

The value of "experiential learning" - Show me and I will learn

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The Early Childhood SELO Pasifika Leadership programme offers bi-monthly networking meetings to participants enrolled in the programme. The purpose of the network meetings is to explore the many aspects of Pasifika cultures through hands-on learning and language. One of the key messages echoed from the participants is that they value the hands-on experience as a catalyst for people sharing knowledge and skills, but also the bringing of people together with a common purpose.

WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

There is a wide range of research on the value of experiential learning. Haynes (2007) describes experiential learning as learning through action, doing, through experience, through discovery and exploration. Although learning content is important, learning from the process is at the heart of experiential learning.

Kolb (1984) signaled that experiential learning contains four elements: active experimentation (doing), concrete experience (experiencing), abstract conceptualization

(thinking), and reflective observation (reflective). He described each one of these elements as an essential part of the critical thinking process moving beyond rote learning. It provides a better understanding of the material and instructors can increase their enjoyment of teaching.

MY OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

“Show me and I will learn”.

The foundation of my own learning through ‘hands-on experience’ began at home, where my mother showed and taught me how to weave a mat. My mother was very skilled and a fast weaver, and it was one of her daily chores that she carried out during the early hours of the morning until dawn. The process of weaving appeared simple as I watched my mothers’ hands weaving the strips of pandanus through, under, and over each strip. It took me a while to get the strips of pandanus in the right order with the help from Mum.

Once I mastered the skills of weaving, she let me do the rest until it was completed. Through the process, I often checked, asked questions, and reflected on what I was doing.

It was a moment of pride when I had completed a mat, and I enjoyed the feel of success about learning a new skill. This experience really affirms my beliefs that learning a new skill involves seeing and doing.



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ACTION

At a recent Pasifika Leadership network, the Pasifika leaders set up three stations for ‘ei’ making, coconut opening, and coconut creations for hands-on learning about cultural resources. This was an opportunity for two Cook Island teachers, to share their cultural knowledge about the weaving of ‘ei’, the flower garland in the Cook Islands culture, which depicts the importance of love, respect, and friendship.

Step by step they showed and demonstrated the weaving of ‘ei’ with fresh flowers and leaves. Once the teachers began working on their ‘ei’, the noise level was phenomenal as there was laughter, teachers helping others and exchanging of conversations.



Teachers who were involved in the coconut experiences followed the same procedures with Pasifika teachers, demonstrating the coconut cracking and removing the flesh from the shell. This led to coconut creations in many different forms.

While teachers were engaged through the process, a Palagi teacher commented, "I have never thought that you can make other things from coconut shells. I thought it was only used for musical instruments".

Through the hands-on experience process, teachers were actively engaged in posing questions to their Pasifika sisters, experimenting, problem-solving, being curious, being creative, being selective of what materials to be used.

TAKING THE LEARNING BACK TO THE CENTRE



"I didn't know it was so easy", is a comment from one of the participants, as she shared her experiences of taking her learning about using coconuts from the resource-making network to implement into her own service. After connecting with this experience of using coconuts, a Pasifika child went home and told his grandparent about it. His grandfather then came into the centre to extend this learning by showing how the coconut is opened, the process of drinking the juice, making coconut cream, making coconut biscuits, and to tell the coconut legend of Sina and the Eel. This experience enabled teachers to strengthen relationships with this Pasifika family and has given them the confidence to connect in deeper ways with other children and families in the service. During the facilitator's visit at the centre, the centre supervisor commented that they hadn't got to know the grandfather in four years, yet they had got to know him through such a simple experience as the coconut day at the centre.

This comment signifies the change of teachers' implicit ideas, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs. It allows teachers to visualise, to understand, and enact the assumptions and implications of different perspectives to make sense of cultural practice.

WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUCCESS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE PASIFIKA LEADERSHIP NETWORK?

- Leaders taking the learning back to their centres strengthened relationships and enabled families to contribute cultural knowledge and participate with children and teachers at the centre.
- Providing teachers with experiential learning of another culture challenges teachers to investigate and examine their own beliefs and attitudes towards another culture. This enables them to reflect on how their attitudes and beliefs might positively or negatively impact on the effectiveness of their teaching practice in early childhood settings.
- Teachers can step up as leaders in relation to sharing their cultural knowledge with their palangi sisters in authentic ways that enables them to strengthen respectful and responsive relationships, and be conscious of each other's ideas and values.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured within the group and beyond.
- It engages and motivates leaders and involves them deeply in the learning process of meaningful discovery.
- The planning of a non- threatening learning environment fosters and creates learning in a fun and authentic way.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- Do you recall a memory of experiential learning in both your personal and professional life that inspires you in your work with teachers?
- How can we experience experiential learning in an online strategy?

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