

A Delphi Investigation to Determine Experiential Learning Activities Utilized for Soft Skill Development at Agriculture Community Colleges Across California

Introduction

Learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Baker & Robinson, 2016, p. 132; Baker & Robinson, 2019, pp. 14-15) Stewart, Wall, and Marciniac (2016) define soft skills as “those non-technical competencies associated with one’s personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others” (p. 276). Employees today have less repetitive tasks, and there is a “far more need to work with and through people at every level of the organization” (Brungardt, 2011, p. 2) The development of soft skills ties back into the experiential learning theory; “skills are developed by learning from experience” (Baker, Robinson, & Kolb, 2012, p. 4). This study will address the question of which events contribute the most to developing soft skills in community college agriculture students.

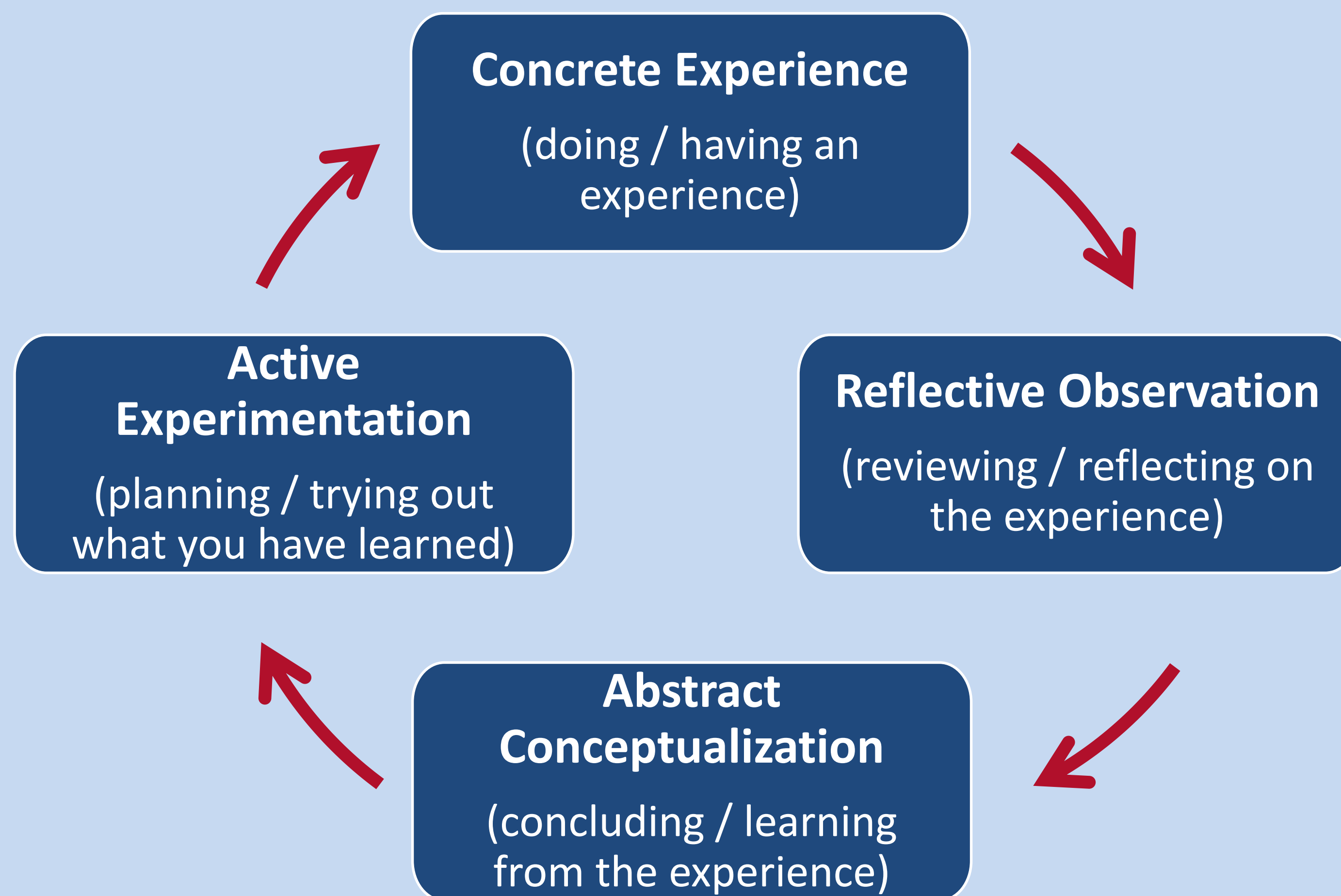
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiential learning activities that develop soft skills at agricultural community colleges in [State]. The following research objective guided this study:

Determine which experiential learning activities are conducted at agricultural programs within community colleges. Determining these experiential learning activities will contribute to the ACRS21 Community College Certificate.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study, which includes four stages, 1) concrete experiences, 2) reflection and observations, 3) abstract conceptualizations, and 4) active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Roberts (2006) summarizes what is known about experiential learning theory as experiential learning beginning with an initial focus of the learner, followed by an experience, then the learner reflects on their observation, formulates a generalization, and then tests the generalization with experimentation. Once completed, the circle starts over in a spiral-like pattern (Roberts, 2006, p.22).



Methodology

A three-phased Delphi study was utilized in this research. An initial email was sent out on November 9, 2021, to a representative from each of the [State] community colleges that have agricultural programs on their campuses. From the initial email, which included the open-ended question, “What experiential learning activities are offered at your community college?”, six community college representatives responded with a total of 35 experiential activities listed. On February 23, 2022, each participant from the initial question was asked to indicate yes or no to each of the 35 experiential learning activities according to their community college campuses. These results were then analyzed to determine a more precise list of experiential learning activities. A minimum of 83% of the respondents must have indicated “Yes” for that activity to be considered in the last round of questioning. There were 24 experiential learning activities that had a minimum of an 83% affirmative response. The final question, sent out on April 4, 2022, asked the respondents to select only their top ten activities in which they believe developed the most soft skills and then asked the respondents to rank the activities from what they believe to be the most beneficial to the least beneficial.

Field	Yes	No	Total
Industry Tours/ Field Trips	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Guest Speakers	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Resume/Cover Letter Workshop	100.00% 5	0.00% 0	5
LinkedIn/ Jobspeaker Profile Development	100.00% 5	0.00% 0	5
Networking Events	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Job Fairs	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Internship	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Work Experience Course	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
CAL Conference	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
State Ag Ambassador Conference	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
CAL Competition	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
High School Recruitment Visits	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Student Tours	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	6
Participating in Judging Competitions (livestock, dairy, etc.)	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Ag Banquet	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Club Fundraising Events	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Working on Instructional Unit (horse, sheep, poultry, etc.)	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Interview Training	100.00% 5	0.00% 0	5
Facilitating FFA Field Day	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Judging FFA Competitions	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
World Ag Expo	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Career Services	100.00% 5	0.00% 0	5
Volunteer at FFA Field Days	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6
Ag Ambassadors	83.33% 5	16.67% 1	6

Conclusions

The top ten identified activities will be incorporated into the ACRS21 Community College Certificate, providing students with increased opportunities for work based learning and soft skills development. This research further demonstrates the essential nature of experiential learning activities such as internships, student ambassador programs and industry related tours and networking opportunities, which were reported to be the most utilized learning activities in the development of community college students’ soft skills. Future research efforts should be focused on examining these activities to measure the effect they may have on the soft skills development of community college students.

Results

Top Ten Ranking of Experiential Learning Activities Utilized at Community Colleges

Top 10 Activities	Ranking 1	Ranking 2	Ranking 3	Ranking 4	Ranking 5	Overall Ranking
Internships	10	5	9	9	10	43
Ag Ambassadors	9	4	5	5	7	30
Ind. Tours/Field Trips	8	10	4	4		26
Networking Events	6	6	1	10		23
Working at Units	7		10	2	3	22
CAL Conference	2	3		8	6	19
Judging Competition	5		3		9	17
Guest Speakers	4	9		3		16
CAL Competition		1		6	8	15
St. Ag Amb. Conf.				7	5	12

Note. Reverse scoring was used when ranking (Ex. ranking of 1 = 10 points).

References

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