
EXPERIENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AKHUWAT COLLEGE FOR WOMEN CHAKWAL

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates higher education students' readiness at Akhuwat College for Women Chakwal to learn leadership competencies and apply them in practical leadership scenarios through experiential learning. The underlying theoretical framework for this study builds upon Dewey's Experiential Learning, Kolb's Learning Cycle, and Amartya Sen's capability approach. The research design is qualitative and includes in-depth interviews with college leadership, teachers, and administration followed by classroom observations. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. Findings reveal the leadership competencies that students must develop before they can practice leadership. The themes of the activities are mainly roleplay, case studies, and problem-based learning enabling students to better tackle the given scenarios and related tasks in their academic and professional journeys. The different themes of the activities have been designed based on careful classroom observations followed by discussions with the teachers regarding their understanding of students' needs. These findings subsequently help develop an Experiential Leadership Module for the current students accompanied by a Teaching Guide. This module carries strong implications for students at

Akhuwat College Chakwal to develop leadership skills through experiential learning in higher education through extra-curricular activities.

KEYWORDS

Experiential Learning, Higher Education, Leadership development, Low-SES, Competencies

INTRODUCTION**Experiential Learning and Experiential Leadership**

Experiential Leadership refers to the phenomenon whereby the participants undergo different challenging situations to gain experiential knowledge and understanding pertaining to those instances. The process entails the leaders to engage the students by providing them with relevant contextual realities and helping them formulate results based on their experiences. The idea stems directly from the theory of Experiential Learning. According to Denny (2013), learning leadership experientially means recognizing, naming, and reflecting upon leadership concepts as the individuals experience and materialize them, such as authority, conflict management, team spirit, vision, and engagement in front of their eyes. Thus, experiential leadership brings an opportunity for individuals to navigate the challenges they face and prepare them for eventual succession.

Experiential leadership training plays a significant role in building a better workplace environment. Such an experience accounts for the personal and professional development of the individuals. It fosters the development of soft skills, boosts the morale of the participants, and increases their capability to face challenges. Experiential Leadership connects concepts like team building and innovation that enhance collaboration.

Akhuwat College for Women Chakwal

Akhuwat is a not-for-profit organization founded by Dr. Amjad Saqib in 2001. The philosophy of Akhuwat is based on the Islamic Principle of 'Mawakhat' or 'solidarity' to eradicate inequality and poverty from the world. Akhuwat Education Services is one of the programs that Akhuwat manages by granting the fundamental right to education to all of its citizens. Akhuwat provides a free-of-cost, high-quality education through its intervention in primary, secondary, and higher education. Akhuwat College for Women in Chakwal is a residential college providing education to women from diverse areas of Pakistan. The admissions are merit-based, with reserved seats from all the regions of Pakistan. The college is currently offering four-year undergraduate programs in Economics and English. The first batch from each discipline will graduate in 2023. The focus is mainly on providing a solid academic foundation for women to develop a strong academic base and to survive in the

professional job market. Akhuwat College for Women Chakwal aims to develop leadership in women from diverse cultural backgrounds through experiential learning. The college aims to provide undergraduate students with a safe space to take risks, push boundaries, and succeed in their personal and professional lives. The objective of the college is to transform these women into leaders of tomorrow.

According to the World Bank Report (2019), 7.8% of the total labor force aged 15-24 is unemployed in Pakistan. The sharp dip in the enrollment levels between high secondary schools and universities is one main reason behind the prevalent youth unemployment in the country. Akhuwat happens to be one of the organizations striving hard to bridge the gap by providing quota-based free educational services to less privileged students so that they can qualify for the job market. However, the initiative requires support in the realm of confidence-building of the diverse student body. The concept of free education comes with the problem of multiculturalism and heterogeneous educational experiences. The differences have been limiting the capacity building of students, mostly the domains related to inclusion and confidence uplifting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership is defined as the potential to impact others to make them follow a direction of action. Ralph Stogdill (1948) stated the term leadership as possessing traits like a demonstration of knowledge, confidence, effectively managing and solving problems, and efficient decision-making. Emotional stability, achieving goals, and demonstrating skills are the consistent traits of leadership (Nichols & Cottrell, 2014). There are seven core leadership competencies in addition to digital skills. These include communication, collaboration, information management, creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Van Laar et al., 2017). Moreover, ethical awareness, cultural awareness, lifelong learning, self-direction, and flexibility are identified as contextual leadership skills. There is a long list of twenty-first-century leadership traits in literature, but there is no clear review of how these skills are taught at the undergraduate level.

Dewey (1986) stated, "Learning starts with problems rooted in experiences. For Dewey, experience is at the heart of the educational process; indeed, education is defined exclusively to the extent that it develops and reconstructs experience" (Zedler, 1985). "The concept of education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. The reconstruction or reorganization of experience adds to the meaning of experience and enhances the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey, 1916). While planning an experiential activity for the students, the methods of instruction, subject matter, organization of the social environment, and available materials should be considered and analyzed carefully. Moreover, there should be

room for reflection on the experience. This will help students connect the knowledge gained from experiential learning and experience. John Dewey's experiential learning theory summarizes that knowledge is based on experiences and is socially constructed. The organization of knowledge must be based on actual life experiences and provide the context of the information. The role of the teacher is as a facilitator, and the teacher must organize the knowledge for the students. The role of the learner should be as an active learner, and the quality of the experience is a significant part of the theory. The students must be able to apply the knowledge to the different situations after experiencing them in a specific situation.

Roberts (2007) described the experiential learning process of leaders “as a necessary condition to foster deeper leadership” (p. 17). Kolb (1984) states that “the student will interact in four different phases that are concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing)” (p. 47). Each individual will process the learning through the phases of feeling, observing, reflecting, and doing something to create a new tangible experience (Owens, 2011).

Students in higher education get a chance to engage and participate in their environment through various opportunities such as classroom discussions, societies, and learning groups. In this way, the college provides a foundation to develop leadership skills through experiential learning (Astin, 1993; Roberts, 2007). The student's leadership development is becoming a core element of undergraduate education to strengthen the development of student leaders. This is evident in the literature that learning gained through experience is valuable for students' learning. However, research suggests that if the experience is emotionally charged, they have long-lasting effects that are restored more valid in memory than the neutral events (Buchanan, 2007). Mair and Watkins (2010) find that the leadership development process must be rigorous, hard-hitting, and challenging to prepare leaders for challenging situations. Effective experiential leadership modules at the higher education level require both curricular and co-curricular activities to play a positive role in ensuring confidence-building environments. However, the two sets of activities are seen and dealt with independently of one another in most educational institutions (Manning, 2012). Co-curricular activities, especially, often face neglect in the higher educational institutions that are funded by either the government or private donors. The major reason is their limited visibility in the feasibility reports that generate annual funds for their functioning. However, co-curricular activities play an integral part in students' confidence building and uplifting. These activities tap multiple areas, ranging from reflection to discussions, ensuring enhanced self-confidence. Therefore, co-curricular activities need to be regularly introduced in institutions that are being run by donor-funded money of any sort.

Research has shown that socioeconomic factors affect how students in higher education show their participation in college (Walpole, 2003). Scholars from low socio-economic strata have lesser educational ambitions, perseverance, and educational achievements. Their approach in higher educational institutions results from cumulative life experiences that include parenting styles, schooling, and financial status embedded in the hierarchy. Based on these findings, it is likely that students in Akhuwat College would also import the same learning dynamics in the classroom ecosystem that they have learned throughout their lives. They could also find it challenging to adapt to the experiential leadership module. Hierarchy influences the learning process (Sousa, 2013) and facilitates the transfer of skills and knowledge through various modes. In this program, instructors would be up on the hierarchy, whereas students would seek guidance, learn how to be independent, and challenge the existing norms.

The soft interpersonal skills of leaders impact the choice of pertinent behaviors. One of those skills is empathy. It is one of the most important skills required to practice great leadership. Leaders with elevated empathy can recognize the relevance of different behaviors (Mahsud et al., 2010). The sign of an empathetic leader is that they are more compassionate, encouraging, and beneficial when an aide is concerned about a workplace challenge or burden due to job pressures. An effective leader can develop high-quality relationships with subordinates (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). The high exchange relationships are built on the level of trust, liking, and respect. Empathy plays a significant role in contributing to positive associations and organizational cultures. Thus, empathy drives positive results. It leads to innovation, increases engagement of people at their workplace, and enhances the productivity of people.

Boyatzis and Gunz (1983) developed a framework of social and emotional intelligence competencies that are significant in developing effective relationships. Influential leaders in today's world have highly developed skills in self-management, effective relationship management, and self-awareness. In today's world, there is a need to prepare leaders by the process of educating and developing skills through a hands-on approach. The learning process where students "learn by doing" by engaging and reflecting on some experience is experiential learning. There are opportunities for students to be involved creatively, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically (Kolb, 1984).

Research has demonstrated a positive link between transformational leadership and experiential leadership. The use of an experiential system is directly related to intelligence, and intelligence is linked to leadership. The relational system is linked with emotion. Transformational leaders motivate people by considering their individual needs, relating to their life values, and intellectually stimulating

constructive thinking. So, today's world leaders need to learn how to use their competencies by using emotional intelligence. Experiential leadership will be one of the most effective leadership strategies to cater to 21st-century demands.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate students' readiness from the learning point of view at Akhuwat College regarding a shift from a traditional academic setting towards an experiential learning framework.
2. To understand the competencies required to develop leadership skills in undergraduate students and find out the themes of the leadership development module for students.
3. To explore ways to set up an experiential leadership model that shall help the administration, faculty, and students form an inclusive college environment, which will help maximize student capacity building so that they are both empathetic and market-ready.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the students' readiness from the learning point of view at Akhuwat College regarding a shift from a traditional academic setting towards an experiential learning framework?
2. What are the competencies required to develop leadership skills in undergraduate students and the themes of the leadership development module for students?
3. How can an experiential leadership model be set up that shall help the administration, faculty, and students form an inclusive college environment, which will help maximize student capacity building so that they are both empathetic and market-ready?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted to understand the pedagogy employed by teachers in their classrooms, identify leadership competencies in students, and understand students' readiness to shift from traditional teaching to an experiential learning model to develop leadership skills. It was a qualitative study. Therefore, qualitative interview protocols were employed for data collection from Akhuwat leadership, the college Principal, and the teachers. The interviews with teachers aimed at understanding their classroom practices, students' challenges, and the need for leadership skills for students at this stage either through curricular or extracurricular activities. Interviews were primarily focused because they provide researchers with data that is beyond observations. Observations are confined to data in that particular slot only. Classroom observations were also used to understand the students' needs and their current standing.

Sample of study

In this study, the researchers used purposive sampling for the selection of the participants. Akhuwat College is offering two majors – Economics and English Literature. Researchers interviewed five teachers from both programs. A group of students was selected for the focus group discussions. All the students selected for the focus group discussion belong to low SES and all the students were girls. Both the students and teachers were selected and provided by Akhuwat College.

Instruments of the study

The interview schedule developed for the teachers at Akhuwat College comprised three sections. The first section had six questions that provided demographic details, educational backgrounds, and professional development of the teachers before or during their employment tenure at Akhuwat College. The second section was about student diversity in the college and the challenges faced by students coming from diverse backgrounds. Section two also focused on the teaching methodology and challenges faced by teachers in this process. The third section included questions about leadership development and the importance of a module related to leadership development for higher education students. The primary focus of the interview was to know the perspective of teachers on experiential leadership and identify the competencies that teachers believe are essential for their students to develop before practicing leadership.

Along with the interview protocol, a classroom observation tool was also designed to observe students on the following items: on-task behavior, frequency of responses, cooperative responses, accuracy of responses, and appropriate behavior in the classroom that enables learning.

Data collection

All the interviews were conducted in person. Periodic classroom observations were arranged while considering the academic calendar of the college for optimal results. The Likert scale was used to draw comparisons between different batches.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first research question revolved around gauging student readiness in Akhuwat College for Women, Chakwal, regarding the shift away from traditional modes of learning towards experiential learning. Data was collected using an observation tool, which focused on five variables that would help us identify the levels of students' readiness. The responses were quantified on a Likert scale, and class averages were calculated regarding all these variables, identifying students' interest and readiness toward experiential learning and the pedagogical methods that would be more suitable for a particular class. All classes have shown varying tendencies to shift towards an

experiential learning framework. However, the accuracy and frequency of responses differ for every class, indicating the need for differentiated modes of teaching and facilitation based on current levels of student engagement and relevance. The students who were initially not engaged in the class were also encouraged to participate in the activities. The constant mentioning of 'no one right answer' helped create more engaged classrooms overall.

The researchers identified and used different codes to gauge teachers' perspectives toward experiential leadership through an experiential learning approach. They conducted interviews with college leadership, teachers, administration, and coordinators, each ranging between 30-60 minutes, and scheduled classroom observations of third-year, second-year, and first-year undergraduate students to identify the key challenges (academic and non-academic) they were facing in the college.

The researchers transcribed the data collected from the interviews. The transcriptions, followed by rigorous sentence-by-sentence thematic coding, helped identify the leadership competencies. All the activities for leadership development were designed around the competencies identified in the qualitative data collection. The consolidated codes were then categorized into themes and extracted using the Microsoft Word Extension Doc Tool.

The final categories narrowed down the findings to the competencies that aligned with the prerequisites of practicing experiential leadership at professional and personal levels. The competencies identified through coding were categorized into anticipated and unanticipated themes. Some of the themes expected that emerged from the data were the competencies that students already possessed. Whereas other competencies, as identified by the teachers, principal, and administration, needed attention. The interview with the college Principal and teachers highlighted the issues pertaining to the concept of multiculturalism, and heterogeneous educational experience brings differences. The data analysis revealed that these differences limit the capacity building of the students, mainly in the domain of inclusivity and uplifting confidence. Hence, along with the college administration, the research team collectively decided to work on an experiential leadership model that will help maximize the student capacity building to be empathetic and market-ready. The evaluation also included analyzing confidence-building strategies from peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, and books while understanding ground realities from preliminary data to develop experiential leadership modules that were delivered to college. These findings gave clarity to the researchers about the competencies that needed to be developed in students as prerequisites for developing leadership skills.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The researchers used a qualitative approach for collecting and analyzing data. There were semi-structured interviews with teachers, which were then transcribed, and classroom observations. The data was quantified on a Likert Scale for comparisons drawn within the batches. Based on the data gathering and analysis, the following conclusions have been made regarding the research questions identified earlier.

Findings from students

To gauge students' readiness to shift away from a traditional framework toward an experiential learning module, an observation tool was formulated that helped collect data regarding students' engagement. It can be concluded that students at Akhuwat College for Women, Chakwal, are ready to move towards an experiential learning framework. There is a disparity among the batches, with the senior batches showing more readiness than the junior ones, but this has been considered. The execution of activities in the classrooms has been contextualized based on these differences. Students showed readiness and acceptance of the experiential learning module that has been designed for them.

Findings from teachers

The data was collected through interviews to determine the teachers' understanding of experiential learning and experiential leadership and how much they are ready to accept the change. The teachers had a preconceived notion that leaders are not made, they are born, and their skills can be polished. The teachers also highlighted different competencies they want to inculcate in their students. These competencies were diversity, confidence building, decision-making, communication, language skills, inclusivity, character, honesty, integration, encouragement, positivity, collaboration, etc.

The competencies shared by the teachers showed they have already been thinking and working on moving on traditional standards of education. They want their students to be competitive. Teachers have shared that they want to work on the students' communication skills. They are already trying to enhance the students' confidence by working on their speaking skills. Apart from teachers, they showed keen interest in inclusivity and multiculturalism. These themes have shown us that teachers are already thinking about shifting from the traditional learning standards.

Some competencies were taken out from the literature required for good leaders that can be taught through the experiential leadership process. Most 21st century skills are those that teachers have already shared with researchers. The module that was designed by the research team was based on all these competencies.

DISCUSSION

In the light of findings and data analysis, the discussion now proceeds toward sustainable intervention at the institutional level for undergraduate students. Akhuwat College is an institution that is focused on financially marginalized communities. Observing their tilt towards experiential learning and leadership modules is a good sign of change away from traditional classrooms, where the focus was solely on course completion and academic performance. The institution is now focusing on providing its students with a good academic footing and ensuring that they have the qualities to apply different concepts in different situations and leading in the social environment.

To become sustainable and long-lasting at the College, this project is helping teachers apply the same course design and course delivery concepts in the non-academic domain, which is focused on different leadership competencies. The main interventions of this project are formulating a set of activities that are based on different leadership competencies, making their teaching guide alongside, shaping it as a curriculum as per the need of inculcating specific competencies, and conducting thorough training sessions with the teachers. The impact of our interventions was gauged via interaction with students, to understand their readiness regarding shifting away from traditional classrooms and observing the teachers in their independent conduct of the different activities that were designed. The document was constantly updated based on the observations so that the product is not only contextually relevant but also easily implementable by the teachers at an independent level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the overall results, limitations, and implications of the project, it is recommended that experiential learning and leadership modules have an extensive market that remains untapped owing to the absolute dominance of the traditional school setting. Akhuwat College for Women, Chakwal, is a learning space that is exclusively designed for women of financially marginalized communities. However, there is a clear shift towards experiential learning and leadership modules. Therefore, our primary recommendation is to expand this initiative of introducing experiential learning modules to schools and colleges that cater to the needs of students from the lower-income strata. The idea is to prepare such students for the professional journey in terms of jobs and leadership roles.

Another recommendation that stems from our research is that the teaching manuals and teaching guides need to be formulated not only for the academic stream of education but also for the non-academic domain. By breaking down all the activities according to the BOPPPS structure, the researchers examined that the teachers at Akhuwat College clearly understood how to go forward with such teaching manuals in academic classrooms, reflecting their prior training in the arena. The transition

towards this framework of learning is easy to follow for the teachers. These recommendations stem from the findings regarding the project and observations made while interacting with different stakeholders at the College.

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