

EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR TEACHING MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article presents an action-oriented case study on how the experiential learning theory (Kolb 1984) can be applied in the management and leadership education at the undergraduate and graduate level. We build an experiential pedagogical model for the higher education context for teaching the management and leadership in the knowledge economy. The experiential pedagogical model combines three different courses, where the advanced students act as leaders for those who are in an earlier stage of their studies. By using empirical data from six different implementations of this experiential pedagogical model (in 2020–2023), we demonstrate its implementation practices and evaluate its usefulness.

Keywords: *Kolb's experiential learning theory, higher education, leadership education, pedagogical model, peer learning.*

1. Introduction

Teaching leadership and management for undergraduate and graduate students at the university is a challenging task because it is said that leadership can be best learned by practicing. Experiential learning that emphasizes learning from experience has been recognized as an effective approach to leadership development (Mitchell & Poutiatine 2001; Doh 2003) and it has been successfully applied in different settings of management and leadership education (Savage et al. 2015; Page et al. 2021).

Based on the need to develop more experiential approaches to leadership education and utilize the learning opportunities in peer-to-peer learning, we build an experiential pedagogical model for the higher education context for teaching the management and leadership in the knowledge economy. Specifically, this study aims to answer the research question of *how to build a pedagogical model based on experiential learning theory and utilizing peer-to-peer learning for the higher education teaching of the management and leadership in the knowledge economy*. We use action research and case study research methodology for building and testing the pedagogical model.

This article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, the experiential learning theory is described. Section 3 presents the study context and the method. Results are described and discussed in Section 4. First, the developed pedagogical model is explained, and second, its feasibility and learning outcomes are evaluated. Finally, the article ends in conclusions.

2. Experiential learning theory

Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) is an established educational theory, widely applied in higher education context (e.g., Healey & Jenkins 2000; Gittings et al. 2020), which involves four stages of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. According to Kolb (1984, 38), "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Thus, experience has a central role in the theory. However, the key aspect in the theory is that learning is not only about in-context experiencing and action but encompasses all four modes of learning. The learning process is a recursive circle, where the learner reflects on the experience, conceptualizes it, and plans a new experiment for testing the developed conceptualization/theory. As Gibbs (1988, 9) argues "It is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply to do and think. Learning from experience must involve linking the doing and the thinking." Furthermore, the educator must adopt different roles when helping learners move around the learning cycle, and move from facilitator to subject expert and furthermore, to standard setter/evaluator and to coach (Kolb & Kolb 2017).

Thus, ELT is a theory that explains the process of learning from experience, and the cycle is based on two dimensions of the learning process: first, on grasping the experience, and second, on transforming that experience. Grasping the experience means moving from unconscious experience and intuitive feelings

towards conscious and abstract thinking, whereas transforming the experience means moving from reflection towards active experimental activity. So, the learning cycle is “driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction.” (Kolb & Kolb 2017, 11).

3. Research context and method

This action-oriented case study was conducted in Finland, and it focused on the development of three courses in the Degree Program of Information and Knowledge Management. The study can be characterized as “action research as collective case study”, where the purpose is to provide an exhaustive understanding about a real context and to improve educational practices (Sáez Bondía & Cortés Gracia 2022). The authors of this paper had a dual role as the teachers and developers of these courses and as researchers studying the course development work. The starting point of the development work was a situation with two courses: the other theory-focused undergraduate course and the other practice-focused graduate course, which were organized independently of each other. The experience was that the students in the undergraduate course could not connect the theoretical part with their own experiences, and the learning was more superficial, whereas the students in the graduate course were not able to deepen and broaden their knowledge without organized reflection and theoretical support.

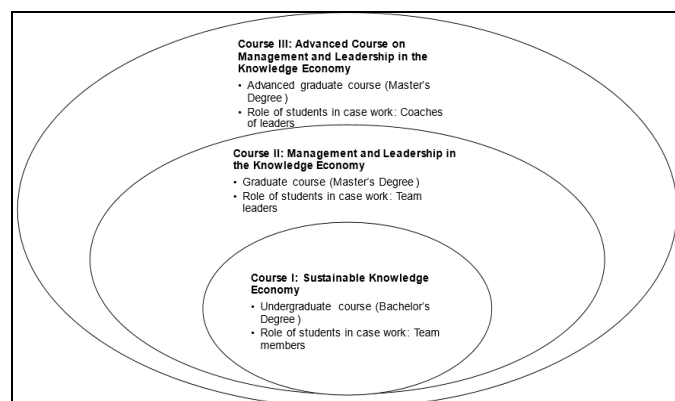
The development work started in the spring of 2020 and the first implementation of the new experiential pedagogical model was held in the fall of 2020. The key focus was on linking the experience with the theory and supporting the process of grasping the experience. Thereafter, during six implementations (in 2020–2023) we have reflected our own experiences as teachers and collected feedback from students in different forms and made improvements to the course setting. For example, the advanced course was missing at the beginning and reflection tasks have been strengthened along the way. Thus, the development focus has moved towards supporting the other process of transforming experience. The interactive nature of the courses has made possible to get ongoing feedback both during and after the courses. The next section describes the final result of this development work.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Experiential pedagogical model for teaching management and leadership

The experiential pedagogical model for teaching management and leadership in higher education combines three different courses, where the advanced students act as leaders for those who are in an earlier stage of their studies (Figure 1). The course package is designed so that all students are engaged in a service design project (case work) but their role varies from team leaders, and to coaches of leaders. This structure enables peer-to-peer learning across students who are in different levels of studies and the learning of leadership through concrete experience by engaging in practical leadership tasks. The first course is the basic course on the topic of sustainable knowledge economy, where the leadership aspect is limited to the topic of self-management/self-leadership. The management course and the advanced management course are solely focused on management and leadership.

Figure 1. The course set for teaching management and leadership in higher education.

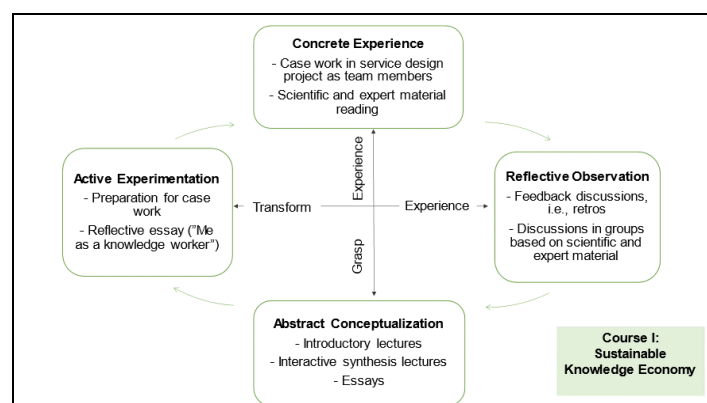


The service design project is a real-life assignment from a client organization and working to solve that organizational challenge forms the concrete experience for the students. Service design process (the double-diamond process model by the British Design Council), and different tools (such as lean service creation canvases, customer journey, and ideation methods) are used in the work. The project lasts 12 weeks and consists of nine learning events from team building to final presentations that are instructed by the teachers. Teachers prepare the ground for the learning events and guide learners, but leaders lead their teams independently. In addition to the service design project, each course consists of its own

independent tasks. All three courses and their learning tasks are built based on the experiential learning cycle and on the idea of peer learning. Next, the learning cycles in each course are presented.

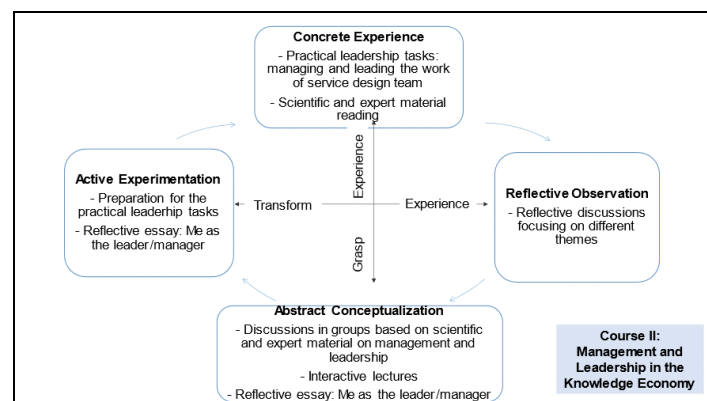
The learning cycle in the first course and tasks that support the different phases of the cycle are illustrated in Figure 2. The case work in service design project as team members, and the scientific and expert material reading forms the concrete experience for the students. During the case work, feedback discussions (retros) are held regularly by the team leaders to reflect on the experience. Finally, students write a reflective essay, where they describe what kind of knowledge worker and self-leader they are and highlight future development targets. In addition, group discussions based on peer-to-peer teaching and learning are arranged to discuss on the material. The group discussions are organized in such a way that first those who are familiar with the same material form a common understanding of it. After this, new groups are formed from those familiar with the different materials, and the materials are taught to others and a synthesis is created. Abstract conceptualization is supported by introductory lectures at the beginning of the course, and especially by the synthesis lectures that are designed based on the questions that students bring up in group discussions. In addition, students are writing two essays based on the read material and group discussions.

Figure 2. The learning cycle in the Basic Course.



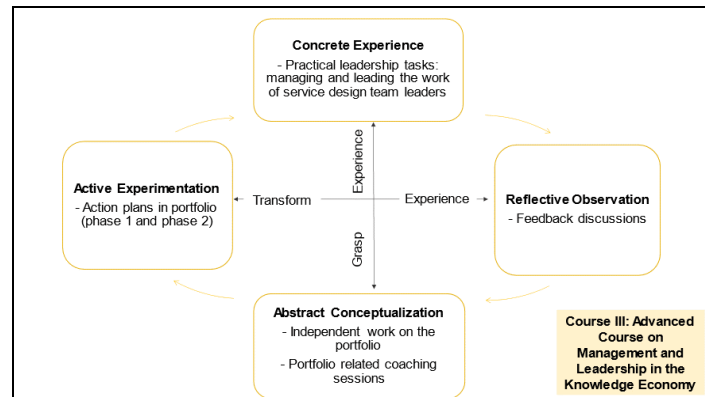
In the second course, practical leadership tasks form the foundation for the concrete experience (Figure 3). Students manage and lead the work of service design team throughout the project phases from team building to final presentations. This includes weekly preparation for the leadership tasks, and opportunity for active experimentation during the project. In each learning event of the project work, reflective discussions among the team leaders focusing on certain management themes are held to enable reflective observation on the experience. These events are facilitated by the students in the advanced course. In addition to this project work, student dwell into scientific and expert material on management and leadership (scientific articles, TED Talks, popular book on leadership). After reading/watching them, students discuss them in small groups of six students, where one of them in turn acts as a chair and one of them as a peer-reviewer. Interactive lectures that synthesize course themes are used to support the phase of abstract conceptualization along with the material-based discussions, where students are encouraged to link their experiences with the theory. Finally, students write a reflective essay, where they describe what kind of leader/manager they are and set out development targets.

Figure 3. The learning cycle in the Management Course.



In the third course, students lead the project portfolio and act leaders for the team leaders (Figure 4). They organize the reflective discussions for the team leaders and give feedback on the work of team leaders thus acting as more organizational level leaders. The central task of the course is a portfolio, the content of which can be customized according to the student's own learning goals. At the first stage of the portfolio, they present a development plan for themselves as leaders/managers, and concrete steps how to achieve them in the course. During the course, they do leadership exercises related to their development goals (in the classroom, but also outside the class is possible, e.g., at work or in leisure activities), and in the final portfolio they evaluate their activities and make an action plan for the future. In addition to this, they present in their portfolio their own vision of leadership by using appropriate research literature. Teachers' main role is to work as coaches and give feedback in different stages of the portfolio.

Figure 4. The learning cycle in the Advanced Management Course.



4.2. Feasibility and the learning outcomes of the pedagogical model

The pedagogical model was designed so that all the stages of the learning cycle have central roles in all three courses. As the theory emphasizes, it is not only about providing leadership/management experience, but about reflecting on it (reflective discussions on different themes, feedback discussions) and theorizing (discussions in groups based on scientific and expert material, interactive lectures) and making new action plans (preparation for the project work). Next, the learning outcomes and practical implementation issues of the three courses are discussed through these four stages of the learning cycle.

Case work and related tasks in a certain role (team member, leader/manager, coach) form the *concrete experience* for the students. Learners get to experience both the theories of the subject matter, but also the experience of acting as a knowledge worker or leader, which gives them opportunity to develop working life skills by acting in a certain role. The joint course structure supports this kind of setting compared with the traditional one. From the perspective of practical implementation, the most critical and challenging factor is the number of participants in different courses. The structure works well, for example, when the basic course has 36–40 students, management course has 8–16 students, and advanced management course has 3–5 students. So, it is crucial to have suitable ratios in the number of students in different courses. Then it is possible that there is one team leader or leader pair for the group of 4–5 students. Based on the feedback from the learners, taking the role lets learners to start thinking through the lenses of their role, which develops their knowledge worker/leader identity and mindset.

Reflective observation happens when learners reflect explicitly at the end of the course in their reflective essays, self-assessments, and portfolio, and during the course in organized reflective discussions and feedback sessions, but implicit reflection happens throughout the courses. Students have mentioned that during the course II they have “learned to reflect” and use that as a skill in developing their leadership skills. In addition, the leaders commonly mention that because of the course they have actively started to observe other managers/leaders and reflect what they could learn from those. Conscious reflection could still be improved as it is proven to be a very effective way of learning.

Abstract conceptualization is proven to be the most difficult part of the cycle for the learners. Even though, educators try actively help the learners to find connections between theory and practice through interactive lectures, discussion and feedback, some learners still struggle to find the connection. The discussions in groups based on scientific and expert material in courses I and II have been appreciated by the learners as they make the learning deeper, and more fun compared with typical essay writing or exams. Overall, the timing of the theoretical content is a factor that needs to be thought through. For example, when the team has formed in the project work and the team leaders have reflected on the experiences of teaming, the theory discussions about team leadership could follow in the course II. In the current structure, theory content is provided in different phases of the course.

Active experimentation – preparation for the case work and leadership tasks – happens in this course structure mostly outside the classroom and official tasks. The course structure enables that it is possible to go through several learning cycles during each course, and to conduct low threshold experiments as a leader. The role of the reflective essays and portfolio is to ensure that active experimentation will continue also after the course. Overall, the implementation of the pedagogical model has been a positive experience and it has had many benefits in helping learners to learn. The feedback has been overall very positive, because of the novel and versatile methods and effective learning. Even if some learners have thought that the course requires more effort than some other courses with same amount of credit, they have been happy with the balanced workload (no peaks).

From the educators' perspective, teaching these courses has been a rewarding experience, because of the continuous interaction with the learners and opportunity to take on different roles and organize different kinds of learning events. The pedagogical model challenges educators' traditional role, but at the same time it allows educators to be in direct contact with learners which allows discussions and enables deeper understanding about students' ways of thinking. In this setting, there were two teachers involved, which was a huge benefit, because they complemented each other with different strengths and built a conversational atmosphere with their own dialogue. In addition, the advanced course students performed the roles of a facilitator and coach along with the educators and in some situations, they had better opportunities to create confidential relationships with other learners. In the beginning, educators' various roles can be confusing for the learners. For this reason, the learners would benefit from making the educators' roles and their changes visible and explicit.

5. Conclusions

This research contributes to the field of leadership and management education by building an experiential pedagogical model for the higher education context for teaching the management and leadership in the knowledge economy. Combining three courses through project work has proven to be a pedagogically effective solution to teaching management and leadership. The course structure makes possible the organization of practical leadership tasks and learning from concrete experience, as well as peer learning through reflection at different study levels. Team members get feedback from team leaders, and team leaders get feedback from the organizational level leaders. As a conclusion, students have appreciated the learning methods, the versatility of tasks as well as the balanced workload. Learners have been motivated to work because they have found the tasks meaningful for their learning.

The central learning goal of the courses has been the development of agency, i.e., to get the learners think themselves as leaders and reflect on it. Future research could go deeper into this topic and study how learners' identity as a manager/leader or as a knowledge worker has developed during the course. In future research, this model could also be tested in a more detailed manner to find its specific strengths and potential deficiencies regarding learning outcomes.

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