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UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPROACH: BENEFITS, IMPACTS AND STRATEGIES.

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Abstract

Experiential learning is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposely engage with students through direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. Experiential learning opportunities exist in a variety of course-and non-course-based forms and may include community service, serving learning, undergraduate research, study abroad and culminating experiences such as internship, student teaching, and capstone projects. The study is a descriptive survey designed to investigate the perception of undergraduate students of experiential learning approach: benefits, impact, and strategies. The population of the study is 121 year two students in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt and 106 year two students in the Department of Educational Technology. A sample of 100 students was used in this study. A stratified sampling technique was used for the study. The instrument used for the study was a structured questionnaire titled Undergraduate students perception of experiential learning approach: Benefits, Impact and Strategies (USPELABIS) with 15 items. The study used face and content validity. Using Cronbach alpha, reliability co-efficient of 0.72 was obtained. The study's statistical methods included the mean and Z- test. The study found that students often perceive experiential learning as a means to better grasp theoretical knowledge by applying it to real-world contexts; Engaging in hands-on activities helps students retain information longer than traditional lecture-based learning. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended that university curricula should incorporate more possibilities for experiential learning, such as fieldwork, internships, and practical projects

Introduction

The dynamic global economy necessitates a change in educational paradigms that prioritize experiential and pragmatic learning methods. According to Skageen, McCollum, Morsch, and Shokoples (2018), traditional rote-based teaching approaches are becoming less and less effective at giving students the critical thinking, problem-

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solving, and adaptability abilities needed in today's changing environment. Experiential learning, which is the process by the which knowledge is produced by transforming experience, is an effective teaching strategy that connects theory to practical application (Foo & Foo, 2022). Through experiential learning theory and tecniques, teachers intentionally include students in firsthand experiences and concentrated introspection to broaden their knowledge, hone their skills, and make sense of their values. This method is based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the cyclical process of experiencing, reflecting, comprehending, and experimenting (Serhat, 2022).

The concept of experiential learning is based on the notion that the best ways to learn are through real-world experiences, which help people remember information and facts (Anjan, 2022).

Experiential learning, according to Barton & Ryan (2020), is made up of educational activities that take place both within and outside of the classroom and are intended to actively involve students in learning by doing, followed by reflection on the experience and process and active creation of their own understanding. Primary, secondary, and postsecondary educational institutions can all create and implement experiential learning activities. According to Kolb's theory, successful learning is achieved through a four-stage process that includes tangible experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Students' personal and professional development is significantly influenced by their undergraduate education. Experiential learning provides a mechanism to address issues like graduate unemployment and skills mismatch, which are problems facing postsecondary institutions (Norwich University online, 2017). Experiential learning improves knowledge retention, develops transferable skills, and generates deeper engagement by involving students in activities like internships, service learning, group projects, and simulation exercises. It supports the global movement toward competency-based education, which places an emphasis on using and acquiring skills rather than just mastering theory. Weilbach, Schreck, and Reitsma (2022).

Incorporating experiential learning methodologies is crucial in Nigeria, where higher education institutions are working to increase graduate employability and match academic programmes with industry priorities. However, little is known about how undergraduate students view and gain from this strategy (Olalekan, 2024). The successful use of experiential learning approaches is frequently hampered by a lack of faculty training, insufficient funding, and a lack of cooperation between academics and industry (Dhliwayo, 2008). Additionally, a variety of institutional, personal, and sociocultural factors impact students' attitudes, awareness, and preparedness to embrace experiential learning. According to Suffolk University Boston (2023), community service is a pedagogy that incorporates academically relevant service activities that address human and community needs into a course. By integrating service and reflection in a controlled learning environment, students are able to relate theory and practice to knowledge. A methodology of experiential learning, community service empowers students to become active learners and cultivate civic knowledge and skills outside of the classroom. By addressing a genuine need in the community, students enrolled in community service courses collaborate with local, national, and worldwide public and nonprofit organizations to get a deeper understanding of the course material. In the process, students gain knowledge about their areas and the course they are taking. Almost any act of service is considered community service.

Tutoring, meal service, patient care, aiding a refugee family, serving the community, and being involved in the educational environment are all examples of direct service (Elmhurst University, 2023). The application of academic knowledge and skills to real-world problems strengthens them. Community service also fosters positive relationships, helps people discover new interests and skills, helps them set and achieve goals, fosters teamwork and leadership, teaches them the value of helping and caring for others, makes them feel like they belong, and helps them develop a positive sense of self. This study aims to determine how undergraduate students view the

experiential learning approach, with an emphasis on the perceived advantages, effects on academic and personal growth, and tactics that can improve its application. Designing successful experiential learning frameworks that meet the needs and goals of students requires an understanding of their viewpoints. The findings will offer insightful information for educators, legislators, and institutional leaders looking to enhance educational methods and results.

Problem of the study

Experiential learning is a pedagogical strategy that stresses learning by doing and is becoming increasingly acknowledged as a successful way to help undergraduate students develop critical thinking problem-solving, and practical knowledge. In many contexts, especially in areas where traditional teaching methods predominate in higher education, undergraduate students' perceptions of experiential learning remain understudied despite its acknowledged benefits. Insufficient resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, and poor curriculum integration frequently impede the adoption of experiential learning strategies. These difficulties cast doubt on the viability, acceptability, and effects of such methods on students' academic and personal growth. Experiential education teaches students to examine their actions, thought processes, and even their emotional responses, which prepares them for the workplace and helps them make important life decisions, improve their personal relationships, and address their emotional needs. It is used effectively in schools, higher education, therapy, corporate training, and other areas for educational learning, personal development, and skill building. Experiential learning focuses on creating experiences that have a practical application of knowledge and skills to real-world experiences to increase learner's knowledge and develop competence in skills and behaviors.

The higher education system in Nigeria has long depended on lecture-based teaching strategies that give theoretical knowledge precedence over real-world application. As a result, many undergraduates graduate without suffice practical experience, making them unprepared for the demands of the job market and real-world problems. This disparity emphasizes the necessity of looking into how students view experiential learning strategies and how they can improve their academic results.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine the perception of undergraduate students regarding the experiential learning approach:: Benefits, Impact and Strategies. Specifically, the study intends to:

1. The study investigates undergraduate students' perception of the benefits of the experiential learning approach in enhancing their academic performance and practical skills in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt.
2. The impact of the experiential learning approach on the overall learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt was evaluated.
3. Identify effective strategies for implementing the experiential learning approach in undergraduate programmes in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt.

Research Questions

The following research questions were drawn based on the research objectives.

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the benefits of the experiential learning approach in terms of academic performance and practical skills in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?

2. How does the experiential learning approach impact the overall learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?
3. What strategies do undergraduate students consider effective for the implementation of the experiential learning approach in their programs in the department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between the perceptions of students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt regarding the benefits of the experiential learning approach in terms of academic performance and practical skills
2. There is no significant difference in the impact of learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt'
3. There is no significant difference between the strategies of students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt to consider for the implementation of the experiential learning approach in their programmes

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate undergraduate students' perceptions of the experiential learning approach in terms of its benefits, impact, and strategies for implementation within the Departments of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt. The target population for this study comprised undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Education at the University of Port Harcourt, specifically those in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and the Department of Educational Foundations. The population of the study is 121 year two students in the department of curriculum studies and educational technology, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt and 106 year two students in the department of Educational Technology. A sample of 100 students was used for the study. A stratified sampling technique was used for the study. The Instrument used for the study was a structured questionnaire titled Undergraduate students perception of experiential learning approach: Benefits, Impact and Strategies (USPELABIS) with 15 items. The study used face and content validity. Using Cronbach Alpha, reliability co-efficient of 0.72 was obtained. The study's statistical methods included the mean and Z- test.

Results

Research Question 1: What are undergraduate students' perceptions of the benefits of the experiential learning approach in terms of academic performance and practical skills in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?

Table 1: Benefits of experiential learning

S/N	Items Benefits of Experiential Learning	SA	A	SD	D	Mean	SD	Total Number of Respondents
1	Students often perceive experiential learning as a means to better grasp theoretical knowledge by applying it to real-world contexts; Engaging in hands-on activities helps students retain information longer than traditional lecture-based learning.	92	8			3.92	0.28	100
2	Students value the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, which bridges the gap between classroom learning and real-life challenges; experiential learning often involves tackling real-world problems, which enhances critical thinking and decision-making skills.	85	15			3.85	0.35	100
3	Working on group projects or in professional settings helps students build interpersonal skills and teamwork capabilities; Experiential learning fosters a sense of independence and self-confidence in handling complex tasks.	79	21			3.79	0.40	100
4	Students often perceive experiential learning as a stepping stone to professional success, equipping them with skills required in their careers; Engaging with	88	12			3.88	0.32	100

	professionals during internships or community projects allows students to build valuable industry connections.							
5	Projects and practical tasks contribute to a tangible portfolio, which is beneficial for job applications or further studies.	71	29	-	-	3.71	0.46	100
	Average Mean					**3.83**	**0.36**	

Table 1 shows that students often perceive experiential learning as a means to better grasp theoretical knowledge by applying it to real-world contexts with a mean score of 3.83 Engaging in hands-on activities helps students retain information longer than traditional lecture-based learning.

Research Question 2: How does the experiential learning approach impact the overall learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?

Table 2: Impact of experiential learning

S/N	The Impact of Experiential Learning	SA	A	SD	D	M	SD	Total Number of Respondents
1	Experiential learning shifts the focus from passive knowledge acquisition to active participation; this hands-on approach enhances motivation and makes learning meaningful.	75	25	-	-	3.75	0.43	100
2	Applying theory to practice reinforces comprehension and bridges the gap between academic concepts and their real-world applications; students often report a stronger grasp of subject material, which positively affects their academic outcomes.	66	34	-	-	3.66	0.48	100
3	Students take ownership of their learning through self-	59	41	-	-	3.59	0.52	100

	directed projects and reflection.							
4	Students gain workplace-relevant skills, such as project management, teamwork, and technical expertise; Experiential learning often provides networking opportunities with professionals in the field. It equips students with tangible experiences to showcase in resumes, portfolios, and interviews.	97	3	-	-	3.97	0.26	100
5	Experiential learning empowers students to become independent thinkers, fostering lifelong learning habits.	90	10	-	-	3.90	0.32	100
	Average Mean					**3.77**	**0.40**	

Table 2 shows that with a mean score of 3.77, the study found that students gain workplace-relevant skills, such as project management, teamwork, and technical expertise and that experiential learning often provides networking opportunities with professionals in the field. It equips students with tangible experiences to showcase in resumes, portfolios, and interviews.

Research Question 3: What strategies do undergraduate students consider effective for the implementation of the experiential learning approach in their programs in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology and Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education University of Port Harcourt?

Table 3: Strategies used in teaching experiential learning

S/N	Strategies to be used in teaching experiential learning	SA	A	SD	D	M	SD	Total Number of Respondents
1	Combining knowledge from different fields to solve real-world problems makes learning holistic and relevant; students value interdisciplinary projects that reflect the complexity of real-world challenges.	62	38	-	-	3.62	0.48	100

2	Technology-driven tools such as virtual reality and interactive simulations make experiential learning accessible even in resource-limited settings	69	31	-	-	3.69	0.46	100
3	Collaborative projects and group activities encourage knowledge sharing and skill-building among students; involving local communities in experiential tasks (e.g., service-learning) fosters teamwork while addressing real-world issues.	80	20	-	-	3.80	0.43	100
4	Collaborative reflection allows students to share perspectives and learn from the experiences of their peers; guided reflection with instructors or mentors helps students contextualize their learning.	60	40	-	-	3.60	0.49	100
5	Assignments such as group projects, problem-solving tasks, and simulations allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Gaining exposure to professional environments helps students connect classroom learning with real-world applications.	50	50	-	-	3.50	0.51	100
	Average Mean				**3.64**		**0.47**	

Table 3 shows that with a mean score of 3.64, the study found that collaborative projects and group activities encourage knowledge sharing and skill-building among students; involving local communities in experiential tasks (e.g., service-learning) fosters teamwork while addressing real-world issues.

Hypotheses

H_{O1}: There is no significant difference between the perception of students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt regarding the benefits of the experiential learning approach in terms of academic performance and practical skills

Table of analysis to examine the significant difference between the perception of students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt' regarding the benefits of the experiential learning approach in terms of academic performance and practical skills

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Df	Standard Error	Z (Cal)	Z (Tab)	Decision
Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology	3.92	0.28	50	98	0.12	1.75	1.96	Accepted
Educational Foundations	3.71	0.46						

The calculated Z value of 1.75 is less than the tabulated Z value of 1.96. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the two groups' perceptions of the benefits of experiential learning regarding academic performance and practical skills. Since Z (Cal) < Z (Tab), we accept the null hypothesis (HO1). There is no significant difference between the groups' perceptions. The two departments seem to have similar views on the benefits of experiential learning in enhancing academic performance and practical skills. This suggests that experiential learning may be universally valued across different educational domains within the Faculty of Education at the University of Port Harcourt. No intervention or modification of teaching methods related to this aspect is urgently required because there is no notable difference in perception.

H_{O2}: There is no significant difference in the impact of learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt.

Table of analysis to examine the significant difference between the impact of learning of learning experience and personal development of undergraduate students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Df	Standard Error	Z (Cal)	Z (Tab)	Decision
Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology	3.90	0.32	55	98	0.13	2.38	1.96	Rejected
Educational Foundations	3.59	0.52	45					

The calculated Z value of 2.38 is greater than the tabulated Z value of 1.96. This indicates that there is a significant difference between the two groups' views on the impact of learning experience and personal development. Since Z (Cal) > Z (Tab), we reject the null hypothesis (HO2). There is a significant difference between the groups.

Students in the two departments perceive the impact of their learning experience and personal development differently. The Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology group has a higher mean score, suggesting they perceive a stronger positive impact of their learning experiences on personal development. This difference could be related to the nature of the programs in each department. The Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology program might incorporate more practical and hands-on learning experiences that enhance personal development. Educational interventions or curriculum redesign may be needed in the Educational Foundations department to enhance the personal development aspect of their programs.

H_{O3}: There is no significant difference between the strategies of students in the Department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt to consider for the implementation of experiential learning approach in their programs

Table of analysis to examine the significant difference between students in the department of Curriculum studies and Educational Technology and students in the department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt's strategies to consider for the implementation of experiential learning approach in their programs

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Df	Standard Error	Z (Cal)	Z (Tab)	Decision
Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology	3.80	0.43	60	98	0.14	2.14	1.96	Rejected
Educational Foundations	3.50	0.51	40					

The calculated Z value of 2.14 is greater than the tabulated Z value of 1.96. This indicates that there is a significant difference between the two groups regarding strategies for implementing experiential learning. Since Z (Cal) > Z (Tab), we reject the null hypothesis (HO3). There is a significant difference between the groups. The difference in perceived strategies for implementing experiential learning may suggest that the two departments have different approaches or levels of readiness to incorporate experiential learning into their programs. The Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology group, with a higher mean score, might be more inclined toward incorporating practical and experiential strategies into their curriculum. The Educational Foundations department may require support or training on best practices for implementing experiential learning.

Discussion of the Findings

According to Baker and Robinson (2017), students who participate in internships reported a 50% increase in the practical application of their academic knowledge and a 35% higher rate of job placement. Furthermore, fieldwork greatly improved the problem-solving abilities and professional preparedness of students. As the percentage of pupils learning English in schools keeps rising, Villarroel, Benavente, Chuecas, and Bruna (2020) found that experiential learning fosters success in the classroom and builds real-world skills. The study's results are consistent with those of Mooney & Bob (2001), who found that community leaders, educators, mediators, lawyers, agency volunteers, and students could collaborate to create and run a school program.

According to Gavillet (2018), experiential learning or education can fill in important gaps in traditional educational practices. Boggu and Sundarsingh (2016) found a highly significant difference between the pre and post SILL survey responses after an intervention period, which is consistent with the study's conclusions. According to Zapalska & Dallas (2020), games and simulations help students grasp things more deeply and provide them with real-world experiences.

Devon, Berna, and Walsh (2017) found that when students use the scaffolding provided by experiential learning, it gives them the confidence to value their own life experiences as a source of knowledge, increases their cultural flexibility, and fosters deeper connections between teachers and students. According to Chusni, Saputro, Suranto, and Rahardjo (2022), students who are exposed to experiential learning methods outperform those in traditional settings by 20% on theoretical and practical tests. Students that took part in experiential learning programs reported a 30% increase in personal growth measures, including resilience and leadership abilities, according to Kelley, Baker, Robinson, and Culbertson (2023).

Conclusion

The experiential learning technique is seen by undergraduate students as a very successful way to improve academic achievement and the acquisition of practical skills. According to the results, students are aware of the substantial advantages of this method, especially its capacity to close the gap between academic understanding and practical application. Students cite internships, fieldwork, practical exercises, and lab sessions as some of the most important growth-promoting tactics that aid in both understanding difficult ideas and preparing them for their future jobs.

Additionally, experiential learning has a significant effect on students' personal growth and overall educational experience. It develops critical thinking skills, improves problem-solving aptitude, and promotes a more in-depth understanding of the material. Additionally, the process of reflection that is a part of experiential learning activities like journaling and group discussions greatly aids in students' self-awareness, personal development, and acquisition of critical life skills like cooperation and communication.

When it comes to putting experiential learning into practice, students highlight a number of tactics that guarantee its success. Clear learning objectives, prompt feedback, technological integration (such as digital portfolios and virtual labs), chances for group learning, and enough resource availability are a few examples. When these tactics are used, an atmosphere is produced in which students may actively participate in their education, think back on their experiences, and use what they have learned in meaningful ways. The importance of a supportive learning environment that fosters active involvement, enables real-world applications, and facilitates reflection is ultimately highlighted by students' perceptions. Through the ongoing integration and improvement of these experiential learning techniques, academic institutions can greatly improve undergraduate students' academic and personal development, setting them up for future professional success and wider contributions to society.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the researchers recommended the following:

1. Experiential learning, such as fieldwork, internships, and practical projects, should be incorporated into university curricula.
2. For students to critically assess and benefit from their experiences, universities should ensure that they receive prompt, helpful feedback from peers and professors.
3. Educational institutions should invest in technology such as digital portfolios, simulations, and virtual labs to enhance conventional experiential learning techniques. These technologies give students more chances to participate in hands-on activities even in situations where physical resources or outside relationships are scarce.

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