

Interactive Methods of Experiential Learning and Employee Skills Development

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Abstract

This paper examines interactive experiential learning methods and their contribution to employee skills development. The purpose of the study is to analyse how experiential learning approaches support the development of cognitive, behavioural and practical competencies within organizations. The paper uses a conceptual qualitative methodology based on literature review and analytical examination of six experiential learning approaches: role-playing, games and simulations, observation, mental imagery, writing tasks and action learning. Findings indicate that experiential methods increase participant engagement, improve knowledge retention, strengthen problem-solving abilities and support teamwork, adaptability and sustainable organizational learning.

Key words: experiential learning; employee skills development; role-playing; simulations;
action learning

JEL Classification: M12, M50, M53, M54

Introduction

Employee training is more effective when learning is organised around practical application, participant involvement and reflection. In many organisational settings, trainer-centered presentations can be complemented or replaced by methods that promote direct engagement with tasks, situations and feedback.

In this context, experiential learning not only improves understanding of concepts, but also paves the way for the development of skills. Experiential learning is a way of learning based on direct experience, in which the employee discovers and understands the information received through action, reflection and practical application.

The concept is associated with David Kolb, who described this type of learning as a cyclical process in four stages - concrete experience (living a situation), reflection (analyzing what happened), conceptualization (forming ideas or rules) and active experimentation (applying them to new situations) (Kolb, 1984).

Despite the growing use of experiential learning in organisational training, the literature still needs a concise synthesis of how specific interactive methods contribute to employee skills development. This article addresses that problem by examining six experiential approaches and discussing their relevance for cognitive, social and practical learning outcomes.

Experiential learning approaches are particularly suited to affective and behavioral learning objectives. They help participants become aware of their own feelings and reactions to new problems and ideas, and allow them to practice and refine skills and procedures.

Accordingly, the paper analyses six major experiential learning approaches—role-playing, games and simulations, observation, mental imagery, writing tasks and action learning—and discusses their contribution to employee skills development in organisational settings (Brookfield, 2013; Herger, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Silberman & Biech, 2015).

Methodology

This article is a conceptual paper based on a focused literature review and comparative analysis of experiential learning methods relevant to employee training. The discussion synthesises major contributions from the specialised literature in order to identify the instructional logic, expected learning outcomes and practical applications of role-playing, games and simulations, observation, mental imagery, writing tasks and action learning. The paper does not report original empirical data; rather, it offers an analytical framework for understanding how interactive experiential methods contribute to employee skills development in organisational contexts. The literature reviewed covers foundational contributions as well as recent studies published between 2021 and 2025.

1. Role-playing

Role-playing is an essential element in any trainer's repertoire. It is an active learning method, based on the exploration of participants' experience and subsequent reflection, with

feedback/debriefing as the central element (Silberman & Biech, 2015). Role-playing is a proven way to facilitate participants in experiencing emotions and training certain skills.

By engaging in authentic scenarios, learners develop communication, decision-making, and problem-solving competencies while experimenting with alternative behaviors in a safe environment.

Harvard Business Publishing emphasizes that experiential learning should be applicable, approachable, and realistic, allowing learners to practice skills that transfer directly to workplace situations (Bonner & DeSmet, 2021).

Similarly, Lana and Tigerstedt (2025) assigned students multiple roles—including consumers, researchers, and marketing analysts—to help them understand consumer behavior from diverse perspectives. This role-based approach encouraged learners to connect theory with practice and fostered critical thinking and reflective learning.

When using Role Playing, the following aspects should be considered:

a. Scenario

The design of role-playing exercises offers multiple options, one of which is related to the scenario of the play. This focuses on the development of roles and the context in which the action takes place.

The following six options can be used: improvisation; prescribed roles; semi-prescribed roles; replay of life; skits prepared by participants; dramatic readings.

Role playing is suitable for both face-to-face and virtual interactions. Structured scenarios work best in a virtual classroom setting.

b. Staging

Another category of options concerns the staging, i.e. the format used for the role play, regardless of the content. Here are five options:

- Informal role play – the role-play can develop naturally from a group conversation;
- Staged role play - a couple, three individuals, or similar can act out scenarios in front of the audience, who will watch and provide feedback;

- Simultaneous role play - all participants can be grouped into pairs for a duo drama or trios for a trio drama, and concurrently engage in their role plays;
- Rotating role play - actors at the forefront of the group can be changed, typically by pausing the ongoing role play and substituting one or more of the performers;
- Repeated role plays - No matter which staging option is selected, the role play can be performed again.

c. Processing

Processing refers to reflective discussions, a debriefing of the role play, or providing feedback on the actors' performance.

There are six processing options:

- Designated observers - each role-playing group can include one or more observers who receive detailed instructions on what to look for and how to provide feedback;
- Self-assessment - the participants can express their thoughts on the experience;
- Open audience discussion and feedback - encourage the entire group to share their thoughts and responses to a role play;
- Small group discussion and feedback - designate a small audience group for each of the role players and request that they talk about what they observed;
- Trainer observations - you can share your feedback on the role play for all to listen;
- Benchmark comparison – the performance can be compared to an ideal script by the observers and the role players.

In addition to the processing options mentioned, video feedback can be included. It is recommended that each person record themselves on their own phone.

Also, to consolidate skills, the classic way to teach a skill is to do a “show and tell” demonstration before asking participants to practice it.

A more active approach is to demonstrate the skill with little or no explanation. Instead of telling participants what you are doing, ask them to carefully observe the demonstration and describe the steps they observed. This strategy encourages attention and reflection.

2. Games and simulations

Some trainers avoid using games and simulations in their programs, fearing that participants will perceive them as artificial or dismiss them as mere entertainment.

Like any other training method, games and simulations have potential drawbacks: used incorrectly or at the wrong time, they can be less effective. Used properly, however, they can be an enjoyable and effective way to achieve training objectives. An important benefit is that they encourage participants to examine their own attitudes and values (Herger, 2014; Silberman & Biech, 2015).

Games and simulations provide immersive environments where learners can practice skills, experiment with decisions, and experience consequences without real-world risks.

Harvard Business Publishing identifies immersive simulations and gamified challenges as effective methods for increasing learner engagement and motivation (Bonner & DeSmet, 2021).

Likewise, experiential learning platforms frequently incorporate simulations, quizzes, and game-based activities that encourage active participation and collaboration (Pappas & Sangtani, 2022).

Simulations are particularly valuable because they allow learners to make mistakes, reflect on outcomes, and improve performance through repeated practice, thereby strengthening knowledge retention and skill development.

Games and simulations contribute to a holistic understanding of the course content.

3. Observation

Observing others without direct participation can be an effective method of learning. While hands-on practice has value, observation plays an important role in training design, as long as it is active, not passive (Silberman & Biech, 2015).

Three formats are commonly used in observation activities:

- Using observers as an audience for a demonstration, video, role play, or other “on-stage” performance.

- Assigning observers to small groups to provide feedback after the performance of another small group.
- Arranging participants in an aquarium format, with observers forming a circle around the subjects being observed.

Observation is a fundamental experiential learning strategy that supports reflective thinking and analytical skill development.

Through observing processes, behaviors, and interactions, learners gather information that informs subsequent reflection and conceptualization.

In the service robot study by Lana and Tigerstedt (2025), students acted as observers and researchers, examining human-robot interactions and analyzing behavioral and emotional responses. Observation was combined with surveys, interviews, and data analysis to deepen learners' understanding of consumer behavior. Similarly, experiential learning environments encourage learners to observe demonstrations, peer performances, and workplace practices before applying their own knowledge.

4. Mental imagery

Mental imagery involves visualizing situations, actions, or outcomes before actual performance.

Although less explicitly discussed in the reviewed documents, mental imagery aligns closely with the abstract conceptualization phase of Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

During reflection and analysis, learners mentally rehearse future actions, anticipate consequences, and imagine alternative solutions.

The experiential learning framework presented by Pappas and Sangtani (2022) emphasizes abstract evaluation and assessment, where learners use observations and reflections to develop theories and envision improved responses for future situations.

Mental imagery therefore serves as a bridge between reflection and action, helping learners prepare for real-world application.

Mental imagery is the ability to visualize an absent object, person, place, or action (Silberman & Biech, 2015).

Trainers can use six imaging experiences:

- visual imagery - perceiving colored shapes, such as a golden triangle or a violet circle;
- tactile imagery - experiencing physical sensations, such as the texture and temperature of a handshake;
- olfactory imagery - detecting scents, such as the crisp air in a pine forest;
- kinesthetic imagery - sensing bodily movement, such as the tactile feedback of steering a car;
- gustatory imagery - focusing on the flavors and textures of food ;
- auditory imagery - hearing sounds, such as the resonance of a voice calling one's name.

Although it can facilitate the retention of cognitive information, mental visualization has a particular value in mentally training skills and in focusing attention on feelings and events.

Mental visualization exercises can complement or, in some contexts, partially replace role-playing and can stimulate discussions.

5. Writing tasks

Writing is usually an individual activity, giving each participant time to reflect deeply on their understanding and response to the information received during the training (Brookfield, 2013; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Reflection is consistently identified as a critical component of experiential learning because it transforms activity into meaningful learning.

The enterprise experiential learning guide highlights structured reflection, discussion, and analysis as essential stages in experiential learning (Pappas & Sangtani, 2022).

Writing activities range from short answers to long essays.

Lana and Tigerstedt (2025) required students to write reflective essays following their interactions with service robots. Through writing from the perspectives of consumers, researchers, and marketing analysts, students critically examined their experiences, synthesized theoretical concepts, and generated practical recommendations. Reflective writing therefore strengthens self-awareness, critical thinking, and knowledge integration.

The most common short form is the worksheet, which provides specific instructions on the written content. Worksheets can be used at any point in the training session.

6. Action learning

Action learning involves assigning tasks in which participants, individually or in teams, intervene on crucial and authentic problems, while explicitly aiming to learn from these interventions (Brookfield, 2013; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

These tasks should lead them to seek additional information, not provided by the trainer, or to apply the knowledge acquired in the workplace.

Action learning focuses on solving authentic problems through cycles of action, reflection, and continuous improvement.

Learners work on real-world challenges, implement solutions, evaluate outcomes, and adapt their approaches based on feedback.

Harvard Business Publishing emphasizes that experiential learning must be applicable to professional practice and integrated into everyday work experiences (Bonner & DeSmet, 2021).

Similarly, the service robot project required students to generate managerial recommendations based on their analyses and reflections, moving beyond theoretical understanding toward practical application (Lana & Tigerstedt, 2025).

Action learning is particularly effective because it develops both technical and interpersonal competencies while fostering lifelong learning and adaptability.

Action learning projects frequently used in training programs include:

- In-basket assignments - are a project-based learning method where participants, acting in specific roles, receive a collection of letters, emails, phone messages, and similar items. They are then allotted time to draft formal responses to the contents of their in-basket;
- Research projects - is a highly effective learning tool, where the participants are asked to conduct research; this work can be performed individually or in small teams, with

participants either sharing the same assignment or working on different ones. Information may be gathered from human sources, written documentation, or the Internet;

- Field observation - A highly effective approach to action learning is to organize a “field trip” to a real-world environment that is directly relevant to the training subject. Consider starting by splitting the participants into smaller groups of four or five and having them create a list of questions and/or particular aspects they should observe during their field trip. Once the subgroups have placed their questions or checklist items on flip-chart paper, they should display them for the entire group; this allows the larger group to review the items and create a unified list for everyone to utilize. You can subsequently assign them a deadline (such as one week) and instruct them to explore a site or sites, using their questions or checklist items to conduct interviews or observations. Let participants select their own locations, or consider assigning specific ones to prevent overlap or ensure proper distribution;
- Teaching projects - one is truly said to have learned something if they can teach it to others. Another task is to have participants instruct one another in new information or skills. Instruction can be delivered by individuals or teams to the entire group or in smaller groups;
- Working group projects - the aim of such projects is to instill confidence in participants regarding their capability to perform the same task in their workplace. Usually, groups are requested to develop a plan or another particular result that can be utilized by other participants in the real work scenario.

Conclusions

The paper contributes to the experiential learning literature by integrating six widely used interactive approaches into a unified framework for employee skills development.

The analysis indicates that interactive experiential learning methods make employee development more effective because they connect knowledge acquisition with action, reflection and feedback.

Across the six approaches discussed, the most consistent benefits are stronger engagement, better retention, improved problem-solving, enhanced teamwork and greater transfer of learning to workplace situations.

As a conceptual paper, this study offers an integrated view of experiential methods that can assist trainers and organisations in selecting training activities aligned with practical skill development.

Managers and trainers can use the framework proposed in this study to select training methods according to desired competency outcomes.

Future research could extend this discussion through empirical testing in different industries and training formats.

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