

# Service Based Experiential Learning in Management Education: A Case Study from an Emerging Economy

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**Abstract.** In this research paper, we describe the direct service learning experience of students of a top tier business school in India. Service learning experience was one of the pedagogical tools used during the course, Corporate Social Responsibility. Students were assessed on the basis of their self-reflection, feedback from beneficiaries and joint evaluation by faculty-in-charge and community representatives. The study reveals that students' understanding of social issues, commitment towards society, empathy, responsibility and creative thinking were enhanced after the service learning experience.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, social responsibility, service learning.

## 1. Introduction

Council of Europe – Contribution to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning (SDG 4). India faces significant challenges related to education, for example, the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) for primary education is 87.3%, and 51.26% and 32.3% for secondary and higher secondary education respectively. Gross Enrolment Ratio for tertiary education is 24.5%. Unequal access to education is a major barrier to the delivery of cost-effective quality education.

Christensen *et al.* (2007), in an investigative survey of top 50 higher education schools offering MBA programs (as per Financial Times Rankings, 2006) found that the top 10 B-schools focused on teaching concepts of ethics, sustainability and social responsibility through experiential learning and immersion techniques.

In fact, business education has been criticized for being too focused on academic methodologies, thereby producing less competent and in some cases, unemployable graduates, who have a narrow understanding of business,

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management and sustainability issues. In such a situation, service learning may provide a an opportunity for a stronger foundation in terms of education as well as experience (Godfrey, Illes, and Berry 2005).

In this study, we describe a service based experiential learning approach used during a Corporate Social Responsibility course in a top tier business school in Pune, India (Symbiosis Centre for Management and Human Resource Development - SCMHRD), and evaluate its impact on student learning and the development of the target community. The initiative TE.A.CH (Teach A Child) sought to enable students to learn by engaging with local stakeholders, namely underprivileged children, and contribute towards sustainable development goals.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Experiential and Applied Learning*

Learning is effective if the curriculum is rigorous and the pedagogy addresses the needs of students with varying intelligence levels (Rhodes and Shiel 2007). The onus lies on the faculty to aptly use various student centric learning strategies to make learning effective (Hmelo-Silver and Barrows 2006). Learning should be complemented with proper tools for assessment and evaluation (Preziosi and Alexakis 2011). The teaching fraternity should be flexible in terms of curriculum development, course content and pedagogical changes (Douglas *et al.* 2008). Learning is most effective when the learning process is experiential and the knowledge gained can be applied in real life (Gooden *et al.* 2009, Neimi and Tiuraniemi 2010). According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), experiential learning comprises both concrete experience and active conceptualization. Concrete experience encompasses reflective observation and active experimentation. It is necessary that students' learning experiences are taken into account when carrying out pedagogical changes (Robinson and Taylor 2007) and to enable students to take informed decisions in real life situations (Ferguson 2011). Further, student learning should be ensured through intellectual, social and emotional support (James and Pollard 2011). Learning can be inspired, motivated and nurtured by generating learners' interest, involvement and active participation in real life situations (Kim and Hannafin 2011). These form the basis for applied experiential learning (Christmas 2014). This approach to learning encourages learners to solve existing problems by applying learned knowledge (Hui and Koplín 2011). Combining past experiences, new knowledge and present experiences forms the basis of continuous lifelong learning (Serbessa 2006). Thus, learning by doing must be encouraged (Schwartzman and Henry, 2009) – a model in which the role of the instructor is that of just a facilitator (Silcock and Brundrett 2001). Taking into account the effects of globalization and the changing demands of the business world, it is necessary to alter the way students are educated. In line with the above, the student-centred approach has become

increasingly prevalent among pedagogies (Hudson 2009). To summarize, a student-centric approach combined with differentiated curriculum and assessment paradigms seems necessary to ensure student learning (Klein 2003), especially when considering the variance in student learning styles and intelligence. According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), experiential learning should encompass longitudinal outcome assessment, curriculum development and faculty and student development.

### *Social Responsibility Through Service Learning Experiences*

Service learning is increasingly being adopted by business schools to offer real world learning experiences, as the focus has shifted from class room-based instruction to experiential instruction (Govekar and Rishi 2007). Govekar and Rishi (2007) define service learning thus, “Service learning (SL) is as an educational approach that combines community service projects with credit bearing educational experience” (Govekar and Rishi 2007, p. 4).

According to Goodfrey *et al.* (2005), the four pillars of service learning are: reality, reflection, reciprocity and responsibility. Goodfrey and Grasso (2000) argued that service learning (SL) could be of three types, based on which – service or learning – was given relatively greater importance, or alternatively, both were given equal importance. Several studies, such as the one by Lamb, Swinth, Vinton, and Lee (1998) emphasize that service learning helps in both personal and professional development. The objective of service learning is to develop social sensitivity, and broaden focus from a “career only” approach (Sherwood and Nordstrom 2000). Service learning also gives students the opportunity to participate in client based projects and apply classroom learning to real life situations (Lopez and Lee 2005). Yet, there are limited studies on service learning in the context of business schools (Hagenbuch 2006). According to Andrews (2007), a majority of schools have centres for service-learning activities run by non-academic staff, rather than faculty. They offer service opportunities for interested students on a voluntary basis, sometimes relating it to credit or non-credit courses. SL lacked creditability and acceptance among academic fraternity for a long time (Zlotkowski 1996a). However, in recent years, SL has received due recognition in the curriculum (Kenworthy-U’Ren 2007). Service contribution is now being included as one of the performance appraisal criteria for academic staff (Furco 2007). As more schools have included community involvement as an important part of their mission, its significance in business-related curriculum has increased (Gujarathi and McQuade 2002, Madsen and Turnbull 2006, Andrews 2007). Community involvement creates a win-win situation for students and communities; student expertise helps the community, while the real-world experience facilitates the advancement of students’ careers. Service-learning helps solve problems of the community. The goal of business schools must not be limited to providing functional knowledge, rather, it must extend to inculcating within students’ responsibility towards the community (Gordon and Howell