

**CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION**

**SECTION 3: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR HOLISTIC  
CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

**Experiential learning beyond the mainstream curriculum**

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## Experiential learning beyond the mainstream curriculum

**JNUSTA:** *In your capacity as Vice Dean in the Office of Student Affairs (OSA), we know you are in the process of thinking through a more formalised way of providing students living in Halls of Residence a platform to experience forms of experiential learning/service learning. Could you share with us your view of how best to incorporate experiential learning from an OSA perspective?*

**KC:** Kolb *et al.* (2001) refer to learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984:41). While Kolb draws parallels from works of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1951) and Piaget (1971) in terms of their perspectives on learning and intellectual development, he makes a clear distinction between these three major traditions and experiential learning theory. To Kolb, experiential learning is fundamentally different as the key emphasis in learning is experience; and arising from this emphasis, it describes how experience contributes to the learning process and how it has an impact on one’s (deep) learning. For experiential learning to be significant and effective, Kolb opines that participants must engage in what he calls reflective observation and active experimentation (1984).

For decades and perhaps centuries, educators in institutions of higher learner have devised many ways to provide students with opportunities, avenues and platforms to engage in learning. As is apparent from such classical movies as *The Sound of Music* and *Dead Poet’s Society*, learning occurs and is reinforced outside the boundaries of the classroom. Learning is not just about gaining knowledge but it is about the development of an appreciation for a subject and eventually a passion for it which can be sustained for life. In fact, it is as much a meaning-making or sense-making process as it is an attitude.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), experiential learning takes different shapes and forms, and it is observed to occur increasingly in three key spaces. One of the most common spaces where experiential learning is incorporated is through internship, immersion, student exchange programmes, entrepreneurship, community involvement and leadership schemes. These programmes and initiatives are usually external to the specific modules that students read and experiential learning is imbibed implicitly through immersion into the host community. A second approach, though not yet commonly seen, involves an embedded component of experiential learning in an academic module where the outcomes of such learning are formally assessed. This kind of module

normally has a strong reference to and dependence on the academic content. The third approach, and this is perhaps where the definition of experiential learning is closest to Kolb's, is the experience of being involved and engaged in a context into which are built opportunities for learning that form the core of a participant's learning process or journey.

The Office of Student Affairs (OSA), given its close engagement with student activities, and with residential and student life, is well-placed to harness the advantages of experiential learning and provide students with a holistic-learning experience while they are at NUS. Its approach to experiential learning is three-pronged, each requiring a synergy among different stakeholders within and beyond the University. The main contributions of OSA in experiential learning are the mapping of students' holistic-learning experience at NUS, the facilitation of such opportunities, and the attempt to evaluate, both formally and anecdotally, the extent to which this experience contributes to or correlates with a learning landscape envisaged by NUS.

The first approach towards experiential learning is through a range of community involvement programmes (CIPs) and co-curricular activities which have been in existence for a number of years. These initiatives are independent of the students' academic modules and they centre on developing teamwork, effective habits in college, and leadership qualities. While this approach engages the students and they are enthusiastic participants (since participation is on a voluntary basis), the challenge is usually sustainability in addition to "cascade-ability".

A second and more structured approach is through offering modules that capitalise on the inherent environment of halls insofar as it is conducive for learning beyond the classroom and for values to be inculcated within a shared and closely knit community. The formalisation of the hall modules has the advantage of capturing learning for a shared community in a systematic, coherent and concrete way that involves the grounding of practice(s), thinking critically about the philosophy behind identified practice(s), as well as reflecting on the learning process. There can be more intense sessions and opportunities created to facilitate dialogues as well as informal discussion and hands-on sessions for students living within a community that may not be as readily accomplished within the regular curriculum. Additionally, the organisational structure of a hall which is headed by a master and assisted by resident fellows plus the presence of the Senior Common Room Committee (SCRC) and Junior Common Room Committee (JCRC) is, in fact, a microcosm of the "real world". Another key element of modules offered by halls is the incorporation of team work that fosters not only interpersonal and organisational relationships but also a deeper appreciation of inter-cultural understanding. The exposure and experience of working in teams in close proximity help prepare students for

successful integration into the workplace and society both of which are becoming increasingly multi-cultural.

While halls of residence are suitably positioned to facilitate experiential learning, there are a few challenges. First, they need to convincingly demonstrate to the University that there is rigour in learning, in knowledge making, in the pursuit of intellectual or cognitive development, as well as in experience making, which calls for a clear definition and articulation of attributes or characteristics that experience entails. Second, as acknowledged by Tsui in this volume, rigour must be shown through tools used or evidence recognised as effective measures to capture and ground the extent and quality of experience. Third, the identification of effective partnerships that will make the experience and learning journey meaningful is equally crucial in ensuring effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the halls remain one of the most fertile grounds for experiential learning to be facilitated.

A third approach that OSA intends to further explore is collaboration with faculty members to embed experiential learning into their respective academic modules. Through these opportunities and platforms, students develop confidence and competence in exploring, critically examining, and at times questioning what they have learned. Such a process implies the transfer of theory to practice and entails an intense level of engagement through conversations with peers, content experts, academics, industry players, and others in the shared learning communities.

All of this can contribute towards this kind of engaging learning environment for a holistic learning experience that is being proposed in current higher education pedagogy. In his 2012 State of the University Address, NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan spoke about the importance of experiential learning in enhancing the entire educational experience of the students. This is in line with contemporary theories of education that posit that engaging activities at higher education level involve a high level of social interaction (Coates, 2006), reflecting and advancing the constructivist theory that the building of knowledge is closely intertwined with one's reference to prior knowledge and one's dialogue with individuals within the same communities of academic inquiry (Bruner, 1960; Brown *et al.*, 1989; Laurillard, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Hutchins, 1995).

C.S. Lewis once said, "Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil." For OSA, at a micro level, there are a variety of projects and programmes that reinforce learning beyond the classroom. At

a macro level, it is seeking a shift in curricular space to allow opportunities for students to engage in not just a discrete experience, but to have a coherent, connected and meaningful educational life that extends beyond academics.

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