For experiential learning to be effective, the teachers plan literacy-rich projects, case studies, and learning expeditions around compelling topics.

The idea is to encourage them to use multiple sources and be able to critique them and arrive at their perspective or understanding rather than passive consumption of content. This will be a critical skill as loads of information served to us is increasingly laden with agendas and is a medium of propaganda serving larger purposes and our students have to be trained to reach out to multiple sources, and question and analyse them rather than blindly accept one text as the final truth.

Myth 5: It is irrelevant to the Indian context and lacks rigour

The New Education Policy (NEP) has made teaching through experiential learning one of the key guiding principles for all schools. Parents often share concerns about whether students from an experiential learning system will be able to take the rigour required for the preparation for high stake exams and entrance exams in India.

It has been found that students who have been taught using experiential learning methodologies have a far deeper and clearer understanding of concepts, and have better skills to learn what they need to learn and express themselves. All of these put together place them at an advantage in any kind of examination scenario whether it be a high-stake board exam or an entrance exam. The time and effort required to shift students from a conventional system to an application-oriented model which is the need of most entrance exams are reduced in the case of students from an experiential system as they are already trained to apply what they learn.

And this has been proven by the results that some of the authentic experiential learning schools like Heritage have been getting over the last several years. Rigour to build comprehension, critical thinking and higher-order skills are what experiential learning schools work on instead of the rigour of rote learning. Going forward most entrance exams are increasingly going to test students on their transfer and application skills which will come naturally to students from the experiential learning pedagogy.