Online ISSN: 2581- 6632
Vol.6, Issue 2, April – September 2024

Understanding the Impact of Experiential Learning on Student's Learning Effectiveness: A Case based on Zillennials Student-Led Assessment Center

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ABSTRACT

Assessment center popularly known as AC involves one- or two-day long series of activities and are being recently used in the business school curriculum to encourage experiential skill-based learning among zillennials. However, what we still do not know is concerning the effectiveness of such real-life experiences of business school students in the changing landscape. Purpose: This paper aims at understanding the relationship between experiential learning and student's learning effectiveness based on a business school course of organizing a student-led assessment center using the experiential learning theory. Methodology: A pilot survey-based study with a purposive sample of students with an experience of conducting an assessment center. Findings: It was found to have a strong positive relationship between experiential learning and student's learning effectiveness for students who took the course and conducted a student-led assessment center. Implications: The results support the view that more experiential learning opportunities should be added to MBA student's curriculum to increase their learning effectiveness and support talent management to be a hands-on learning opportunity for better results. Originality: This paper tests the model of experiential learning and student's learning effectiveness on a unique case of conducting a student-led assessment center and highlights the requirement of experiential learning activities in a business school as well as state prominent future research directions.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, Student's learning effectiveness, Assessment center, Talent management, Zillennials, Experiential learning theory*

INTRODUCTION

Assessment center popularly known as AC involves one- or two-days long series of activities like in-basket, group discussion, interviews, presentations, and others which are used in business to assess leadership behaviour and forecast competencies within an individual (Knott et al., 2018). AC is not just used in business but is also used to develop students. Such student-led ACs

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have recently been used in the learning in terms of business school courses for HR students and aims to understand the impact of conducting an AC on student's learning effectiveness which isn't previously been studied in the literature. This paper will answer two research questions. RQ 1: Is there any association between demographic variables and the study variables? RQ 2: What is the relationship between the experience of the business school curriculum and encouraging experiential skill-based learning (Bartels et al., 2000). To develop a wide range of competencies in students Tan et al., (2021) have emphasised on active experimentation and creating new experiences on doing. Experiential learning focuses on converting experiences into knowledge. In this paper, I take an HR course offered at business schools to students pursuing their MBA degree with an HR specialization. The course requires students to conduct an assessment center in the course duration as an experiential activity to gain real-life experience. The student serves as an assessor in an AC and invites other non-course students to participate in the AC as assessees. They recreate a similar experience of AC which is conducted in an organization and provide feedback reports towards the end of the assesses. The objective of this paper is to understand the wide practice of experiential conducting an AC as an experiential activity on a student's learning effectiveness. In the next four sections I'll be discussing the theoretical background, methodology followed, findings of the study, and implications.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Assessment centers are not just used in business but is also used to develop students. While student's AC is a new phenomenon (Herd et al., 2019) it prepares students for real world by building better learning outcomes and sharpens their skill sets (Knott et al., 2018). An assessor in AC is responsible not only for conducting an AC, but also manage the whole process of reaching to the D-Day of AC. As a general practice, each assessor has one or two participant assessees to observe. They take notes of the candidate behaviour and after completion of the exercise make an attempt judgement for that candidate (Steuer, 1992). Mostly these courses offer a diagnostic AC to allow students to tailor the activities as per their needs and allows goal setting to get good grades as per the path they design (Cronin, 1995). AC is conducted in a

highly controlled environment and at times is denoted as an ideal scenario (Bommer, 2010) for assessing a candidate. The course of student-led AC considered for this study also tries to recreate commonly used workplace activities of employee selection or leadership development (Sturre et al., 2022). For example, in the study by Guachalla and Gledhill (2019), they focused on an AC that replicated the recruitment process followed in the travel and tourism sector. Another study by Hoover et al. (2010) focused on a course designed to develop interpersonal skills within their MBA students and used a fully developed AC to increase the learning outcomes.

As per Kolb (1984), experiential learning happens through four modes of learning. These modes start with concrete experience which leads to reflective observation which further extends to abstract conceptualization and finally, the outcome is seen as active experimentation. For years cognitive learning practices have been used in the academic field to impart learning among students. However over a decade, a shift has been observed in the learning practices with a more robust choice of using experiential learning practices to engage students (Burgess, 2012). The study by Yang (2009) focused on experiential learning activity of providing a website design pedagogy to their enrolled students for the website development course curriculum. A similar approach is found in the study by Radford et al., (2015) which focused on a marketing course and integrated ELT to offer a framework for designing an experience-based interactive pedagogy for teaching macro marketing.

Experiential Learning

The importance of learning through doing has always been given more weightage. By doing an individual gets the necessary experience themselves (Spackman, 2006). In this study the term experiential learning also referred to as EL is defined as a process of learning from actual experience. As per Kolb (1984) EL is a knowledge creation process gained through experience. In education philosophy EL is a source of business education which aims at addressing the real-life problems (Spackman, 2006) by providing students an opportunity to learn by doing rather than just books. EL is a form of constructive active learning that particularly guides the learners to process information as per the active real environment (Bell & Bell, 2020). When the learners make decisions on the know-how of a process in practice through

undergoing simulation or co-creation of a similar real-life environment the learner is in a better position to resolve the problems (Olivares et al., 2020). Management education is one such field that often faces the issues of preparing their students for complex business world problems (Memar et al., 2020). MBA students are hence encouraged to gain hands-on experience through internships and learn through case study pedagogy. Involvement in these meaningful activities provides better understanding to the students and helps to base more realistic expectations from the outside world. (Caza et al., 2015). EL not only supplements the learning process but actively allows students to conceptualize the process as per their different ways of learning (Rohm et al., 2018).

In today's dynamic world organizations need people who are ready to adapt to different situations swiftly. Allowing MBA students to experience an event has been found to be stronger evidence of learning effectiveness rather than just memorizing lessons (Joardar et al., 2019). The last few decades have seen prominent use of student-centric approaches like EL to be relevant in management education (Tomkins &Ulus, 2015). This approach provides students with a sense of the concept's application in practice. A similar notion was used by Bell & Bell (2020) in their study took the case of a university that provided an active EL opportunity to their students by enabling them with a project to develop a business idea and a plan. The project was found to provide students a hook kept them engaged in the learning process and improve their experiential learning skills. In another study by Foltice and Rogers (2020) it was found that participants with EL experience had a significantly better post-learning equity of the course. Waller et al. (2016) in their study talked about the need to further assess the impact of EL on learning in the moment. Through this study I aim at filling in the gap highlighted in the body of literature.

Student's Learning Effectiveness

In this section, I have talked about student's learning effectiveness as one of the major learning outcomes (Hu & Hui, 2012). Learning happens in multiple ways which range from seeing to reflecting to doing. It can also influence their learning styles (Rajaram & Collins, 2013). Kolb (1984) proposed that learning outcomes can be improved by matching learning activities with learner's styles of learning. Further literature has also shown how learning effectiveness gets influenced by the learning environment and learning techniques implemented

(Rajaram & Collins, 2013). In this study student's learning effectiveness is referred as the learning outcome derived from the experimental activity through which a student's experience of that particular course gets impacted. As per experiential learning theory, people tend to learn by experiencing things. To maximize one's learning effectiveness it is vital for students to engage in the learning activities and internalize the whole experience (Hu & Hui, 2012). Researchers have found that one's learning effectiveness is a combinational effect of two factors which are namely individual and social that are driven toward goal attainment (Zaccone & Pedrini, 2019). This process is supplemented by using both traditional as well as online modes (Nayar & Koul, 2020) of learning to boost students' participation in the learning process (Sun et al., 2018). New forms of learning like experiential learning or web-based learning are relevantly newer concepts and need to be explored further in depth to understand what role these inputs play in affecting learning effectiveness and other outcomes (Aboobaker & K.H, 2022). For example, in The Student by Li and Liang (2020) they highlighted about the need to design courses keeping in mind the audience at the receiving end to create a conducive learning environment for the students. Students are the central character in higher education (Sun et al., 2017) as they are on the reviewing end of the learning process. Student's learning effectiveness has a long-lasting impact on the learners and has been a core critical area of research because of its important implications on the learning outcomes field (Zaccone & Pedrini, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Previous researchers have also tried to establish a relationship between gender and the study variables (Fowler & Thomas, 2015). In the study by Hsu et al. (2022), they found that when students are offered experiential learning females have a better learning effectiveness than males. Business games as a learning activity also highlighted that across genders the experience of the course was significantly different (Garber et al., 2017). However, in the search, I did not come across a study that tested the relationship association of the demographic variables like gender and both the study variables EL and student's learning effectiveness.

Hypothesis 1a: There is a significant association between experiential learning and gender.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a significant association between gender and student learning effectiveness.

Further, this study attempts to extend the body of literature by introducing another demographic variable like age to test if there is any association between the age of the learner and the study variables.

Hypothesis 2a: There is a significant association between age and experiential learning.

Hypothesis 2b: There is a significant association between age and student's learning effectiveness.

Main challenges postulated in front of teachers is to provide meaningful experience for learners (Quesada-Pineda & Haviarova, 2014). Underpinning the study in ELT, I study the impact of experiential learning of conducting an AC on students' learning effectiveness for a course at the business schools. Previous scholarly work suggests that students taking up experiential courses reported positive learning outcomes (Rayburn et al., 2018) like increased learning effectiveness (Hui et al., 2008). Introduction of one such experiential activity was using MIT App platform which was found to have a significantly improved impact on student's learning effectiveness from the course (Hsu et al., 2021). Several of these previous studies have highlighted the relationship between experiential learning and learning effectiveness (Cheng et al., 2019) but this model is yet to be tested in relevance to the AC paradigm. In this study, I test the EL model for a course driven by student-led AC as an active learning practice to see if it impacts the student's learning effectiveness which is shown in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 3: There is significant positive impact of experiential learning on student's learning effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between experiential learning and a student's learning effectiveness. The data is gathered from MBA

students from a particular business school using a purposive sampling technique. Only those students who are specializing in HR degree in India and have an experience of conducting an assessment center for a course are approached to fill a survey form. A total of 52 responses are collected from this study. The questionnaire (details shown in Table 1) had 18 questions and was circulated among the students via email.

TABLE 1

Details Of variables Of The Study

Variable	Construct	Description	Measure	Source
Demographic variables	Gender	Male Female Others	-	
	Age	Below 26 26-30 31-35 36 and above	-	
Independent variable	Experiential learning	It is an adapted scale and shows the strength of one's belief that a learning experience will fulfill user's intrinsic motives	Experiential learning	Tang et al. (2014)
Dependent variable	Student's learning effectiveness	It is an adapted scale which helps to examine the effect of student's learning effectiveness through simulation/ experiential programs	Simulation Learning Effectiveness Scale (SLES)	Pai (2016)

Measure

The 18-item questionnaire was adapted from Tang et al. (2014) and Pai (2016) which compromised on the questions of experiential learning and student learning effectiveness respectively. Tang et al. (2014) scale had 4 items on experiential learning which was used post changing a few words in the questionnaire. Example- Learning experience from an assessment center has had a good effect on me, Conducting an assessment center had sufficient knowledge support for my learning, and others. While Pai (2016) scale had 12 items on student's learning effectiveness which was used post changing a few words in the questionnaire. Example- Made me more aware of the need to make an effort to practice as an assessor, Gave me opportunities to participate in

decision making, Makes me more confident about the assessor's role, and others. Reliability is the measure of internal consistency of the construct in the study. A construct is reliable if the Alpha (α) value is greater than 0.7 (Hair et al, 2013). Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The results revealed that the Experiential learning scale of four items (α =0.915) and Student's learning effectiveness scale with twelve items (α =0.951) were found reliable. Reliability results are summarized in the Table 2.

TABLE 2

Reliability Statistics

Constructs	No. of items	Alpha (α)
Experiential learning	4	0.915
Student's learning effectiveness	12	0.951

Data Analysis Technique

Previously research scholars have used various statistical packages to perform analysis of data collected through surveys. So, in this study, I have used "Statistical Package for Social Sciences" (SPSS) to perform all the statistical data analysis. For Hypothesis 1 and 2 Chi-square analysis is performed to check the association between the variables while for Hypothesis 3 a regression analysis was performed.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Respondent Profiling

In the study, demographic variables captured are Gender and Age. Following are the descriptive statistics of the demographic variables shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Demographic Statistics Of The Respondents

Variables	Characteristics	N	%
Gender	Male	18	34.6
	Female	34	65.4
	Others	0	0
Age	Below 26	31	59.6
	26-30	18	34.6
	31-35	0	0
	36 and above	3	5.8

Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistic for Experiential learning reveals an overall mean score of 6.4135 (SD= 0. 87711). This shows a positive perception of experiential learning among business management students as the scale ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The descriptive statistic for Student learning effectiveness reveals an overall mean score of 4.2212 (SD= 0. 73503). This also shows a positive perception of student learning effectiveness among business management students as the scale ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Hypotheses Testing

To verify the hypotheses above stated Chi-square statistics were used to examine the association between the categorical variables 1a: Gender and Experiential learning, and 1b: Gender and Student's learning effectiveness. It was found that there is an insignificant association at 5% significance level between both gender and experiential learning at ($\chi 2$ =9.253, df=9, p= 0.414), and gender and student's learning effectiveness of respondents at ($\chi 2$ =20.599, df=22, p= 0.546). Hence, H1a and H1b were not supported. So, we can say that there is no association between gender and the study variables which means that gender is not related to experiential learning and student learning effectiveness. Again, like Hypotheses 1 Chi-square statistics were used to examine the association between the categorical variables 2a: Age and Experiential learning, and 2b: Age and Student's learning effectiveness. In this case, it was found that there is an insignificant association at a 5% significance

level between both age and experiential learning ($\chi 2$ =15.198, df=18, p= 0.648), while there is a significant association between age and student's learning effectiveness of respondents at ($\chi 2$ =63.750, df=44, p= 0.027). Hence, H2a was not supported but H2b was supported. So, we can say that although age was not related to experiential learning of the participants, but age had an association with students' learning effectiveness. This means that the learning effectiveness has different impacts on different age groups of students.

To test the impact of experiential learning on student's learning effectiveness linear regression was performed. The first step in the process was to check the correlation between the two study variables. Using Pearson product correlation, it was found that there is a statistically highly positive correlation between experiential learning and student learning effectiveness (r=0.797, p<0.001). Hence H3 was supported. This shows that an increase in use of experiential learning would lead to a high level of student's learning effectiveness. In the second step, I ran a linear regression analysis in SPSS and found that the F statistics is also significant at (1,51) = 87.031, p<0.05. The findings indicate that experiential learning has a significant and positive impact on student's learning effectiveness. Further, the R2 = 0.635 indicates that the model explains 63.5% of the variance in student's learning effectiveness. H3 evaluated whether there is a significant impact of experiential learning on student's learning effectiveness.

TABLE 4
Regression Analysis

Hypotheses	Regression Weights	β	t	p-value	Results
H3	EL → SLE	0.668	9.329	0.000*	Supported
R^2 = 0.635					
F (1,51) = 87.031					
Note, *p<0.05. EL: Experiential Learning, SLE: Student's Learning Effectiveness					

The results in Table 4 reveals that experiential learning has a significant and positive impact on student's learning effectiveness (β=0.668, t=9.329, p=0.00). Hence H3 was supported. These findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between both study variables. And the regression equation derived from the study is: Y= 0.062 + 0.668X i.e. Student's learning effectiveness= -

0.062 + 0.668 (Experiential learning). Table 5 provides a summary of all the hypotheses tested in this study.

TABLE 5

Summary Table For Hypotheses Tested

Hypotheses	Factors	p-value	Result
H1a	Gender → EL	0.414*	Not Supported
H1b	Gender → SLE	0.546*	Not Supported
H2a	Age → EL	0.648*	Not Supported
H2b	Age → SLE	0.027*	Supported
H3	EL → SLE	0.000*	Supported

Note, *p<0.05. EL: Experiential Learning, SLE: Student's Learning Effectiveness

DISCUSSION

Conclusion

Real learning tends to happen through encountering challenging experiences Learning through experience enhances critical competencies in an individual (Foltice and Rogers, 2020). The learning-by-doing philosophy of Kolb (1984) stands true. Experiential learning is one such branch of learning that follows the rule of active learning to improve learning outcomes for the learner. Here understanding student's learning outcomes is crucial as it is a developmental process of learners encouraging them to grow and increasing their learning effectiveness. The objective of this study was to understand the relationship between experiential learning and a student's learning effectiveness for MBA students specializing in HR course. For this course, the students conducted an assessment center which acts as an experiential learning opportunity for them and provides a simulation of real-life organization. The findings of the study showed that not only there is a positive relationship between experiential learning and student learning effectiveness, but it also showed that there is an association between age and student learning effectiveness. While other these two hypotheses were supported other three hypothesis which examined the association between other demographic variable like gender were not supported. So, based on the findings above I conclude that gender does not play any role in influencing a learner's experiential learning experience of their

learning effectiveness. Age has a significant relationship with students' learning effectiveness, and it can be commented from eh findings that a student's age can influence their learning outcome from the whole experiential learning experience of conducting an assessment center.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the literature based on experiential learning theory from a lens of business education. Further, this study also fills the gap arising due to the lack of body of literature in evaluating assessment centers for students as an experiential learning activity. Today assessment center is a vital source of learning to prepare students for the outside world. Specifically talking in terms of HR students who often in their job roles have to deal with people who lack the necessary exposure required to be organization-ready because of this not only do they underperform but also tend to make wrong decisions in workplaces. These wrong decisions related to hiring, training, and promotion can cost organizations a lot if not taken care of. This study will act as a base in the business school curriculum to encourage incorporating more real-life simulation activities to be included in MBA courses. The assessment center is one such experiential learning opportunity that allows students to step in the shoes of assessors and closely experience the nuances of selecting and promoting talent in the workplace. Business schools should encourage educators to integrate student-led assessment centers into their courses and offer students an opportunity to increase their learning effectiveness. Further educators should also take into account the age group of students registering for their course and provide necessary assistance to ensure an optimal level of learning effectiveness throughout the various age groups.

Future Direction and Limitations

This study was a cross-sectional study and hence does not account for the changes in a learner's outcomes over some time. Future researchers can conduct a longitudinal study and note if time plays any role in influencing a learner's effectiveness. Next, this study focuses on a single course offered by the business school for which students have to conduct an assessment center. Here given the fact that the students in such courses are a handful future researchers can replicate this model on to other course offering similar

experiential learning opportunities to the students with a larger sample of respondents. Further, future researchers can also introduce age as a moderator and check its influence on the model. Apart from age, other variables like past knowledge, learning styles, learning models, and personality types can also be introduced into the model to test their impact on it using more robust multivariate methods. And lastly, other theories like- self-determination theory and learning theories can be used to better explain the model.

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