

THE IMPACT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ON STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A CAREER IN SALES

Syadiyah Abdul Shukor^{1,a*} and Nur Shahira Mohamad Nor^{2,b}

¹Faculty of Economics and Muamalat, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

²Commerce Department, Polytechnic Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

^asyadiyahas@usim.edu.my

^bshahira@polipd.edu.my

*Corresponding Author: syadiyahas@usim.edu.my

Abstract: *Students generally tend to avoid the sales profession as salespeople are often perceived as insincere, pushy, aggressive, and annoying. Moreover, their negative perception of the profession continues to be reinforced by their lack of understanding about it. This study aims to examine the impact of participation in personal selling experiential learning course on student perceptions of a career in sales. Students enrolled in personal selling course participated in a range of experiential learning activities over the course of one semester including promoting financial service product in a real sales environment. The findings presented in this study show that students' confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling differs before and after their participation in experiential learning. Also, interest in selling is associated with the student's intention to pursue career in selling.*

Keywords: experiential learning; selling; financial service

1. Introduction

Selling is a crucial component of any business. Business cannot generate revenue or profits if the company's salespeople have no ability to sell. However, salespeople are often viewed as pushy, insincere, aggressive, and selfish. The negative perception of sales and salespeople may influence one's decision to consider a career in sales. This study aims to explore the effects of participation in personal selling experiential learning course on student perceptions of a career in sales. Corbett, Kezim, & Stewart (2010) claim that selling is challenging and involves complex activity, suggesting that the active learning experience approach is useful and successful teaching strategy. With experiential learning, students engage in activities and then encourage to reflect on the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking (Lewis & William, 1994).

Several factors prompted authors to explore the impact of experiential learning on student perceptions of a career in sales. First, students enrolled in the personal selling course are marketing students specializing in financial services. Thus, sales position will be at some point of their careers. Secondly, sales are essential to business, nevertheless, 24 percent of Malaysia's employer found that the most difficult professionals to recruit are sales (The Star Online, 2017). Finally, personal selling involves building relationships with clients and therefore it is essential that students possess both professional and interpersonal skills, which are best acquired through experiential learning (Hawes & Foley, 2006). Experiential learning experiences help to assist

students' preparation for their chosen careers which support course content and theory. As such, this study intends to investigate how students' perspective of a profession in sales are influenced by their participation in a personal selling experiential learning course. In particular, this study compares students' confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling before and after participating the personal selling experiential course. The present study also examines whether student's interest in selling will affect their intention to pursue a profession in sales.

2. Experiential learning

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes learning through doing, reflecting, and applying knowledge in real-world contexts (Kolb, 1984). This type of learning is rooted in the idea that learners acquire a deeper understanding and retain knowledge better when they actively engage in hands-on experiences (Dewey, 1938). According to Keeton and Tate (1978), experiential learning is a type of instruction where students interact directly with the subjects they are studying.

Nonetheless, experiential learning was described as "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" by Kolb (1984). Kolb (1984) further claim that active exploration, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and a tangible experience are all necessary components of experiential learning. The learner must be involved in each of these activities above everything else; only then can the activity be classified as an experiential learning activity.

Studies found that experiential learning requires a number of essential elements, including interaction between students, teachers, and staff at the organization, and—above all—maintaining students' exposure to real-world situations (Gentry, 1990). According to Frontczak and Kelley (2000), experiential learning is providing students with real-world experiences and then having them reflect on those experiences to make inferences that will help them perform better in the future. Kennedy et al. (2001) claim that lecture-based courses encourage passive learning and give students little opportunity for reflection (Civi & Persinger, 2011). In addition, experiential learning enhances critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Kennedy et al., 2001) and has a favorable effect on student learning (Warren, 2012).

2.1 Advantages of experiential learning

Experiential learning has emerged as a transformative approach to education, offering a multitude of benefits that transcend traditional classroom instruction. This research paper delves into the compelling advantages of experiential learning, drawing from a wealth of scholarly references to underscore its profound impact on student development and academic success.

Foremost, experiential learning fosters deeper student engagement and motivation (Kong, 2021). By actively involving learners in the learning process, this approach cultivates a sense of ownership and investment, leading to enhanced comprehension and retention of subject matter. Furthermore, experiential learning enables students to apply their knowledge to real-world scenarios, bridging the gap between theory and practice (Kong, 2021).

The interplay between experiential and traditional learning methodologies has been the subject of extensive research, revealing the unique advantages of each approach. In his seminal work, renowned philosopher and educator John Dewey (1938) emphasized the crucial role of incorporating learners' lived experiences into the educational process, arguing that true learning

emerges from the dynamic interplay between the individual and their environment (Voukelatou, 2019; Puay, 2015).

Experiential learning, as a construct, has been explored through various theoretical lenses, including psychoanalytic theory, which highlights the significance of the unconscious and its role in the learning process (Puay, 2015). This perspective underscores the intricate interplay between the known and unknown spheres of human cognition, underscoring the transformative potential of hands-on, immersive learning experiences.

2.2 Application of EL in teaching

Learning styles are a whirlwind of unique techniques that are available to students to use while they are gaining knowledge. The focus of experiential learning is on the students. Experiential learning is the ideal method of establishing four learning modes because it allows learners to experience life and the stresses of their surroundings (Passarelli & Kolb, 2011). According to Pittaway and Cope (2007), experiential learning also promotes instruction that deviates from the conventional method of pragmatic learning. In the conventional method, the instructor serves as the main source of knowledge, drilling the students on their tasks (Wang, 2006). This teaching approach does not give students the knowledge and abilities they need to function in a world that is changing all the time (ibid). Learners need to upgrade critical thinking and life-long learning skills.

Much of the research on experiential learning theory has focused on the concept of learning style using the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLSI) to assess individual learning styles. Engaging in experiential learning entails both active participation and thoughtful analysis of that engagement. In experiential learning, the student engages in an activity, considers the experience, and then applies the knowledge gained to novel circumstances. Experience, reflection, thinking, and action are the four modes of the experiential learning cycle. The term "deep learning" refers to the learning process that fully incorporates these modes. A holistic educational theory known as experiential learning was established with the idea that a person's life experiences, education, and employment all have a significant impact on how they learn and gain new knowledge.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted with 38 students in a semester-long personal selling experiential learning course at a public university located in Negeri Sembilan. The course is required for all undergraduate students majoring in marketing, and it provides an overview of sales and the selling process (Futrell, 2016). The course runs for a semester (equivalent to 14 weeks) and students were exposed to various experiential learning exercises including task to promote a specific financial service product in a real sales environment. This task allows student to both observe and practice selling with the guidance received from a practitioner.

44 students enrolled the course. On the first day of class, the students were given a pre-test, and on the last day, students completed a post-test. The pre-test resulted in 42 usable respondents and the post-test resulted in 38 usable responses. Only responses having both the pre-test and post-test were used, resulting in 38 usable paired response. 68.4 per cent were female and 31.6 per cent were male. Students were asked to respond to a questionnaire on their confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling before and after participating the personal selling experiential learning course.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Paired sample t-test

A paired samples t-test was performed to compare students' confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling before and after they enrolled the course. As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that there was a significant difference in students' confidence in selling before ($M=2.92$, $SD=0.882$) and after ($M=3.82$, $SD=0.730$); $t(37) = -5.478$, $p<0.01$) participation in the personal selling experiential learning course. The results also reveal that there was significant difference in interest in selling before ($M=2.58$, $SD=1.030$) and after ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.658$); $t(37) = -10.601$, $p<0.001$) participation in the course. Similarly, there was significant difference in knowledge in selling before ($M=2.79$, $SD=0.664$) and after ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.594$); $t(37) = -9.239$, $p<0.001$) participation in the experiential learning personal selling course.

Table 1. Paired sample t-test result (confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling before and after the course)

			Means	Means differences	Std. Deviation	t	Significance (two-tailed)
Pair 1	Confidence	Before	2.92	-.895	.882	-5.473	0.000
		After	3.82		.730		0.000
Pair 2	Interest	Before	2.58	-1.421	1.030	-10.601	0.000
		After	4.00		.658		0.000
Pair 3	Knowledge	Before	2.79	-1.368	.664	-9.239	0.000
		After	4.16		.594		0.000

4.2 Correlation

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to determine the relationship between interest in selling and intention to pursue career in selling. The results indicate that there was a significant, strong, positive correlation between interest on selling and intention pursue career in selling, $r(38) = 0.526$, $p < .001$. Students with higher interest in selling are more likely to express intention to pursue career in sales. This result aligns with existing literature where interest in a particular field often plays a crucial role in shaping career intentions (Scott et al., 2008).

5. Conclusion

This study aims to examine the impact of participation in personal selling experiential learning course on student perceptions of a career in sales. Findings show that initial student's confidence, interest, and knowledge in selling increase over the course of one semester. Students were exposed to various types of experiential learning activities and this exposure increases not only knowledge on selling, but also students' confidence and interest in selling. In addition, student interest towards selling course is positively related to student intention to pursue their career in selling. This study considered the impact of one sales course over the course of one semester. Future studies may consider a longer period to look at changes in sales perception among the students. The study's findings highlight the importance of experiential leaning that students can link theory with practice. This is a

crucial finding for both lecturers who operate primarily within a classroom setting as well as sales managers that often provide ongoing training to employees within organizational environment.

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