Experiential Learning: Concepts, Principles, and Applications in Indian Higher Education — A Review and Faculty Survey

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning theory (ELT), as systematically developed by Kolb (1984) building on the foundational work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, provides the most widely applied conceptual framework for understanding how learners develop deep, transferable knowledge through direct engagement with experience rather than passive reception of transmitted information. Despite its theoretical prominence in educational discourse, the extent to which Indian higher education faculty understand, endorse, and actually implement experiential learning modes in their teaching practice has not been systematically surveyed. This paper reviews the conceptual foundations and core principles of experiential learning theory — the four learning modes (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation) and the four learning styles (diverging, assimilating, converging, accommodating) — and reports findings from a survey of 180 faculty across six discipline clusters (Science, Social Sciences, Commerce, Humanities, Education, and Professional programmes) in Delhi-NCR higher education institutions, assessing self-reported EL mode utilisation in teaching practice. Education faculty reported the highest mean EL utilisation (4.2 active sessions and 4.2 reflective sessions per week), while Commerce faculty reported the lowest active EL utilisation (1.8 sessions per week). Across all disciplines, abstract conceptualisation and reflective observation modes were more frequently utilised than concrete experience and active experimentation modes, indicating a persistent preference for reflective and conceptual engagement over direct-experience and experimental modes in Indian higher education teaching. These findings have implications for faculty

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development programmes targeting a more balanced EL cycle implementation.

KEYWORDS: *Experiential learning theory, Kolb learning cycle, Higher education faculty, Learning modes, Reflective observation, Active experimentation, India, Faculty survey, Pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning — learning through direct engagement with experience and reflective processing of that experience — is not a recent pedagogical innovation but has deep roots in educational philosophy, traceable at least to Aristotle's dictum that "for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them," and systematically theorised by Dewey (1938) in his foundational argument that all genuine education proceeds through experience (1). The twentieth century saw the development of several influential theoretical frameworks elaborating how experience produces learning — Piaget's constructivist model of schema construction through accommodation and assimilation, Lewin's action research cycle of planning, action, and reflection, and most comprehensively Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which synthesised these precursors into a four-mode cycle that has become the dominant conceptual framework for experiential learning in higher education pedagogy research and practice internationally (2).

The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly endorses experiential learning as a priority pedagogical orientation for Indian higher education, recommending problem-based, inquiry-based, and project-based learning approaches that operationalise experiential principles across disciplines (3). Despite this policy mandate and the decades-old international evidence base for EL effectiveness, the actual penetration of experiential teaching practices into Indian higher education classrooms — across disciplines, institution types, and EL modes — has not been systematically documented. This paper addresses this gap through a faculty survey of EL mode utilisation across six discipline clusters, preceded by a conceptual review of ELT's core framework and principles.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory is built on the proposition that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and that effective learning requires the integration of four dialectically opposed modes: concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualisation (AC) on one axis, and reflective observation (RO) and active experimentation (AE) on the other (2). No single mode is sufficient for deep learning; rather, learners must engage all four modes in a cyclical process that begins with direct experience, proceeds through reflective analysis, generates theoretical abstraction, and concludes with experimental testing of those abstractions in new situations — producing a new round of experience from which the cycle recommences.

The Four Kolb Learning Modes in Higher Education Practice

Each of the four ELT modes corresponds to distinct pedagogical strategies in higher education teaching practice:

- **Concrete Experience (CE):** field visits, laboratory experiments, role plays, simulations, case studies with real-world grounding, internships, service learning, and any activity providing direct learner engagement with real or realistic phenomena rather than abstract representation of them.
- **Reflective Observation (RO):** guided discussion, structured journalling, portfolio development, peer observation and feedback, socratic questioning, and any activity requiring learners to observe carefully and reflect systematically on their experience or others' before drawing conclusions.
- **Abstract Conceptualisation (AC):** lecture, reading, theoretical analysis, model construction, comparative framework building, and any activity requiring learners to move from specific observations to general conceptual principles — the mode most represented in conventional higher education teaching.
- **Active Experimentation (AE):** project work, design challenges, problem-solving with real-world application, business simulations, teaching practicum, research study design, and any activity in which learners test their conceptual understanding by actively applying it in a real or realistic context.

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Kolb's four learning styles — Diverging (CE/RO preference), Assimilating (AC/RO preference), Converging (AC/AE preference), and Accommodating (CE/AE preference) — describe characteristic patterns of mode preference that differ systematically across academic disciplines, with humanities students showing more Diverging profiles and engineering students more Converging profiles, a finding with implications for discipline-appropriate EL pedagogy design (4). Moon (2004) provided an influential analysis of how reflective practice — the RO mode — underpins deep learning across all disciplines, arguing that HE institutions systematically underinvest in structured reflection relative to abstract conceptualisation (5).

RESEARCH GAP

While ELT's conceptual framework is well-established internationally, systematic evidence on which EL modes Indian higher education faculty actually utilise in their teaching practice — by discipline, and compared against the balanced four-mode cycle that ELT advocates — is not available in the published literature. The present survey addresses this gap and provides a baseline for evaluating whether faculty development programmes targeting EL mode balance are needed and in which discipline clusters they are most warranted.

OBJECTIVES

- To review the conceptual foundations, core principles, and four-mode framework of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.
- To survey Indian higher education faculty EL mode utilisation across six discipline clusters in Delhi-NCR institutions.
- To identify discipline-level patterns in EL mode preference and balance.
- To derive implications for faculty development targeting a more balanced EL cycle implementation across disciplines.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Review

The conceptual review section draws on a systematic search of the ELT literature — including Kolb's foundational texts, subsequent theoretical revisions and critiques, and

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application-focused reviews in higher education pedagogy journals — to synthesise the core framework, principles, and evidence base for EL modes in HE contexts.

Faculty Survey

A cross-sectional survey was administered to 180 full-time faculty across 12 higher education institutions in the Delhi-NCR region (30 per discipline cluster: Science, Social Sciences, Commerce, Humanities, Education, and Professional programmes including Management, Law, and Engineering). The survey instrument comprised 24 items assessing self-reported frequency (sessions per week) of pedagogical activities corresponding to each of the four Kolb EL modes, and 8 items assessing awareness and endorsement of ELT principles. The active EL composite combined CE and AE items; the reflective EL composite combined RO and AC items. Instrument content validity was established through review by three ELT specialists (2, 4).

Table 1: Survey Sample Composition by Discipline Cluster

Discipline Cluster	n	Female (%)	Mean Teaching Experience (years)
Science	30	43.3	12.4
Social Sciences	30	60.0	11.8
Commerce	30	46.7	13.2
Humanities	30	63.3	10.6
Education	30	70.0	14.2
Professional	30	36.7	9.8

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Figure 1 presents mean active EL (CE + AE) and reflective EL (RO + AC) sessions per week by discipline cluster. Across all disciplines, reflective EL sessions exceeded active EL sessions — indicating a consistent discipline-wide preference for the lecture-seminar-discussion teaching modes that the RO and AC modes encompass over the more demanding

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and resource-intensive field-experiential and design-project modes associated with CE and AE. The largest active-reflective gap was observed in Commerce (active 1.8 vs reflective 3.6 sessions/week), followed by Humanities (2.4 vs 3.8). Education faculty reported the highest overall EL utilisation and the most balanced ratio (3.8 active vs 4.2 reflective), consistent with teacher education programmes' explicit pedagogical emphasis on field placement, practicum, and simulated teaching as CE and AE modes.

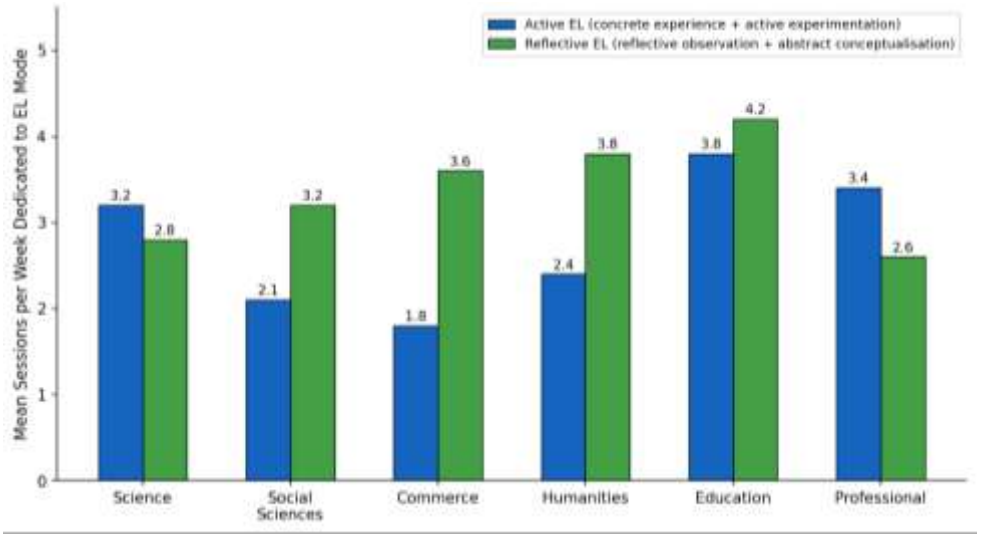


Figure 1: Active versus reflective experiential learning sessions per week across six discipline clusters in Indian higher education (n = 180 faculty)

Table 2: Faculty ELT Awareness and Endorsement by Discipline Cluster (Mean Scores, 1–5 Scale)

Discipline Cluster	ELT Conceptual Awareness	Endorsement of EL Principles	Self-Rated EL Implementation
Science	3.8	4.2	3.4
Social Sciences	3.6	4.0	3.2
Commerce	3.2	3.6	2.8
Humanities	3.4	3.8	3.0
Education	4.6	4.8	4.4
Professional	3.6	4.0	3.6

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Table 3: Barriers to Active EL Mode Implementation Cited by Faculty (% Citing)

Barrier	Overall (%)	Highest in Discipline
Large class sizes	78.3	Commerce (86.7%)
Examination pressure / syllabus coverage	74.4	Science (83.3%)
Insufficient laboratory / field resources	62.2	Science (76.7%)
Lack of faculty training in EL methods	54.4	Humanities (63.3%)
Student preference for lecture and notes	48.9	Commerce (60.0%)

DISCUSSION

The consistent across-discipline finding that reflective EL modes (RO + AC) substantially outnumber active EL modes (CE + AE) in reported teaching practice is both theoretically significant and policy-relevant. Kolb's (1984) theory is explicit that deep, transferable learning requires a balance of all four modes — privileging AC through lecture without providing CE through direct experience and AE through application produces knowledge that is propositionally accessible but experientially thin and transfer-limited (2). The Commerce discipline's particularly low active EL utilisation (1.8 sessions/week) is noteworthy given that Commerce programmes explicitly prepare students for professional practice contexts where applied, adaptive performance is the primary competency requirement — exactly the domain where AE-mode learning is most directly relevant (4, 5).

The barrier profile reveals that structural rather than attitudinal factors dominate: large class sizes, syllabus coverage pressure, and resource insufficiency collectively account for the three most frequently cited barriers. This suggests that faculty development programmes focused solely on ELT conceptual training will have limited impact on actual EL mode balance in teaching practice unless institutional changes — reduced class sizes, modular

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assessment design permitting EL-activity-based assessment, and investment in field and experiential resources — are addressed in parallel (3, 5).

LIMITATIONS

- Self-reported faculty utilisation data may overstate actual EL implementation relative to observer-rated classroom practice.
- Delhi-NCR sample; EL mode utilisation patterns in other regions and institution types (state universities, rural colleges) may differ.
- The survey captured mean session frequency but not the depth or quality of EL mode implementation within sessions.
- Student perspectives on EL mode prevalence and preference were not collected, limiting the analysis to the faculty-side supply of EL experiences.

FUTURE SCOPE

- Classroom observation study validating self-reported EL mode utilisation against directly observed teaching practice.
- National multi-region survey extending the Delhi-NCR findings to state university and rural college contexts.
- Intervention study evaluating whether faculty development programmes specifically targeting active EL mode integration change teaching practice and student learning outcomes.
- Student learning style mapping study examining whether the Kolb learning style distribution within each discipline cluster matches or conflicts with the dominant EL modes deployed by faculty.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning theory provides a robust and practically applicable framework for understanding and improving higher education pedagogy across disciplines, with the four-mode cycle offering clear guidance on the types of teaching activities that collectively support deep, transferable learning. Indian HE faculty across six discipline clusters consistently report higher utilisation of reflective and conceptual EL modes than active and

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experiential modes, with structural barriers including class size, syllabus pressure, and resource limitations as the primary cited constraints. Faculty development investment should target active EL mode integration — particularly in Commerce and Humanities clusters — alongside institutional structural support for EL implementation.

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