

Teaching Graduate Students through Experiential Learning Not Stress

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Abstract

Graduate students handle many outside factors while attempting to complete their degree. Examples of factors consist of “age, career state, personal life circumstances, reasons for pursuing an education, and finances” (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995, p. 677). Stressful factors tend to lead into increased attrition rates at higher education institutions. Therefore, a supportive environment and quality education need to be provided to graduate students in order provide a community and knowledge that is considered valuable and useful in future situations. David Kolb’s experiential learning theory encourages that “each person has the ability to articulate the desired learning outcomes; the mix of learning activities that work best; the range of print, visual, experiential, and human resources that would be useful” (Chickering, 2006, p. 9, Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Rather than primarily learning through traditional lectures and/or stressful academic workloads, graduate students can benefit learning from curriculum that is integrated with experiential learning.

Keywords: graduate students, stress, experiential learning theory

Graduate students are different than grade school or undergraduate students because these individuals are older in age, possess different academic goals, and have more responsibilities. Graduate students possibly have to maintain a career and/or family to while attending classes. These social aspects are important to consider. With multiple social aspects emerging, it can be difficult for graduate students to become academically successful (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995). There are also academic aspects that cause difficulty. The academic aspects that graduate students are responsible for are large workloads and/or constant due dates as course requirements. Although formal education is needed to provide background information on a topic, it is not always provided in an efficient manner that can be reflected on or utilized in the future (Bekerman & Keller, 2003). Numerous studies have shown that the graduate degree requirements are considered as exhaustive or not of quality to graduate students. Studies have also shown that there is a lack of effective learning outcome after a degree is obtained, which leads to attrition (Kausar, 2010). A solution to this higher education issue is rather than increasing stress with social and academic aspects, it is beneficial for educators to provide quality and useful education in order for graduate students to also receive quality education for the futures. A theory that can help this solution is teaching and implementing Kolb's experiential learning rather than primarily stressful academic workloads.

David Kolb, an educator and psychologist, introduced the experiential learning theory in 1975. Kolb believed that the learning process and valuable knowledge are increased by transformation of experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). There is a discrete difference between learners who primarily watch the educator while learning compared to learners who react and participate (Green, 1995). There are must be some level of engagement, understanding, reflection, and application that occur during the learning process to make a lesson relative and/or

useful. This is not to say that formal education should be disregarded, but having the opportunity to also practice active participation helps the learner get a better understanding of the content after formal education is provided. However, graduate students are not able to experience this experiential learning theory if the education given is primarily through lessons and assignments that are more stressful than beneficial. Quality education is considered beneficial when the lesson that can be applied and utilized inside and outside of the classroom, especially for graduate students who may need hands-on learning and experience that can be helpful to their career field.

There are four elements to Kolb's experiential learning theory. The elements go through a cycle that consists of the following: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Stokes-Eley, 2007). The first stage of the cycle is concrete experience, which is when a learner is actively engaged and participating in an educational lesson. The second stage is reflective observation. Reflective observation is the stage when a learner observes and reflects on what they have previously learned. The next stage, abstract conceptualization, is when a learner tries to theorize their observations. Finally, the last and fourth stage of the experiential learning theory is active experimentation. The learner uses their overall experience, previous observations, and formed theories in order to understand how to use the theories in similar contexts in the future. Examples of experiential learning in higher education are group discussions, role-playing, and use of technology.

Literature has been reviewed in order to develop an understanding of the graduate student culture and the importance of experiential learning. The majority of the journal articles reviewed have described how graduate students experience stress while obtaining graduate degrees. Other journal articles reviewed provided information about Kolb's experiential learning theory.

However, there is not much research found on the correlation of graduate students and the experiential learning theory, which calls a need for this topic to be explored.

Review of Literature

College Environment

Before the topic of graduate students is specified, understanding the overall college environment could be important. The college environment is known “for its knowledge transmission (teaching) and knowledge production (research) function” (Gumport & Snyder, 2002, p. 403). Regardless of what level a student is in during their academic studies as a college student, there is one relatable factor: the goal to successfully obtain a degree (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams III, & Wiklund, 2002). The general purpose of college environments is to educate students successfully. It can be difficult to obtain a degree or successfully educate a student due to various social and personal reasons, but colleges can put students at ease with the overall school environment with innovation, encouragement, supportive faculty, and information education (Bassis, 2003 & Bekerman & Keller, 2003).

Culture of Graduate Students

According to the National Center of Education Statistics’s *Profile of Graduate and First-Professional Students* survey, 65.3% of all potential graduate students in the United States obtained a Master’s degree in 2007-2008. In addition, 15.1% obtained a Doctoral degree in 2007-2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Although the attrition rates have increased since 1995, future percentages could improve even more if graduate students’ general perceptions of their education were explored and understood. Research has been limited on

graduate students compared to undergraduate students due to the complexity and multiple factors of graduate students, but the few research found provided valuable information.

The differences of graduate and undergraduate students consist of “age, career state, personal life circumstances, reasons for pursuing an education, and finances” (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995, p. 677). Other examples of graduate students’ difficulties are “expressed frustration with the lack of time available to maintain family and friend relationships, to pursue leisure activities, and to develop new relationships with other graduate students” (Offstein, Larson, McNeill, & Mwale, 2004, p. 403). Although higher education educators do not necessarily have to consider these social and personal factors while developing a course for graduate students, it is better for educators and advisors to be flexible when things like this occur because student attitudes decrease and student attrition increases when they do not feel supported as a student.

Research has found that the results of stress can consist of change of sleeping and eating habits and an increased need for vacations or breaks, but “there is [also] a positive relationship between academic workload and perceived stress among students” (Kausar, 2010, p. 31-32). Assignment and paper due dates are examples of academic workload that trigger various types of stress: “...time pressures are a thread that appears to drive a variety of professional, social, and internal stresses” (Offstein, Larson, McNeill, & Mwale, 2004, p. 407). In one study conducted about graduate students in stressful situations, 19 out of 26 of the surveyed situations derived from the academic workload (Kjerulff & Wiggins, 1976, p. 251). To aid the problem about the need of support and academic workload, graduate students need to be more directly involved with their education. It would be helpful for graduate student to develop strong professional relationships to feel a sense of support and belonging at their educational institution (Pritchard

&Wilson, 2003). It would also be helpful for educators “to consider students as an essential part of the creation of new knowledge. In other words, students may contribute ideas that can develop and enhance the community” (Stubb, Pyhalto, & Lonka, 2011, p. 47).

Also, studies show that “more generally, if they are dissatisfied with the experience, they may also want to quit the program (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995, p. 679), which leads to the question on if higher education needs to be more hands on with their students. One article claimed that students need to be responsible for their own education through two successful approaches: inquiry-guided learning and critical self-reflection (Rusche & Jason, 2011, p. 338). Inquiry-guided learning is “a student-centered learning process that includes questioning, investigation, interpretation, and guidance”, while critical self-reflection “not only improves students’ critical thinking skills but also helps students develop self-knowledge” (Rusche & Jason, 2011, p.339- 341). These two learning approaches help transform a student academically and personally, which is very similar to Kolb’s experiential learning theory.

Experiential Learning Theory

David Kolb’s experiential learning theory consist of four elements with specific distinctions, are concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing) (Green, 1995 & Stokes-Eley, 2007). The uniqueness of this learning theory compared to others is that Kolb believed that “learners ‘learn how to learn’” and “learning is a cycle wherein most people understand concepts better when the message and/or concept is presented from four different perspectives” which has the possibility to target different types of learners (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 297 & Stokes-Eley, 2011, p. 27).

Reflection is an aspect that occurs during the experiential learning process, which can help learners to understand and apply what they learn in different situations. This provides learners the ability to “adapt this learning to new situations” as well as increasing individual development (Daudelin , 1996 & Garner, 2000). Examples of reflective techniques that promote experiential learning consist of reflective writing, creative summaries, representations, perspective taking, and interactions. After the experiential learning process and reflection, one important result of experiential learning is lifelong learning. Experiential learning encourages the learner to take the responsibility of their own education and to eventually develop into lifelong learners. Lifelong learners gain “the ability to regulate their work experiences and learning in ways that are both goal relevant and enjoyable and interesting”, which can improve professional development in graduate students (Sibthorp, Schumann, Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, & Rathunde, 2011, p. 389).

Methods to achieve experiential learning should be the obligation of both educators and students. An article challenges educators to have the ability to recognize, respect, and respond effectively to their students. In addition, educators need to have a variety of educational tools and lessons because “each person has the ability to articulate the desired learning outcomes; the mix of learning activities that work best; the range of print, visual, experiential, and human resources that would be useful” (Chickering, 2006, p. 9). On the other hand, students need to be responsible to actively participate. An example would be asking questions in class to learn to transform the classroom into an engaging environment (Pedrosa de Jesus, Almeida, Teixeira-Dias, & Watts, 2006).

Kolb’s experiential learning theory has been criticized in research as well. The theory is limited in methodology since the “use of Kolb is not synonymous with the concept of assigning

students to learning styles and associating those with degree courses” (Garner, 2000). The overall idea behind of experiential learning is clear, but the learning styles to support the theory are varied. Also, the experience from experiential learning may not become altered by the learner if needed. Individuals may not want to change from their original experience and preconceived abstracts even if they learned the concept inaccurately or individuals may not want to re-experience an educational lesson or situation due to previous observations or conceptualizations (Cunningham, 2007). Therefore, the learning process also has to include theoretical and research based information.

Discussion

The culture of graduate students is unique to other academic groups because of the variety of aspects that may emerge during their educational journeys. Different cases of emotional, social, and financial factors can occur, which may cause students to drop out of their respective graduate programs. Rather than effectively learning from their academic workload, graduate students are more focused on feeling overwhelmed with stress. However, if an educational institution provides quality support and education, then students will feel a sense of belonging, which allows students to reflect on their education and increase the need to reach academic goals.

A method to provide quality education is through Kolb’s experiential learning theory, which promotes critical thinking, reflection, and responsibility in graduate students. This literature review does not claim that traditional education should be avoided altogether, but that it can be beneficial to integrate experiential learning with it. With this mixture, graduate students will learn different concepts through instruction while experiencing the concept in depth through

previous observations and experiences. This type of learning can be utilized in the futures of graduate students academically, professionally, and personally. Although there are Kolb critics and limited research on graduate students and experiential learning, there is validity to continue exploring this topic to relation to reducing attrition in graduate students as well as benefiting higher education professionals.

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