



# Journal of Innovation & Knowledge

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## Educational paper

# Promoting innovative experiential learning practices to improve academic performance: Empirical evidence from a Spanish Business School

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 December 2017

Accepted 22 December 2017

Available online xxx

#### JEL classification:

I23

A22

#### Keywords:

Experiential learning

Innovative learning practices

Academic performance

Management education

### ABSTRACT

There are plenty of theoretical studies addressing how active-based practices and methodologies influence university students' level of performance. However, there is a scarcity of works that bring empirical evidence to sustain the existence of a positive link between the students' involvement in experience-based learning methods and their academic results. The aim of this paper is to examine the impact exerted by an experiential learning based educational methodology on students' level of academic performance. This research was carried out within the specific context of a Spanish private business school, using a sample of students belonging to the Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration at a Spanish Business School. Pearson's correlation and structural equation modeling are applied to test the relationship hypothesized. Our results derived from the analysis of an undergraduate business students sample suggest that getting involved in experience-based practices and managerial simulations constitutes an effective approach to develop their competencies. Thus, we may conclude that fostering experiential learning strategies favors the students' understanding of theoretical concepts and leads to the attainment of superior performance. This paper contributes to management education by empirically testing the value of innovative experiential learning based training.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2017.12.001>

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## Introduction

*“Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself.”* — John Dewey.

*“I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand”*  
— Ancient Chinese proverb.

Since organizations and educational institutions are nowadays increasingly turning into the application of teaching and training approaches that emphasize the individuals' active immersion and involvement during the course, there exists an emergent awareness and interest in grasping how the employees' or students' practical engagement during the learning process affects their learning outcomes and drives its academic and professional success.

Firms are these days increasingly demanding new learning approaches that are more clearly oriented or in line with competencies acquisition by means of training and experience. Such approach involves on the one hand the individuals' full absorption and commitment (Kahwajy, Kemanian, Keys, & Strebel, 2005), and on the other hand, the existence or availability of trainers, coaches or mentors that serve as guides during the learning process. As Salas, Wildman, and Piccolo (2009) point out, under this experience-based learning framework, individuals become notably more responsible for their own learning, and there exists a more robust link between the learning experience and reality (e.g., role playing, business games, computer-based simulations, virtual reality, etc.).

This training approach is considered a much more efficient method while transferring tacit knowledge than other more traditional forms of learning (Salas et al., 2009). Coherently with this tendency, and as a response to the increasing demand for more dynamic, participative and engaging learning experiences, universities and educational institutions are positioning toward the design and development of learning approaches that foster learners' immersion and active participation. Several studies have stressed the paybacks of such highly engaging learning approaches (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003; Druskat & Kayes, 2000).

After many years stuck in the past, universities have finally understood the positive impact exerted by experiential learning and have begun to design and include some kind of experience-based learning methods within their courses that come to complement the traditional learning approach, where lecture stands as the cornerstone of the learning process (Bisoux, 2007). Furthermore, following Peris-Ortiz, Gómez, Vélez-Torres, and Rueda-Armengot (2016) fostering an experience-based learning environment with innovative educational, technological and pedagogical tools is turning increasingly imperative to universities. University chancellors, along with educational policy-makers and other faculty members and staff have acknowledged that students may have different learning styles (i.e., passive and active learning). Traditional learning is narrowly focused on the student's passive absorption of knowledge and information from theoretical lectures and its application and external measurement through a set of objective proofs, assignments, tests and exams (McKeachie & Gibbs, 1999). Reaching higher levels of engagement from students is unlikely to follow the traditional

lecturing system, where the continuous and often unidirectional flow of information leaves students with very scarce time to process and interiorize concepts (Gasiewski, Eagan, Garcia, Hurtado, & Chang, 2012).

Although there exists a certainly wide variety of approaches related with experiential learning, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) is still among the most prominent theories within the field of management learning and is at the very core of this study. In this vein, plenty has been researched in this particular topic and many scholars have hypothesized the existence of a positive effect of experience on the learning outcomes of individuals. The ELT approach has been addressed and applied by distinct disciplines such as education, strategic management, information systems, psychology, sociology, medicine, nursing, accounting, and law, among others (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001).

Nonetheless, although numerous academics and practitioners consider experience to be at the core of successful management learning, this notion has also attained several criticisms. Disapprovals of the so-called experience-based learning arise for both empirical and theoretical reasons (Kayes, 2002). The main empirical criticisms deal with the validation of the measuring instrument, which comprised a students' self-assessment instrument. Concerning the theoretical aspect, critics from the psychodynamics perspective question the nature of learning and suggest lessening some assumptions of the ELT related with the emphasis on experience, advocating for stressing the importance of reflection within the learning process (Reynolds, 1999). Besides, Holman, Pavlica, and Thorpe (1997) and other critics from the social perspective criticized that the ELT overstresses the role of the individual and decontextualizes the learning process. These critics highlight the social component of the learning activity over emotions as a way to neutralize perceived cognitive bias in ELT. Along with these criticisms there have arisen several alternatives or modifications that deal with the introduction of critical theory, social learning theory, psychodynamics and phenomenology. Besides, several authors, while reflecting further on experiential learning classroom practices, Buck and Akerson (2016) incite educators to assess the incongruence between espoused values and values in practice within their classes, claiming that many educators frequently lecture about student-centered learning theories while they remain largely teacher-centered (Breunig, 2017; Buck & Akerson, 2016). This might generate a disentanglement between experiential theory and classroom practice.

In this line, the aim of this paper is to shed light upon this phenomenon while examining the relationship between an experiential learning based education methodology and students' academic performance. There are plenty of theoretical studies addressing this topic. However, there is a scarcity of works that bring empirical evidence to sustain the existence of a positive link.

This research was carried out within the specific context of a Spanish private business school, using a sample of students of the subject “Management Skills”, belonging to the Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration at a Spanish Business School. Pearson's correlation and structural equation modeling are applied to test the relationship hypothesized.

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