

# 80 Balancing challenge with care: Students' perceptions of classroom-based experiential learning in vocational postgraduate degrees

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## Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

## Abstract

Experiential learning activities in vocational post graduate degrees typically combine theoretical and practical content to ensure that graduates are 'practice-fit' and ready for essential aspects of professional life. These classroom activities can include scenario-based role plays and demonstrations where learners engage with peers to emulate real-world practice contexts. While retrospective studies highlight positive learning outcomes associated with experiential learning, relatively little is known about the in-vivo student experience. Students currently enrolled in four vocational postgraduate degrees at the University of Melbourne answered quantitative and qualitative questions designed to understand their perspective of the value of experiential learning activities in the classroom. Findings from the mixed methods analysis indicate that relational pedagogies should be central to the design of experiential learning tasks. The main theme, 'Balancing challenge with care', was informed by subthemes connected to cohort factors, individual student qualities, and pedagogical aspects related to being clear, collaborative and constructive.

## Full paper

Background: This project aimed to evaluate and better understand the student experience of engaging in small-group, experiential learning tasks in online and on-campus environments. Experiential learning activities in vocational post graduate degrees typically combine theoretical and practical content, and therefore aim to simulate practice to ensure that graduates are ready for various aspects of professional life. These learning tasks include activities such as scenario-based role plays and demonstrations (Kolb, 2015). In classroom contexts, these non-graded learning tasks are often constructively aligned with graded assessments or core competencies that are relevant to work placement and future employment requirements.

Classroom-based experiential learning tasks are centred around the principle of 'learning through doing'. Despite literature highlighting that graduates of vocational courses look back on these classroom activities and see value in their contribution to learning, relatively little is known about the in-vivo student experience of associated challenges or risk of harm through their engagement. Risk is in fact considered to be inherent in these learning activities as students are deliberately placed out of their comfort zones, challenged and destabilised (Morris, 2020). Experiential learning can therefore elicit strong emotional responses in some students, which can either enable or be a barrier to learning and achievement (Taylor, 2018).

However, an increasing number of young people in Australia are reporting high levels of anxiety. The most recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicates that 15% of young people aged between 18 – 24 years old experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress. Psychological distress is defined as an individual's overall level of psychological strain or pain and is highly correlated with the presence of depressive or anxiety disorders. Surveys of young people in Australia during the first year of the pandemic reveal that psychological distress rose to 26% (Brennan et al, 2021), while other reports indicate that 74% of young people considered that their mental health was worse since the outbreak of the COVID-19 (Headspace, 2020). Teachers are increasingly taking the mental health of learners into consideration during curriculum design. Anecdotally, teachers within at this University observed a growing trend for post-graduate students to 'opt out' of experiential learning activities and request to just observe their classmates instead.

Various learning theories are relevant when considering the learner experience, effectiveness, and suitability of experiential learning activities. For example, cognitive disequilibrium is a state of imbalance when encountering information that requires learners to develop a new schema or modify an existing schema. However, disequilibrium is often an uncomfortable state for individuals, and therefore some learners seek to quickly return to a state of

equilibrium (D'Mello & Graesser, 2012). When faced with applying new knowledge to an active learning task in a small peer group, the discomfort of learning may become too great for students with anxiety or learning disabilities resulting in them choosing not to participate.

Hattie and Ziere (2018) consider that learning task design should follow the 'Goldilocks Principle', where the task should not be too easy/boring, not too hard, but 'just right' for the learners' stage of education. Teachers should therefore tailor learning experiences to the needs of the learner and their learning stage to both promote engagement in learning and foster learning environments that support wellbeing. Teachers and tutors who facilitate experiential learning tasks would benefit from a deeper understanding of what 'just right' means when considering the intersection between learners' stage of education and their health and learning diversity.

Method: Students from four vocational postgraduate degrees at the University of Melbourne answered quantitative and qualitative questions designed to understand their perspective of the degree to which experiential learning activities are considered valuable to their learning, and the challenges and/or benefits they identify.

Findings and conclusions: Findings from the convergent mixed methods analysis indicate that relational pedagogies should be central to the design of experiential learning tasks. The main theme, 'Balancing challenge with care', was informed by subthemes connected to relational qualities of the cohort/group, individual student qualities, and pedagogical aspects related to being clear, collaborative and constructive.

## References

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