

Exploring Student Experiences and the Perceived Impacts of Experiential Learning in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation Course: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) suggests that meaningful learning is acquired through active engagement in a venture. The notion is based on the idea of 'learning via doing', a method of learning through direct experience. Concerns about employability and skill gaps among graduates, the need for 21st-century capabilities, and the focus on learner-centered education have made ELT theory a fundamental component of educational approaches in many disciplines of knowledge. The development of General Subjects (MPU) courses in Malaysian higher education necessitates the use of diverse teaching methods to achieve the objectives of the MPU course, which aim to improve affective skills. The objective of this research is to explore the experiences of students involved in experiential learning activities in the MPU course and the impact of these activities on their values, ethical reasoning, and interpersonal skills. Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to 589 students who have registered for the Penghayatan Etika dan Peradaban (PEP) or Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation course at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which identifies patterns, significance, and themes from the students' open-ended responses. The study indicated that the teaching and learning methodologies based on ELT provide changes in the thinking, reflection, learning experience and appreciation of ethics and civilisation.

Keywords: Experiential Learning; ethics; civilisation; General Subjects (MPU)

INTRODUCTION

The General Subjects (MPU) courses are implemented in all tertiary educational institutions in Malaysia, including local institutions of higher learning (IPT) and private institutions of higher learning (IPTS). Starting in 2013, all MPU courses were categorized into four groups, namely U1 to U4, with each group encompassing different core knowledge and course learning outcomes. For the courses under the U1 group: Appreciation of Philosophy, Values, and History, they are implemented to foster students' knowledge and appreciation of Malaysian history as well as noble values (Higher Education Department, 2016). Until February 2025/2026, there are two courses offered under U1, namely Philosophy and Current Issues (FIS) and Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization (PEP). Both courses were first offered in 2019 to replace the two original courses, namely Islamic Civilization and Southeast Asia (TITAS) and Ethnic Relations. Since the implementation of the FIS and PEP courses, several studies have examined the effectiveness and impact of the MPU courses, particularly course U1. Previous studies discuss the role of the MPU course in developing holistic, balanced, and entrepreneurial human capital to face global challenges (Mohd Idzwan et al., 2026). The roles discussed include developing general skills such as critical thinking and communication for employability, self-character, and maturity of thought, which are the core objectives of the MPU courses introduced at the tertiary education level. For the study on the course of Ethics and Civilization Appreciation, it was found that implementing the PEP course as a strategy to address the issue of moral value decline in society, especially among students. The

content of the PEP course, which focuses on values such as responsibility, human rights, innovation, national identity, tolerance, leadership, and patriotism, can help shape a holistic character in students (Hon & Sihes, 2024). Additionally, quantitative studies show a positive relationship between understanding of the PEP course content and the practice of noble values (Ani, Madihah & Azizah Mohamad, 2023). The PEP course has been identified as an effective effort to foster racial unity, making it a relevant course to offer to students (Sakinatul et al., 2022).

However, the teaching and learning methods and strategies of the MPU course, particularly PEP, remain among the issues raised in past studies. The lack of interactivity in teaching materials and the negative perception that the PEP course is a repetition of History or Civics subjects learned at the school level have become new challenges for instructors (Ruzaini et al., 2021).

In this regard, experiential learning strategies have emerged as a new approach applicable to the PEP course. Experiential Learning is a pedagogical approach proposed by John Dewey and reinforced through Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). This strategy emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, concept formation, and knowledge application to enhance soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, and students' self-confidence (Almulla, 2020). Previous studies have shown that experiential learning and digital technology can enhance students' skills and readiness to face the workforce (Kunasegaran et al., 2026).

The teaching and learning strategy for the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization (PEP) course at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan is implemented in a structured manner, combining experiential learning and digital integration to address the challenges of conventional lecture methods and students' negative perceptions of the subject. Based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, this pedagogical strategy places primary emphasis on knowledge acquisition through direct experience, bridging the gap between academic theory and the realities of societal life. The implementation procedure for this strategy is systematically organized into a structured cycle that begins with the concrete experience phase. In this initial phase, students work in groups to choose one of the four practical themes offered, namely community awareness, sustainable environmental preservation, cultural heritage appreciation, or ethnic relationship integration. The next procedure requires each group to plan and submit three field activity proposals to the instructor for suitability assessment and approval before the activities are conducted, to reinforce their chosen theme.

The second phase of this strategy focuses on digital reflection, in which students record field activities and submit written portfolios through the LMS ecampus, followed by the abstract conceptualization phase, which links practical experiences to the PEP course theory. This learning cycle is completed through the active experimentation phase, which requires sharing videos on YouTube or TikTok to spread civic awareness within the community. This integrated implementation has not only proven to yield higher academic achievement in practical assignments than in final exams. However, it has also successfully strengthened students' soft skills, digital capabilities, and overall character development. Qualitative research was conducted to explore students' perceptions after undergoing experiential learning. The following are the research questions of this study;

RQ1: How do students experience experiential learning through activities outside the classroom?

RQ2: How does the learning experience influence students' thoughts on experiential learning, values and reflection related to ethics and civilisation?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the experiences of the students in the experiential learning activities in the MPU course, and the effects of these activities on their values, reasoning and interpersonal skills related to ethnic and civilisation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of modern pedagogy, experiential learning emerges as a transformative alternative to traditional learning models characterized by passive lectures, which often limit students to mere fact memorization rather

than building deep conceptual understanding (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024). According to David Kolb (1984), experiential learning refers to “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, emphasizing the students’ active participation in real-world contexts in the development of cognition and practice. Epistemologically, this model is based on John Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy (1938). Dewey introduced the notion of “learning through doing” and stressed the necessity of critical reflection in transforming raw experiences into meaningful knowledge (Malik & Behera, 2024; U-senyang, 2024). This paradigm is further reinforced by Jean Piaget’s (1970) constructivist approach, which shows that humans actively construct understanding through physical contact, adaptation, and assimilation of new information with their environment. Also, the group dynamics theory of Kurt Lewin (1951) through the Action Research Model, a process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, strongly supports the premise that best learning occurs when practical practice and mental reflection engage dynamically (Malik & Behera, 2024; U-senyang, 2024). The work of these figures, from Carl Rogers (1969) to Donald Schön’s reflective practices (1983), has laid a solid basis for a learner-centered teaching paradigm that, while stimulating student autonomy and intrinsic motivation, also bridges the gap between the academic lecture hall and complex social reality. Kolb expressed the whole of this thinking with a four-stage cycle that guarantees continuity of holistic learning:

1. **Concrete Experience:** This is the first level of learning when students get involved in new activities or experiences that are directly experienced and involve affective and physical domains.
2. **Reflective Observation:** Students look back, study, and reflect on the event from several viewpoints to uncover the underlying significance.
3. **Abstract Conceptualization:** Students reflect to develop logical models, ideas, or generalizations that inform their understanding.
4. **Active Experimentation:** Students apply the theories they have developed to new settings or problems that will provide them with more tangible experiences.

Experiential learning has been found empirically to have a major impact on pupils in the cognitive, emotional and psychomotor domains. The comparison of the research of Almulla (2020) and Elfis Suanto et al. (2019) reveals that empirical methodologies and systematic analysis can explain the effectiveness of Experiential Learning in student development. Almulla (2020) adopted a quantitative method, through experiments and questionnaires, to examine student participation in project-based learning, especially from the perspectives of cognitive and intrinsic motivation. Another support for the use of experience and active engagement in learning is the study of Almulla (2020). Conversely, Elfis Suanto et al. (2019) performed an inductive systematic literature review to analyze the efficiency of experiential learning in mathematics instruction in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. The study corroborates that Experiential Learning is an inductive, student-centered, activity-oriented learning technique that fosters reflection on experiences before their application in different learning situations. Kumar and Bhandarker (2019) highlighted the efficacy of using the Kolb Model in education management. This model can improve the quality of learning because it is holistic, adaptable and interdisciplinary. The study findings suggest that students who participate in experiential learning gain a more meaningful understanding of management concepts, as they are given the opportunity to apply theory to real-life problems in organizations and industries. The results of the study reveal that experiential learning is beneficial in improving not only mastery of concepts but also motivation, active involvement and the ability to integrate theory with real life problems. However, the disparities in the setting and methodological methods of the research lead to the conclusion that the impact of PBL should be investigated considering the learning context and the experiences provided to students.

The use of experiential learning has a considerable favorable effect on students’ cognitive, emotional and psychomotor domains. Interaction with real or virtual environments directly improves higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities in real-life scenarios from a cognitive perspective (Malik & Behera, 2024; U-senyang, 2024). Moreover, it minimizes students’ fear of cognitive failure as mistakes are seen as great learning opportunities, therefore increasing long-term memory (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024; Tangkui, 2025). Apart from the intellectual domain, this technique plays a significant part in the development of emotional intelligence, personal maturity, and social skills such as empathy, leadership, cooperation, and interpersonal communication (Malik & Behera, 2024; U-senyang, 2024). The student’s participation in extracurricular activities such as industrial training (internships), community projects (service learning),

fieldwork or student exchange programs is an opportunity for students to meet diverse communities and understand different socio-economic perspectives (U-senyang, 2024). The success of high impact programs such as the Co-op Program at the University of Waterloo in Canada and the German Dual Education System shows that the combination of practical work training and academic theory not only produces highly confident graduates but also provides highly competitive industry competencies which ensure a smooth transition to the workforce (U-senyang, 2024).

To actualize this revolutionary potential, educational institutions and politicians must seriously consider the instructional implications, including curriculum design, the role of instructors, assessment systems, and infrastructure support. The literature writing points out that the curriculum design should be well-planned to incorporate hands-on activities and field experiences with core academic objectives without compromising on traditional achievement criteria. The role of instructors has experienced a major paradigm shift, educators are now facilitators, mentors and guides who foster investigation, critical thinking and reflection in students, instead of being one-way information transmitters (subject specialists). Furthermore, the traditional assessment techniques such as written tests are not capable of measuring the overall development of the students which necessitate the use of more dynamic assessment tools such as reflective journal writing, peer assessment and student development portfolios. However, the use of experiential learning is not without some critical challenges, especially institutional resistance to change, financial constraints to support outdoor activities and issues of equitable access for students from low socio-economic backgrounds who are often denied opportunities to participate in high-cost hands-on activities. Moreover, there is a gap in the existing literature that calls for more longitudinal studies to assess the sustained impact of this method on the career trajectories of graduates, as well as the need to examine the integration of advanced technologies such as augmented reality to expand the accessibility of experiential learning inclusively. Although the literature showed the effectiveness of experiential learning in many educational contexts, it is still important to understand how these learning experiences translate to the development of competences and values among students in the setting of higher education in Malaysia. Therefore, a collective commitment through infrastructure investment, close collaboration between industry and community, and comprehensive professional development training programs for educators is crucial to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the implementation of this experience-based pedagogy to produce balanced, resilient and responsible human capital.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions and experiences after participating in Experiential Learning through continuous assignments in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation Course. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand students' meanings, experiences, and perceptions based on their own written responses. This is consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018), who highlight the suitability of qualitative inquiry for exploring meanings and human experiences within their natural contexts. Data were collected through a Google Form containing 15 open-ended questions. A total of 589 students from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) who had participated in the Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation Course responded to the questionnaire. The participants were students who had completed the course and were invited to provide written reflections and perceptions regarding their learning experiences. Thus, the qualitative data analysed in this study consisted of students' written responses to the open-ended questionnaire rather than interview data. Although the questionnaire consisted of 15 open-ended questions, only seven questions were selected for analysis in this article. The selection was based on the alignment of the questions with the specific focus and objectives of the present study. The remaining eight questions addressed aspects beyond the scope of this article and were therefore excluded from the present analysis. This focused selection enabled the thematic analysis to concentrate specifically on students' experiences and perceptions relevant to the research topic. The responses were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and themes emerging from the students' written responses. The questionnaire was administered in Bahasa Melayu. For the purpose of analysis and reporting in this English-language article, relevant responses and direct quotations were translated into English by the author. The translation adopted a conceptual rather than strictly literal approach to preserve the intended meaning, emotional tone, and cultural nuances of the students' original responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Though the distributed open-ended questionnaire responses, 3 themes were generated. Here are the questions in the survey.

Table 1 Theme and Survey Questions

Theme	Questions
Theme 1: Learning Experience	1. How does this out-of-classroom learning experience differ from the theoretical learning approach experienced in the classroom?
	2. What challenges did you face while in the field, and what strategies did you use to overcome them?
	3. What was the most emotionally impactful moment for you during the implementation of this activity?
Theme 2: Reflection and Mindset Shift	4. Did this assignment succeed in changing your initial perceptions and preconceived notions?
	5. Please summarize your overall learning experience in this course.
Theme 3: Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation	6. How did this assignment help you understand the relationship between ethical values and the realities of daily life as a university student?
	7. How did you apply principles of etiquette and civility when interacting with others during the execution of this project?

Table 2 Theme and Student Survey Responses

Theme	Student Survey Responses
Theme 1: Learning Experience	"Learning outside the classroom is more practical and based on real experiences, compared to theoretical learning in lecture halls that emphasizes concepts and knowledge. Through this activity, I was able to directly apply values of ethics, responsibility, and cooperation in real situations."
	"The experience of learning outside the classroom is different from the theoretical learning approach encountered in lecture halls because learning outside the classroom involves emotions and the heart." This is because I not only know what humanitarian aid or friendliness is, but I also personally feel satisfaction, shyness, or a sense of realization when interacting with outsiders."
	"Learning outside the classroom is more challenging and enjoyable because it involves real experiences, teamwork, and direct communication." Unlike theoretical learning in lecture halls, which focuses more on explanations and reading, this learning helps me better understand the values of ethics and civilization through real-world practice."
	"Learning outside the classroom is different because it shifts from passive theory to practical application." If in lectures I only understand concepts abstractly, this experience forces me to solve real problems, communicate effectively, and act according to uncertain situations. In short, it bridges the gap between 'knowing' and 'doing', deepening my understanding and making it last longer."
Theme 2: Reflection and Mindset Shift	"Yes, this assignment successfully changed my initial perception because direct exposure helped me view an issue more openly and objectively." I now understand better that every situation has its own background and cannot be judged hastily."
	"Yes, this assignment has successfully opened my mind to not judge something or a group of people based solely on appearances." I now better understand the context and the real situations they face."
	"Yes, this assignment successfully broke down the walls of my prejudice against certain groups in society." I learned that every individual has their own story and struggle that cannot be judged from the outside alone."
	"The most emotionally impactful moment for me was when I realized how diligently cultural

		practitioners and the local community strive to preserve their heritage, such as the art of Wayang Kulit and Dikir Barat, even while facing the tide of modernization." A mix of admiration and sadness arose upon witnessing their sincerity in sharing knowledge to ensure the nation's identity does not fade, which indirectly made me aware of my great responsibility as the younger generation."
Theme Appreciation Ethics Civilisation	3: of and	"This assignment helps me understand that ethical values are not just theoretical concepts, but need to be practiced in real situations such as when interacting with others, managing information, and making decisions."
		"I apply the principles of etiquette and civilization by communicating politely, respecting the views of others, maintaining proper speech and behavior, and adhering to local norms and culture while conducting activities in the field."
		"I apply the principles of etiquette and civilization by prioritizing politeness in language and a respectful attitude in every interaction, regardless of the background of the parties involved." I always ask for permission before starting a discussion, listen attentively, and appreciate others' views to build harmonious relationships."
		"I practice etiquette and civility by using polite language and fully respecting the views of group members and outsiders." The principle of civility is demonstrated through an attitude of tolerance toward cultural and background differences, as well as maintaining professionalism and integrity in every communication to ensure harmonious relationships."

For Theme 1: Learning Experience, qualitative data reveal that students see learning outside the classroom as engaging, practical and fun, unlike the passive theoretical learning in lecture halls. This direct exposure was effective in connecting their emotions and minds to social realities, bridging the gap between the “knowing” (conceptual) and “doing” (practical application) parts. A survey of the literature strongly supports this empirical observation among students that experiential learning shifts the focus from passive memory approaches to a “learning through doing” approach (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024; Malik & Behera, 2024). This strategy is an effective bridge between the theoretical information one acquires in the classroom and its application in the field (U-senyang, 2024). Students’ immersion in genuine community settings helps them make the dots between theoretical academic ideas and their practical real-world applications, increasing interest, enthusiasm, and long-term retention of complex knowledge (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024). Active engagement based on emotions and physical presence in the field is associated with John Dewey’s observation that authentic education needs to be linked to real-world activities, which promotes motivation and facilitates long-term retention of knowledge (U-senyang, 2024). Moreover, students have faced other barriers in the field such as time constraints, weather factors, financial implications, and group dynamics issues. Still, their willingness to work together effectively has developed resilience, flexibility, and high collaborative problem-solving skills successfully (Tangkui, 2025; U-senyang, 2024).

In the context of Theme 2: Reflection and Mindset Shift, student feedback reflects deep cognitive and affective changes. Field assignments helped break down walls of prejudice, develop mature attitudes, and change initial thoughts about certain community groups and cultural heritage. The students' paradigm shift and emotional growth occur through critical reflection following the field exercise (U-senyang, 2024). The experiential learning paradigm considers reflection a key component that turns raw field experiences into meaningful knowledge and high self-awareness (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024; U-senyang, 2024). The Kolb cycle's reflective observation phase gives students the chance to reconsider their activities, to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their adopted tactics, and to test their former assumptions (Tangkui, 2025; U-senyang, 2024). Direct social connections with different groups of community members have been shown to promote empathy, emotional intelligence, social intelligence and civic duty (U-senyang, 2024; Malik & Behera, 2024). This realistic exposure also helps break down the initial walls of prejudice and bias that students have toward specific cultures, thereby educating them to think more openly, more maturely, and more objectively, without judging something by its superficial appearance alone (U-senyang, 2024).

Lastly, the research findings for Theme 3: Appreciation of Ethics and Civilization describe how students practically translate ethical values, manners, and civilization in the field. Examples include using courteous language, having respectful attitudes, asking permission before beginning discussions, and upholding integrity

and accountability in group assignments. The qualitative findings support the proposition that experiential learning is an excellent tool for embedding the aspects of morality, ethics, and social responsibility in the character of students (Malik & Behera, 2024).

The academic literature suggests that when students are placed in real-world collaborative contexts, they learn intellectually and are motivated to practice effective interpersonal communication, respect cultural differences, listen actively and be tolerant (Sharma & Lajwanti, 2024). The practical approach of this work is effective in producing a young generation that is not only academically competent but also highly principled and civically responsible, as evidenced by students' ability to translate the abstract concept of academic ethics into civilized actions in the field (Malik & Behera, 2024).

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