

1-21-2017

Experiential Learning in Action: A Collaborative Inquiry

Alexios Brailas

Panteion University, Athens, abrailas@yahoo.com

Stella-Maria Avani

Panteion University, Athens, stellavani@hotmail.com

Christina Gkini

Panteion University, Athens, christina_gini@hotmail.com

Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou

Panteion University, Athens, m.a.deilogkou@gmail.com

Konstantinos Koskinas

Panteion University, Athens, kkoski@panteion.gr

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Brailas, A., Avani, S., Gkini, C., Deilogkou, M., Koskinas, K., & Alexias, G. (2017). Experiential Learning in Action: A Collaborative Inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(1), 271-288. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2551>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Experiential Learning in Action: A Collaborative Inquiry

Abstract

In this paper, we describe a case study of an undergraduate course on research methodology, in which lecture was reduced to a minimum and replaced with experiential learning activities. The course design was project-based and spiraled through four phases: a mini-lecture on a given research method, an “early practice” activity, and “reflection on practice” tutor-guided small group collaborations which led to deeper understanding of the given research method. This particular course design constitutes a paradigm shift in comparison to the predominant in Greek higher education didactic pedagogical model. How this paradigm shift was received and experienced by the participating students? In order to get rich insights into the lived experiences of the participants (N=15), we adopted a blended qualitative research approach: thematic analysis combined with students’ critical reflections on their experience, aiming to produce a thick description of our intervention. The course design and implementation positioned students and their tutors as knowledgeable actors able to contribute research insights through their transactions.

Keywords

Experiential Learning, Reflective Practice, Group Work, Qualitative Research, Case Study

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Authors

Alexios Brailas, Stella-Maria Avani, Christina Gkini, Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou, Konstantinos Koskinas, and Georgios Alexias

Experiential Learning in Action: A Collaborative Inquiry

Alexios Brailas, Stella-Maria Avani, Christina Gkini, Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou, Konstantinos Koskinas, and Georgios Alexias
Panteion University, Athens, Greece

In this paper, we describe a case study of an undergraduate course on research methodology, in which lecture was reduced to a minimum and replaced with experiential learning activities. The course design was project-based and spiraled through four phases: a mini-lecture on a given research method, an “early practice” activity, and “reflection on practice” tutor-guided small group collaborations which led to deeper understanding of the given research method. This particular course design constitutes a paradigm shift in comparison to the predominant in Greek higher education didactic pedagogical model. How this paradigm shift was received and experienced by the participating students? In order to get rich insights into the lived experiences of the participants (N=15), we adopted a blended qualitative research approach: thematic analysis combined with students’ critical reflections on their experience, aiming to produce a thick description of our intervention. The course design and implementation positioned students and their tutors as knowledgeable actors able to contribute research insights through their transactions. Keywords: Experiential Learning, Reflective Practice, Group Work, Qualitative Research, Case Study

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the impact of an experiential, project-based, undergraduate course on participants’ lived experience. This senior level course on *Internet Research Methods* was offered at the authors’ university (Psychology Department, Panteion University, Athens, Greece) during the winter semester of the 2014-15 academic year. The academic unit in charge for the delivery of this course is the *Virtual Reality, Internet Research and e-Learning Laboratory* (<http://vrlab.panteion.gr>), directed by Professor Konstantinos Koskinas who is also the principal instructor of this course. Alexios Brailas is a post-doc researcher in the above laboratory, and Associate Professor Giorgos Alexias acts as an academic advisor on many of the lab’s projects including this. The other three co-authors, Stella-Maria Avani, Christina Gkini, and Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou, were undergraduate students during the specific course delivery and they collaborated with Alexios in subsequent research projects. Alexios Brailas’ post-doc research is on the field of educational psychology and group dynamics. Through his research, he strives to bring insights from systems thinking and complexity theory to teaching practice. During August of 2014, before the official start day of the course, Konstantinos proposed to Alexios to undertake part of the instruction as Tutor Assistant in order to organize instruction based on innovative practices in the context of his post-doc research. The idea was welcomed by Alexios and this is how the story of this educational intervention begins.

Fifteen students enrolled, actively engaged in the in-class course sessions and participated in the final exams. During the semester-long intervention, the in-class lecture portion of the course was substantially reduced and replaced with “early practice” sessions. The overall learning design was project-based and practice driven: students were required to submit a total of seven predefined assignments, followed by a capstone project. Our weekly teaching sequence during this course can be summarized in the following schema:

1. A 5-10 minutes introductory mini-lecture on a research method was presented in a face-to-face session.
2. Students were assigned an early practice activity involving use of the research method, to be completed individually prior to further presentation of information about the background theory of the method.
3. Students worked in face-to-face and small groups to share their personal reflections on their early practice products, guided by a tutor who has been mentored in the “guide on the side” approach to tutoring.
4. The tutor guided the group discussions to elaborations on the theoretical underpinnings of the research method.

This schema resonates strongly with David Kolb’s experiential learning model, which consists of four discrete elements: concrete experience; observation and reflection; the formation of abstract concepts; and testing in new situations (Smith, 2010). In order to support the above schema, an e-learning website was developed. The site was hosted by Eliademy™, a Software as a Service (SaaS) e-learning provider based on the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). The aim of the present investigation was to get insights into the lived experiences of the participants in this project-based and practice-driven course design in order to evaluate and improve our scholarly teaching practice. In our inquiry, we combined thematic analysis and personal narrative essays to produce a thick description of the participants’ lived experiences.

Theoretical Background

Experiential learning can be defined as the “direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it” (Borzak, 1981, as cited in Brookfield, 1983, p. 16). In other words, experience comes first, and learning is the byproduct of the direct experience. “formal, explicit propositional knowledge arises from a vast sea of informal, tacit embodied experience” (Davis, 2004, p. 129). Therefore, experiential learning is usually described as learning by doing:

Constructivists assert that all formal, explicit knowledge is abstracted from physical, bodily sensations that occur as one moves through the world – touching, being touched, hearing, being heard, and so on. Each and every action contributes to knowing, and each and every knowing orients action. (Davis, 2004, p. 133)

Theory and practice are closely related: “contrary to what many practitioners believe, there is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Cohen & Lotan, 2014, p. 3). However, early practice allows students and their tutors to experiment, to make mistakes, and to learn from their mistakes: “learning can only take place when the learner is engaging in an active process of building and creating knowledge through participation and interaction” (Sanford, Hopper, & Starr, 2015, p. 28). In our course design, the early practice phase prepared the ground for a small group collaborative reflection, and a final phase of critical and effective theory development. “Personal knowing and collective knowledge are mostly nonconscious – a suspicion that has been substantiated by a century of research in the cognitive sciences. Explicit knowledge is the mere surface of a knotted tangle of experience and interpretation” (Davis, 2004, pp. 129–130).

Our instruction was designed to engage students in direct experiences related to real-world challenges and complex problems requiring practical handling. For example, in order to teach *social network analysis*, our lesson design took the following form:

1. A 5-minutes mini-lecture introduction to social network analysis theory was presented, just to set the context, and provide a sense of “what we were talking about.”
2. Students were given a real-world challenge for early practice: “Is it possible to analyze our personal Facebook profiles to depict the underlying structure of our personal social networks?”
3. The software tools we were going to use were presented, to familiarize students with their use.
4. Students worked on their early practice challenge using the available tools to analyze their personal networks. The instructor was available to offer help as a “guide on the side.”
5. Students worked in small groups with a tutor to present and reflect on the results and of their practice and experience.
6. The tutor guided the groups’ collaborations toward theory elaboration and development.

Steps 1-3 took place in a face-to-face class session; steps 4-5 took place on the course’s e-learning site and step 6 took place during the next face-to-face session. Thus, the course unfolded in a spiral fashion, with the last phase of each lesson initiating the next one. By letting students actively explore a real-world problem or challenge (e.g., to analyze their Facebook’s friendship network) before the full presentation of the theory, students became more motivated to learn, question, and understand the theoretical knowledge.

According to King (1993), the students in a typical modern class

...are passive learners rather than active ones. Such a view is outdated and will not be effective for the twenty-first century, when individuals will be expected to think for themselves, pose and solve complex problems, and generally produce knowledge rather to reproduce it. (30)

In the words of John Dewey almost half of a century earlier, in the traditional educational approach “The subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation” (Dewey, 1938, p. 17). In such a traditional didactic pedagogy: “students are primarily configured as passive knowledge consumers. The knowledge that is transmitted to them takes the form of a univocal narrative” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 378).

Today’s educators are confronted with a critical question: How can we prepare current students to cope, both as humans and as scientists, with a social reality that we have not yet envisioned? (Osberg, 2005). We are confronted with what can be considered as the epistemological end of certainty: “Classical science emphasized order and stability; now, in contrast, we see fluctuations, instability, multiple choices, and limited predictability at all levels of observation. Ideas such as chaos have become quite popular, influencing our thinking in practically all fields of science” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1997, p. 4). However, teachers are usually “programmed to center their ‘instruction’ around predictability, patterning, control, linear-thinking and universality; ways of thinking that view the world as an ordered mechanism” (Ramiah, 2014, p. 63). “The sensibilities, habits of mind and skills of heavily

didactic pedagogy are not well aligned to the spirit and practical needs our times, with its intensively participatory new media” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 379). In the constructivist educational paradigm, learning is a complex phenomenon that cannot be controlled and imposed on students (Davis, 2004). Learning can be facilitated and students can be guided by an educator on their side, acting as the catalyst for the creation of a participatory educational culture. We live in a time where collaboration, communication, and versatility are key expectations for students more than traditional cognitive thinking (Sanford et al., 2015). This is a paradigm shift that requires a change in traditional roles:

But how do we get from transmission of information to construction of meaning? Such a change can entail a considerable shift in roles for the professor, who must move away from being the one who has all the answers and does most of the talking toward being a facilitator who orchestrates the context, provides resources, and poses questions to stimulate students to think up their own answers. (King, 1993, p. 30)

Having rejected the idea that learning is a matter of information transmission, constructivists argue that: “learning is an ongoing, recursive, elaborative process, not an accumulative one. Learners are not incomplete beings, but cognitive agents whose universes are always and already seamless even if they are never fixed or finished” (Davis, 2004, p. 130). When acting as a guide on the side, the teacher’s role is to nurture a learning organization (Senge, 2006), “to facilitate students’ interaction with the material and with each other in their knowledge-producing endeavor” (King, 1993), to focus students’ intellectual energy on the active investigation of structures and relationships instead of passively accepting someone else’s story (Postman & Weingartner, 1969), and to allow complex properties to emerge as the result of members’ interaction and synergies (Ricca, 2012). In such an approach, “teaching tends to be conceived in terms of chains of perturbation and construal in which the teacher attempts to interpret the learner’s actual interpretations to decide on the next prompt, and so on” (Davis, 2004, p. 133).

Research Approach

In order to get insights into the lived experiences of the students during our intervention and to provide a thick description, we adopted a blended qualitative methodological approach: thematic analysis combined with students’ critical reflections on their experience. Thematic analysis is “the search for and extraction of general patterns found in the data through multiple readings of the data” (Yukhymenko, Brown, Lawless, Brodowinska, & Mullin, 2014, p. 96).

This research study adheres to the code of Ethics of the authors’ University Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects. The empirical data for the thematic analysis inquiry came in the form of fifteen reflection essays that we collected from the students immediately after the end of the course. To ensure ethical research practice, the students were informed for the research purpose and voluntarily participated and provided the reflective essays which were consequently imported anonymized to Atlas.ti for further analysis. Following thematic analysis on students’ reflective essays and the identification of the emerging themes, three volunteer students (co-authors of this paper) contributed their critical reflections, in the form of personal narrative essays, on their lived experience, taking into account the emerging themes of the analytical process above. However, this research decision, in particular to ask the three students to provide their personal essays *after* sharing with them the results of the qualitative analysis, was not an easy one. This is a critical point, a bifurcation in where you have to confront all of your ontological (the nature of reality) and epistemological (how we can

know it) assumptions. If you decide to share the thematic analysis's results only after writing the narrative essays, as part of this paper, you try somehow to control the influence these results could have on the personal narratives and this is a fair concern. If you decide to share the thematic analysis results early, before writing the narrative essays, you acknowledge that influence and you even celebrate it. In the last case, your main concern is to provide a trustworthy and authentic interpretation of the phenomenon; an interpretation that is inevitably co-constructed by both the participants and the researchers in a transparent way. Personal narrative essays in this form, following the thematic analysis of the empirical data (presented in the next section), are an effective way to get an even richer description and insights into participants' experiences and meanings (Hunter, Ortloff, & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). Furthermore, reflecting on the emerging themes was a formative way to improve upon and validate the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis results. Therefore, these three narrative essays provided both members' check, and informants' feedback on the analysis themes (Lincoln & Guba, 2003), although in an informal and not systematic way.

In addition to the above methodological approach, the process of the collaborative writing of this research paper proved to be a transformational action research experience for all participants (students and tutor). Action research "is also a practice, composed of saying, doing and relating" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 463). Through our online and face-to-face collaborative writing we shared ideas and inspiration, we crafted a web artifact (this paper), and, most of all, we connected to each other, and we felt more empowered (Ritchie & Rigano, 2007; Siry & Zawatski, 2011). The call to reflect upon our experiences and the collective writing of this research paper embodied the principles of experiential learning we promoted during the course time in an isomorphic way. Action research is an approach to research that "It is organized and conducted in ways that are conducive to the formation of community – the 'common unity' of all participants – and that strengthen the democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualities of social life" (Stringer, 2007, pp. 27–28). Collaboration is an essential characteristic of action research, especially in the Nordic tradition (Lyngsnes, 2016) and in the participatory action research strand (McIntyre, 2008; Williamson & Brown, 2014). Our collaborative inquiry proved to be a transformational action research experience as far as it enabled us to develop an effective community of inquiry. This learning community played a catalyzing role in the following semesters; it helped us to design and implement even more complex research projects and sophisticated teaching innovations. This kind of collaborative inquiry is

...the antithesis of "ivory tower" research. Rather than a "technical" activity that is carried out by "expert researchers" it is a form of research that can be undertaken by practitioners such as teachers, social workers, community development workers as well as student and service users. (Munn-Giddings, 2012, p. 71)

Thematic Analysis Results

Thematic analysis is the identification of important patterns in the empirical data through the process of systematic reading and re-reading of the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Yukhymenko et al., 2014). We followed an inductive approach to thematic analysis which involves reading the raw data and making sense of them by deriving coding categories (Yukhymenko et al., 2014). Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software (Friese, 2012) supported the overall coding process of carefully examining the reflection essays to establish general coding categories. Initially, fourteen first order code themes emerged from the data that were later merged in four higher-level themes: *experiential learning*, *guide on the side*, *group process*, and *e-learning* (Figure 1). The first theme, *experiential learning*, resonates strongly

with the classical experiential learning model. Kolb and Fry (1975) proposed the classical model of experiential learning as consisting of four conceptual blocks: concrete experience, observation, reflection on the experience, and formation of abstract concepts. As one participating student reported in her short reflection at the end of the course:

I enjoyed there wasn't a barrage of dry information, either during the face-to-face sessions or in the e-learning environment; our participation in the learning process was active. The course's substantive subject got my attention without [my] having any prior knowledge.

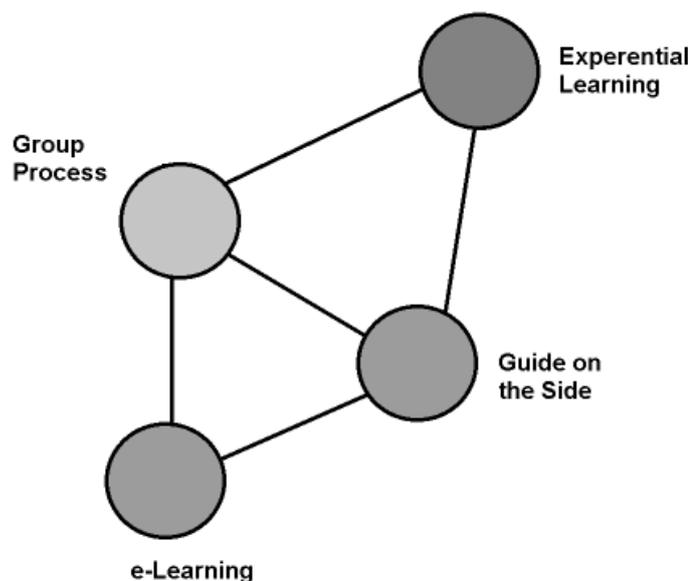


Figure 1. Four higher level themes emerged from the analysis of the students' reflective essays.

Guide on the Side was the next theme that emerged during the analysis. The main task of a *guide on the side* practitioner is to create a warm climate and to nurture a learning organization (Senge, 2006). It's not easy to approach *sage on the stage* teachers, even if their e-mail is prominently displayed, and office hours are available to students; there is still a distance. After all, they are sages! On the other hand, it is far easier to approach your guide on the side. As one participating student reported in her reflection:

It was interesting and while at the beginning I thought that it would be yet another class in which the professor will endlessly be talking.... This time, the courses were requiring a more active participation from the students and that gave them the opportunity to express their opinions, shaping that way the course and its flow into something that was appealing to every one of us. Every week, the assignments gave me the opportunity to be involved with subjects that appealed me and the choice to express myself in any way I wanted. In some way, we turned learning into a game and a game is always fun.

The *group process* theme emerged from the students' reflections through comments such as this:

We get a sense of belonging to a team and a sense of collaboration, which facilitated the creation of a plethora of new ideas; we all felt more active, more connected with each other, and more affiliated to the course subject; we learned through practice and not in theory and we were full of productive and creative ideas. It was a process which truly changed my way of thinking.

The group process theme is closely related to all other themes. Experiential learning takes place not only on the individual level but also on the group level, and a group has emergent properties that are different from the sum of its parts (Lewin, 1951). In our course design, experiential learning tended to be a group process. In this case, the guide on the side acted as the facilitator of the group process, while the e-learning environment allowed the continuation of the process after the end of each face-to-face session.

E-Learning is the final theme that emerged during our analysis. One function of the e-learning component was to offer easier access to course resources: course resources were efficiently organized in units and were always available on the website. More importantly, the e-learning component was used for interactions among peers and tutor, which extended the learning process beyond the face-to-face sessions. As one student reported in her reflective essay: “Through the e-learning site, I had the opportunity to participate in discussions about a particular subject of the course in order to draw useful information.” In a networked social media landscape in which almost all the students—the modern digital natives—have rapid access to a plethora of online resources, e-learning seems to be an organic part of an experiential learning process. As another student stated: “It was a very pleasant experience since feedback and help were provided during our assignments through the e-learning.” Feedback and help are the essentials in the modern participatory web culture.

Personal Narrative Essays

Following thematic analysis and the formation of the four-phase conceptual model for our experiential learning course design (Figure 1), a reflective practice approach was implemented. Reflective practice “has significant potential for linking academic activity with professional action” (Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Fernández Peña, & Pérez-Burriel, 2014, p. 12). The group work tutor and three students provided data in the form of personal narrative essays about their teaching and learning experience in this course. Narrative is one of the most broadly employed ways of systematizing human experience. The oral guidance given to the three students and co-authors of this paper was to be authentic in an idiographic style:

Given your lived experience and the results of the thematic analysis, write down your thoughts, your feelings, provide a rich account of your lived experience. Try to be as authentic as you can and share what you think is most important to you, regarding your lived experience during this course. Be yourself and tell your story from your point of view.

Idiographic research of this kind aims to describe and understand what is unique and distinctive about a particular individual (Coe, 2012). “As human beings, we experience our worlds and live our lives by telling stories” (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 162). In this way, these four personal narrative essays were utilized to check the credibility and trustworthiness (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006) of the thematic analysis derived model, as well as to elicit more nuanced dimensions of the participants’ lived experiences. The ultimate aim of these narrative essays was to create a collective meta-reflection—to tell the collective story of a learning community (Shevellar, 2015).

Reflection One –Stella-Maria (Student)

This was the first time I used an e-learning platform in a course in my university. The overall instructional process opened to me a new perspective on learning and studying. It was amazing to see the course resources online and available from the comfort of my home place! Besides the ease of accessing the required resources for my weekly assignments, the thing that most impressed me was the experience of trying real tools in real-world situations. I had the opportunity to test these tools on my own; not just to learn about them in theory. So, in this way the tutor urged us to learn how to use the research tools, to apply our knowledge, no matter how many mistakes we would do in the meantime. During this course, I felt it was the first time I could express MY opinion, my thoughts and my feelings about the course process and content. It was really awkward for many of us to write a reflection, expressing our point of view. We had been given a chance to articulate our unspoken thoughts, and that was my first time doing so, reflecting on my practice. I could express the difficulties I had, the things I couldn't do, the obstacles I experienced during the assignments, and my ideas about whether we could do something in a different way; I was encouraged every moment to express all the things I liked, and the things I disliked. It was like the whole course design demanded the active involvement of the student through new, fun and direct processes.

I believe that an important factor for the success of the course was that only a few students participated and actively engaged. This allowed for effective hands-on practice in small groups during the face-to-face sessions, such as running a vivid focus group simulation or a brainstorming for our capstone project. The abundance of pioneering ideas tested in practice would have been constricted in a lecturing amphitheater full of students. Therefore, I believe such an intervention should always take place in a seminar-type course with a few participating students to be more effective. Besides this observation about the applicability of the intervention, the overall way the course was conducted, organized and planned, was innovative and valuable. The main advantage in this course offering didn't lie in its interesting content - many times quite interesting courses result in total disappointment and frustration; what was unique, besides the valuable e-learning component, was the tutor's teaching approach. There was freedom to discuss, to question, to argue, to dispute, to search. It was definitely teaching; but teaching in a way that was letting you feel safe, valued as individual and motivated to discover and feel that joy; a teaching that lets you leave every class meeting cheerful and excited about what you learned.

To conclude, the most important [thing] was that students didn't come across what was supposed to be an unknown, although thought provoking, territory; they came across a tutor who wasn't playing the sage and who wouldn't criticize or disrespect their thoughts and questions. They came across a tutor with a human face who would empower them, and who valued them as individuals; a tutor who celebrated their "mistakes" and encouraged them to practice and experiment in order to transform them into critical and creative beings.

Reflection Two –Christina (Student)

This particular course was a quite interesting experience. Besides the increased level of participation in group work activities we experienced during our face-to-face sessions, as the result of the tutor's approach in teaching and his focus on experiential group learning, the introduction of an e-learning component, to supplement and extend face-to-face sessions and to create a blended learning environment, was an important aspect of our experience. In particular:

1. It established a direct communication channel among tutor and peers. The tutor was always available, either in the classroom or online.
2. The fact that all course material was posted online on the e-learning platform helped us feel more “relaxed” during class work. Not having to be occupied with keeping notes or trying to memorize information allowed us to be present in the ‘here-and-now’ of the teaching experience.
3. The weekly assignments contributed into our reception and understanding of the course material, but, most of all gave us the opportunity to think of new ways to analyze, express and present our opinions (e.g., Reflective writing, use of digital artifacts).

This “mixed” teaching method outweighs the advantages of both traditional and online methods. However, I believe that my positive impression for the e-learning part was due to the overall course delivery, rather than due to the particular online environment. The non-commonplace course design (non-commonplace to our experience, at least) facilitated a sense of belonging to a team and of acting collectively, which produced many original ideas. The “Brainstorming” that often took place during the in-class time was of particular interest, and I believe it led many of the participants to a more positive representation of the course’s subject. Also, it led us to reflect on, rethink and re-imagine what is considered to be the cornerstone of academic teaching: learning and researching. Both in the face-to-face sessions and through the e-learning platform, we had the opportunity to *experiment*. We explored and—most importantly—*enjoyed* new research tools; we learned through practice how to use them and in that way we were able to understand how those tools could be utilized in our own particular research interests. The weekly assignments were, therefore, not seen as “homework,” but as an occasion for active experimentation with multiple research methods, non-traditional media, computer software, online resources, etc. As a result of this active experimentation, I now find myself using most of the “resources” which were presented to us and, more importantly, I feel that the “limits” on my research practice have been substantially expanded. Not only am I *using* more resources, I *think* more resourcefully.

Our tutor was always there, by our side, to help us during these “experiments” and we always felt we could reach out to him. We were at all times encouraged to freely express ourselves in the way that best fitted us and to speak out our minds. His way of teaching, communicating and being present through this process, led us to the most important teaching of this course: meaningful collaboration. Being able to freely articulate and communicate our thoughts and arguments led to respecting everyone else’s and trying to build on them. We learned to interact productively with each other. A phrase our tutor often used to say was that “A group is not just the sum of its parts; a group is something different, it has emergent properties.” This phrase was to me the most important piece of knowledge that I have capitalized through this course and it was not transmitted to me through lecturing, as a rather superficial “wishful-thinking” catchphrase; it was a feeling and a reality that one could see being unfolded before her eyes. I used to think that the pursuit of knowledge was a solitary activity. After this experience, I am eager to collaborate with others and explore these “emergent properties.”

To summarize, I believe we all felt more active, more connected with each other and with the course subject; we learned through practice rather than through lecturing and we were filled with productive and creative ideas. It was a process that deeply changed my way of thinking.

Reflection Three – Maria-Afroditi (Student)

The class began as a regular course, but it was soon transformed into a group process. I went to the first meeting where the introduction was made. Frankly, I couldn't have expected what followed. It is a usual procedure for the professor to ask for emails and propose that we should write assignments in order to be evaluated. However, this course was different. I remember the lecture of the first day. We discussed available research methods in cyberspace. At the end, the professor said the task for the following week would be to put a link in an app called tag-crowd. He explained and showed us the procedure in detailed screenshots in a Powerpoint presentation. I thought "Oh, what a nice thing to explore a new app, this will be definitely a useful course for me." Personally, I like practicality and I have an enthusiasm for exploration and trying out new tools. Choosing what article to put in the app for analysis was challenging and the time for exploration limited. I had it in the back of my mind to do the task, but I was delaying it. Due to delays and disorganization, I missed the class for two-three weeks.

When I returned, the students had formed a group, and they were familiar with the e-learning platform. I felt nervous when I realized I had missed the weekly tasks, but I thought it was still possible to catch them up. I signed up to Eliademy (our e-learning platform) too. And I came to see the procedure was easy and comfortable. The platform was nice and it didn't take a long time to understand how it works. All the material was there and the professor had done a nice job building the material as comprehensive as possible. Eliademy gave us the space to learn, write, be further informed, and communicate with each other online.

Communication with the group and the professor was a major advantage for our class. It allowed us to have immediate help and feedback for what we did and we—the members of the group—had the chance to send our data to one of our classmates for her research. The classroom had literally been transferred online in Eliademy. And it was a classroom with an open polyphony of methods, actions, and ideas. It was the beginning of a nice journey.

This course had a lot of innovative characteristics. Eliademy with its nice and friendly environment pushed me to explore more the world of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). But apart from Eliademy and the whole online learning experience what I think is priceless is the encouragement we got out of this class to explore, to express ourselves and to try new ways of thinking and approaching problems. We learned research skills and explored a little of the massive world of the Internet.

Reflection Four – Alexios (Tutor)

Now, when I recall my teaching experience for the specific course design, I can see how my instructional practice was deeply influenced by my experience and training in group psychotherapy. One of my first priorities in every lesson was to always be in the classroom *before* my students, to be able to welcome them into my teaching session: a lecturer often enters the lecture room after her students; a psychotherapist waits for her clients. I felt rather as a guide on the side of a learning organization, of a complex formation with emergent properties. I felt that, I and my students, we were the coevolving constituent parts of a greater whole. In this context, I felt I couldn't act as the mere transmitter of dry information from my head to the students' heads; it was impossible for me to act as a sage on the stage. The instructional scheme of early practice, followed by reflection on practice, and elaboration of the theoretical concepts later on, came almost naturally to me. In this way, I could impart as much information as was needed, during the in-class face-to-face sessions, allowing students to experiment, make errors and come to deadlocks and raise questions. My lecturing then was focused on the students' direct experiences and everybody knew exactly what we were talking about and why theoretical

tune and make improvements to this instructional practice, I don't believe I will go back to commonplace course design again.

Discussion

In the above students' narratives, although special emphasis is given to the tutor such as "letting you feel safe, valued as individual and motivated to discover and feel that joy..." our study focuses not on some personal traits but on the methodology employed at work. However, the methodology employed is actually manifested through the tutor's attitudes and practice (and vice versa in a complex, non-linear, way):

There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its center the attitudes of teachers, and it is an illusion to think otherwise. The beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of teachers are the air of a learning environment. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 33)

The traditional approach to teaching research methods is to deliver in-class lectures, followed by after class practice assignments. Our course design flipped this traditional approach: early practice came first, preceded only by a short introductory mini-lecture to set the context; theory development followed as a process of discovery through experimentation and reflecting on practice. A central challenge for tutors in teaching research methods is to enable students to act as researchers themselves: by performing background literature review, conducting experiments, and engaging in informed debate (Sharples et al., 2014). A non-commonplace course design can drive some students out of their comfort zones (Barney & Maughan, 2015; Ricca, 2012). Our approach to experiential learning was not a complete replacement of traditional approaches, but it did offer students the authentic experience of being researchers themselves, which goes to the very core of what research is all about, and why one might find it a fascinating field of study. As Bateson (1972) has said, a researcher is an explorer who "can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored. He carries no Baedeker in his pocket, no guidebook which will tell him which churches he should visit or at which hotels he should stay" (Bateson, 1972, p. xxiv).

Based on the above premises, we designed our course based on an *Early Practice* leading to *Theory Development* weekly learning cycle, as shown in Figure 3. In this scheme, a *Short Introduction*, or mini-lecture is only necessary as a way to "ignite" the learning cycle by setting the context for a meaningful face-to-face experiential learning inquiry: "The professor is still responsible for presenting the course material, but he or she presents that material in ways that make the students do something with the information" (King, 1993, p. 30). *Early practice* always follows the short introductory lecture: when students are actively applying a research method in a real-world situation, they are far more likely to remember it and apply it in new situations (King, 1993). Early practice is a domain-specific and in-context educational research activity, in the sense that to learn a subject, and not just to learn about a subject, you need to be involved in an authentic activity:

This is not to suggest that all students of math or history must be expected to become professional mathematicians or historians, but to claim that in order to learn these subjects (and not just to learn about them) students need much more than abstract concepts and self-contained examples. They need to be exposed to the use of a domain's conceptual tools in authentic activity. (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 34)



Figure 3. A weekly learning cycle of Early Practice leading to Theory Development.

Authentic activities are activities that “engage students’ lived experience, and students can find meaningful connections with their current views, understandings and experiences” (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004, p. 240). In such a case, students develop various theoretical rules of thumb or theoretical generalizations about what to do in different, or unexplored before, contexts (Smith, 2010). The activities in our course design were not experienced as “intimidating homework,” and the effort was to create the ideal “micro-context” for critical reflections (Boud & Walker, 1998). During the *Reflection on Practice* phase, students discussed and shared their reflections with each other in small-group or plenary sessions. The ultimate aim was to critically understand the different points of view (Livingstone & Lynch, 2000; Paugh & Robinson, 2011), and to synthesize a meta-reflective narrative, as a way of fostering theory development through an interpretive synthesis (Fullana et al., 2014; Suri, 2013). In such a case, the different points of view open up space for a collective zone of proximal development (Brailas, Koskinas, Dafermos, & Alexias, 2015). According to Engeström, “In order to move to a new developmental phase, the team would have needed to take up, discuss, and resolve the issue of the expected and actually achieved outcomes of its work” (Engeström, 2008, p. 47).

In our course design, during the *Reflection on Practice* phase, the tutor should “act against established classroom practice by holding back answers in the interest of sustaining students’ self-directed inquiry” (Sharples et al., 2014, p. 311). The tutor should also

...suspend judgment in favor of further exploration of the students’ meanings, histories, and cultures. It is this ability to follow a student wherever she leads and do something helpful in response that requires improvisation on the part of the teacher. (Ricca, 2012, p. 45)

Theory Development, as the byproduct of a meaningful experiential inquiry and theoretical elaboration was the final phase of our course design. Students, with the aid of their “guide on the side” tutor, were challenged to develop a theoretical framework for a specific research method or technique. How far “on the side” the tutor stayed—how much information was imparted during this process—depended on the dynamics of a given group of students. Teaching praxis is always situated in a given cultural context.

Conclusion: A Meta-Narrative Synthesis

Initial concerns that the tutor's and students' narratives would be so disparate that we would be unable to draw a meta-narrative conclusion regarding our lived experiences proved not to be the case. In contrast, while the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the students' reflections (experiential learning, group process, guide on the side, and e-learning) highlighted the coarse characteristics of the course's pedagogical model, the three students' narrative above complement the analysis with more nuanced descriptions. What we think emerges from the narrative essays above and the thematic analysis model is that learning by doing, and group learning led by a tutor in a "guide on the side" approach, can be a transformational experience. As Maria-Afroditi so aptly put it, "The class began as a regular course, but then it was soon transformed into a group process. I went to the first meeting where the introduction was made. Frankly, I couldn't have expected what followed." What followed, as Stella-Maria explained it, "was definitely teaching; but teaching in a way that was letting you feel safe, valued as individual and motivated to discover and feel that joy; a teaching that let you leave every class meeting cheerful and excited about what you learned." This kind of engagement leads to "developing the capacities for reflection which facilitates personal, professional and ultimately system change" (Leitch & Day, 2000, p. 179).

The design of this course was based on the epistemological belief that student groups are complex living systems, learning organisms with emergent properties (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Osberg, 2005; Ricca, 2012). An effective way to nurture a learning organization of this type is to provide a facilitator who prioritizes relationship development and sustaining connectedness among group members (Hutchings, 2015). Stella-Maria described this role as "a tutor who celebrated their 'mistakes' and encouraged them to practice and experiment in order to transform them into critical and creative beings." An advantage of reflecting on your "mistakes" is that "failure is never a mere failure. It is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes" (Dewey, 1998, p. 142). This is especially true today, since, increasingly, "the 21st-century Knowledge Age emphasizes creative, conceptual work where there is no clear right or wrong answer, or where there may be many right answers, requiring the knowledge workers to collaborate to identify or create the best option" (Harasim, 2012, p. 84). Christina described her impression of this moving-knowledge landscape. "The non-commonplace. . .course design facilitated a sense of belonging to a team and of acting collectively, which produced many original ideas."

Experiential learning was implemented in our course design through hands-on early practice, followed by reflection on that practice, and tutorial guidance to theory elaboration. This proved to be a learning provoking process. Christina expressed the nature of the experience as learning that was not a "solitary activity" in which knowledge was "transmitted" through lecture, but as a collaborative process in which learning "unfolded before her eyes." Our course design effectively engaged students in the language and thought processes of the discipline of research. As Bateson (1979) has pointed out, "Break the pattern which connects the items of learning and you necessarily destroy all quality" (p. 8). In this project, we endeavored to preserve and reveal that pattern. Given a research tool and a problem to solve with that tool, students were guided to the discovery of the theoretical underpinnings of the tool by means of gently prompted small group collaboration.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight some of the limitations of this paper. First, this study has an idiographic and self-reflective focus, and its interpretation is very reliant upon our personal views. A more comprehensive qualitative (or quantitative) analysis of cases of experiential and "early practice" learning is needed to further investigate the reception, effectiveness and applicability of such an approach. A more extended set of empirical data, instead of only fifteen students' reflections, can justify the use of a method like Grounded

Theory to allow for the emergence of a more nuanced set of themes, the theoretical saturation and the inductive formation of a credible theoretical model for this kind of teaching practice.

Also noticeably absent from this analysis is an account of the actual student learning outcomes taking into account the actual content of this course on Internet research methods. Although such an account would be crucial in other forms of research, it should be emphasized that such an account was not the aim of this study.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this paper makes an important contribution by offering a richly situated exploratory investigation of a pedagogical design based on iterations of early-practice, reflective learning and small group collaboration phases. How such an approach is experienced by the participating actors? The suggestion made in this paper is that this kind of pedagogy can be a transformational learning experience.

References

- Barney, L. S., & Maughan, B. (2015). Getting out of the way: Learning, risk, and choice. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 12(2), 49–80.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 191–206.
- Brailas, A., Koskinas, K., Dafermos, M., & Alexias, G. (2015). Wikipedia in education: Acculturation and learning in virtual communities. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 7, 59–70.
- Brookfield, S. (1983). *Adult learners, adult education and the community*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.
- Coe, R. (2012). The nature of educational research. In J. Arthur, M. Waring, R. Coe, & L. V. Hedges (Eds.), *Research methods and methodologies in education* (pp. 5–14). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Cohen, E. G., & Lotan, R. A. (2014). *Designing groupwork: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Davis, B. (2004). *Inventions of teaching: A genealogy*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Davis, B., & Sumara, D. J. (2006). *Complexity and education: Inquiries into learning, teaching, and research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1998). *The essential Dewey: Ethics, logic, psychology*. (L. Hickman & T. M. Alexander, Eds.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (2008). *From teams to knots: Activity-theoretical studies of collaboration and learning at work*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92.
- Friese, S. (2012). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti*. London, UK: Sage.
- Fullana, J., Pallisera, M., Colomer, J., Fernández Peña, R., & Pérez-Burriel, M. (2014). Reflective learning in higher education: A qualitative study on students' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(6), 1008–1022.
- Harasim, L. M. (2012). *Learning theory and online technologies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hunter, C. A., Ortloff, D. H., & Winkle-Wagner, R. (2014). Out of our comfort zones: Reflections about teaching qualitative research at a distance. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(45), 1–24. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss45/3>
- Hutchings, M. (2015). Improving doctoral support through group supervision: Analysing face-to-face and technology-mediated strategies for nurturing and sustaining scholarship.

- Studies in Higher Education*, 1–18.
- Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2015). Learning and new media. In D. Scott & E. Hargreaves (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of learning* (pp. 373–387). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Kemmis, S. (2009). Action research as a practice-based practice. *Educational Action Research*, 17(3), 463–474.
- King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 30–35.
- Knewstubb, B. (2016). The learning–teaching nexus: Modelling the learning–teaching relationship in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 525–540.
- Kolb, D. A., & Fry, R. (1975). *Theories of group process*. London, UK: John Wiley.
- Leitch, R., & Day, C. (2000). Action research and reflective practice: Towards a holistic view. *Educational Action Research*, 8(1), 179–193.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (Eds.). (2003). *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Livingstone, D., & Lynch, K. (2000). Group project work and student-centred active learning: Two different experiences. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 325–345.
- Lyngsnes, K. (2016). A reflexive eye on a collaborative action research project in school. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(2), 196–211. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss2/3>
- McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Munn-Giddings, C. (2012). Action research. In J. Arthur, M. Waring, R. Coe, & L. V. Hedges (Eds.), *Research methods and methodologies in education* (pp. 71–75). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Osberg, D. (2005). Redescribing “education” in complex terms. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 2(1), 81–83.
- Paugh, P., & Robinson, E. (2011). Keeping a “vigilant critique”: Unpacking critical praxis as teacher educators. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(3), 363–378.
- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- Prigogine, I., & Stengers, I. (1997). *The end of certainty: Time, chaos, and the new laws of nature*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Ramiah, R. (2014). Complexity thinking in all practice. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 8(3), 62–71.
- Ricca, B. (2012). Beyond teaching methods: A complexity approach. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 9(2), 31–51.
- Ritchie, S. M., & Rigano, D. L. (2007). Solidarity through collaborative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(2), 129–150.
- Sanford, K., Hopper, T., & Starr, L. (2015). Transforming teacher education thinking: Complexity and relational ways of knowing. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 13(2), 26–48.
- Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. London, UK: Random House Publishing Group.
- Sharples, M., Scanlon, E., Ainsworth, S., Anastopoulou, S., Collins, T., Crook, C., ... O'Malley, C. (2014). Personal inquiry: Orchestrating science investigations within and beyond the classroom. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 24(2), 308–341.
- Shevellar, L. (2015). From bearers of problems to bearers of culture: Developing community in the community development classroom. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(4), 457–475.

- Siry, C. A., & Zawatski, E. (2011). "Working with" as a methodological stance: Collaborating with students in teaching, writing, and research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(3), 343–361.
- Smith, K. M. (2010). Producing the rigorous design case. *International Journal of Designs for Learning*, 1(1), 9–20.
- Souto-Manning, M. (2014). Critical narrative analysis: The interplay of critical discourse and narrative analyses. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(2), 159–180.
- Stein, S. J., Isaacs, G., & Andrews, T. (2004). Incorporating authentic learning experiences within a university course. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(2), 239–258.
- Stringer, E. T. (2007). *Action research* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Suri, H. (2013). Epistemological pluralism in research synthesis methods. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(7), 889–911.
- Trochim, W. M. K., & Donnelly, J. P. (2006). *Research methods knowledge base*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Williamson, K. M., & Brown, K. (2014). Collective voices: Engagement of Hartford community residents through participatory action research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(36), 1–14. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss36/2>
- Yukhymenko, M., Brown, S. W., Lawless, K., Brodowinska, K., & Mullin, G. (2014). Thematic analysis of teacher instructional practices and student responses in middle school classrooms with problem-based learning environment. *Global Education Review*, 1(3), 93–109.

Author Note

Alexios Brailas is a Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. Through his research he strives to bring insights from complexity theory and practices from group psychotherapy to both formal and informal teaching. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: abrailas@yahoo.com.

Stella-Maria Avani is an undergraduate student at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: stellavani@hotmail.com.

Christina Gkini recently graduated from the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: christina_gini@hotmail.com.

Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou recently graduated from the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: m.a.deilogkou@gmail.com.

Konstantinos Koskinas is a Professor at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. He is the founder and director of the Virtual Reality, Internet Research and e-Learning Laboratory. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: kkoski@panteion.gr.

Georgios Alexias is an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. His research interests focus on Sociology of Health and Sociology of the Body. In this context he focuses on the experiential dimension of health and illness, mainly the way the patient "lives" his illness. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: galexias@panteion.gr.

Copyright 2017: Alexios Brailas, Stella-Maria Avani, Christina Gkini, Maria-Afroditi Deilogkou, Konstantinos Koskinas, Georgios Alexias, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Brailas, A., Avani, S.-M., Gkini, C., Deilogkou, M.-A., Koskinas, K., & Alexias, G. (2017). Experiential learning in action: A collaborative inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(1), 271-288. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss1/15>
