

Enhancing Service Marketing Course for Polytechnic Students Through Simulation and Experiential Learning

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Introduction

Simulation learning refers to learning in a secure learning environment where a simulation of reality is used. “Learners must both learn and act within this environment, often completing complex tasks that closely resemble real-life situations. Accordingly, simulation learning constitutes a form of experiential learning that is learner-centred, encompasses multiple dimensions of learning (including cognitive, motivational, affective, psychomotor, and social aspects), and is characterized by a high degree of authenticity (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Kolb, 1984; Lateef, 2010)

Moreover, team-based simulations provide students with the opportunity to develop and refine essential skills highly valued by employers WEF Future of Jobs Report (2023), LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report (2024) including communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and the analysis of both verbal and financial data within a safe environment where failures can be addressed and alternative strategies explored without the risk of enduring punitive consequences

A variety of pedagogical approaches are used for this purpose, such as role-playing, educational drama, historical case studies, live case studies (where students develop the cases themselves), real-world observation projects, consulting assignments, and in-basket exercises.

Literature Review

Service marketing education has increasingly emphasized student-centered and experiential approaches to address gaps between theory and practice (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2020). Simulation-based learning, which includes role-playing and scenario-based exercises, fosters critical thinking and decision-making skills in dynamic service contexts (Kolb, 1984). Fieldwork and direct observation also support deeper conceptual learning by placing students in authentic service environments (Beard & Wilson, 2018). Previous studies suggest that such methods not

only improve academic performance but also enhance soft skills like communication, teamwork, and customer-centric problem-solving (Ali & Zainal, 2022).

Simulation

Simulation with its emphasis on practice during learning, aligns closely with the key principles of experiential learning. A widely referenced model of experiential learning is Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, which identifies four recurring stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation.

This model functions as a cycle, as the fourth stage involves forming generalizations and developing new hypotheses to be tested in future practice. As learners encounter the next relevant situation, they re-enter the first stage, continuing the learning process in professional work, activities often take place across all stages simultaneously. However, when analysing specific work episodes especially to identify learning from a particular experience it is beneficial to distinguish the stages explicitly. Kolb's experiential learning model naturally aligns with the learning processes involved in simulation training. "The simulation experience affords an excellent opportunity to expand on this model [of experiential learning]. Learners are thrown into a simulated concrete experience that allows them to progress through the cycle, ideally developing skills and knowledge to be applied in future simulated or actual concrete experiences.

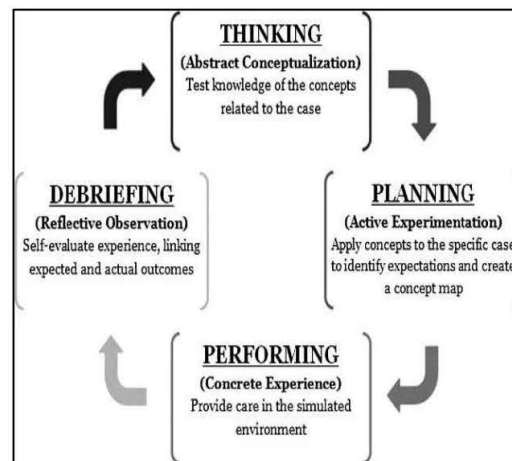


Figure 1: Simulation learning cycle

Experiential Learning

The experiential learning model places a stronger emphasis on direct experience compared to other life-oriented learning models. According to Passarelli and Kolb (2011, pp. 4-5), the theory is based on six key principles: Learning is a continuous process rather than final outcome. All learning builds upon prior knowledge. It involves resolving contradictions within the adaptation process to the world. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation. It emerges through the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment.

Learning is the process of acquiring and discovering knowledge through experience. According to experiential learning theory, learning occurs by transforming experiences into knowledge, which is defined as a blend of comprehension and the ability to adapt and apply experiences (Kolb, 2015, pp. 49-51). Experiential learning is schematized as a four-stage cycle comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

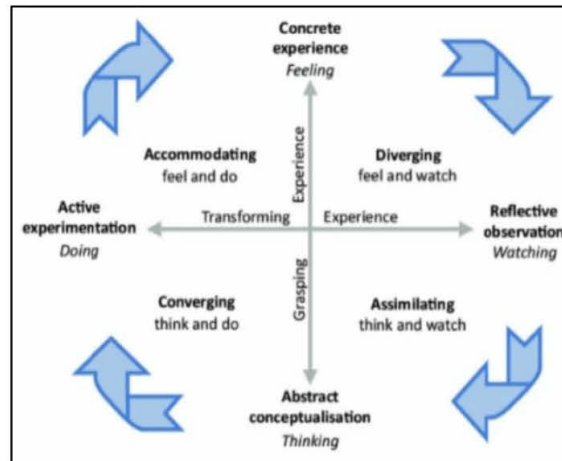


Figure 2: Experiential learning phases by Kolb

Various techniques and methods are employed in developing educational experiences within the experiential learning model such as simulations, project based learning, gamification and workplace training, among these, educational simulations play a crucial role in experiential learning theory. Contrary to being seen as overly theoretical or unworkable methods, Hofstede, Caluwe, and Peters (2010) emphasize that simulations prioritize hands-on, practical learning experiences. As a result, simulations become a learning tool that practically integrates complicated abilities needed in real life.

Simulated experiential environments are learning settings where realistic fictional scenarios are designed to elicit real-world-like responses from participants (Keys & Wolfe, 1990). Additionally, simulations serve as an educational method that provides opportunities to develop and apply various skill sets for navigating future situations (Fowler & Pusch, 2010) An excellent approach and strategy for teaching social studies is simulation-based learning.

Marketing education emphasizes skill-based learning, directly influencing learners' social lives and enhancing their individual competencies through real-life elements. In this context, simulation games can have a significant impact by equipping students with a wide range of complex skills and values essential for skill-based education within the marketing discipline. At times, abstract social issues can be effectively taught through hands-on social simulations, allowing students to engage deeply with the subject matter. Additionally, problem-solving one of the most vital skills of the 21st century holds a key position in the Social Studies curriculum, particularly in marketing.

Experiential learning methods, like field trips, can significantly enhance simulations by providing real-world exposure that strengthens students' understanding of service marketing concepts. When students observe, interact, and analyse service marketing practices in real businesses, they bring authentic insights into simulations, making them more engaging and realistic.

Methodology

This research employed a quasi-experimental design involving 42 students enrolled in the Diploma in Marketing program. The Service Marketing course was redesigned to include the following components:

1. **Simulation tasks:** Role-playing of service encounters, complaint handling, and service blueprinting.
2. **Experiential projects:** Field trips to service businesses, observation journals, and reflective reports.
3. **Assessment tools:** Pre-and post-tests, observation checklists, satisfaction surveys, and presentation rubrics.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data from reflections and open-ended responses were thematically analyzed.

Results and Findings

This study explored the impact of integrating **simulation and experiential learning** methods into the *Service Marketing* course for 42 students enrolled in the Diploma in Marketing program at a Malaysian polytechnic. The aim was to assess improvements in students' understanding of service marketing concepts, engagement, and skill acquisition through practical, immersive learning strategies.

1. Student Engagement and Participation

Survey and observation data indicated a marked improvement in student engagement compared to traditional lecture-based teaching:

- i. 95.2% (40 students) reported that the simulation activities (e.g., mock service encounters, complaint handling roleplays) made the class more interactive and enjoyable.
- ii. 92.9% (39 students) actively participated in at least three or more experiential tasks, including service blueprinting, service failure recovery scenarios, and customer journey mapping.
- iii. Qualitative feedback showed that students felt "motivated", "in control", and "immersed" during role-playing and scenario-based simulations.

2. Knowledge and Conceptual Understanding

Knowledge gains were assessed through pre-and post-tests focused on service marketing principles (e.g., the 7Ps, service characteristics, service quality models):

- i. Average pre-test score: 56.7%
- ii. Average post-test score: 80.4%
- iii. Improvement rate: 23.7%, suggesting a significant increase in understanding core topics.
- iv. 38 out of 42 students (90.5%) showed improvement in at least 70% of the test items.

3. Skills Acquisition

The experiential activities enhanced several key skills critical to service marketing:

- i. **Communication and interpersonal skills:** Rated as "improved" or "highly improved" by 88% of students.

- ii. Critical thinking and problem-solving: 35 students (83.3%) were able to apply theoretical knowledge to solve real-life customer service challenges during the final group simulation.
- iii. Teamwork and collaboration: 40 students (95%) successfully completed group-based service audits and presentations.

4. Student Satisfaction

A satisfaction questionnaire (5-point Likert scale) provided the following results:

Table 1: Student satisfaction

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoyed learning through simulations and real-life case studies.	64.3%	30.9%	4.8%	0%	0%
I understand service marketing concepts better through experiential tasks.	66.7%	26.2%	7.1%	0%	0%
I feel more confident to apply service marketing in real business contexts	59.5%	33.3%	7.2%	0%	0%

5. Project-Based Assessment Performance

Students were tasked with creating a service marketing plan for a real or hypothetical business. Evaluation rubrics revealed:

- i. 83% of students scored above 75% on creativity, practicality, and alignment with service marketing theory.
- ii. Common innovative service strategies included: self-service kiosks, mobile app integration, personalized service packages, and customer loyalty systems.

Here’s how field trips can enhance simulation-based learning:

1. Providing Real-World Context for Simulations

- i. Field trips allow students to witness service marketing in action, such as how businesses handle customer experiences, branding, and promotions.
- ii. When students participate in simulations after a field trip, they can apply real observations instead of relying purely on theoretical knowledge.
- iii. Example: After visiting a five-star hotel, students can simulate a customer service management scenario, applying what they learned about handling guest complaints and loyalty programs.

2. Improving Decision-Making in Simulations

- i. Seeing actual service encounters (e.g., customer interactions in retail or hospitality) helps students make more realistic decisions in a simulation.
- ii. Example: After a field trip to a shopping complex, students can role-play as customer service agents, handling different customer requests and complaints based on real-life examples.

3. Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills

- i. Students can analyze real business challenges observed during field trips and incorporate solutions into their simulations.
- ii. Example: A field trip to a theme park may reveal issues in queue management. Students can then simulate a marketing strategy to improve the guest experience.

4. Strengthening Engagement and Retention

- i. Hands-on experiences help students retain knowledge better and make simulations more meaningful.
- ii. Instead of just imagining a service marketing scenario, they can recreate real experiences they encountered.
- iii. Example: After visiting a fast-food restaurant, students can design a customer loyalty program simulation, using real pricing and promotional tactics they observed.

5. Encouraging Reflection and Application

- i. Field trips provide a foundation for debriefing, where students can compare real-world experiences with their simulation outcomes.
- ii. Reflection activities, such as writing reports or discussing key takeaways, can enhance their learning experience before participating in simulations.

Conclusion

By combining experiential learning (field trips) with simulations, students gain a deeper understanding of service marketing. Real-world exposure ensures simulations are practical, engaging, and reflective of industry practices, ultimately preparing students for real marketing challenges in their future careers. Simulation and experiential learning significantly enhance students' comprehension of service marketing principles, equipping them with the skills needed to excel in the modern marketplace. The majority of students responded positively, showing increased confidence and ability to apply marketing principles to real-world service scenarios.

This study demonstrates that integrating simulation and experiential learning approaches into the Service Marketing course significantly enhances students' academic and professional development. The findings highlight that students not only improved their conceptual understanding of service marketing frameworks but also developed essential soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. The use of simulations, role-plays, and field trip observations provided students with authentic, hands-on experiences that bridged the gap between theory and practice. The 23.7% increase in post-test scores and high levels of

engagement and satisfaction among the 42 participants underscore the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach.

Moreover, the incorporation of real-world observations through field trips enabled students to critically analyze service encounters and apply theoretical knowledge in evaluating service delivery. These experiences fostered reflective thinking and increased students' confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the service industry.

In conclusion, this research supports the integration of simulation and experiential learning into service marketing curricula, particularly within polytechnic settings where employability and practical readiness are educational priorities. Future research may expand the sample size or explore the long-term impact of such interventions on graduate performance in the workplace.

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