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Challenges Associated with the ERE Cycle as an Andragogy in Pakistan: Experiential Learning Practices

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Experiential Learning, ERE cycle, Andragogy, Barriers, Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of Experiential Learning (EL) theories, many studies have been conducted to explore and test the effectiveness of EL strategies in education. Experiential learning (EL) is a process where a learner learns in various phases by doing, reflecting, and experimenting (Kolb, 1984). To determine the best practices in EL, one needs to explore it by doing in-depth readings of primitive and contemporary researches and theories of EL. A doctoral-level study (Akhtar, 2019) was conducted to investigate EL practices and developed an ERE cycle to facilitate EL practitioners in the local context of Pakistan. This model was experimented at a business school in teaching business communication courses to the students of bachelor's and master's programs. The results showed a positive influence of the model in developing communication skills among the learners. However, there were found some major barriers in implementing the ERE cycle which was observed by the researcher and highlighted by the participants during in-depth interviews. The current study is aimed at highlighting those hindrances which were and may be faced by EL practitioners while utilizing EL strategies in Pakistan. This study extracted three major barriers from the data and observation. The challenging environment, reluctant students and exhausted planning & execution on the part of teachers can produce adverse effects while implementing the ERE cycle at higher educational institutes of Pakistan. The findings of this study would prove very vital and helpful for all those teachers who want to pursue EL as andragogy. Furthermore, it would help them in better planning and arrangements to overcome these obstacles while using the ERE cycle.

Introduction

Since the emergence of Experiential Learning (EL) theories, many research studies have been conducted to explore and test the effectiveness of EL strategies as pedagogy and andragogy. It has been observed and proved that the use of EL as an andragogy can better enhance the learning skills as compared to other traditional methods (Akhtar, 2019). Throughout the past century and especially in the contemporary 21st century, the EL method has been used widely in many fields of education. The use of EL strategies in teaching has transformed the teaching practices and many studies are being conducted around the world to experiment with the efficacy of this method and bring it in regular educational settings. Miettinen (2000) concluded that EL based method in teaching has become an established approach that is required to be further explored and utilized in the paradigm of education. According to the modern-day requirements of the corporate sector, skilled employees are being sought out by the managers over those candidates who merely possess the degrees. The traditional methods have contributed sufficiently in the expansion of educational processes but they are not fulfilling the modern-day requirements. These modern-day requirements demand a higher level of skills among fresh graduates when they complete their education. According to Kolb (1984) and later Kolb and Kolb (2008; 2014) in an El process a learner learns, being involved in a learning process, by doing; thus, he develops certain skills which are part of his academic courses.

Across the globe, the impact of EL has been felt and this approach is being applied in many countries, academia, and higher education (Weil & McGill, 1989; Boud & Miller, 2002; Boud, Keough & Walker2013). Miettinen (2000) has found that EL theory has two major concepts which are characterized as experience and reflection that bring learning to the top. Akhtar and Nasreen (2019) concluded that EL based education can help the students to discover their hidden skills that ultimately brings a very significant positive impact on their learning. Considering the effectiveness of EL, many higher education institutes around the globe are following EL based curriculum plans. These practices are mainly based on the EL perspectives of Dewey, Lewin, Pfeiffer, and Kolb. There exist numerous EL cycles according to the learning styles of the learners. However, in many countries, there is a scarcity of researches to explore and develop EL cycles that are based on the learning styles of the local learners in the local settings.

Akhtar (2019) explored and developed the EL based ERE cycle to facilitate the EL practitioners in Pakistan. The results revealed that the ERE cycle can be effective as andragogy. However, it was not an easy task to implement an EL-based model with its full potentials considering the limitations of the educational system and the presence of traditional methods which are quite outdated and are not helping a great deal in developing the

skills of the learners. There were found some other barriers which could prove to challenge for EL practitioners in Pakistan. This study is aimed at exploring and highlighting those barriers which were observed by the researcher and were mentioned by the learners during in-depth interviews.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning is becoming an integral part of higher education in North America, Europe and Australia. This theory is proposed to confront the diverse methods of education and it has marked the distinct line between the educations imparted at various levels. Though this approach is widely used in pedagogy, its significance is increasing day by day in andragogy as well (Miettinen, 2000). It has continuously been serving learners and teachers devising modern strategies and improving the educational standards of the modern era. In a recent study Prastawa, Akhyar, and Suharno (2020) have declared that the EL is effective for improving the entrepreneurial competency of vocational high school students which reflects the expanding positive impact of experience-based learning.

The concept of EL has been widely considered over the last few decades and the shift of learning methods from teacher-centered has become the prime issue of many researchers. Traditional teaching methodologies have left students disengaged and unmotivated due to the teacher's highly transmissive attitude. The need to learn from one another's cooperation and from real-world experiences has been immensely felt among students. Owing to this fact the work of several notable 20th-century scholars have been put together who considered the experience as a prime approach in their theories of human development and learning.

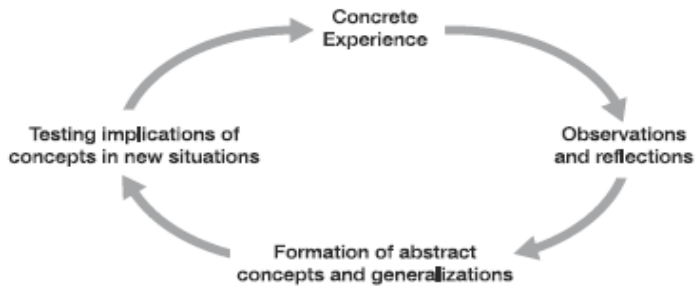
The emergence of EL theories has assisted the work of numerous eminent scholars - markedly Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, Carl Rogers, Jean Piaget, and many others to cultivate a holistic model (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning serves as a comprehensive and holistic approach to the learning process. It assists the learners to utilize their abilities to get hold of the learning situation. The learners thus become much creative and more experienced and they become able to cope up with the needs of the subject and put forth their understanding and critical analysis on the subject matter. It is based on the notion of how experience enhances learning, growth, and adaptation of an individual, where students are not restricted with subjective experience in the learning process rather they gain experience through their own understanding and interpretation of new information and the teacher serves as a facilitator and makes learning adaptable through a continuous reconstruction of experiences. It discourages the rote learning process and gives way to active learning. It inculcates in the student the confidence to deal with various problems in infinite ways which eventually fosters the situational skills that do not get developed through using the traditional didactic approach. Here the learner is not just a recipient of knowledge in a

passive mode rather acts as an active participant who observes, analyses, evaluates, and synthesizes the information; consequently enabling the student to have a better grip of the topic with the sheer understanding of the concept. In this way, EL distinguishes itself from other learning theories and applicable not only in the formal education system but in all the decorum of life (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLES

According to Ord (2012), EL based learning follows three major assumptions; 1. People learn best when they are involved in the personal learning experience, 2. The knowledge develops and it is discovered by the self-efforts of the learners, 3. A person can learn the best when he sets his own objectives of learning. He developed these assumptions after a thorough study of the works and cycles presented by EL practitioners especially Dewey and Kolb. Many EL scholars developed their own models of the learning process which fit in the context of the specific learning environment. These cycles closely relate to one another and are based on the works of other leading EL theorists. In this study, the researcher also developed a learning cycle that is based on Kolb's (1984) EL cycle. Among some eminent cycles which are being used by the organizations, institutes, and researchers, the researcher studied most of them for his understanding and discussed and included some selected cycles and theories. Lewin (1951); Dewey (1938); Kelly (1955); Pfeiffer and Jones (1985); Juch (1983); Kolb (1984); presented EL theories and also provided EL cycles of learning. Moreover, in many other works done by these scholars they have defined the perspectives and function of EL theories. Lewin (1951) presented his EL cycle in the mid-20th century which was also referred to by Kolb (1984) for developing his own four staged cycle (Ord, 2012). Other researchers as Smith (1988); Jeffs and Smith (2005); Blacker (2001); and Young (2006) followed and referred to the EL cycle of Kolb. Kolb (1984) discussed Lewin's theory on EL and has referred to his works in many of his research articles and books and admired how they have laid the foundation for experiential learning. According to Kolb (1984), Lewin's cycle highlights the elementary conflict between concrete experience and abstract concepts and the conflict between observation and action.

Figure1: Lewin's EL cycle (1951) as cited by Kolb (1984)



Another frequently used five staged EL cycle (See figure 2) was presented by Pfeiffer and Jones (1985) which is being followed in many universities that follow EL learning patterns. This model was developed from the EL cycle of Kolb (1984) and provided a further explanation of how EL based learning can prove effective. The first phase of this cycle is to Explore and perform by putting self-efforts that does not involve any assistance from a teacher or facilitator. According to this phase, the learner may perform some individual activities or group works which can help to learn a topic or skills with personal works. In the second phase, the learner shares his experiences and observations of the first phase of learning. Then in the next phase, the learner processes learning by discussing, analyzing, and reflecting on the whole experience. The cycle moves on to generalizing the learning where the learner connects the experiences with real-world examples. The final phase of their learning process was termed application where the learner applies the knowledge in a different situation and ensures the effectiveness of his learning. This learning cycle is being used in many of the universities effectively and is serving as a model to EL practitioner.

Figure 2. Pfeiffer and Jones experiential learning cycle (1985)

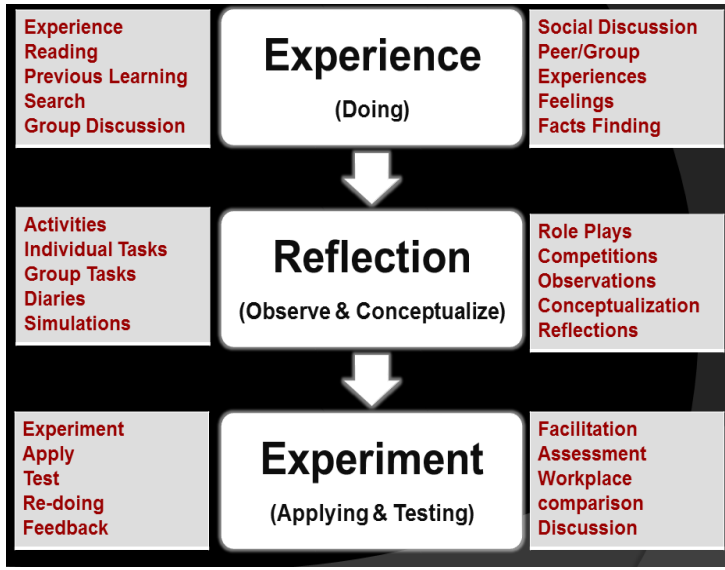
A study of these cycles suggested that the process of learning in an EL model remains the same which involved the learner's involvement in which he learns the best by doing, reflecting, and experimenting. However, the researcher discussed in detail the EL concept of Dewey and Kolb who are the pillars of EL based learning.

EL BASED ERE CYCLE

The literature review provided an in-depth understanding of the EL process and its function. Using content analysis in the paradigm of qualitative research, the researcher tried to develop a practical EL based learning cycle to fulfill the needs of the local students. The need to develop this cycle emerged from the limitations and different classroom setting locally as compared to the other developed countries. The existing cycles enabled the researcher to recognize the three major phases in an EL process, and after reading numerous theories of prominent EL scholars, these three phases are; experience, reflection and experiment. The whole process was termed as 'ERE' cycle, where 'E' referred to 'experience', 'R' referred ' to reflection' and 'E' referred to 'experiment'. According to Kolb (1984) and Pfeiffer and Jones (1975), experience comes at the first place in any EL process. Kolb (1984) defined the EL process is the combination of grasping and transforming experience into knowledge. Kolb's model of EL includes four stages, whereas the ERE cycle has only three phases considering the essence of an EL process which these three phases can cover in the context of Pakistan. The other prominent models have presented and followed three to five stages of an EL process; however, after careful study of all those cycle it was considered that these three phases will suffice to successfully

achieve the spirit of any EL process. Figure 3 shows that the ERE cycle has included all the major components of Kolb's EL process and other existing EL cycles.

Figure 3: ERE Layout



METHODOLOGY

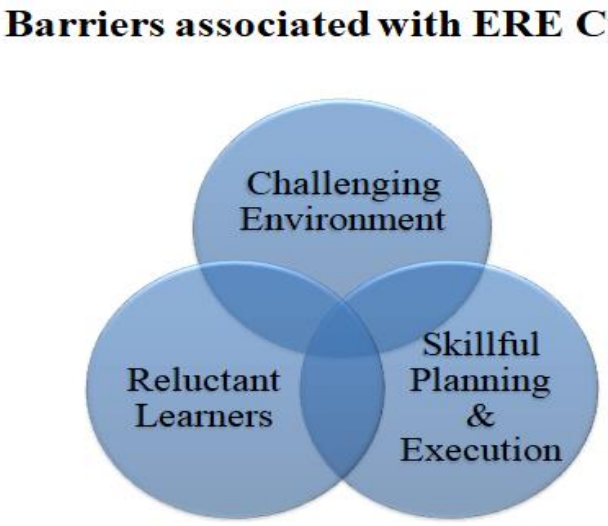
The purpose of this study was to find out the barriers in implementing the EL based ERE cycle to facilitate EL practitioners in Pakistan. Qualitative techniques were used to collect the data and explore the challenges which were faced during the study. Initially, the participants submitted reflections at the end of each class and mentioned the challenges they faced during the execution of the ERE cycle. In the next phase, five participants were randomly selected from the class for in-depth interviews. Along with other questions, they also provided detailed feedback on the obstacles they faced during the experimentation. Finally, the researcher also included his observations on the challenges he faced during the process.

DISCUSSIONS

Akhtar (2019) performed a detailed doctoral study and explored the utilities of EL based learning in a business school in Pakistan. After providing a thematic analysis of the existing and primitive EL based cycle the EL based ERE cycle was developed and tested in the local settings of

Pakistan. The results of the study reflected the positive impact of EL based learning on both the skills and grades of the participants. One of the objectives of that study was to find out the challenges which may occur during this process. This article covered all those challenging aspects which were mentioned by the participants and observed by the researcher himself. The analysis of the reflections, in-depth interviews, and researcher's observation helped to conclude on the three major obstacles which were faced during this study (see figure below).

Figure 4: Barriers associated with ERE cycle



Challenging Environment

One of the major obstacles the researcher had to face the challenging work environment. Kolb and Kolb (2006) in their research have indicated that disintegration of the practicality of the courses with experiential learning's theory, not evaluating the processes and the outcome of the experiential learning, not supporting institutionalized educational system for development of the supervised experiential learning including (1) developing a system within the college, (2) Empowerment of the administrators and personnel, and (3) providing resources for developing experiential learning activities. The Degree Awarding Institutes (DAIs) in Pakistan follow the guidelines and policies prescribed by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan. Most of the institutes have established their own patterns being followed in their respective institutes mainly directed by the HEC. The credit hours, in-class learning patterns, and

allocation of different exams usually have the set pattern. The ERE cycle had to follow a non-conventional way of learning where the students were assigned different tasks before the start of the class and they were not assessed on the basis of the traditional exams system. In-class learning and EL based activities were the major sources of assessment of the students. In the first place, the researcher had to seek permission for implementing a different kind of methodology. There were mixed responses from the management side where a few encouraged and others opposed this way of teaching. The management had their own reservations especially on the non-traditional ways of assessment. The researcher had to convince the authorities as it was a part of doctoral research. However, throughout the process, and in departmental meetings, the researcher faced some opposition, and questions were raised against this methodology.

To some extent, it was understandable that the management was concerned if there was a violation of any HEC policy or Institutional guidelines. The non-traditional examination system which did not include any specific midterms and final exams, the focus on the participation of the learners in every activity and their assessment on the basis of their development of real-life skills instead of giving the answers at the end of the semester were challenged time and again. Through these observations, the researcher concluded that only a favorable environment and supportive administration would help this model to be successful. The execution of the ERE cycle is itself a daunting task for teachers and it would require continuous motivation to achieve the maximum rewards using EL strategies. Nooghabi, Iravani, and Fami (2011) also highlighted a similar barrier that was faced in the context of their study.

Moreover, it would be very difficult for low budget or small sector universities to provide sufficient resources and space to their teachers to perform EL practices with ease. As mentioned by Fowler (2008) the experiential quality is dependent on the degree of students' participation in practical activities. Warner and Washburn (2009) have also mentioned the unavailability of the required experiential resources would hamper the utilization of the EL method.

Reluctant Learners

Penrod (1985); Arengton (1983); Miller (1980); Harris & Newcomb (1985) in their studies have indicated that the unwillingness of students to participate in experiential learning is one of the main problems of higher education. These studies have been conducted over the previous four decades which shows the unwillingness of students to participate in EL based activities has been a common phenomenon. The current study also faced similar challenges while the ERE cycle was being implemented. In

Pakistan, most of the education is based on traditional methods and setting and the focus of the learners remains on rote memorization which would ultimately help them in passing exams. Unfortunately, after higher secondary education, the same practices are being followed in higher education where most of the teachers and students trust in PowerPoint presentations which are readily available on Google. A very few teachers and students follow any specific textbooks, research papers, research-based education or project, and experiential learning. In such circumstances, it was always going to be a difficult task to motivate the students to accept this daunting challenge and study using EL activities.

The first evidence that reflected the reluctance on the part of students was shown once 15 to 20 % of students from the treatment groups dropped their courses after attending the first class. Initially, these curses have maximum strength knowing the facilitator of the course, however, when the same teacher informed them the protocols and procedures for the coming classes which demanded continuously involvement of the students, suddenly the students dropped these courses. However, it was encouraging to still have sufficient students in each of the courses to execute the ERE cycle. One of the participants reported that after the first class most of the students had decided to leave this course and opt for another teacher or course. Another student said on the first day's lecture;

> *"Yes we had different expectations, It was my 3rd semester and I had already completed around 18 courses. Although in other courses we had activities and tasks, it was difficult and different. Before each class, we had to study and some topics and had to come prepared for any surprise activity that was marked. Obviously, we had been doing quizzes and assignments and mid and final terms for that we needed to prepare mostly from the slides. Reading research papers and books, planning activities for the class, quizzes competitions; this was all new for me and exciting, but scary".*

The similar kind of statements from other students reflected that they were not prepared for self-learning and they always opt to easy choices to get degrees rather challenging themselves to equip with the important skills. In the initial phases, the researcher faced a lot of reluctance from the students who challenged the methodology and did not participate in the activities or showed very little interest. The drop out of the students also disturbed the researcher as it was being observed by the management who were already not in favor of such experiments. It is worth mentioning here that the students who continued with these courses shared very positive and encouraging experiences at the completion of this study. Nevertheless, this

behavior of the students was already expected by the researcher and he did his utmost to motivate the students to participate in these courses. The studies of Foster (1986) and Nooghabi et. Al., (2011) had already highlighted this barrier in their studies and this study also revealed the unwillingness of the students as one of the major barriers in EL practices,

Skillful Planning and Execution

Finally, this study revealed that to implement the ERE cycle the teachers would have to come out of their comfort zone. The ERE cycle proved to be a demanding task for the researcher as he had to do a lot of work and keep himself motivating. Despite motivation and passion, the obstacles during implementation, sometimes, discouraged the researcher to give up this experiment. This experience forced the researcher to think of those teachers who have a scarcity of passion or they find it difficult to think or do out of the box, it would be quite difficult for them to follow the ERE cycle. For every topic and lesson, the teacher is to plan the activity in three phases and then observe each of the students, evaluate and guide them, read their reflections at the end of each lesson, and provides feedback; all could prove very difficult for most of the teachers. As it was mentioned in the first barrier that the strength of a class is a challenge for an experiential learning environment, it would be very difficult for the teachers to design a holistic process and then evaluate it, In the current study the dropouts of the students helped the researcher to control and tackle around 30 students per class where an average number of one class in Pakistan remains from 40 to 60. Arnold et.al (2006) has rightly mentioned the possible challenges on the part of the teachers. These challenges are: unawareness of the faculty members about the practical experiences, paying less attention, registering for the class, the timing of practical activities, supervision on practical courses, and managing the students' activities in the plans of experiential learning.

Apart from abovementioned challenges on the part of teachers, many other arguments were given by fellow teachers during this study. In short, in the absence of great motivation, high dedication, and genuine passions, these would be the most challenging factors for teachers to motivate themselves to implement the ERE cycle. This can be a genuine issue as the workload and strength of the classes would make it very difficult for such a method.

CONCLUSION

Experiential Learning can solve many problems related to the skill development of the students. Numerous studies have endorsed its worth and its effectiveness has been proved around the globe. It is comparatively a novice concept in countries like Pakistan, where experimentation and research have not been encouraged either being practiced. Nonetheless, in the last decade, there have been conducted some studies on EL and its

effectiveness in Pakistan, especially in higher education. Akhtar (2019) developed the EL-based ERE cycle in his doctoral research and experimented it in a business school. The results proved encouraging as both qualitative and quantitative indicators reflected a positive and significant impact of the ERE cycle on the development of the students' skills. However, during this study, the researcher observed some serious obstacles which can hamper implementing the ERE cycle. The purpose of this study was to highlight those barriers to enable the EL practitioners to understand the problems while implementing the ERE cycle and devise strategies to overcome those barriers. The data included the observations of the researcher and the experiences of the participants reflected three major barriers that can come on the way to applying the ERE cycle. These barriers were categorized as a challenging environment, reluctant learners, and skillful planning and execution. The observation revealed that the environment at higher education in Pakistan is still not favorable for Experiential based learning. There are many factors that can be identified as the reason for such an environment; however, this article only highlighted the barriers. Moreover, the execution of the ERE cycle is an exhausted and demanding task for the teachers. Likewise, there are many factors which may demotivate the teachers to turn their eyes from EL method and stick with other relevant traditional and typical method. Lastly, the unwillingness of the learners is another barrier that would create problems for EL practitioners. The traditional system of learning, focus on exams and getting degrees, making educational institutions profit-oriented organizations and many other factors would make it difficult for the EL practitioners to practice EL freely and with its maximum potential. Similar findings have been revealed by Atchoarena and Holmes (2004) who mentioned the difficulties in EL execution are due to; weak national support, Decreased investment by government and donors, declining standards in teaching and research, infrastructure; lack of staff incentives Low-level of Information Technology (IT). Lamberth (1986) in his research findings also indicates that there are many constraints regarding experiential learning for conducting participation of the students in the practical courses such as students not having past agricultural experiences, insufficient inputs, too many students (unacceptable faculty-student ratio) faculty members having many responsibilities within the educational system

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