

## Learning by Actually Doing: MBA Students Work with Organizations to Increase Learning

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### Abstract

*Learning by doing (LBD) is a philosophy of education that emphasizes the value of practical, firsthand experience as a means of learning. The more a student applies what they learn in the classroom to a realistic situation, the more effective the learning. LBD not only yields increased learning, but also increases the student retention rates. Also known as experiential learning, the premise is that the best way to learn is to actively engage in the process of doing and practicing rather than just passively receiving information through lectures, reading, or other forms of instruction. This article explores the effect of classroom/workplace collaborations on student learning. The article examines how combining an instructional assignment with a real organization can serve as a catalyst for more effective learning in a graduate MBA program and explores the principles, benefits, and limitations of LBD.*

**Keywords:** learning by doing, experiential learning, hands-on learning, active learning, practical experience, reflective practice, experiential education, participatory learning, project-based learning, simulation, internship

### 1. Learning by Actually Doing: MBA Students Work with Organizations to Achieve Increased Learning

The learning-by-doing approach can be applied to a wide variety of fields and subjects, including but not limited to technical skills, arts, sports, and leadership. In each case, the goal is to provide opportunities for individuals to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world contexts, helping them to develop a deeper understanding and build confidence in their abilities.

This approach is based on the theory that people retain information and develop skills better when they are actively involved in the learning process rather than simply being told what to do. The objective is to look for the strategic instructional design elements that more consistently provide direct (or applications-based) learning experiences (learning by doing) for graduate-level business students resulting in higher levels of knowledge retention.

*Learning by doing (LBD)*, also known as experiential learning, is the process of acquiring new skills and knowledge through direct experience and active participation. LBD has been applied in various fields, including education, psychology, and management. In education, LBD is often used in direct, experiential learning programs, such as outdoor education and vocational training programs. In psychology, LBD has been used to study the development of motor skills and the acquisition of complex cognitive skills, such as problem-solving and decision-making. In management, LBD has been used in training programs for employees, where they engage in direct tasks and simulations to develop the skills necessary for their job.

There are many examples of learning by doing. A person can learn how to cook by actually preparing meals, experimenting with different ingredients and techniques, and receiving feedback from others. A person can learn how to build a birdhouse by getting firsthand experience with tools, building materials, and following a set of instructions. One can learn how to play a new sport by participating in games, practicing skills, and receiving guidance and feedback from a coach or more experienced player. A student can learn how to program by writing code, testing it, and debugging any errors. A class can learn how to play a musical instrument by practicing and receiving feedback from a teacher or more experienced musician.

*Practice by doing* can significantly increase learning retention and is often referred to as active learning or experiential learning. It involves actively engaging with the material one is trying to learn through firsthand experiences, problem-solving, and practical application. While practice by doing is an effective learning strategy, it is not the only approach and may not be the best approach for every type of material or learner. Different subjects and individuals may benefit from a combination of learning methods, including reading, listening, watching, and doing. Additionally, the effectiveness of active learning can be influenced by the quality of the activities and the relevance of the practice to the learning objectives.

In each of these examples, the person is actively engaged in the learning process, applying what they have learned and receiving immediate feedback. This active approach helps to embed the new knowledge and skills more deeply and make it easier to recall in the future.

The concept of learning by doing refers to the idea that individuals learn best through active engagement in the task they are attempting to learn. This concept has been around for centuries and has been applied in various fields such as education, psychology, and management. This paper reviews the theory and practice of LBD, including its benefits and limitations, as well as its applications in different fields.

### 1.1 The Theoretical Background

The theory of LBD has roots in the works of John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer. Dewey's (1938) educational philosophy emphasizes the importance of direct, experiential learning and the idea that learning is a continuous process that is ongoing throughout an individual's life. According to Dewey, learning occurs when individuals engage in problem-solving activities, reflect on their experiences, and use the new knowledge they have acquired to improve their performance in future tasks.

Another influential theory in the field of LBD is cognitive load theory, which suggests that individuals learn best when they are actively involved in the task they are trying to learn. This is because active engagement requires the learner to use their cognitive resources, which promotes deeper understanding and retention of information. Additionally, active engagement also helps to reduce extraneous cognitive load, which refers to mental effort that is not related to learning the task at hand.

### 2. Just What Is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is an educational approach that emphasizes learning through direct, hands-on experiences. It is a learner-centered method that focuses on practical engagement and reflection as key components of the learning process. Experiential learning is often contrasted with traditional classroom-based learning, which relies heavily on lectures, textbooks, and theoretical knowledge. The Key principles of experiential learning include:

1. **Active engagement:** Learners actively participate in activities, experiments, or real-world tasks that allow them to apply their knowledge and skills in a practical context.
2. **Reflection:** After the experiential activity, learners are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, analyze what they learned, and consider how it relates to existing knowledge or concepts. This reflection phase is crucial for deeper understanding.
3. **Concrete experience:** Learning begins with a direct encounter or experience, which serves as the foundation for understanding and building new knowledge.
4. **Abstract conceptualization:** After the concrete experience, learners work to abstract general principles, theories, or concepts from their experiences. They seek to understand the broader implications of what they have learned.
5. **Active experimentation:** In this phase, learners use the new knowledge or concepts they have acquired to solve problems, make decisions, or act in different situations. This allows them to test their understanding and adapt their knowledge to new contexts.

Experiential learning can take various forms, such as internships, apprenticeships, field trips, role-playing exercises, simulations, group projects, and hands-on experiments. It is widely used in fields like education, business, healthcare, and outdoor education, among others, as it is believed to promote deeper understanding, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and real-world applicability of knowledge.

One of the most famous models of experiential learning is David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which includes the four stages of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Many educators and trainers use this model as a framework for designing experiential learning activities and facilitating the learning process. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) model, first developed in the 1970s, is a widely recognized model that describes how individuals learn from their experiences. It has become a fundamental concept in the field of adult education and experiential learning and is often depicted as a continuous, cyclical process where one's experiences and reflections continually inform and shape their understanding and ability to apply knowledge. It suggests that learning is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that involves both doing and thinking. Educators and trainers often use this model to design effective learning experiences that encourage active engagement and reflection, promoting deeper understanding and skill development. The cycle consists of four stages and emphasizes the importance of reflection and active experimentation in the learning process.

#### 2.1 Stage 1: Concrete Experience (CE)

Stage 1 is known as the concrete experience (CE) stage and involves experiencing a specific event or situation firsthand. It is the initial encounter with a new experience or problem. During this stage, individuals gather information and have a direct encounter with the subject matter.

## 2.2 Stage 2: Reflective Observation (RO)

Following the concrete experience stage, individuals move to reflective observation. In this phase, they reflect on their experiences and try to make sense of what they have encountered. This may involve thinking about their thoughts and feelings during the experience and trying to understand the significance of the event.

## 2.3 Stage 3: Abstract conceptualization (AC)

Next, learners move on to the abstract conceptualization stage where they develop general principles, theories, or concepts based on their reflections and observations. They try to create a broader understanding of the topic or experience by organizing and analyzing the information they have gathered.

## 2.4 Stage 4: Active Experimentation (AE)

The final stage of the experiential learning cycle involves active experimentation where learners put new knowledge or insights into practice. Learners use the concepts and theories they have developed in the previous stages to solve problems, make decisions, or act in real-world situations. This stage allows for testing and applying what has been learned.

### 3. The Benefits and Limitations of Experiential Learning

LBD has numerous benefits, including improved understanding and retention. By actively engaging in the task, learners are more likely to understand and retain the information they are trying to learn. It also provides increased motivation. Engaging in experiential learning can be more enjoyable and motivating than traditional methods, such as lectures and reading. It also has real-world relevance. LBD often involves tasks that are relevant to real-world problems, which can increase motivation and help learners see the value in what they are learning.

However, LBD also has several limitations. These include time and resource constraints. LBD can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, as it requires learners to actively engage in the task they are trying to learn. It can also be difficult to measure learning outcomes. It can be challenging to accurately measure learning outcomes in LBD, as learning is often an ongoing process that occurs over time. Inadequate preparation also plays a role. If learners are not properly prepared for the task, they may not be able to engage in effective learning by doing.

### 4. Increasing Retention Rates

Learning by doing can increase retention rates for learning in many cases. It increases the student retention rate by making the information being learned relevant to the life of the student. This approach to learning is based on the idea that active engagement with the material or concept being taught leads to better retention and understanding compared to passive forms of learning, such as reading or listening. Some of the reasons why learning by doing can enhance retention rates include:

- 4.1 Engagement:** When learners actively participate in an activity or hands-on experience, they are more engaged and focused on the task. This heightened level of engagement can lead to better retention because the brain is more attentive to the information being processed.
- 4.2 Application of knowledge:** Learning by doing allows learners to apply the knowledge they acquire in real-world or simulated situations. This application reinforces understanding and memory retention as learners see how the concepts are relevant and useful.
- 4.3 Multisensory learning:** Engaging multiple senses, such as touch, sight, and sometimes even hearing or smell, can create a richer and more memorable learning experience. Activities often involve tactile and visual elements that enhance memory.
- 4.4 Active problem-solving:** Experiential learning often requires learners to solve problems or make decisions, which promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The act of solving problems and making decisions can lead to deeper understanding and retention of the material.
- 4.5 Emotional connection:** Experiential learning can evoke emotions and create a personal connection to the material. Emotionally charged experiences tend to be remembered more vividly and for a longer time.
- 4.6 Repetition through practice:** Many experiential learning activities involve repeated practice, which strengthens memory and skill development through reinforcement.
- 4.7 Immediate feedback:** Hands-on activities often provide immediate feedback, allowing learners to correct mistakes and reinforce correct behaviors or knowledge, which contributes to better retention.

While learning by doing can be highly effective for many types of learning, it is essential to consider the specific context and subject matter. Some topics may still benefit from a combination of different learning approaches, including lectures, readings, and hands-on activities, to ensure a well-rounded learning experience. Additionally, individual learning styles and preferences can influence the effectiveness of experiential learning, so educators and learners should adapt the approach to suit their needs and goals.

## 5. Types of Experiential Learning

Many MBA programs incorporate some form of experiential learning into their curriculum. However, the specific methods and extent of experiential learning can vary widely among programs. Experiential learning is valued for its ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering students opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to real-world situations. The adoption of experiential learning experiences can vary among MBA programs, and the specific opportunities available may change over time. Some of the more common forms of experiential learning in MBA programs include:

- 5.1 Internships:** MBA programs often encourage or require students to complete internships with companies or organizations. These internships provide practical, firsthand experience in a specific industry or function.
- 5.2 Consulting projects:** MBA students may work on consulting projects for real companies. These projects involve solving actual business problems and can be a valuable form of experiential learning.
- 5.3 Entrepreneurship and start-up initiatives:** Many MBA programs have entrepreneurship tracks or offer opportunities for students to work on their own startup ventures. These experiences can provide valuable insights into entrepreneurship and innovation.
- 5.4 Case competitions:** MBA students often participate in case competitions where they analyze real business cases and present recommendations to judges, often from the industry.
- 5.5 Global immersion programs:** Some MBA programs offer international experiences where students work on global business projects or study abroad, gaining exposure to different cultures and business environments.
- 5.6 Simulations:** Business simulations are used to replicate real-world business scenarios, allowing students to make decisions and see the consequences in a risk-free environment.
- 5.7 Experiential courses:** Some MBA programs offer specific courses that are entirely experiential, focusing on activities like negotiation, leadership, or teamwork through practical exercises.
- 5.8 Field studies:** MBA students might engage in field studies that involve visiting companies, industries, or regions to gain firsthand insights into business practices.

## 6. Examples of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is often integrated into a curriculum to provide students with practical, real-world experiences that complement their academic coursework. Some MBA programs emphasize social responsibility by involving students in projects with nonprofit organizations or social enterprises. While many MBA programs around the world integrate various experiential learning methods, two examples are the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia and the Regent University School of Business & Leadership.

### 6.1 Experiential Learning in the Darden School of Business MBA Program

At Darden, experiential learning is a fundamental part of the program, and the school is well-known for its case-method approach to teaching. Darden incorporates experiential learning through case method, field projects, global business experiences, business incubator and innovation challenges, leadership and teamwork, simulation games, and experiential courses.

#### 6.1.1 Case Method

Darden uses the case method extensively, where students analyze real business cases and make decisions as if they were the executives facing those situations. This approach encourages students to apply theoretical concepts to real-world business problems.

#### 6.1.2 Field Projects

Darden offers various field projects and consulting opportunities for students to collaborate with real companies on real business challenges. These projects allow students to gain practical experience and make tangible contributions to organizations.

#### 6.1.3 Global Business Experiences

Darden emphasizes global experiential learning through global business courses and international projects. Students can participate in global immersion experiences where they work on consulting projects or intern with companies in different parts of the world.

#### 6.1.4 Business Incubator and Innovation Challenges

Darden has an innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem that includes a business incubator and innovation challenges. Students can work on start-ups or innovation projects to apply their business knowledge in a practical setting.

#### 6.1.5 Leadership and Teamwork

Darden places a strong emphasis on leadership and teamwork development. Through experiential learning exercises, students collaborate in diverse teams, solving complex problems and honing their leadership skills.

#### 6.1.6 Simulation Games

Darden also uses business simulation games, where students manage virtual companies and make strategic decisions in a competitive environment. This provides a risk-free way to learn and experiment with business strategies.

### **6.1.7 Experiential Courses**

Some courses at Darden are designed specifically to provide experiential learning opportunities. These courses may involve working directly with businesses, conducting market research, or developing business plans.

## **6.2 Experiential Learning in the Regent University MBA Program**

Another MBA program that extensively uses LBD is the Regent University MBA program located in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The program implements some form of LBD into all of its core MBA courses. In each course, students apply the principles and concepts of the course topic. They can choose to work with an organization (either for-profit or not-for-profit), work with their employer, or explore their own idea for a business startup. For example, in the marketing management course, students develop a real marketing plan based on their own industry research and analyses. Support is provided through the electronic library databases, and core topical information is provided in a course textbook.

The organization benefits from receiving a complete marketing plan that provides a guideline for how to increase their marketing activities. The student completes the course with a portfolio-quality project that can be used in advancing their professional career.

The Regent MBA program is primarily an online program, although approximately 10% of the students have access to on-campus classes. LBD is used in both the online and on-campus courses since each individual student can exercise it regardless of where they are located. Technology allows on-campus students to work with organizations located elsewhere, and online students can work with organizations in their own communities or anywhere in the world.

Learning by doing works especially well for online students. This approach is not limited to traditional in-person classrooms and can be adapted for online learning environments. It is important to note that the effectiveness of LBD in an online setting depends on various factors, including the quality of course design, the engagement of instructors, and the motivation and self-discipline of the learners. Additionally, different subjects and topics may require different approaches to hands-on learning in an online environment. However, with the right resources and strategies, online students can benefit from experiential learning.

## **7. Future Challenges and Considerations for LBD**

In the future, several challenges may arise in the context of learning by doing. Inequity in access to resources and opportunities for experiential learning can persist or worsen in the future. The digital divide and disparities in access to technology and experienced-based learning resources can hinder some individuals or communities from benefiting fully from this approach. As technology continues to advance, there may be an increased reliance on digital simulations and virtual environments for experiential learning. While these tools can enhance accessibility, they can also bring challenges, such as the need for digital literacy and concerns about authenticity in virtual experiences.

The nature of work is evolving rapidly, with automation and artificial intelligence (AI) playing a significant role. Preparing learners for future job markets that may require different skills and competencies can be challenging, especially when traditional hands-on experiences may not align with emerging job demands. Additionally, traditional education systems often rely on standardized testing and formal credentials to measure and recognize learning outcomes. Adapting assessment and credentialing mechanisms to reflect experiential learning can be a challenge, particularly when it comes to recognizing the value of informal learning experiences.

The integration of online and offline learning experiences, especially in a post-pandemic world, can be complex. Ensuring a seamless transition between digital and physical learning environments while maintaining the benefits of experiential learning may require innovative solutions. Scaling up experiential learning can also be a challenge, especially for complex, resource-intensive activities. Educators and institutions will need to find ways to make these experiences accessible to larger and more diverse groups of learners.

Ethical considerations, such as ensuring the safety and well-being of learners in practical, firsthand experiences and addressing potential biases in experiential learning scenarios, will continue to be important. Preparing educators and facilitators to effectively design and guide experiential learning activities can be demanding. Professional development programs may need to evolve to meet these needs.

As the need for lifelong learning becomes more pronounced, supporting individuals in continually engaging in experiential learning throughout their lives will be a challenge, especially for adult learners who have work and family responsibilities. Demonstrating the long-term impact and value of experiential learning can be difficult.

Developing robust assessment methods that capture the benefits of hands-on experiences in terms of personal and professional growth can be challenging.

Addressing these challenges will require a collaborative effort involving educators, policymakers, technologists, and employers. It will also involve reimagining education systems to be more adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving needs of learners in the 21st century.

## 8. Summary

Learning by doing is a valuable educational approach that emphasizes experiential learning and hands-on experiences. There are numerous areas to explore in this field as it continues to evolve and adapt to the changing needs of education and society. Here are 15 potential areas for future research:

- 8.1 Digital learning environments:** With the increasing integration of technology in education, researchers could explore how digital tools and virtual environments can enhance LBD experiences. This includes studying the effectiveness of virtual labs, simulations, and immersive learning environments.
- 8.2 Assessment and feedback:** Research could focus on developing innovative methods for assessing and providing feedback on LBD activities. This might involve the use of automated assessment tools, peer assessment, or real-time feedback mechanisms.
- 8.3 Personalization:** Investigating how to tailor LBD experiences to individual learners' needs and preferences could involve adaptive learning systems that adjust the level of challenge, content, or resources based on the learner's progress and capabilities.
- 8.4 Interdisciplinary approaches:** LBD often spans multiple disciplines and domains. Researchers could explore how to effectively integrate diverse fields of knowledge and skills in experiential learning settings.
- 8.5 Cultural and socioeconomic context:** Understanding how LBD varies across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts is crucial. Researchers could explore how to make this approach more inclusive and accessible to diverse populations.
- 8.6 Workplace learning:** Investigating the role of LBD in professional development and workplace training could include how to design effective on-the-job training programs and assess their impact on employee performance.
- 8.7 Collaborative learning:** Researchers could delve into the benefits and challenges of collaborative LBD experiences, including group projects, teamwork, and cooperative problem-solving.
- 8.8 Ethical and moral dimensions:** Exploring the ethical considerations of LBD, especially in fields like healthcare, where making mistakes can have serious consequences, is crucial. Researchers could address issues of patient safety, informed consent, and ethical decision-making.
- 8.9 Long-term retention:** Studying the long-term retention of knowledge and skills acquired through LBD experiences could help determine the lasting impact of this practical method on learners' abilities.
- 8.10 Neuroscience and learning:** Leveraging insights from neuroscience could help us to better understand the cognitive processes involved in LBD and optimize this learning method for improved outcomes. When individuals actively participate in experiments or practical applications, they are more likely to stay engaged and curious, which can increase their interest and motivation to learn.
- 8.11 Innovative pedagogies:** Developing and testing new pedagogical approaches that incorporate LBD, such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, or flipped classrooms could enhance the learning experience, foster creativity, and promote critical thinking. Innovative pedagogies aim to engage students in active, meaningful, and transformative learning experiences.
- 8.12 Learning analytics:** Utilizing data analytics and machine learning, researchers could analyze the effectiveness of LBD activities and identify patterns to inform instructional design.
- 8.13 Sustainability education:** Exploring how LBD could be used to promote sustainable education and practices, research could also address environmental and social challenges.
- 8.14 Lifelong learning:** Investigating how LBD can be integrated into lifelong learning models could help individuals adapt to changing career demands and personal development goals.
- 8.15 Policy and implementation:** Research could focus on the policy frameworks and strategies needed to support and scale effective LBD initiatives in educational institutions and organizations.

These areas represent a wide range of opportunities for researchers to contribute to the field of learning by doing, ultimately enhancing the quality and effectiveness of practical learning experiences for students of all ages and backgrounds.

LBD is a powerful learning approach that has numerous benefits, including improved understanding and retention, increased motivation, and real-world relevance. While there are limitations to LBD, including time and resource constraints, difficulty in measuring learning outcomes, and inadequate preparation, its benefits make it a valuable

learning approach for a variety of fields. By combining LBD with other learning approaches, such as lectures and reading, learners can maximize their learning potential and achieve their goals.

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