



## Experiential Learning – Case of Emirati Female Students in Dubai

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### Abstract

*This research focuses on the use of engaging assignment projects that I create with industry for student assignments in Brand Management, Innovation Management and Integrated Marketing Communication classes. I teach marketing at Zayed University (ZU), based at the Dubai campus, an all-female Emirati (local nationals) campus. Unlike a traditional Western university setting, these students never or rarely get opportunities to experience a workplace to get work experience while studying. Therefore, it is crucial for me to use experiential teaching and learning methods to help create an engaging environment thus motivating students to learn. Over the last ten years, students from the three courses that I mentioned above have done their major class assignment projects with Garnier, Lancôme, L'Oréal, Miral (Warner Brothers Theme Park, Abu Dhabi), Ministry of Finance UAE, Procter & Gamble, MBLM and others. Ruhanen [1] states that such real-life experiential situations where students are required to apply theory to the real world can be immensely valuable. According to Garrick, Chan and Lai [2], "often the real-life problems that students' encounter from industry, are far more meaningful than any carefully worked up examples that they might read in a textbook or have explained by a tutor in a university classroom". Further, Morris [3] states that research into the value of experiential learning is hugely unrealized, also Lourenço [4] found significant gaps between academic requirements and industry expectations. For this research, I will be using Kolb's [5] 'Learning Cycle' concept, I have completed three levels i.e., by providing students a 'Concrete Experience', and always do a 'Reflective Observation', the rubrics I use target the 'Conceptualization of Ideas'. The final phase of this research includes me interviewing the organizations that my students work with to investigate whether 'Active Experimentation' has taken place during the assignment, at internships and the workplace.*

**Keywords:** *Experiential, Learning, Dubai, Kolb, Emirati*

### Introduction

At Zayed University I teach female Emirati (local national) students, unlike students in western societies, my students do not have any work experience, they also do not work and study like most western undergraduate students. Hence teaching courses that need application at the workplace i.e., marketing courses becomes a challenge, for instance when I explain how consumers behave at a Carrefour supermarket, Garnier, Warner Brothers, I don't get that real-life experience and response from my students.

### Literature Review



The act of applying knowledge gained to practice is not a new phenomenon, in fact as early as 400 B.C., Sophocles the ancient Greek tragedian once said, 'one must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it-you have no certainty, until you try' Gentry [6]. According to Glazier, Bolick & Stutts [7] experiential is a method of applied learning, and it should be engaging students "intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically. My first technique to overcome the lack of work experience of my students was for me to invite guest speakers from the industry to make presentations to my class. I began this a few years after joining ZU in 2004, the industry-university interaction and presentations began in earnest sometime in 2008. During my initial four years I built up my network within industry e.g., Dubai Tourism, Jumeirah Hotel Group, Emirates Airlines, Procter & Gamble, Leo Burnett to name just a few. These guests talks and field visit began to slowly translate to a more authentic form of learning e.g., applied/experiential learning, since the past ten years students in my Brand Management, Innovation Management and Integrated Marketing Communication classes have been doing their major assignment with an organization. Some of these companies include Emirates Airlines, Garnier, Lancome, L'Oreal, MBLM, Ministry of Finance United Arab Emirates, Miral Warner Brothers, Procter & Gamble and others. My students also won awards for their class assignments from industry (<https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/awards/2017/miral.aspx>. (<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6830060002875645952/>)

## Background

During Fall 2022, some ten years after I began these experiential learning assignments for my students, I considered doing a research project for which I received a grant from ZU University's Center for Educational Innovation (CEI). I am now beginning to collect data in the form of feedback that I have been receiving from my past students past and present and from the industry partners. 'Dr. Michael's assessment style is where we were required to interact with people and companies to understand and implement what we learn in class', Thomassen & Jorgensen [8] suggested that it was critical to introduce real-life problems in education, and this contravenes learning by rote. According to Bentley [9] a sound gauge of the understanding of knowledge is when students are able to use it in the practical world, outside the bounds of formal educational experience. One of my students mentioned 'after graduating, I got a job easily at Etisalat, and I had to go through several interviews, and I managed to pass through them smoothly with the amount of knowledge and experience I showed to the judging panel'. Another student of mine, who worked on two industry assignments in two courses mentioned 'as a student, this project was a vital element to my experience in marketing for companies because it introduced creative marketing strategies that are both effective and sustainable. By creating a whole campaign alongside my teammates, I gained new innovative marketing skills refining my profile as a marketing student." Further, I kept discovering that the organizations too began learning from my students especially about their target market (young Emirati females), a comment by the Communications Manager of one organization 'during the course of last year we worked with him and his students to develop practical research projects that would aid our understanding of how his students communicate through practical insights, whilst also helping the students understand how we market our brands'. Another practitioner mentions "I am happy to share my view of Prof Ian Michael's passion for building bridges between academia and real-life practice, his students interacted with me, as a practitioner of brand management'. In fact one of executives from a brand management company mentioned the following "I wanted to look at setting a date for the presentation, we were thinking to bring along a client to listen in and give a client viewpoint", proving that the brand management company had such confidence in the quality of the students work that they were inviting a client to watch the class presentation. I was pleased and proud to receive this feedback from another executive 'your students did an amazing job, and you should be very proud of them'. From all these details that I have collected e.g., feedback from students and industry partners, and in accordance with Kolb's [5] 'Learning Cycle' concept, I feel that three phases have been considered in my teaching and student's learning style namely: 'Concrete Experience', the presentations and reports to industry met the 'Reflective Observation', criteria, whilst the creation of the assessments met the 'Conceptualization of Ideas' criteria. By now focusing on doing a qualitative research using in-depth interviews and focus groups, will enable me to achieve the last factor in Kolb's [5] model, which is whether 'Active Experimentation' has taken place. This is the reason that the respondents that I am interviewing include past students on mine either doing a work-based internship or are working in a company either full or part-time. I have also begun contacting the various organization's executives that worked closely with my students and me, those that designed, watched presentations, read reports and



even provided feedback and grades for the groups. I will be sending them a set of open-ended questions and will be carrying out the interviews and focus groups in Fall 2023. Since it is a specific group i.e., Emirati female students who have studied in my class at ZU, a qualitative research method will work well, since this type of a research method allows stakeholders to influence research. During the initial briefing I make sure to inform the participants that their involvement by providing feedback not just makes me reach my research objective, Denny & Weckesser [10] of greater importance is that I learn their views to follow better and best practice for new students enrolling in my classes. The research will also enable me to fine tune specifications with industry partner to make the assessments more real following industry trends e.g., Social Media Marketing, Artificial Intelligence and also best practices within the industry.

## Research Methods

According to Kleinberg & Toomey [11] qualitative methods is an excellent method to enable people to feel listened to, I can agree with them since I am experiencing the energy and engagement I got when doing the first in-depth focus group interview with my past students. Many of them were very appreciative that I am doing this research, comments such as 'I am sure that I will never forget you and you will always be one of the best professors, 'you continued to inspire and motivate us to become better students and employees and always be open to learn and develop'. One of the comments was very inspiring to me 'Your classes were not just plain theory; they were practical as well! I appreciate you giving me the chance to present to market experts and explore further into my specialization, not just touching on the basics of marketing but discussing advanced topics such as neuroscience in marketing and connecting us to experts in that field to enrich our knowledge and background'. This research project funded by CEI, ZU from which this initial paper has been accepted for presentation and being published in the conference proceedings is the beginning of an exciting journey investigating experiential learning, possibly for the first time in the United Arab Emirates if not the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

## Initial Findings

Here I will mention two findings from the first focus group, it was the first time that students got to work on a concept developed by a company. The first time they saw the industry-based project it was overwhelming for undergraduate students, but all enjoyed it as they began working on it.

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