

## Managing Emotions: A Case Study Exploring the Relationship between Experiential Learning, Emotions, and Student Performance

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### Abstract

Research demonstrates that [experiential education](#) contributes to enhancing students' workplace readiness and [employability](#). Business schools have responded by embedding experiential learning opportunities, ranging from work placements to live client projects, throughout the curriculum. This case study synthesizes research and theory from education and psychology to conceptualize how experiential learning in management education facilitates emotional engagement and learning. We proceed to [pilot](#) a conceptual model through a [content analysis](#) of reflective journals from an experiential course at an undergraduate business school. This case study suggests that student-goal orientation plays an important role in predicting emotional response, regulation and, ultimately, performance within an experiential learning environment. In addition, this study identifies that [interdependency](#) inherent within team-based experiential learning is a critical trigger of negative emotions. This suggests that the educational value of experiential learning is focused on how students learn to regulate and adapt to negative emotions while maintaining a focus on performance.

**Keywords:** emotions, management, mental health

### Introduction

Administrators, policy makers, and scholars have debated the value of experience in management education since the release of the Gordon & Howell (1959) and Pierson (1959) reports (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2013, Koontz, 1961, Vince, 1998). In fact, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) contends that experience and relevance of management education are inextricably interlinked (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2002, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2013). Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning theory* (ELT) has emerged as the leading theoretical framework to examine the transformation of experience into learning (Kayes, 2002). Kayes (2002) noted that over 1500 refereed articles, dissertations and papers have studied ELT to gain additional insight into the underlying processes of how experience contributes to student learning. Kolb asserted that experiential learning extends beyond mere cognition as it also incorporates feeling, observing, and behaving through

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“synergetic transactions between the person and the environment” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195). Similarly, numerous researchers have identified the critical role that emotions – positive or negative – play in the learning process (Fiske, 2002, Lindsay, 1992, Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002, Petkus, 2000, Spelman, 2010, Vince, 1998). It is the exploration of interaction between experiential learning and emotion that is the central goal of our case study.

We synthesize research and theory from experiential education and psychology to conceptualize how experiential learning in management education facilitates emotional engagement and student performance. Specifically, we support the contention of Vince (1998) by conceptually extending Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning theory* to integrate the influence of emotions into the learning process. Specifically, we build on both *achievement-goal theory* (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999) and Pekrun et al.'s (2006) *control-value theory*. We chose to use case study method to explore the relationship between experiential learning and emotion because, as Gibbert, Ruigrok, and Wicki (2008) stated, “case studies seek to study phenomena in their contexts, rather than independent of context” (p. 1466). In this case study, we examine four associated hypotheses through an exploratory content analysis of reflective journals from a senior experiential course at an undergraduate business school. Our study concludes by discussing both the theoretical and practical implications of our contribution and direction for future research.

### **Section snippets Experiential learning**

Management scholars have long contended that the acquisition of theory by management students is not a sufficient learning outcome (Koontz, 1961, Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). Rather, it is the application of this theory through direct experience that leads to the development of crucial management competencies such as interpersonal skills (Chen et al., 2004, Chowdhury et al., 2002); critical thinking (Chonko, 2004, Young, 2005), workplace readiness (Andrews & Higson, 2008) and professional

### **Conceptual model**

As discussed, few studies have explicitly focused on examining the interaction between experiential learning and emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002b). As a result, we synthesize theory from education and psychology to further our understanding of how emotions contribute to student performance within an experiential learning context. To do so, we develop a *conceptual model of experiential and emotional learning* (Refer to Fig. 1). The theoretical anchor to the model is Kolb's experiential learning

### **Study context**

We chose to pilot the conceptual model and associated hypotheses in the context of a fourth year Bachelor of Business (BBA) senior course at a mid-sized undergraduate Canadian university. All students were in the final year of their degree. A total of twenty-eight students (N = 28) were enrolled in two separate classes (n = 15; n = 13). This included 14 females and 14 males.

In this course, each class independently organized themselves into a functional consulting agency team to compete

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**Description of sample**

In total, we coded 322 journal entries across the 28 students. Students averaged 11.93 entries per journal over the length of the course. This ranged from a low of six to a high of 19. In total, the content analysis coded 1368 emotions. The mean emotions coded per journal were

53.70. This ranged from a low of 26 emotions to a high of 84 emotions ( $SD = 18.24$ ). There was a mean of 4.24 emotions coded per journal entry. This included a total of 744 positive emotions (56%) and a total of 624 (44%)

**Discussion**

Experiential learning is emerging as an increasingly important component of management education (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). However, only limited research has examined the role that emotions play in influencing the impact of experiential learning. As such, our case study sought to explore the role of emotions within the context of experiential learning. To do so, we synthesized research and theory from experiential education and psychology to conceptualize how experiential learning in management

**Limitations and future research**

There are also limitations stemming from this case study. The primary purpose was to develop and pilot a conceptual model that provides a framework to explore the relationship between experiential learning, emotions and performance in the context of undergraduate experiential learning classes. Therefore, our results may not hold under different experiential learning conditions (i.e. experiential learning that does not necessitate interdependency amongst students) or by using a different

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