

Article

The Contribution of Experiential Learning to the Development of Cognitive and Social Skills in Secondary Education: A Case Study

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to approach the concept of experiential learning and describes the implementation of the project teaching method in a secondary school in Athens. In the framework of this study, we carried out qualitative research using the method of in-depth interview. We aimed at recording the views, perceptions, feelings and attitudes of 20 students that participated in the project “Traditional dances from different parts of Greece.” The results showed the significant impact of experiential learning on acquiring knowledge and developing social skills and students’ attitudes, while contributing to the promotion of cultural heritage and the values of tradition. This is an original research study that depicts experiential learning in teaching as well as analyzing the teaching method of the project in combination with other different experiential/energetic educational techniques. In general, trainers and scientists of pedagogy and school psychology can use the results to design and implement educational programs in schools of all educational levels based on the experiential teaching method of learning.

Keywords: experiential learning; learning by doing; active learning; energetic educational techniques; project; knowledge; skills; reflection; self-efficacy

“Only what you accepted with your soul, that’s what you are learning and that you incorporate into your life and character.”

Dewey

1. Introduction

The rapid socio-cultural developments and ever increasing educational needs gear towards new pedagogical approaches to the educational process. The teacher-centered assimilative learning of traditional teaching is gradually being abandoned and it is being replaced by the learner-centered active/participative learning experience.

The concept of learning, according to Tight (2002) [1], is defined as the change in the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals. Shunk [2] considers that learning is the acquisition and modification of knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs, attitudes and different behaviors such as the process in which the individual’s cognitive potential changes as a result of the diverse experiences the person is processing.

Gardner (1983) [3] supported the theory of multiple intelligences and reported that there are eight types of intelligence: Musical, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Logical/Mathematical, Verbal/Linguistic, Visual/Spatial, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalistic, which influence the process and effectiveness of learning.

Experiential learning is based on the principle of “learning to do” by C. Rogers (1969), and it refers to the use of pupils’ knowledge and experience in the educational process, where they develop life skills and form a positive attitude towards life [4]. Experiential learning is an active learning approach that enables trainees to use and process critically their experiences and learn. At the core of the learning process in experiential learning are pupils themselves, and the effectiveness of learning depends on “how to learn” and “how to think.”

The students’ active action motivates their incentives and develops their cognitive and social skills, which become necessary for self-defined learning and positive management of difficult situations (Wudinger 2005) [5]. During the experiential teaching, students participate actively, mentally, emotionally and socially during the educational process. The teacher is a member of the team and works with learners to create learning situations for learning experiences that help them interact with learning material.

The teacher has empathy, accepts and understands the needs of the trainees (Kokkos, A., 1999) and manages to understand the obstacles that appear in the course of their learning (Courau, 2000) [6,7]. He enables the members of a group to communicate verbally and non-verbally, to interact, to reflect, to impersonate, to share knowledge and feelings and to cultivate their creative thinking and imagination.

2. Theoretical Approach to Experiential Learning

Many researchers have approached the concept of experiential learning, highlighting the very important role in the educational process. Dewey (1916) attaches great importance to the experience and active participation of students in the learning process [8], and Houle claims that “experiential learning is the result of direct participation in life events” [9]. J. Piaget (1973) argues that the transformation of an individual’s experiences is an energetic process that leads to the understanding of the experience and the development of the individual’s creative skills [10]. During this, their experience changes the way of their thinking resulting in new ideas and interpretations. Vygotsky (1978) talks about the social dimension of learning and highlights the role of the group in shaping the individual view [11]. He also considers that through social interaction individuals acquire knowledge, develop skills and competences and shape their attitude and behavior. Knowles (1978, 1984), in Andragogy theory, states that the learner is at the center of the educational process and emphasizes the needs, the characteristics of adult learners, their self-perception and the self-management of their learning [12,13]. Freire (1977, 1983) [14,15], for his part, argues that education will release trainees belonging to socially excluded groups. He believes that when learners become aware of the conditions they live in, these conditions will challenge them to lead themselves to social change. Social change will come through critical thinking and collective learning. He considers that the teacher should move away from the role of the traditional “teacher” and apply the dialogue with his trainees.

Kolb (1984), Mezirow (1991) and Jarvis (1998) define learning as a process in which the individual processes and modifies the experiences he has already experienced in order to better adapt to social reality [16–18].

David Kolb developed the theory of empirical learning, or the “learning cycle” [16]. In his work, Kolb stresses that experiential learning and critical thinking are the focus of the learning process. Kolb considers that learning consists of four elements and the learner is at the center. It is about a holistic approach that incorporates experiences, logic, emotions, senses, active experimentation, critical reflection, connections and intelligence, which leads to metacognition. The trainee in the educational process can start the learning process from anywhere in the circle.

C. Rogers (1969) developed the person-centered theory and underlined the active participation of the learner [4], describing the role of the trainer as an animator and facilitator of learning.

Mezirow (1991) developed the theory of Transformative Learning [17]. The key points of this theory are based on experience and that is the starting point for the transformation of established beliefs. Mezirow believes that through critical reflection and communication based on rational dialogue, the trainee can thoroughly review his assumptions and look for the meaning of their erroneous perceptions in order to revise them and lead them to change.

Jarvis (1998) [18] perceives the education system as a whole and accepts the systemic approach to education, considering that learning is a complex process that takes place through the learner's interaction and the socio-political context in which he lives. Jarvis [19] considers that learning begins when an adult experiences a social experience and, with critical thinking, accepts or rejects their ideas and knowledge.

Illeris (2016) [20] argues that in the learning process the learning content, the motivation of students to participate actively in the learning process, and the environment that unfolds the educational process interact with each other. He believes that learning is the result of internal changes and the rendering of different meanings in his life.

In addition, recent years' research in neuroscience has confirmed that experiential learning arises from the structure of the brain, since experiences, critical reflection, abstract concepts and generalizations and experimental control trigger the brain's cortex [21].

The processes and methods used in experiential learning contribute to acquiring knowledge, but also to process an understanding of the pupils' personality (Kamarinou, 1998) [22]. One of the important issues directly related to the effectiveness of the educational process and the active participation of students is the choice and application of active educational techniques used in the project teaching method, which can lead to better learning results. Examples of experiential/active learning techniques that enhance student's active participation, interaction and communication are questions—answers, discussion, role play, case study, simulation, educational visits, brainstorming, avalanche, expert interview, exercises, group work, art education and debate.

The project teaching method is considered a flexible educational process without predetermined limits and rules. The framework is tailored to the participants' stimuli and interests. From the personal participation in a project and the deepening in its features, one can perceive the experiential character, the limits and the potential of the method (Kelly, 1983) [23].

Frey (1986) [24] considers the project method as a way of group teaching with the simultaneous participation of teachers and pupils, the process of which evolves according to the interests and interaction of all participants.

In conclusion, the use of the project method is a creative teaching tool, which requires the development of communication relations among learners and between trainers and trainees. Students in the implementation of the projects have the opportunity to use their experience and to acquire basic knowledge and social skills that will help them to better adapt to the social environment.

3. The Implementation of the Project Method in the School

The learning process through the project method is based on the learners' self-action on the subject of teaching following specific stages through collective teamwork. The project "Traditional dances from different parts of Greece" was designed in a secondary school to help the development of communication and collaboration skills among students and strengthen their cognitive and social skills as well. The design of the project's research work included the following stages (Table 1):

Table 1. The stages of planning of the project method.

STAGES	DESCRIPTION
STAGE 1	Selecting a theme
STAGE 2	Formation of the team
STAGE 3	Define purpose and individual objectives
STAGE 4	Locating the sub-modules.
STAGE 5	Collection of data
STAGE 6	Feedback
STAGE 7	Redefine
STAGE 8	Schedule activities
STAGE 9	Organization and archiving of educational material
STAGE 10	Organization of the presentation
STAGE 11	Final presentation—Diffusion of results
STAGE 12	Evaluation

A detailed analysis of the steps is following:

STAGE 1: Selecting a theme. The theme “The traditional dances from different parts of Greece” was chosen among others related to art and science. The students voluntarily chose the subject and showed enthusiasm and joy for action, responsibility and positive mood for work. The subject is related to the culture and cultural heritage of Greece while recognizing the importance and value of traditional dances.

The teachers involved in project coordination were familiar with the traditional dances and with issues related to culture and tradition. The students said, “*The main reason they chose this project was to learn how to dance, get in touch with culture and traditions, and develop their sociability.*” Antigone stated, “*Dance has no age, places, flags, and languages. If you know the steps then you can dance too.*” Odysseus said, “*Dances show the culture, customs and customs of your homeland,*” and Ariadne added, “*Dance is for man the expression of a body of spirit and soul.*”

STAGE 2: Formation of the team. Twenty students declared the project as their first choice and expressed their interest in the subject; most of them did not know how to dance and had no previous project experience.

The group was formed with the sole criterion of their first preference for dancing regardless of gender, age and nationality. During the first meeting, after appropriately arranging the venue in the III configuration, they became acquainted with each other by using the pairing technique with the aim of creating a group and learning spirit. Subsequently, through the educational technical work in groups, the students’ educational needs and expectations were investigated and all members of the group established the educational contract with the rules of common acceptance. The rules set by the team were about honesty, confidentiality, respect, consistency, careful listening and avoiding friction among team members.

STAGE 3: Define purpose and individual objectives. The overall purpose of the project was to learn the traditional dances and to participate in the local student festival organized by the local municipality. The specific objectives were defined through the cooperation of the teams, and they were:

- To mobilize and express themselves through dance,
- To express through their body movements their feelings and to share their experience through dancing,
- To communicate and interact with each other by developing their sociability,
- To study the history and music of the dances,
- To strengthen their self-esteem and empower their personality,
- To improve their behavior and change their attitude towards life, and
- To acquire self-knowledge and relate to different people.

The project consisted of two parts: the practical and the research. In the practical part, the students learned various dances with the choirmaster's guidance, and during the research, the pupils worked, in smaller groups, through the sub-modules set up by the team.

STAGE 4: Locating the sub-modules. The students through their work in groups expressed their desire about which dances they wanted to learn and study. They were:

- Dances from Epirus,
- Dances from Thrace,
- Dances from Crete,
- Dances from other islands, and
- Dances from Pontus.

The team was divided into five subgroups and each one undertook the research of a dance in relation to the following subdivisions, which emerged from the collaboration of the groups:

- The story of each dance,
- The origin of each dance,
- When each dance is danced,
- Men and Women dances,
- Tradition and customs of the place associated with each dance,
- Costumes of each dance, and
- Visit to places with traditional dances.

Each team assigned a representative from the group itself, who organized and coordinated the work of small groups.

For the best delimitation and performance of the teams, a specific timetable had to be set.

STAGE 5: Collection of data. The sources that the students gathered their research data from were the Internet, books, articles in magazines, educational visits to places with traditional costumes and interviews with specialists who knew the variations and the history of dances.

STAGE 6: Feedback. At each meeting, the small groups presented their research work in plenary with the aim of feedback and sharing experiences and emotions they experienced during the research process.

The two coordinators that coordinated the team had a mentor role, so they encouraged and guided the trainees in the research process and handled difficult situations when needed. It was important for the students to understand the importance of the research process and the achievement of educational goals, regardless of the outcome, and this was the task of the trainers-consultants.

STAGE 7: Redefine. In this phase, the mid-term evaluation was carried out in order to assess the progress of the project and the progress of the work of the teams. Thus, it was necessary to redefine the training contract and to recall the objectives, mainly in the rules that had to do with the consistency in attendance and departure of the team members, but also the observation of the schedule.

STAGE 8: Schedule activities. During this phase, educational activities and visits were carried out. The participation of the group of students in the student festival of the local municipality was very important. For this purpose, a PowerPoint, a CD-ROM, a poster and a photo album were created. The presentation of the dances by the group to the local community has strengthened our students' self-esteem and self-confidence.

STAGE 9: Organization and archiving of educational material. Each trainee individually and at the team level maintained a portfolio that included a calendar, printed material, CD, photographic material and everything else that is useful in drawing up the paper and presenting the results. All the material is stored in a file on the PC per group.

STAGE 10: Organization of the presentation. As part of the diffusion of results, small groups worked together to decide how to present their work to the educational community.

STAGE 11: Final presentation—Diffusion of results. After the end of the research process, students presented the project to the educational community. The presentation was performed by dancing the dances they learned and announcing the learning outcomes of the research process through a PowerPoint. The presentation was supported by viewing videos and photos from their participation in the festival, as well as from educational activities and team visits.

The presentation enabled the trainees to cultivate their oral and communicative skills, their persuasion, their argumentation and their readiness to answer the questions and queries of the attendees, while at the same time reinforcing their self-confidence by strengthening their personality.

STAGE 12: Evaluation. After the presentation, the final evaluation of the project's progress and the achievement of the objectives was carried out with qualitative methods. The qualitative method was followed through an interview to see if the objectives were achieved, how they were achieved, to what extent they were achieved or why they were not achieved.

The evaluation criteria set by the group members were:

- The content of the research work,
- The skills acquired at the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes,
- The organization and presentation of the project, and
- Promoting suggestions for improving the research process.

The majority of the students were very satisfied with their participation in the project and stressed the benefits they gained in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, while they expressed their desire to be given the opportunity to learn more dances and in smaller groups in order to be more flexible and manageable.

4. Methodology

4.1. The Method

After the completion of the project implementation, the evaluation of the effectiveness of the method was carried out, following the methodology of qualitative research, which can contribute to the emergence of new elements and theories.

The in-depth interview is one of the most important methods in qualitative research. Its choice was considered the most appropriate tool as it relates to the purpose and objectives of this research. The qualitative method attempts to collect and interpret information, situations, events, behaviors, experiences, thoughts, feelings and opinions of the participants and to understand the social influences they have received.

Extensive interviews with learners provide the researcher with the opportunity to explore and elaborate in depth about a social or educational situation.

The analysis of interview data was done through the method of content analysis.

4.2. The Sample

The sample consists of 20 students at the aged of 18 years old. The participants, 13 girls and 7 boys, are students of secondary education (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographics.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage%	Age
Boys	7	35.0	18
Girls	13	65.0	18
Total	20	100.0	

The selection of the participants took place among 120 students, with the main criterion of expressing interest in the thematic project on traditional dances. They declared their preference in

a printed-paper that included all the themes that would be in the school. Twenty-four declared traditional dances as their first choice. Finally, four decided to join other projects before we formed the group. After the project had begun, two students from other projects expressed the wish to attend the traditional dances, too. We did not accept them as the group had already been set up and the project had begun.

In order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees, the names of the students were replaced with names from ancient Greece.

4.3. Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted by using an in-depth interview. There were open questions and we used the method of content analysis for their analysis.

Three main axes were defined:

1. Demographics
2. Thoughts and feelings before participating in the project
3. Reflections and feelings after participating in the project

Demographics included gender and age.

The research questions on the second axis were:

- Why do I want to participate in the project?
- How do I feel about participating in the project?
- What will I benefit from by participating in the project?

The research questions on the third axis were:

- How did I experience the process of the project?
- What did my project benefit from?
- How do I feel about my participation in the project?

The purpose of the interview was to collect as much information as possible about the experiences, views, attitudes and representations of the participants (Iosifidis, 2008) [25]. The processing of the qualitative data was done using the content analysis method, which allows the in-depth processing of unstructured material and a large number of quality data, providing rich information (Vamboukas, 2006) [26].

The steps taken to interpret the qualitative data were:

1. Recording of the interviews, upon the written consent of the participants
2. Transcribing the interviews in a word file
3. Reading the material and familiarizing ourselves with the data
4. Classifying participants' responses and eliminating the material that was irrelevant to the research objectives
5. Coding the answers and modifying the answers to categories
6. Content analysis
7. Findings-Results.

The analysis of the data resulted in important conclusions that correlated with the way students experienced experiential learning through the project method and the effective implementation of the method in the curriculum.

4.4. Results

From the axes and the research questions, it was found that the participants had a positive experience in implementing the project about traditional dances.

The results showed that 12 out of 20 participants had no project experience and stated in their interviews that they experienced the process as *“an unprecedented and enjoyable experience,”* as Plato said. Some of the participants felt stressed and uncertain how they would do it. *“I’m anxious about if I can make it out,”* Aphrodite said.

However, most participants described their participation as *“an authentic way of entertainment and exhilaration, as the mind and the body co-ordinate,”* as Euryclia said, and they could freely express their feelings. Patroklos stated, *“I feel pleasure, joy and responsibility,”* and Estia said, *“I feel it is an expression of body and soul. The mind and the body are coordinated, emptying the mind and feeling cheerful, joyful and self-confident.”*

The acquisition of knowledge is through a journey that enables students to explore, discover, collaborate, mobilize their senses and express their feelings. Learning becomes an interesting, creative and enjoyable experience that everyone has something to testify to and exchange with others. *“We learned traditional songs, historical figures, geography, traditional costumes and worked together,”* said Hercules, and Hera added, *“We learned to coordinate our movements within the ensemble.”*

The students spoke about the atmosphere of excitement and creativity that prevailed in the group meetings. Artemis stated, *“I feel proud and fortunate to have finally been given the opportunity to participate in the dance project,”* and Epicurus said, *“I feel great pride and joy to learn with my classmates the traditional dances of all the regions of my homeland.”* Homer said, *“I had the feeling of teamwork and the whole,”* and Hermes said the project, *“personally rested me with the fatigue and the stress of everyday life and I liked it because a happy and friendly atmosphere was created.”* Phoebe said typically, *“I liked the project because we mobilized ourselves and got familiarized with each other.”* Athena also completed, *“I learned to be more patient and disciplined.”*

The relationships within the group were equal and based on the relationship of trust and understanding. Iphigenia said, *“I respected others and gained sociability.”* Students found ways of self-expression, self-determination, became more creative, strengthened their self-esteem and developed critical thinking and social skills. Nefeli said, *“I felt very happy and strong to be able to participate in the dance project,”* and Sophocles said, *“It ensures good health, well-being, good physical condition, nice body, kind soul, cultured spirit and I feel great.”*

The participants also considered the pedagogical relationship between their teachers and them very important. Alkistis stated, *“they are not just teachers . . . it is more than that. They inspire us and we learn from them life lessons,”* and Pericles added, *“I feel encouraged, and that brings me up psychologically.”*

When developing the project, the pupils’ personal experiences became the guide for the next steps and new cognitive horizons opened. *“Our music and rhythm cultivate the perception of harmony and beauty, but they teach us self-discipline and self-control,”* said Euriklia, while Socrates stated, *“it makes you behave, respect, cooperate with all people regardless of their country of origin and appreciate life.”*

5. Discussion

The findings of this research have provided significant insights into the effectiveness of the project’s experiential method. Respondents stated that in a pleasant and creative atmosphere, they learned to approach a holistic issue, and through the collaboration with the teams, they discovered new methods of examining and analyzing a problem according to their needs and interests.

Vaikusis et al. (1999) also support this [27]. They report that everyone learns in their own way and pace, connecting the learning object with their vital interests. The participants expressed their feelings of joy and pride from their participation in the project with the traditional dances, which is in agreement with Georgopoulos and Tsaliki, (1993) [28], who particularly emphasized the project’s experiential character. Students feel that *“they fulfill a great desire, learn to dance and understand the deeper concepts associated with traditional dances.”* Thus, they learned to set goals, analyze, explore, reunite a cognitive object, organize activities and evaluate them, discovering new learning processes. This fact confirms the basic principle of education that C. Rogers (1969) [4] pointed out: that students *“learn how to learn.”* The participants had the opportunity to redefine their views and attitudes, regarding

the way some dances are danced, and the deeper concepts related to traditional dances. They confirm Kossivaki (2003) [29], who claims that in this process, all the senses that mobilize the brain provide the possibility of a multifaceted analysis and determination of an issue, while at the same time utilizing many functions of the brain take part.

The project method is based on the needs, aspirations and interests of the students themselves, and the learner is the focus of the learning process, confirming Vaikoussis et al. (1999) [27]. In their work, they emphasize that in the learning process the students themselves become the creators of their knowledge based on their own pre-existing knowledge and experience; they become self-confident and more self-reliant.

Through communication and interaction, participants use their experiences, are encouraged, cultivate critical thinking, develop skills and are led to self-awareness and emotional maturity. This is in line with Bakitzis (2000) [30], who argues that his pedagogical experiential experience aims to create an environment that provides the opportunity for experiences that facilitate the intra-psychic processes and shape the psychic world, personality, needs, motives and the learner's interests.

Students consider their relationship to their teachers to be very important. The teacher in the implementation of the teaching method project has a coordinating role and is the facilitator of the learning process. The teacher is a mentor and consultant who creates the appropriate educational conditions for the team to operate in a climate of trust, acceptance and reflection, confirming Kamarinou (1999) and Navrides (1977), who claim that the teacher can share with the learner the communicating learning game by promoting cooperative-group activity for the realization of teaching objectives [22,31]. The teacher encourages the learners to participate in the learning process by taking care to participate actively in all phases of the project, from planning and targeting to assessment, as Kokkos reports (1999) [6].

The students stated that their relationship with the teaching subject was not only verbal but also experiential. The participants underlined that the experiential experience of the project helped them to seek information, evaluate it and make good use of it, confirming A. Rogers (1999) [32], who claims that it is important for students to relate to learning, so that they can see progress on their approach and gain confidence. Their participation in the student festival of the local municipality and the presentation of the project in the local community are important indications that the implementation of the program does not stop in the classroom and the activities are transferred to the rest of social life. Frey (1986) reports that this helps students acquire knowledge and skills of communication, co-operation, argumentation and persuasiveness. One of the most important features of the method is the point that it allows students to communicate effectively and equitably. This fact confirms Frey (1986) [24], who stated that the project method is a method of group teaching in which everyone participates decisively and that the teaching itself is determined and conducted by all the participants.

In conclusion, the use of the project method is a creative model of teaching, which requires the development of relationships of trust and communication between learners and between trainees and trainees.

6. Restrictions and Proposals for Future Research

This study was based on qualitative research using the in-depth interview method. Through the in-depth interview method, we attempted to explore students' views, perceptions, beliefs, feelings and attitudes regarding their participation in the experiential teaching method.

The research found out that one of the constraints of the research was the frame of time and the place where the interviews of the twenty students had to take place, which influenced the dynamics of the group that participated in the project.

Also, despite the fact that the present research was conducted in a large number of students, it is considered that future research is needed, with the parameter "how much" and "how" the experiential method of the project affects in the pupils' relations and their relationship with the trainers, in order to comprehensively record the pupils' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, feelings and attitudes. In addition,

more schools in the area of Attica could be included in the research or wider research at a national level. This would have the effect of capturing the particularities of each region regarding the implementation of the project teaching method and pupils' characteristics so that the results can be comparable with the application of the method and their generalization to the wider population. A very important parameter would be to extend the research to the team of coordinator trainers who coordinate the project and to explore their own opinions, perceptions of feelings and attitudes from their experiential experience. Research would be of particular interest if we investigated the effectiveness of traditional teaching techniques applied to the teacher-centered teaching model and did a comparative study of results in relation to the effectiveness of experiential active learning techniques at the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

However, this study highlights the importance of the project-based teaching method in the context of the student-centered teaching system that the trainee himself builds his knowledge and acquires life skills by creating a positive attitude of life while providing the appropriate background so that a future research should be based on it and be extended to more target groups.

7. Conclusions

This study presents important evidence for the effectiveness of the project teaching method, and it regards the importance of selection and its use in secondary education.

It is commonly accepted that learning is an energetic process in which the individual exploits pre-existing knowledge, perceptions and skills, understands his experiences, organizes the product of his processing into structured knowledge and is lead to self-knowledge. The project's position highlights a problem related to role, purpose and value, but above all the relationship with learning and teaching, so that teaching is more effective in the educational process.

Teachers can integrate the project method into their educational program with the aim of enhancing students' cognitive and social skills, while students themselves, in the context of modern student-centered teaching, have the opportunity to mobilize and explore ideas, perceptions and beliefs by building autonomous knowledge and shaping a positive and dynamic attitude towards life.

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