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CONNECTING RETAIL EDUCATION TO RETAIL PRACTICE: HOW INNOVATIVE TEACHING FORMATS INFLUENCE STUDENTS' AND EMPLOYEES' TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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Keywords: Retail Education, Marketing Education, Experiential Learning, Transformative Learning

Description: With this research, we investigate experiential learning formats and their effects on students' and employees' transformative learning.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Educational institutions struggle to make their courses more relevant to real-life challenges that students are about to be confronted with in their professional life (Durant et al, 2017).

Researchers and practitioners question the transferability of knowledge gained in the classroom to real-life work environments (e.g., Petriglieri et al, 2011).

Many educational institutions use teaching formats that go beyond passive learning by promoting active learning via case studies, simulations, and group work (Hamer 2000). No doubt, these learning formats help students to develop cognitive, analytical, and communication skills

(Hopkins et al, 2011). However, they do not teach students how to apply the knowledge to the real world and, thus, are not that effective in preparing students for real-life work challenges (Grewal et al, 2018; Loewenstein et al, 2003).

In light of the heated debate on how to bridge the gap between the experiences that students make in the classroom and real-life work experiences (e.g., Durant et al. 2017), this paper examines how an innovative and experiential learning format may contribute to a more application-oriented and sustainable education among retail students and employees (i.e., transformative learning).

Method and Data

With this research, we investigate experiential learning formats and their effects on students' and employees' transformative learning. We conduct two qualitative studies.

The first study follows an ethnographic approach and analyzes more than 3'500 lines of text originating from 36 graduate students who participated in either an experiential or a non-experiential course and field notes from the research team teaching in or observing the two courses. The experimental course assigns small student groups with the task of increasing sales and profits of 30 products at an actual retail store. To achieve this, students can rearrange the store layout, product placements, and product presentations. The non-experiential course also requires students to work on real-life cases centered on one specific retailer throughout the whole semester. Students analyze the problem setting of the specific retailer and come up with a variety of tangible implications on how to solve this challenge.

In a second study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with retail employees of three stores that collaborated with the students of the experiential course. In sum, we conducted five interviews à 20 minutes with store management and three interviews à 20 minutes with frontline employees of the collaborating retailer.

Summary of Findings

Study 1. We used descriptive analysis to compare students' learned skills in the experiential and the non-experiential course. The skills reported in the experiential course are closely linked to key characteristics of transformative learning (i.e., interpersonal relations and teamwork [23.8%], interacting correctly with the store personnel [15.6%], and reflective thinking [11.1%]).

During a hermeneutical interpretive text analysis, five categories of transformative learning, which are idiosyncratic for experiential learning formats (Mezirow 1995), emerged. The categories were found in many text elements of the experiential course but in no text elements of the non-experiential course. The five categories focus on how students test and adapt the validity of their thoughts and behavior through self-reflection and discourse with others. Three of the five categories focus on the self (individual level) and two on the interactions between the self and others (collective level). The five categories are (1) empathy, (2) learning from others, (3) self-reflection, (4) transformation, and (5) personal development.

Study 2. The interview transcripts with store management and personnel validate the existence of the five categories of students' transformative learning, which we identified in study 1.

Furthermore, we find that the students' trial-and-error mentality spilled over to store personnel.

Statement of Key Contributions

Our findings contribute to research and practice in three ways.

First, we contribute to the ongoing debate on how to bridge the gap between experiences that retail students make in the classroom and real-life work experiences (e.g., Durant et al. 2017). We show that experiential learning formats may trigger transformative learning among retail students through empathy, learning from others, critical self-reflection, perspective transformation, and

personal development. Thereby, we aim to fill the void on how real-life experiential tasks influence peoples' transformational learning process outside of the laboratory (e.g., Franco Valdez and Valdez Cervantes 2018).

Second, our findings yield implications for institutions of higher education and business practice in retailing and marketing (e.g., Woods et al. 2022). Given the increasing competition for “stationary” universities stemming from massive open online courses and the like, classes integrating real-life experiential learning can be a fruitful avenue for developing and sustaining a competitive advantage in higher business education.

Third, the experiential learning format presented in this research not only benefits students, but also frontline employees' who work together closely with students in these types of classes and gain feedback on their way of working.

References are available upon request.