

Experiential Learning as an Informal Learning Method in Modern Education

By: Aimie McKenzie-Smith

EDTC8071689 Implementation and Evaluation of Curriculum

Dr. Dana Mason

New Jersey City University

April 5, 2026

Introduction

Education in the 21st century has shifted to meet the demands of a rapidly changing, technology-driven world. As workforce expectations continue to evolve, students are expected to develop not only academic knowledge but also critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills (National Research Council, 2012). Traditional instructional methods that focus primarily on memorization and passive learning are no longer sufficient to prepare students for real-world challenges. As a result, educators are increasingly exploring alternative approaches that promote active engagement and meaningful application of knowledge.

One approach is informal learning, which occurs outside of structured, teacher-directed instruction and often involves self-directed, experience-based activities. Informal learning plays an important role in modern education because it allows students to connect learning to real-life situations and develop practical skills. Among the various forms of informal learning, experiential learning has emerged as a powerful method that emphasizes learning through direct experience and reflection. While experiential learning can occur in both formal and informal settings, this paper focuses on its role as an informal learning method that takes place through real-world experiences outside traditional, teacher-directed instruction. To provide a comprehensive understanding of this approach, this paper will examine experiential learning by exploring its definition, historical development, theoretical foundation, and impact on modern education.

Description of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is commonly defined as a process in which students learn through direct experience, reflection, and active engagement rather than through passive instruction (Kolb, 1984). Often described as “learning by doing,” this approach emphasizes student

participation in meaningful activities that allow them to apply knowledge in real-world or simulated contexts. Unlike traditional methods that focus on lectures and memorization, experiential learning places students at the center of the learning process and encourages them to actively construct their understanding.

A key characteristic of experiential learning is its emphasis on hands-on experiences that promote deeper understanding. Students are not only introduced to new information but are also given opportunities to practice skills, solve problems, and reflect on their experiences. Reflection is a critical component because it allows students to connect their experiences to academic concepts (Dewey, 1938). This process helps learners internalize knowledge and apply it to new situations.

Experiential learning can take many forms in educational settings, including project-based learning, internships, simulations, service learning, and collaborative problem-solving activities. These approaches support active learning and student engagement, which are essential for deeper understanding (Yardley et al., 2012). As a result, experiential learning supports the development of essential skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

History of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning has deep roots in educational philosophy and psychology, with its foundations tracing back to early forms of hands-on learning such as apprenticeships. In these early models, individuals learned skills through direct participation and practice rather than formal instruction. This concept later became central to modern educational theory.

One of the most influential contributors to experiential learning was John Dewey, who argued that education should be grounded in real-life experiences and that students learn best

through active engagement (Dewey, 1938). Dewey emphasized that learning should be meaningful and connected to students' lives rather than based solely on memorization.

Jean Piaget also contributed through his theory of cognitive development, suggesting that learners construct knowledge through active exploration and interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1972). His work reinforced the idea that students are active participants in the learning process. Building on these ideas, David Kolb (1984) developed the most widely recognized model of experiential learning, formalizing the learning process through a structured cycle that continues to influence modern educational practices.

Theory of Experiential Learning

The theoretical foundation of experiential learning is best explained through Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which defines learning as a process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. According to Kolb, effective learning occurs when individuals engage in experiences, reflect on those experiences, and apply what they have learned to new situations. Kolb's model includes four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This cycle is continuous, meaning that each new experience builds upon previous learning.

This theory aligns with constructivist ideas, which suggest that learners actively build knowledge through experience (Piaget, 1972). It also reflects Dewey's emphasis on reflection as a critical part of learning (Dewey, 1938). Because experiential learning combines action and reflection, it supports deeper understanding and long-term retention.

Impact and Success in Modern Education

Experiential learning has become increasingly important in modern education due to its ability to engage students and develop essential 21st-century skills. Research shows that active learning approaches improve student understanding and retention compared to passive instructional methods (National Research Council, 2012). One of the key benefits of experiential learning is its ability to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students are required to analyze information, make decisions, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. These experiences also promote communication and collaboration, which are essential skills for success.

These authentic, hands-on experiences also prepare students for the workforce. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), skills such as analytical thinking, creativity, and collaboration are among the most important competencies needed for future careers. By engaging in real-world situations, students have meaningful opportunities to develop and apply these essential skills.

Recent research further supports the effectiveness of experiential learning. Research shows that active, student-centered approaches improve engagement and long-term retention, especially when combined with technology-enhanced learning environments (Bond et al., 2020). Technology allows students to participate in simulations, interactive tasks, and problem-solving activities while receiving immediate feedback. As a result, experiential learning creates flexible and inclusive learning environments that support diverse learners.

Conclusion

Experiential learning is a powerful and relevant approach to education in the 21st century. As an informal learning method, it allows students to engage in meaningful experiences, reflect

on their learning, and apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Unlike traditional methods, experiential learning promotes deeper understanding and active participation.

This paper examined experiential learning by exploring its definition, historical development, theoretical foundation, and impact on modern education. From the early work of Dewey and Piaget to Kolb's learning cycle, it is clear that learning through experience has long been recognized as an effective approach. As education continues to evolve, experiential learning will remain an important strategy for preparing students for the future. By integrating real-world experiences into instruction, educators can create meaningful learning environments that support both academic success and lifelong learning.

References

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- National Research Council. (2012). *Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st century*. National Academies Press.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). *Future of education and skills 2030*. OECD Publishing.
- Piaget, J. (1972). *The psychology of the child*. Basic Books.
- World Economic Forum. (2023). *The future of jobs report 2023*. World Economic Forum.
- Yardley, S., Teunissen, P. W., & Dornan, T. (2012). Experiential learning: Transforming theory into practice. *Medical Teacher*, 34(2), 161–164.