

## THE ROLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION OF TARABA STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ZING, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This study examined the role of experiential learning on the development of soft skills among students of vocational and technical education of Taraba State College of Education Zing, Nigeria. Experiential learning, which emphasizes hands-on experiences and practical applications, was examined as a strategy for enhancing skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to assess the effectiveness of experiential learning in developing soft skills and improving career readiness. The population of the study consist of all NCE 3 Students of Agric Education, Business Education, Home Economics, Technical Education and Fine Arts department of Taraba State College of Education Zing. The total enrolment of NCE 3 students in the five departments is five hundred and thirty-five (535) students (Directorate of Management Information System, COE Zing, 2024). The average age of the students is between eighteen and twenty-five (18-25) years. A stratified random sampling technique was used for the study. A sample size of 150 TVET students (final-year students who have undergone experiential learning activities) was used for the study. A structured questionnaire was administered to the selected students to gather quantitative data on their perceptions of experiential learning and soft skills development. The instrument's reliability was established with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency. Psychometric analysis, including factor analysis, was conducted to validate the constructs measured by the instrument. The results indicated that experiential learning significantly contributes to the development of soft skills, with internship/industrial training and group projects/simulations being particularly effective. It is recommended that TVET programmes integrate more experiential learning opportunities to enhance students' soft skills and prepare them for the demands of the workforce. Further research should explore the long-term impact of experiential learning on career success.*

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, soft skills, vocational, technical, students

## Introduction

Nigeria faces a significant deficit in soft skills, which are essential for career success and economic development (Ogunsola, 2023; Isijola *et al.*, 2024; Ayodele *et al.*, 2021). Soft skills such as communication, interpersonal, leadership, time management, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence are crucial but often lacking in many areas of application (Kumar & Sharma, 2019; Sharipov & Jabbarova, 2024; Dean, 2017). The Institute of Soft Skills and Vocational Development of Nigeria (ISSVD) has been established to address this deficit by providing tailored training programs and experiential learning experiences (Ogunsola, 2023).

Soft skills are fundamental for preparing students for lifelong learning and work in today's globalized world. They are economically valuable and sought after by employers, enabling students to secure and progress in jobs (Qizi, 2020; Dean, 2017). In the context of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), soft skills like innovation, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration are essential for achieving sustainable development goals (Lei & Abidin, 2024; Dean, 2017; Varma & Malik, 2023; Deep *et al.*, 2020).

Experiential learning is a hands-on approach that enhances the development of both technical and soft skills. It involves practical experiences that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork (Upadhyay & Malik, 2024; Haritha & Rao, 2024). This method is particularly effective in vocational education, where students need to be prepared for practical work environments (Placklé *et al.*, 2020).

Integrating experiential learning into the curriculum in Taraba State College of Education Zing can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. By focusing on experiential learning, the college can enhance students' career readiness and employability, addressing the broader challenges

of unemployment and skills mismatch in Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to explore how experiential learning contributes to the development of soft skills among students of vocational and technical education at Taraba State College of Education Zing. It seeks to identify effective instructional methods, assess the impact of experiential learning on students' career readiness.

### **Methodology**

The study employs a descriptive survey research design, which allows for the collection of data from a sample of students and Lecturers to assess the effectiveness of experiential learning in developing soft skills and improving career readiness.

The population of the study consist of all NCE 3 Students of Agric Education, Business Education, Home Economics, Technical Education and Fine Arts department of Taraba State College of Education Zing. The total enrolment of NCE 3 students in the five departments is five hundred and thirty-five (535) students (Directorate of Management Information System, COE Zing, 2024). The average age of the students is between eighteen and twenty-five (18-25) years.

A stratified random sampling technique was used for the study. A sample size of 150 TVET students (final-year students who have undergone experiential learning activities) was used for the study.

A structured questionnaire was administered to the selected students to gather quantitative data on their perceptions of experiential learning and soft skills development. The questionnaire includes a 4-likert-scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) =3, Disagree (D) = 2, and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 for positive items and reversed for negatively wording items on instructional methods, skill acquisition, and career preparedness.

Descriptive statistics (percentages, mean and standard deviation) were used to analyze the data.

## Results

### Research Question One

What are the roles of experiential learning in the development of soft skills among students in vocational and technical education in Taraba State College of Education Zing?

The results on Contribution of Experiential Learning to Soft Skills Development (Table 1) indicate a high level of agreement on the effectiveness of experiential learning in developing soft skills. Teamwork & Collaboration had the highest mean score (Mean=3.86, SD=0.50), showing strong consensus on its importance. Problem-Solving Skills had the lowest variation in responses (SD = 0.45), indicating most participants agreed on its effectiveness. Communication Skills, Leadership Abilities, and Adaptability & Resilience also showed strong agreement, with Mean score of: 3.74, 3.80 and 3.68 with SD of 0.66, 0.52 and 0.55 reflecting relatively consistent opinions.

**Table 1:** Contribution of Experiential Learning to Soft Skills Development

Soft Skills	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Communication Skills	3.74	0.66	High agreement
Teamwork & Collaboration	3.86	0.50	High agreement
Problem-Solving Skills	3.73	0.45	High agreement
Leadership Abilities	3.80	0.52	High agreement
Adaptability & Resilience	3.68	0.55	High agreement

### Research Question Two

What are the most effective instructional methods for experiential learning?

Table 2 showed Effective Instructional Methods in TVET Programmes. Internships/Industrial Training were the most preferred instructional method with Mean= 3.79, SD=0.63. Role-playing Activities (Mean=3.75, SD=0.62) also received high agreement. Group Projects & Simulations with (Mean=3.62, SD=0.62) had minimal variation in opinions. Hands-on Practical Training

(Mean=3.54, SD=0.90) was considered effective but showed the highest variation suggesting mixed experiences. Traditional Lecture-based Teaching had the lowest mean of 3.45 and a higher SD=0.79 indicating more divided opinions on its effectiveness.

**Table 2: Effective Instructional Methods in TVET Programs**

Instructional Method	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Hands-on Practical Training	3.54	0.90	Strong agreement
Internships/Industrial Training	3.79	0.63	Very strong agreement
Group Projects & Simulations	3.62	0.62	Strong agreement
Role-playing Activities	3.75	0.62	Very strong agreement
Traditional Lecture-based Teaching	3.45	0.79	Moderate agreement

### Research Question Three

What is the influence of experiential learning in career readiness of TVET students?

Table 3 showed the role of Experiential Learning on Career Readiness of TVET students. The variable on Confidence in Job Interviews (Mean: 2.99, S.D: 0.94) showed Moderate agreement among participants while Ability to Work in Teams (Mean: 3.17, S.D: 1.07), readiness for workplace challenges (Mean: 3.55, S.D: 0.74), Entrepreneurial Skills (Mean: 3.42, S.D: 0.83) and Decision-Making Skills (Mean: 3.45, S.D: 0.79) all showed Strong agreement.

**Table 3: Impact of Experiential Learning on Career Readiness**

Career Readiness Aspect	Mean	S.D	Interpretation
Confidence in Job Interviews	2.99	0.94	Moderate agreement
Ability to Work in Teams	3.17	1.07	Strong agreement
Readiness for Workplace Challenges	3.55	0.74	High agreement
Entrepreneurial Skills	3.42	0.83	Strong agreement
Decision-Making Skills	3.45	0.79	Strong agreement

## Discussion of Findings

The findings that experiential learning significantly enhances soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and adaptability agrees with existing findings that emphasizes the role of active and hands-on learning in fostering employability skills (Aung, 2024; Younkin, 2017). Experiential learning methods, such as group projects, role-playing, and problem-based case studies, are widely recognized for their ability to improve communication, critical thinking, and teamwork skills (Abdel-Wahed *et al.*, 2024; Baile & Blatner, 2014; Alabi, 2024; Martin, 2019). Additionally, reflection and feedback mechanisms embedded in experiential learning further enhance students' understanding of these skills (Roland, 2017; Perusso *et al.*, 2020). According to Idris et al, (2020) adapting Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle showed that experiential learning involves a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle facilitates the development of soft skills like adaptability, communication, and teamwork by connecting prior knowledge with new experiences (Jones-Roberts & Bechtold, 2024; Vogler *et al.*, 2018). Moreso, an empirical study on metacognition training for soft skills by Joie-La Marle *et al.*, (2023), Mitsea *et al.*, (2021) demonstrated significant improvements in self-efficacy and adaptive performance among participants. This training therefore enhanced awareness of soft skills, which contributes to better communication, problem-solving, and adaptability. The agreement of this findings with other findings suggests that experiential learning is a robust method for developing crucial soft skills. These findings suggest that institutions can confidently integrate experiential learning methods (e.g., internships or hands-on projects) into curricula to prepare students for real-world challenges. Furthermore, employers can adopt experiential training programs to improve employee adaptability, teamwork, and communication. Policymakers can advocate for experiential learning frameworks in education systems to enhance employability and lifelong learning.

The high preference for internships as an instructional method for experiential learning agrees with Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, emphasizing that learning is most effective when embedded in authentic contexts. Internships offer practical experience, allowing students to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, thereby enhancing their skills and understanding (Hynie *et al.*, 2011; Bayerlein, 2020). This approach of internships as an instructional method for experiential learning is supported by Leary & Sherlock, (2020), Lantu *et al.*, (2022) who underscores the importance of workplace learning for developing vocational competencies and adaptability. The study therefore suggest that TVET programmes should prioritize and expand internship opportunities to maximize learning outcomes.

The result in Table 2 further identified Role-playing Activities as an instructional method for experiential learning. The positive reception of role-playing activities resonates with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, where active participation and reflection are key to learning. According to Abdel-Wahed *et al.*, (2024), Berry & Kowal, 2022) pointed out that role-playing fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, preparing students for real-world scenarios. Honey and Mumford (1986) would classify learners benefiting from this as "activists," who thrive on active involvement and experimentation.

While considering effectiveness of Hands-on Practical Training as an instructional method for experiential learning it was suggested that the quality and relevance of hands-on training may vary. This agrees with Dewey's (1938) philosophy of learning by doing. This method also underscores the importance of ensuring that practical training is well-designed and aligned with industry needs (Viterouli *et al.*, 2024; Bixby, 2018).

The findings further revealed that experiential learning positively impacts career readiness the result agrees with the research of Schwichow *et al.*, (2016) which emphasize the role of hands-on experiences in preparing students for professional environments. These experiences allow students to apply

theoretical concepts in practical contexts, fostering industry-specific competencies and entrepreneurial thinking (Jan, 2024; Rao *et al.*, 2024). However, the relatively lower score for teamwork skills suggests a need for enhanced collaborative training approaches within TVET programmes. Strategies such as group projects, mentorship programs, and simulations can address this gap by promoting interpersonal communication and cultural competence (Heppner, 2017; Bahreman & Swoboda, 2016). Experiential learning also builds resilience and adaptability by exposing students to real-world challenges, which are critical for long-term career success (Seow *et al.*, 2019).

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. There is the need to strengthen soft skills development through enhanced teamwork, leadership, and communication skills by integrating more collaborative projects and leadership roles in training programmes.
- ii. There is the need to improve Instructional Methods in TVET by expanding internships and role-playing activities, as they have the highest agreement on effectiveness. Also, improving hands-on practical training is necessary to ensure consistent quality and access to necessary resources.
- iii. Reduce reliance on lecture-based teaching and incorporate interactive elements like discussions and multimedia presentations should be encouraged for the development of soft skills among students of vocational and technical education.

### **Conclusion**

The findings effectively demonstrate the value of experiential learning in enhancing soft skills development, optimizing instructional methods in TVET programs, and improving career readiness among students. These results



are consistent with broader researches advocating for active learning approaches that integrate practical experiences with structured reflection and collaboration.

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