

Experiential Learning Through the Eyes of Emirati Students

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Abstract: General Studies courses are core to the whole education philosophy espoused in the United Arab Emirates. These courses provide a wider breadth of knowledge for students by fostering skills such as critical thinking, global awareness, research and communication. This paves the way for building the UAE's knowledge base and delivering graduates who can compete globally through research and innovation. The research explores the role of experiential learning within General Studies to cultivate these key skills, and seeks to capture students' responses to this type of learning. This is a mixed methods study that includes ethnographic data collection, uncovering the complexities of a lived classroom learning experience from the perspective of the students. Data was collected from interviews with students, written reflections and a Likert scale survey. Results suggest that Emirati female students respond favourably to experiential learning, thus countering previous findings about their preferred learning style. This study contributes significantly to a field with scant knowledge of experiential learning as a vehicle for instruction in a tertiary Emirati context.

Key words: Experiential Learning, General Studies, Intercultural Learning,

1. Introduction

This study aims to understand more fully whether the practice of incorporating experiential learning into General Studies courses initiates the process of students developing more soft skills, becoming more critical thinkers and better learners. This promotes what Shanti and Jafaar (2020) refer to as “beyond the classroom learning” (p.3), a concept which is transferable to any learning. Research to date shows that experiential learning is a natural companion to General studies courses such as critical thinking and cultural studies (Jackson, 2011). However, this type of approach, in this particular cultural context; that of an exclusively female federal tertiary federal institution in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is not commonplace. Therefore it is important to uncover students' attitudes towards experiential learning in order to build knowledge that will best serve this particular community of learners in the long term. The benefits of doing so not only provide a road map for these learners, but for society at large as they contribute to the economic and social development of the UAE. Graduates enter a workforce where critical and innovative thinking are necessary now more than ever given the shift to a more knowledge-based economy.

1.1 Background and Context of the Research

The students in this program and the participants in this study are young Emirati women studying at a women's tertiary institution in Dubai, hereby referred to as Dubai University (name changed). In this study the background and context of the research are unique in that this takes place in an extremely multi-cultural society. Yet within this, the participants are Emirati women who experience Dubai as more of a conservative, gender segregated Islamic society, often living within the confines of their families or their husband's families. In addition, they will have generally attended government schools, synonymous with a rote learning style where free and independent thought are discouraged (Bristol-Rhys, 2010). Furthermore, notions of identity are positioned in terms of nation building, loyalty and security rather than enquiry (Partrick, 2009). Herein lies the dichotomy inherent in this research: General Studies courses relying on enquiry, experiential learning and higher order thinking, have the potential to unhinge longstanding views. The challenge is to navigate the research through this landscape without compromising on the rigour of the study or impinging on the morals and norms of the Emirati women at the heart of this study.

1.2 Research Question

The aim of this research is to uncover both the perceived effectiveness of, and attitudes towards, experiential learning in the role of teaching and learning within a General Studies curriculum.

To what extent do Emirati students perceive experiential learning as an effective teaching and learning approach for General Studies courses?

1.3 Significance of the Study

As a study of Emirati women, this research contributes to a fairly scant body of literature in regards to knowledge about **how** Emirati women respond to experiential learning. In particular, knowledge about how Emirati women experience the shift in teaching style and pedagogy, from high school rote learning where the teacher is the authority to a more democratic autonomous classroom that fosters agency.

2. Literature Review

Experiential learning is defined and described within the context of this study, drawing largely on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Kolb defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41); in other words, learning involves the whole person: thinking, perceiving and feeling as well as behaving. The nature of experiential learning pedagogy is that it is an approach that students often find effective due to the deeper connection to the learning material than found in traditional teaching. Experiential learning, or learning by doing, has been shown by past researchers to be an effective means of delivering General Studies courses within the curriculum (Sit, Mak, & Neill, 2017), and importantly for this study, one whose efficacy is not diminished by the medium of a second language (Busse & Krause, 2016). Table 1 provides the conceptual framework for this study. The conceptual framework bases the theoretical foundation on experiential learning theory and identifies the effectiveness of experiential learning in General Studies courses within an Emirati tertiary context as a gap in the research.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Question
1: How do Emirati students perceive experiential learning?
Research Gap
Effectiveness of experiential learning for developing skills such as critical thinking, communication and global literacy in a Higher Education Emirati context.
Theoretical Foundation
Experiential Learning Theory
Methodology
Mixed Methods Approach - Ethnographic study - Phenomenology – data collection – interviews – written responses – Likert scale survey
Contribution to existing field of knowledge
In what ways do students perceive the use of experiential learning within General Studies courses.

2.1 Experiential Learning: Classroom Considerations

Experiential learning may often be challenging for students as it is used as a means to achieve a shift in perspective, therefore students need to be “challenged to expand their viewpoints and think outside the box” (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 55). It is ideally suited for this type of deeper learning as it is through experience and engagement that a true connection can be made with learning; it is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41).

This social constructivist model is a change in the type of teaching and learning these participants are accustomed and previous research suggests that Emirati students’ learning preferences may run counter to this experiential approach as these students are accustomed to the practices of government schools in which learning is teacher-centered and where students are not encouraged to exercise independence (Rapanta, 2014). This may cultivate in students an assimilating learning style (Kolb, 2005), where instruction and explanation are key which therefore potentially diminishes the effectiveness of a more learning by doing experiential approach. Research by James and Shamma (2013) raises awareness of the disconnect between the expectations of academic professional expatriate faculty with those of their students, citing teacher dependence and perceived limited drive as key frustrators.

In a study on the public school system in the UAE, students’ perceptions of the rote memorization method, as being the ‘best method’, appear very strongly engrained: “the students were convinced that this [rote memorisation] was the only right way to become a successful student with high grades” (Thabet, 2008, p. 54). This indicates that not only is there an academic hurdle for these students in adjusting to the move to experiential learning, but there is also a psychological barrier, one where their old way of learning is perceived as the best. The experiential learning teacher needs to navigate this classroom mindful of these cultural considerations and provide justification to ensure student ‘buy in’ if necessary.

2.2 Experiential Learning - General Studies: Course Content

Within this study, the primary data collection is centered around an Intercultural Studies course, therefore the classroom practices adopted are planned with both experiential and intercultural learning in mind. It can therefore be assumed that the results of this study are transferable, to some extent, to all General Studies courses. The following section describes three experiential learning tasks used to gauge students' perceptions of experiential learning in the classroom.

2.2.1 Barnnga

Barnnga is an experiential card game 'rigged' to mimic an intercultural experience. Simulation games such as Barnnga (Thiagarajan, & Thiagarajan, 2006) are an integral part of experiential intercultural training with their capacity to powerfully transform life experiences. This is a card game that provides experiential learning through what Mezirow describes as a "disorienting dilemma" (1995, p. 50), an uncomfortable experience which triggers change. p. 1).

2.2.2 Perspective Exercises

Classroom tasks that work on examining perspectives aim to initiate the beginnings of empathic development. Experiential learning needs a transformative component and a shift in attitude in order for students to be able to consciously re-define their worlds.

An example of an activity to facilitate this revolves around telling a personal story involving misunderstanding or conflict, which then must be retold from the 'other perspective'. Student participants are then asked to share a real life based conflict, present both sides of the situation and then offer a solution. More often than not, these conflicts/misunderstandings occur in airports where, with tightened security, the veiled students are sensitive to feeling targeted. This type of work on perspectives mirrors Kolb's four learning modes where students experience, reflect, think and act as a response to the learning situation. A real life experience provides the foundation or the experience, which moves through Kolb's stages with a change to try out the new learning and knowledge:

2.2.3 Use of Film

Research indicates film is a successful medium for incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum and it has been widely used in experiential intercultural training with a number of studies publishing the effectiveness of this medium (Rarick, 2007). Film has also been shown to be highly motivating and a preferred medium of study by students (Roslim, Azizul, Nimehchisalem & Abdullah, 2021). Examples of films used in this course are: *Outsourced*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* and *City of Life*, while documentaries include *God Grew Tired of Us* and *Millionaire Boy Racers*.

3. Research Methodology

The research design is what Greene (2005) calls a classic mixed methods research design with the quantitative tools collecting data to "gather and represent human phenomena with numbers" (p. 274) along with a method that collects data in words. In this case, it is the best 'fit' as it allows for reach through the use of triangulation: "the combination of two or more different research strategies in the study of the same empirical units" (Denzin 1978, as cited in Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 287). Utilising this design framework, the holistic qualitative interview results and written responses to classroom tasks complement and flesh out the quantitative statistical data derived from the Likert survey to not only provide a fuller picture but also to "enhance the strength and validity of research findings" (Biesta, 2012, p. 147).

3.1 Participant Selection and demographic

This is a study of one class of approximately 22 Year Two female Emirati Dubai University students enrolled in a General Studies course at the center of this study. The participants demonstrated homogeneity by being of the same age, gender, and major, English language level and by having the same cultural and religious backgrounds.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

The four data collection tools in this research study are:

- 1: Interviews
- 2: Short written reflections on experiential learning classroom tasks.
- 3: Likert scale survey on three experiential learning classroom tasks.
- 3: Post-course final written reflections.

3.2.1 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data collection comprises of a post intervention interview, short written feedback after each classroom task, and a longer post course final reflection. The aim of the analysis was to see patterns and develop a theory based on those patterns through coding and the generation of salient themes. For the shorter written responses to classroom tasks, analysis is based more on the manifest content as the content is more obvious and easier to decipher with less abstraction and level of depth, here the aim is to generate findings based on established categories. Frequency of recurrent themes determines the weighting of each theme. Once themes were established they were weighted and categorized

3.2.2 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data collection in this study is comprised of Likert scale responses to experiential classroom tasks. The purpose of the Likert scale alongside the written responses was to both corroborate the findings, looking for agreement or discord, and to get a fuller picture from the participants through broadening the responses to the underlying phenomena. The numbers-based quantitative Likert scale data followed the model for descriptive statistics incorporating numerical analysis.. The Likert scale results contribute to this study not only through the data gleaned but by providing an objective judgement.

4. Results

Tables 2 – 4 below illustrate the Likert scale results of the three classroom tasks, followed by a summary of students written responses to each task.

4.1 Barnga Results

Table 2: Barnga Likert Scale Results

N=22	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
1: Did playing Barnga help your learning?	100 % (22)	0% (0)

2: Did you enjoy playing Barnga?	100 % (22)	0% (0)
3: Did playing Barnga help you understand what it feels like to be culturally different?	100 % (22)	0% (0)
4: Did playing Barnga help you respect people from different cultures?	100 % (22)	0% (0)
5: Did playing Barnga help you understand yourself and your own behaviour and way of thinking?	95.5% (21)	4.5% (1)

Results indicate a positive response to playing Barnga, with the majority of overall responses showing agreement with the questions posed. Noticeably, all participants felt that playing Barnga positively impacted their learning.

Barnga Written Responses

Two “patterns of experience” (Kostere, Levinskas, Percy, & Piotrowski, 2008, p. 83) emerge from these written responses. The first pattern to emerge relates to developing an understanding of others, and key phrases include a non-judgemental awareness that cultures have *different ways*, their own *point of view*, and *different rules*, and together these relate to the bigger theme of **empathy**. The final theme to emerge here is that of **respect** for cultural others, illustrated through items such as *respect each other* and *respect their rules*. The majority of participants reported that they *enjoyed* and *learnt* from the activity, which is encouraging in terms of how well these participants reported to respond to experiential learning.

4.2 Perspectives Exercises Results

Table 3: Perspective Exercises Results

N= 23	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
1: Did these perspective activities help your learning ?	100% (23)	0% (0)
2: Did you enjoy these perspective activities?	100% (23)	0% (0)
3: Did the perspective activities help you respect people from different cultures?	100% (23)	0% (0)
4: Did the perspective activities help you understand people from different cultures?	100% (23)	0% (0)
5: Did the perspective activities help you understand yourself and your own behaviour and way of thinking?	91% (21)	9% (2)

According to the ranking, *enjoyment* of these tasks scored the highest, which, as mentioned previously, relates to participants’ responses to experiential learning. Themes of *developing respect* and *helping learning* also scored highly and ranked second and third. Results indicate a positive correlation between perspective exercises and the capacity to develop intercultural sensitivity and positive association with experiential learning.

Perspectives Written Responses

The first pattern of experience to emerge through recurring phrases such as *understand how they thinking*, and *made me put myself in their shoes*, relates to an understanding of others, or **empathy**. The second pattern of experience relates to the learning experience, and phrases such as *I have learned a lot* and *it made things much clearer* relate to a larger theme of **deepening learning** or *broadening of the mind*. This relates to the effectiveness of experiential learning.

4.3 Film Scenes Results

Table 4: Film scenes– Likert scale results

N= 21	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
1: Did watching film scenes help your learning ?	100% (21)	0% (0)
2: Did you enjoy watching film scenes?	100% (21)	0% (0)
3: Did watching film scenes help you understand people from different cultures?	100% (21)	0% (0)
4: Did watching film scenes help you respect people from different cultures?	100% (21)	0% (0)
5: Did watching film scenes help you understand yourself and your own behaviour and way of thinking?	95% (20)	5% (1)

Results indicate a positive correlation between watching film scenes and the capacity to develop intercultural sensitivity with a 95% strong agreement with film scenes *helping understand people from different cultures*. Results also indicate a positive response to experiential learning, with *enjoyment* and *helped learning* both scoring equally highly at 95%.

Film Scenes Written Responses

The recurring theme in these written comments centre around the **educational value** of watching film scenes: *it was helpful, it's useful, it helps us to understand* etc. This theme also crossed over into the other responses, relating to a larger theme of **deepening learning** or *broadening of the mind*. Participants also reported enjoying film scenes through phrases such as *really fun and interesting* and *good and enjoyable way*. These results indicate that participants responded well to the use of film scenes and that it was a very effective experiential classroom practice.

4.4 Interviews

Responses to the experiential learning teaching pedagogy indicate that this was a teaching approach that the participants felt was effective. Key recurrent words were: *enjoyable, interesting, and helped learning*. Film scenes were described as the most impactful as they provided understanding within real life situations; this was followed by Barnga as being helpful in understanding cultural others. This corroborates with the results from the three experiential tasks.

All participants felt experiential tasks had a positive impact on their learning for example signs of higher order thinking were starting to come through. Roudha expressed how she was now more questioning Sharifa explained how the course not only helped her understand others but how others understand herself; and Suhaila spoke about understanding the nuances between Emiratis more now. Table 5 provides a summary of participants' responses.

Table 5: Summary of Participants Responses to Interview Questions

Participant	Response to Experiential Learning from the course.	<i>Names changed to ensure confidentiality.</i>
Alya	Enjoyable, helps learning, especially film.	
Hamda	Interesting, beneficial, enjoyable, helps learning, especially film and group work.	
Amna	It works. Interesting, enjoyable, not boring. Helps learning.	
Marwa	Enjoyable. Helps learning. Especially watching movies. Interesting – not boring.	
Nouf	Love teaching style. Opened mind. Helped learning.	
Roudha	Interesting. Fun. Engaging. Helped learning. Films made situations real.	
Suhaila	Interesting. Helped learning. Beneficial. Activities changed her thinking.	
Sharifa	Enjoyable. Fun. Exciting. Beneficial. Helped learning. Film scenes most impactful.	

4.5 End of Course Written Feedback: Experiential Learning,

All participants felt the activities were likeable using adjectives such as: *enjoyable, useful, interesting* and *exciting*. Perhaps more importantly though, the participants felt the teaching pedagogy benefitted their learning: *makes me understand every word; they help in delivering the idea and point; make the idea clear*. Findings show conclusively that the participants responded very well to experiential learning, and that it was both enjoyable and helped learning.

5. Discussion

Despite the previous learning experiences of these participants being the antithesis of this experiential approach, and the fact that they are immersed in a second language context, it is clear from their perspectives they responded well to this experiential approach and that they developed intellectually; becoming more curious; more questioning; able to think critically and becoming more motivated. Developing motivation is a critical issue which impacts learning across the board and also provides evidence that motivation is dynamic and can be learnt (Singh, et. al., 2021).

Findings validate the effectiveness of experiential learning as a teaching and learning pedagogy that these participants respond well to. Two key themes emerged from the findings: *enjoyment* of experiential learning tasks, and self-reported *enhanced learning* from this classroom experience. Sample responses include the following:

Great way to understand a point.

Help me in understanding more than a piece of paper.

It was really beneficial, it's like it made things much easier to absorb.

It work for me, I feel so interesting because the information will keep in my mind.

They help in delivering the idea and point.

In addition to this, participants expressed a desire to be more active in the classroom with less teacher monologue and passive listening, providing new insight into these participants' learning preferences.

Yes, because not always you are talking and we are sitting like this. You let us do more activities and from this activities you tell us why we do this.

If the Miss come and talk talk talk and we don't understand anything, but if we watch it's better to understand more.

The findings also show that alongside being enjoyable and helping learning, experiential learning also facilitates the development in these participants of soft skills such as critical thinking, higher order thinking, curiosity, intrinsic motivation and reflection skills.

Because I really see my friends emotion and I feel that I must understand other cultures before we decide what we do and because in the game I was angry so after that it made my mind open.

I think my understanding or my view to the world was a bit narrowed but after this it became wider because I knew that not everyone has the same thinking even from the same culture people have different thinking so I think it made my expectation higher or my imagination wider.

Since I started taking this course I've wondered whether the things that we are doing are based on the culture or personal things, it made me really wonder I never thought about this before but now I was thinking that maybe this is because of culture of they're following something specific.

This study demonstrates that experiential learning is a pedagogy these participants respond well to and whose impact is not limited due to their previous traditional learning environments. In fact, the researcher argues that the participants in this study have the capacity to flourish in an experiential learning environment and that they embrace it as a legitimate alternative to more traditional school models they are accustomed to.

6. Further Study

A logical way forward would be to explore the use of experiential learning throughout the core curriculum and whether this success can transfer to content areas such as Business and Health Science.

7. Conclusion

This study corroborates key findings from the literature review supporting the usefulness of experiential learning as a teaching and learning pedagogy in General Studies courses. The findings provide new knowledge about the place of experiential learning in the teaching and learning of a General Studies from the perspective of Emirati women experiencing. Results bear testament to the effectiveness of experiential learning for awakening in students both higher order and critical thinking. This study also raises awareness on the motivational impetuses of Emirati women in Higher Education in relation to learning challenges. It suggests that in order to leverage intrinsic motivation in these students learning tasks should be enjoyable with consideration of the level of difficulty, factors which account for the favourable responses to experiential learning. This present research study not only fills a gap in the literature on how this demographic of student responds to experiential learning, but it also provides new knowledge that demonstrates its success in a General Studies curriculum.

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