Experiential Learning

Folklore as a Learning Experience

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Abstract

New Education policies are designed keeping in mind the increased significance of acquiring 21st century skills. The system of rote-learning and text-based learning that was introduced by the British in India. is being replaced by new pedagogical skills and teaching methodologies. Learning is now affected through direct or virtual experiences or based on actual hands on activities. This paper intends to study the concept of Experiential Learning as expounded by Kolb. It recommends the various activities that can be used for Experiential Learning. It also throws light on the various parameters of defining and assessing the outcome of an experience. The paper also briefly traces the history of folklore and discusses the potential of folk stories and other tales from the past as an effective medium in Experiential Learning. Stories have the innate ability to keep the learner enthralled and ensure active involvement and reflection of the learner. Besides giving opportunities for developing language and other skills, exposure to folklore can also bring in awareness for environmental, social and gender related issues. Use of folklore can help the learners to weave across continents and culture and to take the experience beyond a classroom.

Key words: education, pedagogy, experiential learning, folklore.

Experiential Learning - A Review

Dating back to the system of Gurukula education, Indian Education had in the past, upheld a holistic view of education. The ancient gurukulas were residential schools where the guru undertook to teach life skills to a few students in a complete, continuous and comprehensive manner. Theology, administration, military skills and philosophy were some of the areas which were given thrust. Teaching was an adopted and effective means of learning. The senior students would pass their knowledge to the juniors.

The British colonialism systematically and strategically excised all these. In the western system of education that the Britishers implemented in India, the teacher was the master. The students were meek learners. The Britishers encouraged their practices and beliefs, and the education system was devised to make people subservient. The textbook and syllabus, too, were designed to serve their purpose. Though the post-colonial India realised the need to revisit the original and conventional mode of learning through experience, the education system has not undergone a major paradigm shift since the Britishers invaded India. Rote-memorization and textual learning remain in the system in large measure even today.

New pedagogical skills and teaching methodologies are emerging with the Indian policies envisaged by National Education Policy. Value-based curriculum and skill-based learning are given due emphasis. Facilitators are given due training and the necessary infrastructure is provided. The focus on improved quality of education has become the catalysts in bringing about the much-needed reform. The aim of education has shifted from content-based learning to competency-based learning. With the increased significance and thrust in education for acquiring 21st century skills, Experiential Learning has gained momentum.

It is against this background that the pedagogy of Experiential Learning, with a focus on hands-on experience through real-life situations, becomes relevant and pertinent. Studies reveal that introducing

and practising strategies like Experiential Learning, Bloom's Taxonomy and Multiple Intelligence will strengthen the education system in India. The CBSE Manual on *Experiential Learning* sums up the concept "Experiential approach aims at making the educational environment student-centred. The students have control over their own learning – over the pace of learning, method of learning, and over the skills, they need to utilise for this learning. They are able to evaluate, think critically, make decisions and master knowledge by constructing it. The teacher facilitates or guides the students. The learning experience may be cooperative, collaborative or independent, encouraging the students to work together and learn how to question and evaluate evidence rather than accepting truths communicated by their teacher."[1] Experiential Learning accelerates learning as it uses critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making tools in its module. It provides a safe learning environment, bridges the gap between theory and practice, produces demonstrable mindset changes, increases engagement levels, aids effective retention and enables personalised learning. It introduces the concept of flipped classrooms, where learning goes to the student. In the words of C. Beard and J. Wilson, "Experiential Learning can be defined as a sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment."[1]

Educational theorists like John Dewey, Kurt Hahn, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget and David Kolb helped to popularise the idea of Experiential Learning. According to John Dewey, "Experiential Learning takes place when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity."[2] He points out that experiences do not automatically equate to learning, but he emphasised the need for learning through experiencing. Kurt Lewin stressed on the importance of people being active in learning. Jean Piaget described intelligence as the result of the interaction of the person and the environment. David Kolb in his book *Experiential Learning* describes learning as a four-step process which involves watching, thinking, feeling and doing.[3] The senses play an important role in Experiential Learning. The 'embodied

cognition' leads to an increase in neuron connections in the brain and in turn, leads to higher retention and recall.

In other words, Experiential Learning allows the learner to perceive the information, reflect on it, compare it with the learner's experiences and think about how it will impact the way the learner acts. Learning takes place when the perception and thoughts are integrated by feelings and behaviour. According to Kolb, learning becomes effective when there is an active involvement in the experience. A learner must have skills of reflecting on the experience, to analyse and conceptualise it and possess the ability to make decisions and arrive at solutions in order to gain knowledge from it. The core learning dilemma that confronts Experiential Learning is that it is impossible to see the outcomes of our actions as they become obvious only in the distant future. Peter Serge reminds us, when our actions have consequences beyond our learning horizon, it becomes impossible to learn from direct experience.

KOLB Model

Inspired by Kurt Lewin, Kolb provides one of the most useful descriptive models available for effective Experiential Learning. His highly influential book entitled *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development,* published in 1984, has been a seminal work in this direction. Kolb's model works on **a four-stage cycle**:

1. Concrete Experience - (CE)

2. Reflective Observation - (RO)

3. Abstract Conceptualisation - (AC)

4. Active Experimentation - (AE)
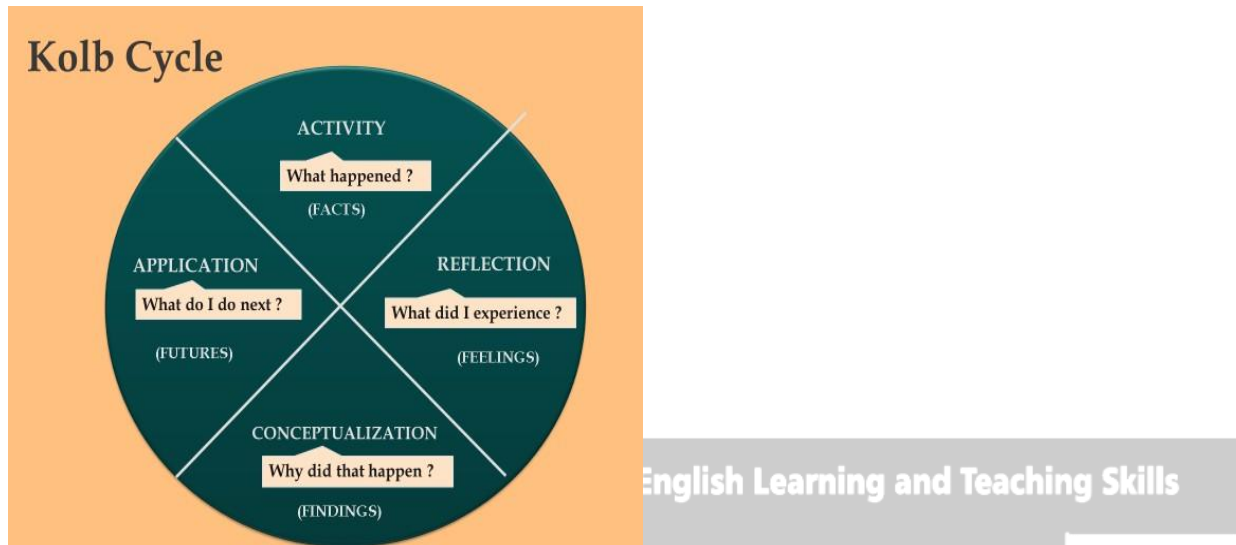
David A. Kolb's explains that through experience

• Learning should be conceived as a process, not measured in terms of outcomes.

• The process of learning is continual and grounded in experiences.

• Learning results from resolving conflicts between opposing modes of adapting to the world.

• The learning process involves holistic adaptation to the world.

• It must involve interaction between the learner and his/her environment.

• Learning occurs when the student is creating knowledge perspectives.[3]

Rogers, in his book *Freedom to Learn* states that learning based on experience ensures personal development. He believes that human beings are naturally inclined to learn, and learning takes place when the subject matter has relevance for the learner. According to him "significant learning is acquired through doing. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner - feelings as well as intellect - is the most lasting and pervasive."[4] Learning which is threatening to the self is more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum. He believes that learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.

Miller and Boud (1996) summarises the following underlying tenets of Experiential Learning

• Experience is the foundation of and stimulus for learning.

• Learners actively construct their own experiences.

• Learning is holistic.

• Learning is socially and culturally constructed.

• Learning is influenced by the social and economic context within which it occurs.[5]

For Dewey, an experience is considered educative if it tends to both knowledge and ideas. Kant is of the opinion that "all knowledge begins with experience."[6]

Countries like Finland and Singapore have adopted the concept of "outdoor education" and "more quality and less quantity" in education. In India, a similar concept is echoed in the national vision of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation.' Experiential Learning encompasses Joyful Learning, Art Integrated Learning, Activity Based Learning, Fun, Games and Studies, Sport- Integrated Learning, Inquiry-based learning, Collaborative Learning, Assessment as Learning, Learning by Doing and Best Teachers' Method. Learning is most effective in children when they are given opportunities to make and do things. Experimentation and presentation followed by reading and discussion, individually and in groups help learners to hone up their skills. In an experience-based activity, there is ample room for listening, thinking, reflecting and applying. Kolb's learning cycle of knowledge, reflection, conceptualisation and application is completed.

Education is no longer the exclusive prerogative of any one subject. As an educational approach, Experiential Learning can permeate a range of discipline, both traditional and new as well as form the mainspring of many integrated courses. With its objectives and methodology firmly interrelated, it can impart understanding and an active concern for the whole environment which alone can enable a human being to plan and realise a world fit to live in. Outdoor experiences in education help to develop leadership skills and other desirable qualities like initiative, resourcefulness, independence, co-operation, self-realisation, perseverance and self-sacrifice. Besides providing leisure time and keeping one healthy and fit, mentally and physically, it gives exposure in training for military service.

Experiential Learning- Activities

As the term suggests, Experiential Learning is based on life experiences. It involves doing projects and designing activities that are age-appropriate and relevant to the learner. The Pfeiffer Library Volume 21, 2nd Edition recommends the following common individual and group activities:

- making products or models

- creating art objects

- writing

- role playing

- transactions

- solving problems or sharing information

- giving and receiving feedback

- self-disclosure

- fantasy

- choosing

- communicating verbally or nonverbally

- analysing case material

- negotiating or bargaining

- planning

- competing or collaborating

- confronting

These activities can be carried out by individuals or in small groups of three or four, or large groups. "The facilitator needs to be careful that the activity does not generate excess data or create an atmosphere that makes discussion of the results difficult. There can be a lot of excitement and "fun"

as well as conflict in human interaction, but these are not synonymous with learning; they provide the common references for group inquiry."[7]

Experiential Learning- Outcome

At the end of the activity, the outcome has to be carefully examined, and the data have to be properly processed. If the process is not carefully analysed, all learning is left to chance, and the task would be left incomplete. An Experiential Learning outcome follows the pattern of SWAT. At the end of the activity, students will be able to comprehend, differentiate, classify, categorise, analyse, apply and appreciate. The outcome should be SMART, i.e. it should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reasonable, Timebound. The activity should aim at achieving the cognitive domains of Bloom's taxonomy- Knowledge, Remembering, Understanding. Applying, Analysing, Evaluating and Creating. The assessment of the outcome of the activity should be done through Worksheets, Rubrics, Questions, Roleplay, Completion, Categorisation, Rating scales etc.

Folklore in Experiential Learning

Education today is being reviewed and much that has been tested in the pre-colonial days are being revisited. Folklore is an area that is being exhaustively researched for the wealth of knowledge and solution for ecological concern, ethics, military tactics, administration and values that it has to offer. In the hands of an educator, it is a multipronged tool and yields well to Experiential Learning.

The History of folklore research is calculated from 1835 with the publication of Jakob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*. Studies on folklore were undertaken based on the customs, language, the life of the people, resemblance of a subject in the tales, migration of the stories, cultural-historical connections between people and history of single tales. According to Krappe, "folklore is a historical science: 'historical' because it attempts to throw light on man's past; 'science' because it endeavours to attain

it goal by the inductive method."**8** In his book, *The Science of Folklore,* he discusses the schools of folklore, broadly categorised under the following heads:

1. Mythological school- was founded by Grimm's and Wilhelm in 1856. Tales were

broken down into myths and myths preserved the most ancient beliefs and culture of the Germans.

2. Anthropological school- E.B. Tylor expounded the theory based on his conclusion

that people resemble one another in their mode of life, customs and their religious and poetic concepts as they have identical culture and biological evolution. *The Golden Bough* (1890) by Sir James George Frazer, Scottish Anthropologist, makes an extensive study of ancient cults and folklore.

3. Migrational or Indianist school - Max Muller was interested in the Ancient Indian Literature and the Vedas. He founded the famous 'Indianist theory' or the 'Migrational school', postulating the Indian origin of folktales and their westward migration into Europe. Benfey later refined it.

4. Sceptical school - was the outcome of Bedier scepticism about the 'intuitive method' of Benfey's Indianist theory. According to him, it fell short of scholarly accuracy.

5. Finnish or Historical-Geographical school- was undertaken by the Finnish scholars who collected, arranged the variants and reconstructed tales. Historic-geographic method investigates the history of each tale. The investigation resulted in finding out the types of tales.

The subsequent studies took a structured approach. The folk narratives were indexed according to their genres. Aarne divided the Finnish and European folk narratives into Animal Tales, Ordinary Folktales and Jokes and Anecdotes. It was further subdivided into Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, Romantic Tales, and Tales of stupid Ogre.**9**

Folklores have since then become a powerful medium of instruction and entertainment. The present paper undertakes to explore its potential in teaching language skill integrated with the value-based approach. Charles T. Scott in *Persian and Arabic Riddles: A language centred Approach to Genre Definition*, says language has two planes, expression and content.**10** The expression plane is what linguistics is concerned with. The content plane is that which the expression plane conveys. William

O. Hendricks summed up the theories of linguistic methods as a line of inquiry to the analysis of literary texts.[11] A folklore item added to the text will enhance the appeal of a particular situation for the learner.

A unified theory which takes into account all the facets of a folklore item has been advanced by Roger D. Abrahams in his paper, *Introductory Remarks to Rhetorical Theory of Folklore*. According to him, a folklore item, as a communication tool contains three stages: The performer who encodes the text, the folklore item which comprises the text and the audience who decodes it. Abrahams explains the four ways in which folklore like other art forms has been approached. In the first approach, he gives importance to the performer. In the second approach, he concentrates on the text. In the third approach, he studies how the piece of performance affects the audience. In the fourth approach, he examines how the audience affects the performance. "A method which would emphasise all aspects of the aesthetic performance, performance, item, and audience" is an ideal one for Experiential Learning. He says, the rhetorical method, expounded by Kenneth Burke, can be successfully utilised as it "asks the observer to see the control of both the aesthetic object and of the context to witness how the two interrelate in creating pleasure and proposing action."[12] Care should be taken to ensure objectivity when using folklore as a tool to Experiential Learning.

To illustrate the use of folklore in Experiential Learning, a story from Panchatantra, *The Brahmin and the Mongoose* can be cited. At the performer's level is the faithful mongoose who encodes the text. The text concentrates on the action of the mongoose saving the child and getting slain by the father in a fit of blind rage. The audience decodes it as they get affected by the death of a faithful animal. Tales from Panchatantra are befitting examples of folklore in Experiential Learning.

Another example can be taken from the subtext of the Mahabharata. In the story, *The Blade of Grass*, the Pandavas and Kauravas engaging in a ball game are at the performer's level. The actual match and the ball falling into a nearby well and the inability of the players to retrieve it forms the text. Drona arrives on the scene and retrieves the ball from the well by a simple mechanism. He first throws his

ring into the well, then collects some grass blades, and throws the blades into the well one after another, like spears to form a rope of grass. The ball is gently pulled out. The excitement and awe, the audience experience when the ball is retrieved from the well, works as a decoder for the audience. The learners get a hands-on of the various nuances of the language, the behaviour of the players and the intervention of the teacher and the skills of concentration, accuracy, resourcefulness, innovation and presence of mind are infused in the learning experience. Learning is affected at various levels of comprehension. The rhetorical and experiential approach to a folk item reminds one of what Pike advocated to Linguistics, "that language should be viewed as a behavioural phenomenon."[13]

A shift in emphasis from the deductive approach to language acquisition to an inductive activity-based approach not only integrates the teaching process with life experiences, but it also includes other disciplines. Ethics, art and environmental concerns are all incorporated in the learning material. This multidisciplinary approach is an emerging trend in education, especially in the Indian scenario with its wealth of folklore treasures. The tendency to view folklore items as a state as well as a process is also emerging. It advocates the place of aesthetics in the cultural context as a forceful and pleasurable thing enabling a joyful learning experience.

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