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Cross-Cultural Evidence on Students' Perceptions of Experiential Learning

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Abstract

The experiential learning approach in higher education enables the effectiveness of courses and is particularly important for having a positive influence on students' engagement in the learning process. This is because it is the learning experience that students tend to assimilate in their quest to develop their knowledge-base. In order to find out how students from United States and Romania perceive the benefits of experiential learning techniques, we conducted a quantitative survey on convenience samples from two higher education institutions, one from Romania and the other from United States and analyzed the results by means of appropriate statistical tests. The results indicate that U.S. students get in contact with experiential learning methods more than the Romanian students, as the American education system represents a model of students-centered setting, where learning through experience is highly supported.

Keywords: *experiential learning, cross-cultural study, skills development, academic system.*

1. Introduction

According to Kolb [1], knowledge is created from grasping and transforming learners' experiences. Experiential learning paradigm was designed to place people on a line between concrete experience (CE) and

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abstract conceptualization (AC); and active experimentation (AE) and reflective observation (RO) [2].

Many academic curricula are looking for the development of the practical side, by incorporating insights from industry-based experiential learning to complement the classroom environment. A study conducted by Lee [3] identifies new learning outcomes or benefits for students who participate in experiential learning, such as a better understanding of how organizations put in practice their business models, the increased ability to view career expectations realistically, the development of the professional contacts network, the increased ability to take initiative and the increased ability to adapt to change.

2. Problem Statement

In the experiential learning context, students deal with authentic problems organizations are confronting with, pedagogical resources (case-scenarios, simulations etc.) are used flexibly to deepen insights on knowledge discovery, multiple viewpoints are discussed with instructors, facts are evaluated from different angles against reality to find creative solutions for decision-making process [4].

Experiential learning culture lies on the orientation in meaningful real-life situations. Students carry out their activities with a clear objective in mind, they want to achieve the goals with their full involvement in the learning process. For this reason, they take part in learning initiatives and act "as in real life", preparing themselves for their future professional life [5].

The experiential learning approach to effective teaching in business schools emphasizes "hands-on" experiences and experimentation activities; the "hands-on" activities should be connected to "minds-on" activities in order to complete the Kolb's experiential learning cycle and provide meaningful understanding of the context-specific issues [6].

Experiential education integrates field experiences as a way to build learners' practical skills and facilitate the fast transition from theory to practice. Moreover, experiential education can lead to more powerful academic learning and help students achieve their expected learning goals, including a deeper understanding of professional life problems; the capacity for critical thinking and application of knowledge in complex situations [7].

Many academic programs are implementing experiential educational in their quest to transform the learning experience into a very effective one. These programs are focused on improving student learning, particularly in dimensions related to long-life learning. Higher education institutions could

benefit from the paradigm shift regarding the increased readiness for self-directed learning made possible by experiential education [8].

The way in which students are engaging in experiential learning is cross-cultural sensitive. Cultural Intelligence, defined as an individual's capabilities to manage effectively diverse settings, while being involved in cross-cultural situations [9], enhance the likelihood that students will be actively engaged in the four stages of experiential learning—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation [10].

When students go internationally to develop their knowledge base, they must be prepared to face new cultural contexts. Experiential learning integrates a comprehensive set of skills - including valuing, thinking, deciding, and acting - compulsory for a variety of academic activities related to cross-cultural learning [11].

In the cross-cultural education context, the findings of a research conducted by Kratzke and Bertolo [12] reveal the importance of cultural competence education and experiential learning to explore students' perceptions of their biases and attitudinal changes.

The research emphasizes new insights on experiential learning contexts in two business schools from countries with significant cultural gaps (Romania and United States), contributing to the development of body of knowledge in this field.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

It is obvious that traditional classroom teaching and testing do not always focus on developing the qualities that are valued the most in the work place like: creativity, critical thinking, curiosity, reliability, leadership, etc. This study indicates that regardless of the cultural background, students understand the role of and value the activities delivered through the EL process.

The research question aims to explore how experiential learning educational context (US vs. Romanian) influences students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on bridging the gaps between theory and practice.

4. Research Methods

Based on the studies highlighted in the theoretical background, we developed a conceptual model (Figure 1) and five hypotheses to be tested by means of Chi-square method.

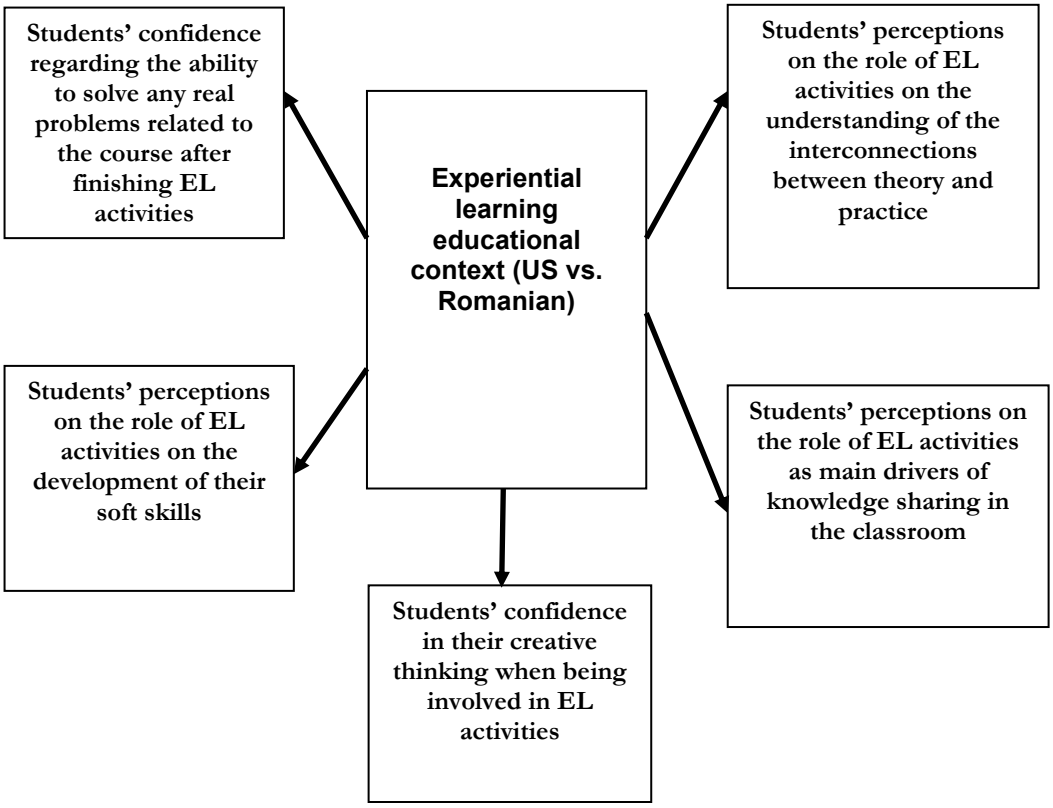

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the research

Chi-square test is applied in view to determine whether there is a significant difference between the expected frequencies and the observed frequencies in the analyzed data set. The use of chi-square test involves the design of two hypotheses: the null hypothesis states that there is no significant difference between the expected and observed frequencies, while the alternative hypothesis states they are different. The level of significance (the point at which we can say with 95% confidence that the difference is not due to chance alone) is 0,05.

The research involves a cross-cultural survey based on a convenience sample of 100 students – undergraduate level: 50 students from Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania and 50 students from Lasell College, United States of America. The online questionnaire was administrated by researchers of these two higher education institutions in the period April – May 2017.

Reliability test

Performing analyses on the items included in the conceptual model, we found out that Cronbach's alpha value is **0.748**, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for our scale with this specific sample of Romanian and US students.

Table 1 - Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,748	,757	5

The correlation between a particular item and the sum of the rest of the items outlines that the best item appears to be the third, with an item-total correlation of $r = .609$. The item with the lowest item-total correlation is the first ($r = .447$). Analyzing "Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted" column, we observe that none of the values is greater than the current alpha of the whole scale: .748. This means that we don't need to remove any items (Table 2).

Table 2 - Item-Total Statistics

ITEM	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
I am confident that I will be able to solve any real problems related to the course after finishing EL activities.	15,80	6,384	,447	,202	,733
I tend to be more confident in my creative thinking when I am involved in EL activities.	15,41	6,507	,462	,215	,724
EL activities are perfect venues for developing my soft skills, especially communication and teamwork.	15,06	6,643	,609	,419	,674

ITEM	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
EL activities help me better understand the interconnections between theory and practice.	15,16	6,560	,546	,316	,692
EL represents the main driver which enables knowledge sharing in the classroom.	15,49	6,677	,535	,341	,696

The following section will highlight the hypotheses testing process, revealing the gaps between Romanian and US students' perceptions on experiential learning.

5. Findings and discussions

Before presenting the results regarding the hypotheses test, we will highlight the distribution of students' answers on the items which were not included in the research framework.

Regarding the most appropriate definition of experiential learning from students' perspective, US students appreciated two definitions (an educational approach in which students are directly involved in a learning experience rather than being seekers of ready-made content from traditional lectures and an innovative active learning method that enable students' commitment in applying their knowledge to real-life problems or situations) as being the most relevant (54%), while Romanian students placed on the top (40%) the following two definitions (an educational approach in which students are directly involved in a learning experience rather than being seekers of ready-made content from traditional lectures and an important pedagogical driver of learning, based on students' engagement in "hands-on" & "minds-on" activities).

According to the opinions of students involved in the research, the courses they are attending the current semester include Experiential Learning activities to a moderate extent (66% - in the US sample, 58% - in the Romanian sample).

In the US sample, case-study/projects based on real world data have been perceived the most frequently used methods of Experiential Learning

delivered inside the classroom (94%), followed by simulation-based learning (44%) and role play (36%) – see Figure 2.

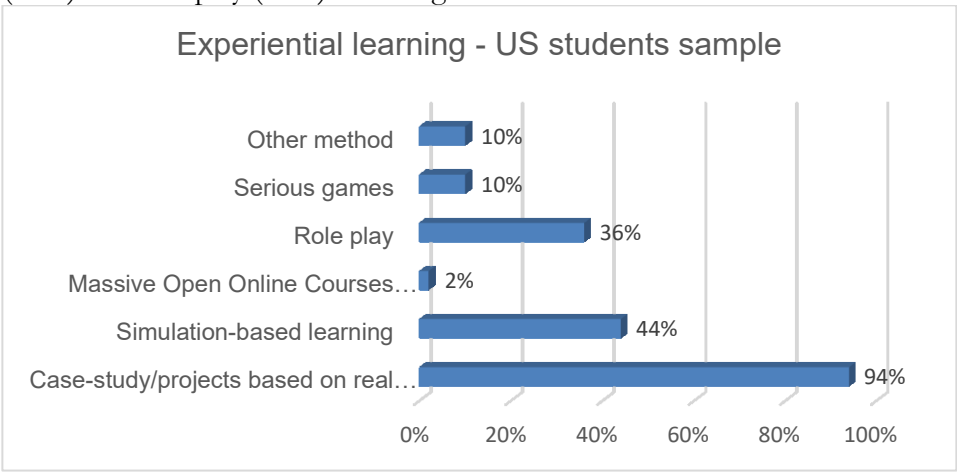

Figure 2: Concrete methods of Experiential Learning delivered inside the classroom (US students sample)

In the Romanian sample, simulation-based learning has been considered as the most frequently used method of Experiential Learning (56%), followed at a short distance by case-study/projects based on real world data (54%) – see Figure 3.

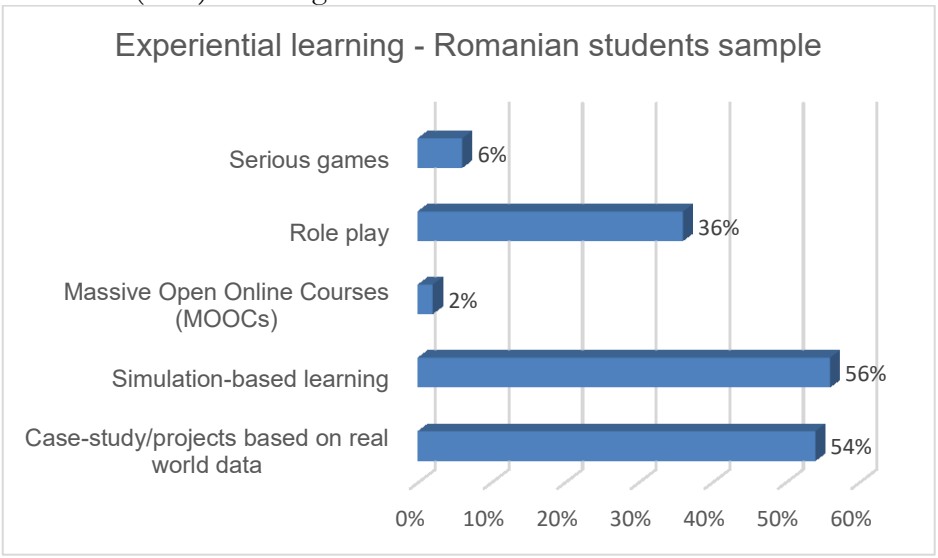

Figure 3: Concrete methods of Experiential Learning delivered inside the classroom (Romanian students' sample)

The main problems US students might face being involved in EL activities are the following: professors' limited expertise when dealing with EL techniques (41,7%) and frustration, which could be related to limited possibilities to engage in the learning experience (33,3%), while, in the case of Romanian students included in the research sample, the main problems concern the fear of incapacity to apply the knowledge acquired in class in a real workplace environment (56%) and professors' limited expertise when dealing with EL techniques (28%).

In the following paragraphs, we will focus on the hypotheses testing process, using Chi-Square tests.

H1: Students' confidence regarding the ability to solve any real problems related to the course after finishing EL activities is cultural context-sensitive (it depends on their affiliation to a Romanian or a US higher education institution)

Table 3 - Contingency table related to the first hypothesis (H1)

		I am confident that I will be able to solve any real problems related to the course after finishing EL activities.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Student	Romanian student	5	10	13	19	3	50
	US student	1	2	9	34	4	50
Total		6	12	22	53	7	100

Table 4 - Chi-Square Tests – H1

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13,115[a]	4	,011
Likelihood Ratio	13,912	4	,008
Linear-by-Linear Association	10,944	1	,001
N of Valid Cases	100		

In this case, the value associated to the Asymptotic significance (0,011) is inferior to the level of significance (0,05) and the Pearson Chi-Square value (13,115) is superior to the Chi-Square value reflected by Chi Square Distribution Table for Degrees of Freedom (9,488), in the context of four freedom degrees, the hypothesis is validated, so we can state that there are significant gaps between the perceptions of Romanian and US students related to their confidence regarding the ability to solve any real problems related to the course after finishing EL activities.

H2: Students' confidence in their creative thinking when being involved EL activities is cultural context-sensitive (it depends on their affiliation to a Romanian or a US higher education institution)

Table 5 - Contingency table related to the second hypothesis (H2)

		I tend to be more confident in my creative thinking when I am involved in EL activities.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Student	Romanian student	1	1	13	30	5	50
	US student	3	4	3	25	15	50
Total		4	5	16	55	20	100

Table 6 - Chi-Square Tests – H2

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14,505[a]	4	,006
Likelihood Ratio	15,400	4	,004
Linear-by-Linear Association	,714	1	,398
N of Valid Cases	100		

In this case, the value associated to the Asymptotic significance (0,006) is inferior to the level of significance (0,05) and the Pearson Chi-Square value (14,505) is superior to the Chi-Square value reflected by Chi Square Distribution Table for Degrees of Freedom (9,488), in the context of

four freedom degrees, the hypothesis is validated, so we can notice that the perceptions of Romanian and US students related to their confidence in their creative thinking when being involved EL activities is also cultural context-sensitive.

H3: Students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on the development of their soft skills are cultural context-sensitive (it depends on their affiliation to a Romanian or a US higher education institution)

Table 7 - Contingency table related to the third hypothesis (H3)

		EL activities are perfect venues for developing my soft skills, especially communication and teamwork.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Student	Romanian student	0	1	9	27	13	50
	US student	1	1	1	26	21	50
Total		1	2	10	53	34	100

Table 8 - Chi-Square Tests – H3

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9,301[a]	4	,054
Likelihood Ratio	10,667	4	,031
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,879	1	,090
N of Valid Cases	100		

In this case, the value associated to the Asymptotic significance (0,054) is near the level of significance (0,05), while the Pearson Chi-Square value (9,301) is also near to the Chi-Square value reflected by Chi Square Distribution Table for Degrees of Freedom (9,488), in the context of four freedom degrees. The hypothesis is partially validated, so we can notice that the students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on the development of their soft skills are cultural context-sensitive, but to a small extent.

H4: Students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on the understanding of the interconnections between theory and practice are cultural context-sensitive (it depends on their affiliation to a Romanian or a US higher education institution)

Table 9 - Contingency table related to the fourth hypothesis (H4)

		EL activities help me better understand the interconnections between theory and practice.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Student	Romanian student	0	2	9	20	19	50
	US student	1	2	5	29	13	50
Total		1	4	14	49	32	100

Table 10 - Chi-Square Tests – H4

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4,921[a]	4	,296
Likelihood Ratio	5,339	4	,254
Linear-by-Linear Association	,351	1	,554
N of Valid Cases	100		

In this case, the value associated to the Asymptotic significance (0,296) is superior to the level of significance (0,05), while the Pearson Chi-Square value (4,921) is inferior to the Chi-Square value reflected by Chi Square Distribution Table for Degrees of Freedom (9,488), in the context of four freedom degrees. The hypothesis is rejected, proving similarities between Romanian and US students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on the understanding of the interconnections between theory and practice.

H5: Students' perceptions on the role of EL activities as main drivers of knowledge sharing in the classroom are cultural context-sensitive (it depends on their affiliation to a Romanian or a US higher education institution)

Table 11 - Contingency table related to the fifth hypothesis (H5)

		EL represents the main driver which enables knowledge sharing in the classroom.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Student	Romanian student	0	5	15	25	5	50
	US student	1	2	8	30	9	50
Total		1	7	23	55	14	100

Table 12 - Chi-Square Tests – H5

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6,014[a]	4	,198
Likelihood Ratio	6,493	4	,165
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,886	1	,089
N of Valid Cases	100		

In this case, the value associated to the Asymptotic significance (0,198) is superior to the level of significance (0,05), while the Pearson Chi-Square value (6,014) is inferior to the Chi-Square value reflected by Chi Square Distribution Table for Degrees of Freedom (9,488), in the context of four freedom degrees. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected, proving similarities between Romanian and US students' perceptions on the role of EL activities on the role of EL activities as main drivers of knowledge sharing in the classroom.

6. Conclusions and future research agenda

The first two hypotheses also indicate that American students are more confident in applying the skills they gained as a result of being involved in EL centered activities. This aspect derives directly from students being continuously and heavily exposed to this type of learning, especially case studies and projects where students are encouraged to participate, share, and support their own opinions/decisions.

Upon understanding the benefits and success of this type of pedagogy in a classroom setting, a few recommendations can be developed:

- Gradually incorporate more EL activities in the Romanian curriculum in order for students to become more confident in their capabilities;
- Focus on activities and topics that are particularly relevant for students;
- Encourage students to share their ideas in smaller groups and boost their participation by forming friendly competitions.

Future research will address cross-cultural peculiarities of experiential learning on bigger samples of students from different countries. Our intention is to develop a cross-cultural research team interested in approaching the hypotheses embedded into the current study.

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