Fostering Student Success in the Changing Job Market: Transferable Skills through Experiential Learning

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Amidst the ever changing job market necessitated by change in technology and its accompanied disruptions, developing graduate employability becomes crucial for higher education (HE). While AI and technology may replace some jobs, unique human skills are challenging to replicate. However, as disruptive technologies reshape the workforce, demand for highly skilled employees increases, shifting the focus from solely degree requirements to alternative measures of graduates' work preparedness. The paper explores the importance of transferable skills in navigating the disruptive job market and how experiential learning, based on John Dewey's theory, fosters these skills. These skills transcend specific job roles and industries, enabling students to remain adaptable and resilient in unpredictable career trajectories. Experiential learning is an educational approach that actively engages students in real-world experiences, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Specifically, the paper examines the components of experiential learning as presented in Dewey's theory of experiential education along with some of the activities to embrace them in Higher Education Institutions. The experiential learning activities considered *inter alia* are work experience of all forms, project based learning, field trips, community engagement and employers and alumni engagements. The paper also offers practical guidance for implementing these activities effectively, empowering Higher Education Institutions to foster students' transferable skills. This equips students with the confidence to navigate dynamic workplaces and attain sustained career success.

Keywords: Changing job market, employability, experiential learning, higher education, John Dewey's theory of experiential education, transferable skills, university students

Introduction

Changes in the workplace arise as new technologies create pressure points, transforming traditional labour market operations (Amenduni et al., 2022). Factors driving these changes include technological advancements, environmental challenges, and significant events like the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the evolving nature of work, companies are proactively redirecting their focus from relying solely on degree requirements to exploring alternative methods of assessing graduates' preparedness for work (Pitan, 2017; Østergaard & Nordlund, 2019). Hence, there is a greater emphasis on evaluating competence and the display of quality transferable skills over and

above formal academic qualifications. The challenge for HE lies in nurturing graduates with these essential transferable skills to effectively navigate workplace disruptions.

Transferable skills are those that transcend specific jobs or academic disciplines and can be applied across diverse situations and work settings. Despite concerns about potential job substitution by technology (Oliver, 2015), the unique human skills, particularly those encouraging creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability, remain indispensable to cope with the rapid changes brought about by disruptive technologies (Seet et al.). Thus, it becomes crucial for HE institutions to design strategies that expose students to activities fostering transferable skills and bridging the gap between theory and practice. One of the empirically proven strategies, backed by various employability studies (Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017; Oke& Fernandes, 2020; Pitan &Muler, 2019; 2023), is EL.

Despite extensive research on various aspects of experiential education and transferable skills, there remains limited work (particularly in Nigeria) on exploring the link between EL and the resulting transferable skills (Robinson, 2013), as well as practical guidance for implementing experiential learning activities (ELA). Grounded on John Dewey's theory of experiential learning, this paper explores the significance of ELA in fostering students' development of transferable skills essential for navigating the ever-changing job market. Additionally, it discusses some ELA and provides practical guidance for their implementation.

Changing job Market and Response from HE

In today's higher education landscape, enhancing students' successful transition to the job market has become a central objective. However, ensuring equitable and responsive development of student employability in the context of the technological changes following the 4th industrial revolution workplace poses a significant challenge. To address this, institutions of higher education must reconsider their role as mere producers of human capital and instead focus on reimagining the curriculum and pedagogy (Østergaard & Nordlund, 2019; Lee, Kendall & Simmons, 2017). This shift requires prioritizing the cultivation of students' abilities to envision their future lives and careers by engaging with the practice of their chosen discipline and honing their self-awareness skills (Bennett, 2019). This approach challenges the conventional emphasis solely on academic or discipline-specific skills and knowledge.

The nature of work is evolving, prompting prominent companies to move away from solely traditional degree requirements and explore alternative measures of graduates' preparedness for employment (Østergaard & Nordlund, 2019). A critical aspect of these measures is multi-skilling, which underscores the importance of transferable skills like adaptability and resilience, innovation, interdisciplinary aptitude, communication, analytical proficiency, ICT literacy, and emotional intelligence as essential for students' employability (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Panchanathan, 2019; Pitan & Muller, 2023). Unlike job-specific skills, these transferable skills can be applied across

various contexts and work environments (Lee, Kendall & Simmons, 2017; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Consequently, it becomes essential for higher education institutions to expose students to activities such as experiential learning, which according to John Dewey's theory and several other empirical studies (Tymon, 2013; Bower, 2014; Kolb, 2015) have the potential to equip students with transferable skills.

For instance, internships that are rewarded with grades or credits can be incorporated to offer students hands-on experience. Inviting guest lecturers from industry can provide real-world perspectives and insights. Industry experts can even deliver entire modules, and educational excursions to relevant industries can be organized (Pitan & Muller, 2020). By incorporating these approaches into the curriculum, students' enthusiasm for academic skill acquisition can be harnessed to ensure they are well-equipped with the transferable skills demanded by the evolving job market.

The concept of Transferable skills

Transferable skills, which can also be referred to as generic skills are skills that are not specifically related to a job, task or academic discipline but can be used across a multitude of situations and work settings (Pitan &Muler, 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). They are skills, knowledge and attributes that go beyond disciplinary knowledge, which are applicable in a range of contexts (Pitan, 2017; Luk, *et al*, 2014), as against vocational, technical or academic skills. Transferable skills are required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an organization and also for coping with the inevitable and impending challenges and stress caused by disruptions and structural changes in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2017; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Such transferable skills needed for student success in the ever changing workplace includeanalytical thinking and innovation, effective communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis, Creativity, originality and initiative, Leadership and social influence, digital and technology literacy, resilience and flexibility, professional qualities and emotional intelligence (Panchanathan, 2019; Hayes, et al., 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023;Tandon, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). With the labour market constantly evolving, individuals may face various challenges such as the need to switch jobs frequently, venture into entrepreneurship, cope with job loss, underemployment, or prolonged unemployment. Developing these transferable skills, provides potential graduates with the ability to navigate and thrive in an uncertain and dynamic job landscape.

The concept of Experiential Learning (EL)

Experiential learning is a system of learning by doing, and it is often referred to as learning by reflection on doing.EL is an educational approach that emphasizes the process of learning through direct experience and active engagement with the subject matter. One of the key justifications for EL in higher education is 'I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand' (Gentry,

1990). Instead of relying solely on traditional classroom instruction and theoretical knowledge, EL encourages students to participate in hands-on activities, real-world projects, simulations, and reflective practices.

EL can take various forms, including students' exposure to work experience through workbased learning, internships, industrial attachment or work placement (or as may be used in different contexts), problem based learning, field trips and site visits, group projects and group discussions, community engagement, employer and alumni engagements, laboratory activities, case discussions, individual case write-ups, role-playing and simulation and all forms of practical sessions (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Claiborne, et al., 2020).

EL as a concept in higher education can be credited to John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kolb, (Kolb, 2015). However, in this paper, particular attention is paid to John Dewey's theory of experiential education.

John Dewey's Theory of Experiential Education

The main argument behind John Dewey's theory of experiential education is that intelligence is shaped by experience, which derives from each individual students' interaction with his/her environment (Pitan & Muller, 2019). To facilitate a better understanding of the important concepts that emerge from Dewey's philosophy of experiential education, a conceptual model has been developed (Roberts, 2003) and presented below as figure 1.

In Dewey's philosophy, the social environment is paramount to education. The model illustrates a box representing the social environment. It starts with organized knowledge by the teacher, followed by facilitated student experiences based on readiness. The outcome of this experience is learning, which contributes to learner readiness and knowledge, thereby creating a continuous learning process.

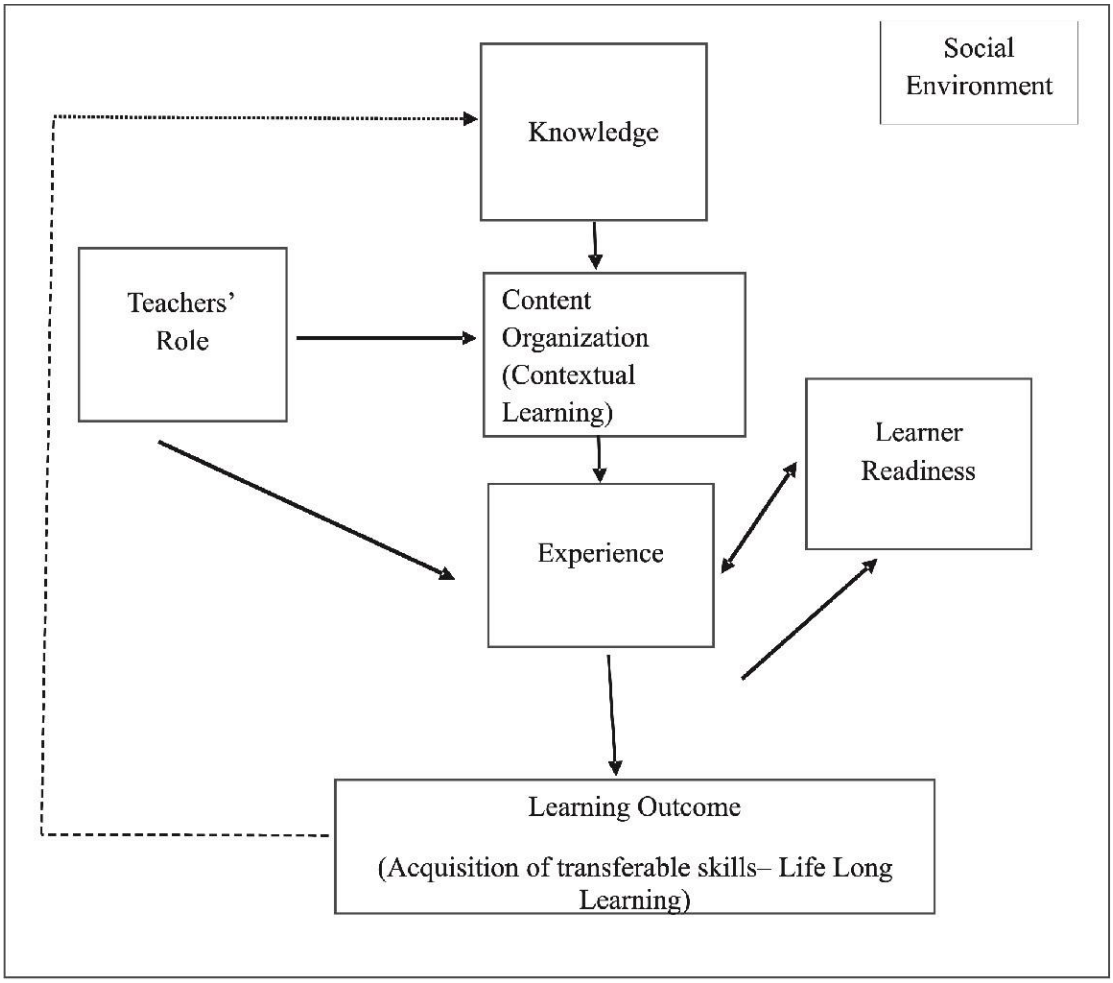

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Dewey's Philosophy of Experiential Education

(Adapted from Roberts, T. G., 2003)

Components of John Dewey's model and implication for HE

Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory revolves around four key aspects of education (Fig. 1), which can be broken down into specific criteria (Bower, 2014; Roberts, 2003) to include:

The Social Environment: This aspect emphasizes the importance of the social context in learning. Dewey believed that education should be grounded in the student's social and cultural environment, promoting collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences with others. Activities such as group work/projects, community engagement, field trips, and visits from alumni who share career insights play a crucial role in encouraging students' interaction with significant people and places in their environment.

Knowledge and Content Organization: Dewey's experiential learning theory challenges traditional views of knowledge and isolated subject structures in education that impede practical application. In this theory, knowledge isn't just predetermined facts but is drawn from current experiences.

Dewey emphasizes learning from the present and students' real-life encounters. He emphasizes that reflection is a fundamental component of the learning process. Thoughtful analysis of experiences enables students to gain insights, establish connections, and extract meaning from their encounters. This process enhances their understanding and decision-making skills. Dewey's redefinition of knowledge and content organization presents a challenge for HEIs and educators. They must recognize that students' capacity to apply learning across contexts signals the quality of education. Consequently, creating opportunities for students to transfer knowledge and establish connections across diverse situations becomes imperative.

The Teacher's Role, Learner Readiness, and the Experience: Dewey stressed the importance of grounding learning in real-life experiences. He viewed experience as the foundation of education, advocating for active involvement and hands-on learning to engage with the world. In Dewey's experiential learning theory, teachers or institutions act as facilitators, providing engaging experiences for students. This emphasises the importance of the role of HEIs in helping students to prepare better for transition to the job market by putting in place structures that will enhance students' employability such as exposure to all forms of experiential learning.

Learning Outcomes: In Dewey's theory, learning goes beyond mere memorization of facts; it involves the ability to apply knowledge to new situations. The crucial outcome of experiential learning is the transferability of knowledge to various contexts, promoting lifelong learning. Experiential education empowers students with knowledge and the ability to apply it in different situations, fostering deeper understanding and adaptability.

By embracing Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory, HEI can create an enriching and relevant learning environment, where students actively participate in their education, connect with the real world, and develop transferable skills that prepare them for success in an ever-changing society.

Experiential Learning Activities and Acquisition of Transferable skills

As discussed in Dewey's theory and shown in the model above, one anticipated outcome of Experiential Learning (EL) is the acquisition of transferable skills. To emphasise the significance of EL approaches in enhancing students' development of transferable skills and employability, multiple empirical studies (Mason et al., 2009; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; García-Aracil et al., 2021; Pitan & Muller, 2019, 2023) have emerged to validate a strong positive correlation between transferable skills and EL. Despite the recognized importance of EL, reports indicate that many Nigerian universities and academics do not sufficiently integrate EL activities into their curricula, leading to students graduating without the necessary skills for the workplace (Nwajiuba et al., 2020; Okolie et al., 2021; Pitan, 2023). To address this gap, various EL activities can be

integrated into higher education teaching methods. Five of these activities are discussed in this paper, exploring the transferable skills that students can potentially acquire through each of them.

Work experience (WE):Work experience is an integral facet of learning that centres around applying theoretical knowledge within a genuine work-oriented environment. It serves as a fundamental mechanism facilitating students in establishing a clear link between theoretical concepts and practical applications. Work experience (WE) manifests through various forms such as work placements, internships, fieldwork, job shadowing, vacation work, freelancing, and voluntary community engagement. The importance of work experience exposure during undergraduate studies cannot be overstated, as it stands as the most effective method for fostering the development of transferable skills (Tymon, 2013; Pitan & Muller, 2023). To enhance the efficacy of such programs, heightened support for students is imperative. For instance, universities should forge collaborations with industries to oversee students' industrial work experiences and meticulously formulate functional work-placement initiatives.

Problem-based learning ?(PBL): This is one of the primary tools used in John Dewey's theory. It is a student-centered approach in which students learn about a subject by working in groups to solve an openended problem (Nilson, 2010). This problem is what drives the motivation and the learning. PBL can be practiced through group projects and assignment to students where the educator acts as a facilitator.?Through PBL, students put what they learn into a real-world context and acquire analytical and critical thinking skills. Other skills that are developed from PBL are oral and written communication, working in teams, self-directed learning, managing projects and holding leadership roles.

Community engagement (CE)**:** CE involves active participation and interaction between students and local communities or broader societal groups. It's a form of experiential education that combines community service with instruction and reflection to enhance learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Bandy, 2011). Engaging in community projects or initiatives demands effective communication, diverse collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability, empathy, and cultural sensitivity from students. These experiences offer a chance to nurture transferable skills like communication, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, leadership, and interpersonal skills.

Community engagement can be integrated into courses through collaborative projects involving faculty and community partners (NGOs, government agencies). These projects merge learning and community action goals, requiring students to apply course concepts to real-world tasks. This facilitates experiential learning in authentic contexts, cultivating community engagement skills for students and addressing urgent community needs (Mcmaster, 2022).

Field trips: Field trips and site visits expose students to real-world contexts beyond traditional classroom methods. They offer experiential learning, enabling students to directly engage with subjects previously encountered only in theory. This experience connects classroom learning with real-world applications. Specifically, tailored field trips, especially those integrating theoretical knowledge into professional settings, effectively bridge the gap between undergraduate education and the job market. These experiences introduce students to potential careers, refine their social skills, and provide clarity in defining professional goals (Higgins et al., 2012). Research studies investigating field trips and experiential learning, including those conducted by Rugaiyah (2022) and Campbell &Gedat (2021), corroborate the link between field trips and experiential learning. These investigations reveal that field trips and site visits facilitate the acquisition of a wide array of transferable skills, including but not limited to leadership, social aptitude, self-confidence, effective communication, adaptability, teamwork, collaboration, and proficiency in data collection and analysis.

***Employer engagement*:** Employer engagement involves active participation by employers in educational processes, often in collaboration with academic institutions. This engagement can encompass various aspects, including employer input in curriculum design and delivery, as well as the provision of career information through activities like career talks, networking events, and mock interviews. Research underscores the significance of students' exposure to working professionals for valuable insights into job prospects (Mason et al., 2009; Mann & Dawkins, 2014; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). Such interactions introduce students to career options, fostering skill development aligned with labour market demands. These experiences cultivate skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, self-awareness, opportunity awareness, and workplace awareness (Pitan & Muller, 2023).

Conclusion

Drawing on John Dewey's theory of experiential education, this paper delves into the significance of experiential learning in equipping students with adaptable skills for the dynamic job market. It explores the components of experiential learning outlined in Dewey's theory and examines their integration within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The paper discusses key activities, including internships, project-based learning, field trips, community engagement, and interactions with employers and alumni. A central recommendation stemming from this analysis is the prioritization of real-world knowledge application through hands-on learning in the curriculum.

Recommendations

1. To equip university students for the evolving job market, application of knowledge in real-world contexts where students are encouraged to learn by doing, experimenting, and engaging

in hands-on activities should be prioritised in the curriculum. Activities such as problem-based learning, and others as discussed in the preceding section, should receive emphasis. These activities are designed to cultivate critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, social skills as well as foster collaboration and effective communication among students. Such an approach contrasts with traditional passive models of education that centred on rote memorization.

2. Successful implementation of experiential learning programs in higher education requires a collaborative partnership between academia and industry. This collaboration aligns education with real-world demands, allowing students to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

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