

Beyond the Classroom: Hospitality Management Students' Experiences in Developing Industry-Ready Competencies through Experiential Learning

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Abstract

The hospitality industry requires graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also practical competencies, professional attitudes, and adaptability to meet the demands of an increasingly dynamic global workforce. Experiential learning has become an essential pedagogical approach in hospitality education by providing students with authentic opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. Guided by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, the study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to understand how students perceive and make meaning of their internship experiences, laboratory activities, simulations, community engagement, and other work-integrated learning opportunities. Fifteen Hospitality Management students from a higher education institution in the Philippines were purposively selected and participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method. The findings revealed six essential themes: (1) Bridging Classroom Learning and Industry Practice; (2) Developing Professional Competence through Authentic Experiences; (3) Building Confidence, Communication, and Interpersonal Skills; (4) Cultivating Adaptability and Problem-Solving Abilities; (5) Challenges Encountered during Experiential Learning; and (6) Strengthening Career Readiness and Professional Identity. The study concludes that experiential learning significantly contributes to the development of technical competencies, employability skills, and professional values necessary for success in the hospitality industry. The findings provide valuable insights for hospitality educators and academic institutions in strengthening work-integrated learning programs and industry partnerships to better prepare students for future careers.

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors worldwide, offering diverse employment opportunities in hotels, restaurants, resorts, tourism enterprises, event management, and other service-oriented organizations. As the industry continues to evolve due to globalization, digital transformation, and changing customer expectations, employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills, professional attitudes,

communication abilities, adaptability, and problem-solving competencies. Consequently, higher education institutions offering Hospitality Management programs are expected to produce graduates who are industry-ready and capable of performing effectively in highly dynamic and customer-centered work environments.

Experiential learning has become a cornerstone of hospitality education because it bridges the gap between

classroom instruction and professional practice. Unlike traditional lecture-based learning, experiential learning allows students to acquire knowledge through direct experience, reflection, experimentation, and application in authentic workplace settings. Internship programs, laboratory classes, simulation activities, community immersion, culinary practicums, hotel operations, and industry exposure provide Hospitality Management students with opportunities to develop technical competencies while strengthening interpersonal, leadership, and decision-making skills. According to Kolb (2015), learning becomes more meaningful when students actively engage in concrete experiences followed by reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of experiential learning in developing employability skills among hospitality students. Jackson (2022) reported that work-integrated learning enhances students' professional competence, confidence, communication skills, and career preparedness. Similarly, Sisson and Adams (2023) found that internship experiences improve students' understanding of workplace expectations while fostering resilience, adaptability, and customer service competencies required in the hospitality industry. These findings demonstrate that experiential learning plays a critical role in preparing graduates for successful transitions from academic settings to professional employment.

In the Philippines, Hospitality Management programs emphasize outcomes-based education through internship training, laboratory instruction, industry immersion, and extension activities aligned with the standards of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). These learning experiences expose students to actual hospitality operations while allowing them to apply classroom knowledge in authentic workplace environments. However, despite the increasing emphasis on experiential learning, many students continue to encounter challenges related to workplace adjustment, communication, technical performance, time management, and adapting to industry standards. Understanding these experiences is essential for improving hospitality education and strengthening graduate employability.

While previous studies have primarily measured experiential learning using quantitative indicators such as academic performance, internship satisfaction, and employability skills, relatively few qualitative studies have explored how Hospitality Management students personally experience and interpret these learning opportunities. Little is known about how experiential learning shapes students' professional identity, confidence, competence, and readiness for industry practice from their own perspectives.

Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Hospitality

Management students in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. By understanding students' narratives and reflections, the study aims to provide valuable insights into how experiential learning contributes to professional growth and career readiness. The findings may guide hospitality educators, curriculum developers, and industry partners in strengthening experiential learning programs that effectively prepare graduates for the demands of the modern hospitality industry.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to:

1. Explore the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students during experiential learning.
2. Examine how experiential learning contributes to the development of industry-ready competencies.
3. Identify the professional skills and personal attributes developed through experiential learning.
4. Describe the challenges encountered by students during experiential learning activities.
5. Develop a phenomenological description of Hospitality Management students' experiences to inform curriculum enhancement and strengthen industry-based learning programs.

Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Experiential Learning in Hospitality Education

Experiential learning has become a fundamental approach in hospitality education because it enables students to connect classroom instruction with real-world industry practice. Unlike traditional teaching methods, experiential learning emphasizes active participation through internships, laboratory activities, simulations, fieldwork, and community engagement. According to Kolb (2015), learning is most effective when students engage in concrete experiences, reflect on those experiences, develop conceptual understanding, and apply their knowledge in new situations. Similarly, Jackson (2022) found that work-integrated learning enhances students' professional competence, confidence, and employability by allowing them to apply theoretical concepts in authentic workplace environments. These studies suggest that experiential learning is essential in preparing Hospitality Management students for the demands of the hospitality industry.

Industry-Ready Competencies among Hospitality Management Students

Industry-ready competencies refer to the knowledge, technical skills, professional attitudes, and interpersonal abilities required for successful employment in the hospitality industry. Employers increasingly seek graduates who possess

communication skills, customer service orientation, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, digital literacy, and problem-solving abilities in addition to technical expertise. World Economic Forum (2023) identified analytical thinking, resilience, collaboration, communication, and adaptability as among the most important competencies for the future workforce. Likewise, Sisson and Adams (2023) reported that hospitality students who participated in experiential learning demonstrated higher levels of professional competence and career readiness than those with limited industry exposure. These findings emphasize that experiential learning plays a significant role in developing competencies aligned with industry expectations.

Internship and Work-Integrated Learning

Internship and work-integrated learning are considered essential components of Hospitality Management education because they provide students with authentic workplace experiences before graduation. Through internships, students gain practical knowledge, improve customer service skills, develop professionalism, and become familiar with industry standards. Jackson (2022) emphasized that internship experiences strengthen students' confidence, workplace communication, and decision-making skills while improving their transition from school to employment. Similarly, Cho and Kim (2021) found that meaningful internship experiences

positively influence students' career satisfaction, self-efficacy, and commitment to hospitality professions. These studies highlight the importance of providing structured and well-supervised experiential learning opportunities within hospitality programs.

Development of Employability Skills

Employability skills are transferable competencies that enable graduates to perform effectively in professional environments. In the hospitality industry, these include communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, adaptability, professionalism, and customer relations. Yorke (2006) explained that employability extends beyond academic achievement and includes personal qualities that support career success. More recently, Succi and Canovi (2020) reported that employers consistently prioritize soft skills alongside technical competencies when hiring hospitality graduates. Experiential learning activities allow students to strengthen these competencies by working collaboratively, solving real workplace problems, and interacting with customers in authentic settings.

Challenges in Experiential Learning

Despite its benefits, experiential learning presents several challenges for Hospitality Management students. Students commonly experience difficulties adapting to workplace culture, managing time, handling customer complaints, balancing academic and internship responsibilities, and coping with workplace pressure.

Pham et al. (2022) found that students often encounter emotional stress and adjustment difficulties during internships, particularly when workplace expectations differ from classroom learning. Likewise, **Jackson (2022)** noted that inadequate supervision, limited mentoring, and inconsistent industry practices may reduce the effectiveness of experiential learning. Addressing these challenges is essential to maximizing students' professional development and learning outcomes.

Hospitality Education in the Philippine Context

Hospitality and tourism remain important contributors to the Philippine economy, increasing the demand for highly competent hospitality professionals. Consequently, higher education institutions have strengthened experiential learning through laboratory instruction, practicum, internship, and industry partnerships following the standards established by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). According to CHED Memorandum Order No. 62, Series of 2017, Hospitality Management programs should develop graduates who demonstrate technical competence, ethical professionalism, communication skills, leadership, and customer-oriented service. However, despite these initiatives, limited qualitative research has explored how Filipino Hospitality Management students personally experience experiential learning and how these experiences shape their industry

readiness. This gap highlights the need for the present phenomenological study.

Research Gap

Existing studies have consistently shown that experiential learning enhances students' technical skills, employability, and professional competence. However, most previous research has employed quantitative methods that measure internship satisfaction, competency levels, and career readiness using standardized surveys. While these studies provide valuable evidence, they offer limited understanding of how students personally interpret and assign meaning to their experiential learning journeys.

Furthermore, few qualitative studies have explored the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students in the Philippine context, particularly regarding how internships, laboratory activities, simulations, and industry immersion contribute to the development of industry-ready competencies. This study addresses this gap by employing a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students and to uncover the meanings they attach to experiential learning in preparing for professional careers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which serves as its primary theoretical foundation. Kolb proposed that learning occurs through a continuous cycle

involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Students acquire knowledge by engaging in authentic experiences, reflecting on those experiences, developing new understanding, and applying their learning in future situations. Within Hospitality Management education, internships, laboratory classes, simulations, and industry immersion provide opportunities for students to complete this learning cycle, thereby developing both technical competencies and professional skills required by the hospitality industry.

The study is likewise supported by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which explains that learning occurs through observation, modeling, and interaction with experienced professionals. During experiential learning, Hospitality Management students observe supervisors, mentors, and hospitality practitioners, enabling them to develop professional behaviors, communication skills, customer service techniques, and workplace ethics through guided practice and social interaction.

Additionally, the study draws upon Yorke's Employability Theory (2006), which emphasizes that graduate employability involves a combination of knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and professional values that enable successful employment and career advancement. Experiential learning contributes significantly to employability by allowing

students to strengthen technical expertise while developing confidence, adaptability, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving abilities valued by employers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Husserlian descriptive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. The phenomenological approach was appropriate because it focused on understanding the meanings students attached to their internship, laboratory activities, simulations, and other experiential learning opportunities. Through this design, the study described the essence of students' experiences while minimizing researcher bias through the process of bracketing.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in a higher education institution in the Philippines offering a Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management program. The institution provides experiential learning opportunities through internships, laboratory classes, industry immersion, community extension, and practical training in accordance with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) curriculum standards. The setting provided a suitable environment for exploring students' experiences in acquiring industry-ready competencies.

Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of fifteen (15) Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management students who had completed or were currently engaged in internship and other experiential learning activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct experiences with industry-based learning. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new themes emerged from the interviews.

Research Instrument

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide composed of open-ended questions that explored students' experiences, competencies developed, challenges encountered, and perceptions of experiential learning. The interview guide was validated by experts in qualitative research and hospitality education and was pilot-tested to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining the necessary institutional approval and informed consent, the researcher conducted individual in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and supplemented by field notes. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed to ensure the accuracy of the participants' responses before analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method. Significant statements were extracted, meanings were formulated, and similar meanings were organized into theme clusters. These clusters were synthesized into major themes that described the essence of Hospitality Management students' experiences in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. Member checking was conducted to verify the credibility of the findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The rigor of the study was established through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing, while transferability was ensured through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail, and confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and bracketing to minimize researcher bias throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participants voluntarily signed informed consent forms after receiving a clear explanation of the study's purpose and procedures. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all interview data

were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences, and the study complied with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants.

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Part 4

PART 4

Findings and Presentation of Themes

Analysis of the participants' narratives using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method revealed six essential themes that describe the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. These themes represent the common meanings shared by the participants regarding their internship, laboratory activities, simulations, and other work-integrated learning experiences.

Theme 1: Bridging Classroom Learning and Industry Practice

Participants described experiential learning as an opportunity to apply the theories and concepts learned in the classroom to actual hospitality operations. They explained that internships and practical activities enabled them to understand workplace procedures,

customer service standards, and professional expectations more effectively than classroom instruction alone.

One participant shared:

"Our internship helped me realize that actual hotel operations are different from what we only discussed in class. I learned how to apply what I studied." (P3)

Another participant stated:

"Experiential learning connected our classroom lessons to real-life situations, making learning more meaningful." (P8)

Theme 2: Developing Professional Competence through Authentic Experiences

Students emphasized that experiential learning strengthened their technical competencies in food and beverage service, front office operations, housekeeping, event management, and customer relations. They believed that continuous exposure to real hospitality environments improved their confidence and professional performance.

One participant expressed:

"The more I interacted with guests, the more confident I became in delivering quality service." (P6)

Another participant remarked:

"Hands-on experience allowed me to improve my technical skills because I performed actual hospitality tasks every day." (P12)

Theme 3: Building Communication, Teamwork, and Professionalism

Participants consistently identified communication, teamwork, professionalism, and interpersonal skills as important competencies developed through experiential learning. Working with supervisors, co-workers, and guests taught them how to communicate effectively, collaborate with others, and maintain professionalism in various workplace situations.

One participant stated:

"I learned how to communicate respectfully with guests and work efficiently with my teammates." (P2)

Another participant shared:

"Professionalism is something you really develop when dealing with real customers every day." (P10)

Theme 4: Developing Adaptability and Problem-Solving Skills

Participants described how workplace challenges enhanced their adaptability, critical thinking, and decision-making abilities. Handling customer concerns, managing unexpected situations, and adjusting to different work environments enabled them to become more resilient and resourceful.

One participant explained:

"Every day was different during my internship. I learned how to stay calm and solve problems immediately." (P5)

Another participant commented:

"Experiential learning taught me how to adapt quickly whenever unexpected situations happened." (P14)

Theme 5: Overcoming Challenges during Experiential Learning

Despite recognizing its benefits, participants encountered several challenges, including heavy workloads, workplace pressure, unfamiliar tasks, time management difficulties, and balancing academic responsibilities with internship requirements. However, they viewed these experiences as valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth.

One participant shared:

"At first, I was nervous because everything was new, but eventually I became more confident." (P7)

Another participant stated:

"Managing internship and school requirements was difficult, but it helped me become more disciplined." (P11)

Theme 6: Strengthening Career Readiness and Professional Identity

Participants believed that experiential learning prepared them for future employment by developing confidence, competence, and a clearer understanding of their chosen profession. Their experiences strengthened their commitment to pursuing careers in the hospitality industry and increased their readiness to meet workplace expectations.

One participant expressed:

"Because of my internship, I now feel prepared to work in the hospitality industry after graduation." (P1)

Another participant remarked:

"Experiential learning helped me realize that this is the career I truly want to pursue." (P15)

Structural Description of the Phenomenon

The lived experiences of Hospitality Management students reveal that experiential learning serves as a bridge between academic instruction and professional practice. Through internships, laboratory activities, and industry immersion, students develop technical competencies, communication skills, professionalism, adaptability, and confidence essential for employment in the hospitality industry. Although they encounter challenges during their experiential learning journey, these experiences foster resilience, personal growth, and stronger professional identity. Overall, experiential learning plays a vital role in preparing Hospitality Management students to become competent, industry-ready professionals capable of meeting the evolving demands of the hospitality sector.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that experiential learning plays a significant role in preparing Hospitality Management students for the demands of the hospitality industry. Participants described their

internship, laboratory activities, simulations, and industry immersion as meaningful experiences that allowed them to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and actual workplace practice. This finding supports Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which explains that knowledge is effectively developed through concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Similarly, Jackson (2022) reported that work-integrated learning enhances students' professional competence by allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in real industry settings.

The study further found that experiential learning contributes to the development of industry-ready competencies, including technical skills, communication, teamwork, professionalism, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities. Students emphasized that continuous interaction with guests, supervisors, and colleagues strengthened their confidence and prepared them for professional responsibilities. These findings are consistent with Yorke's Employability Theory (2006), which asserts that graduate employability depends not only on academic knowledge but also on transferable skills and professional attributes valued by employers. Likewise, Sisson and Adams (2023) concluded that experiential learning enhances hospitality students' career readiness by developing both technical and interpersonal competencies required in the workplace.

Another significant finding is that authentic workplace experiences helped students build professional identity and confidence. Through direct exposure to hospitality operations, participants gained a better understanding of industry standards, workplace expectations, and customer service excellence. This finding supports Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which emphasizes that learning occurs through observation, interaction, and guided practice with experienced professionals. Students developed professional behaviors by observing supervisors and practicing workplace tasks in authentic settings.

Despite the positive outcomes, participants also encountered challenges such as workplace pressure, unfamiliar tasks, time management difficulties, and balancing academic responsibilities with internship requirements. However, these experiences contributed to their personal growth by strengthening resilience, adaptability, and decision-making skills. Similar findings were reported by **Pham et al. (2022)**, who noted that workplace challenges during internships enhance students' confidence and problem-solving abilities when appropriate guidance and support are provided.

Therefore, the findings demonstrate that experiential learning is an essential component of Hospitality Management education. It enables students to acquire industry-ready competencies while fostering professional confidence, employability, and career preparedness.

The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to continuously strengthen internship programs, laboratory instruction, and industry partnerships to ensure that graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and professional values necessary for success in the rapidly evolving hospitality industry.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Hospitality Management students in developing industry-ready competencies through experiential learning. The findings revealed that experiential learning serves as an effective bridge between classroom instruction and real-world hospitality practice. Through internships, laboratory activities, simulations, and industry immersion, students developed technical competencies, communication skills, professionalism, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities essential for success in the hospitality industry. Although participants encountered challenges such as workplace pressure, unfamiliar tasks, and balancing academic and internship responsibilities, these experiences contributed to their personal and professional growth. Hence, the study concludes that experiential learning significantly enhances students' career readiness by equipping them with the competencies, confidence, and professional identity required in the dynamic hospitality industry.

Implications of the Study

The findings highlight the importance of strengthening experiential learning as a core component of Hospitality Management education. Higher education institutions should continuously enhance internship programs, laboratory instruction, and industry immersion activities to provide meaningful and authentic learning experiences. Strong partnerships between universities and hospitality establishments can further improve students' professional preparation and ensure that academic programs remain aligned with current industry standards and workforce demands.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Higher education institutions should strengthen experiential learning by expanding internship opportunities and industry partnerships.
2. Hospitality educators should integrate more simulations, laboratory activities, and project-based learning into the curriculum to reinforce practical competencies.
3. Industry partners should provide structured mentoring and continuous feedback to support students' professional development during internships.
4. Universities should regularly evaluate experiential learning

programs to ensure alignment with current hospitality industry trends and employer expectations.

5. Future researchers may conduct similar studies in other higher education institutions or employ mixed-methods and quantitative approaches to further examine the relationship between experiential learning and graduate employability.

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