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THE BASICS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND MAKING INTERNSHIPS MORE EFFECTIVE BY 2026

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This article builds on the works of experiential learning theory to provide a theoretical foundation and propose practical mechanisms aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of internships as authentic learning experiences. The analysis is conducted in the context of contemporary socio-economic transformations marked by digitalization, professional mobility, and increasing labor market demands, highlighting how these changes require the rethinking and optimization of internships as essential instruments for training and competence development. The sources explore the philosophical and pedagogical contributions of thinkers such as Aristotle, Dewey, Lewin, and Kolb, emphasizing that modern education must transform direct action into cognitive resources through critical reflection. The text further details how the Framework regulation on internships in higher education, developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, translates these theories into concrete mechanisms – such as the cooperation agreement, the internship portfolio, and dual mentorship – in order to ensure the acquisition of real professional competencies.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, internships, competencies, reflection, action research, labor market, feedback.*

FUNDAMENTELE ÎNVĂȚĂRII EXPERIENȚIALE ȘI EFICIENTIZAREA STAGIILOR DE PRACTICĂ ÎN CONTEXTUL ANULUI 2026

Acest articol valorifică lucrările din teoria învățării experiențiale pentru a fundamenta și propune mecanisme practice menite să sporească eficiența stagiilor de practică ca experiențe autentice de învățare. Analiza este realizată în contextul transformărilor socio-economice contemporane, marcate de digitalizare, mobilitate profesională și creșterea exigențelor pieței muncii, evidențiind modul în care aceste schimbări impun regândirea și optimizarea stagiilor ca instrumente esențiale de formare și dezvoltare a competențelor. Sursele explorează contribuțiile filosofice și pedagogice ale unor gânditori precum Aristotel, Dewey, Lewin și Kolb, subliniind faptul că educația modernă trebuie să transforme acțiunea directă în resurse cognitive prin reflecție critică. Textul detaliază modul în care Regulamentul - cadru privind stagiile de practică în învățământul superior, elaborat de MEC, transpune aceste teorii în mecanisme concrete, cum ar fi acordul de colaborare, portofoliul de practică și mentoratul dual, pentru a asigura dobândirea unor competențe profesionale reale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *învățare experiențială, stagii de practică, competențe, reflecție, cercetare-acțiune , piața-muncii, feedback.*

Introduction

We live in a constantly changing world in which the labor market increasingly highlights the mismatch between labor market requirements and the actual competencies possessed by graduates. In this context, higher education systems tend to provide not only theoretical knowledge but also to develop the ability to apply knowledge, adapt to new societal changes, and solve emerging problems.

Theoretical knowledge dissociated from the ability to act is no longer sufficient for professional success. Internships represent the first profound contact with the professional world, where the student transitions from the status of information receiver to that of an active participant in real work situations and processes. Contemporary education involves transforming knowledge into action and action into knowledge.

The historical evolution of the concept of experiential learning

The reconceptualization of university internships requires grounding them in a solid theoretical framework. The paradigm of experiential learning does not represent a theoretical rupture, but rather an evolutionary construction rooted in Aristotelian reflections on the role of action in the formation of knowledge, gradually developing over time.

From Aristotelian thought, knowledge was inseparably linked to practice and based on the idea that “the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them,” thus emphasizing the role of action in the process of knowing [4]. The idea that “we learn by doing” introduces an active dimension to human formation. Action is not merely application, but a constitutive means of understanding. This philosophical intuition became the foundation of modern experiential pedagogy.

John Dewey is undoubtedly considered the father of experiential learning. A central principle of his educational philosophy was that “… amid all uncertainties, there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the connection between education and personal experience” [5].

Two of Dewey’s works provide significant insight into his theory: How we think and Experience and education. His views on education, formulated at the beginning of the last century, remain relevant and applicable to contemporary contexts, surpassing replicative educational systems limited to the accumulation of theoretical knowledge. The learner is an active participant in the construction of knowledge, not a passive recipient of information.

His theory involves the scientific systematization of human experience, the educational process being understood as a “continuous reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation of experience.” Human beings learn about the world through experience, and experience, in turn, generates both individual and societal development. This represents the natural way of learning—through action followed by reflection. Reflective thinking involves problematic situations, possible solutions, and hypotheses.

J. Dewey distinguished himself through several key ideas:

- education is development in, through, and for experience;
- education is the reconstruction or reorganization of experience, which adds meaning to prior experience and increases the capacity to direct subsequent experience;
- experience is vital in learning; it is, first and foremost, action;
- experience occurs under specific conditions and requires a specialized environment;
- experience presupposes knowledge, and knowledge enables us to adapt the environment to our needs, purposes, and desires [5].

Dewey’s approach is naturalistic, grounded in Darwinian biological evolutionary theory, which emphasizes the organism’s need to adapt to its environment. In this process, individuals form habits – routine ways of doing things. When these habits no longer function, a problem arises, along with uncertainty and a crisis that stimulates reflective thinking and investigation of the conditions of the situation. As in experimental inquiry, a hypothesis is formulated and then tested in practice. When habitual behavior is disrupted by new or unexpected experiences, the organism must resort to reasoning or “intellectual activity.”

Dewey’s model of experience and reflection: phases of reflective learning [5.]:

1. *A state of uncertainty and indeterminacy*. When the normal course of activity is disrupted, a state of uncertainty and indeterminacy emerges. The inhibition of direct action is a necessary precondition for reflective thinking, creating hesitation that is essential for cognition. Reflective thinking begins with the examination of conditions, resources, difficulties, and obstacles within action.

2. *Intellectualization – defining the problem*. In the second stage, the organism extracts the essential elements of the situation in order to frame it as a problem to be solved. Reflective thinking begins with an attempt to define what is wrong in a given situation. The actor forms a preliminary conception and defines the problem. Problem formulation already involves studying the conditions of the situation and transforming the situation into a clearly articulated problem, which facilitates further inquiry and knowledge acquisition.

3. *Examination of the conditions of the situation and formulation of a working hypothesis* The next stage involves the “construction of a hypothesis,” whereby the organism creatively uses imagination to generate possible responses. At this stage, the material and social conditions, as well as the means and resources necessary to solve the problem, are analyzed. A working hypothesis may also be described as a guiding idea or plan.

4. *Rationalization*. The fourth stage identified by Dewey involves the use of reason to weigh and organize alternative hypotheses, evaluating the different experiences that may result from each one. In this rationalization phase, thought experiments may be conducted. The hypothesis is assessed and tested in light

of the knowledge and resources available to the individual or community. These thought experiments are important because they allow the process to be revisited and refined. They may lead to the reformulation of the working hypothesis. However, material results and practical experiments are not reversible in the same way.

5. *Testing the hypothesis in action*. Finally, testing or experimentation represents the process through which hypotheses are eliminated or confirmed as they are weighed against the resulting experiences. The working hypothesis is tested by attempting to implement it in practice, through the reconstruction of the situation or the human–environment relationship.

Dewey argues that only practical testing makes it possible to draw conclusions about the validity of a hypothesis. For this reason, he refers to the previous phase as rationalization in a more limited sense. The final outcome of this process appears as the resolution of the problem through the adoption of a new hypothesis that proves functional. This insight underlies his famous statement: "Truth is what works." We are justified in accepting a hypothesis only insofar as it works; any claim of mere "correspondence with reality" is, in Dewey's view, a metaphysical speculation that neither deepens knowledge nor aids in deciding among hypotheses.

Reflection represents a central element of experiential learning and, like the experiential process itself, it can be facilitated through pedagogical intervention or may occur independently and autonomously. Dewey wrote that "successive sequences of reflective thought develop from one another and support each other." This approach confirms the dynamic and cyclical nature of experiential and reflective learning, showing that the development of knowledge takes place through a continuous process of integrating lived experience with its reflective analysis and reinterpretation.

Subsequently, Kurt Lewin introduced a psychosocial dimension, highlighting group dynamics and the action–reflection–action cycle as a mechanism of learning. He established action research as a legitimate research method, starting from the premise that in order to "understand and change certain social practices, social scientists must include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of the inquiry." According to Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, Lewin described action research as "a spiral process of steps, each of which consists of planning, action, and evaluation of the results of the action."

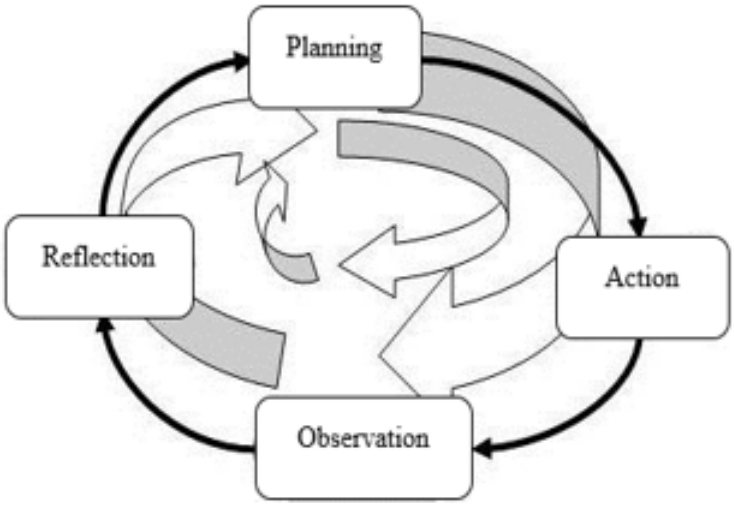


Fig. 1. The model of action, research, and laboratory training, Lewin [12]

The Lewinian model of research, action, and practice considers learning to be an integrated process that involves feedback sessions between concrete experiences, observations and reflections, and the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations. This is followed by testing the implications of these concepts in new situations (the real world). Learning is thus conceived as a four-stage cycle characterized by interdependence, unfolding in a spiral form: reflection, planning, action, and observation.

Planning is the constructive moment that emerges during discussions among research participants, in which the action plan is critically analyzed by each participant and includes an evaluation of the change that is to be produced.

Action involves the implementation of the action plan, a stage in which the intention to improve the analyzed social situation also becomes evident. The action is deliberate and strategic. Through this stage of action research, it becomes fundamentally different from other research methods, since "action or change takes place in reality and does not appear as an experiment of the type: let's just see if it works."

Observation represents, in fact, the "research component" of action research, when the changes outlined in the action plan are observed from the perspective of their effects and the context of the analyzed situation.

Reflection in action research refers to the moment when research participants examine and construct, then evaluate and reconstruct their concerns, starting from the identification of a shared concern or common problem.

In this sense, action research can be defined as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview.” This process seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in collaboration with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to pressing issues of concern to people, and more broadly, the individual well-being of persons and their communities.

Kurt Lewin viewed action research as a form of experimental research grounded in groups facing real problems, since, in his opinion, research in social science must begin with existing social issues. Lewin’s model is based on a cyclical approach to research, consisting of action cycles that include analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation of action.

Thus, we reach the conclusion that theory should be shaped by practice and becomes truly useful when it is placed in the service of practice aimed at achieving positive social change. Due to its multidisciplinary character, action research today offers the possibility of restoring and strengthening the relationship between the university and society.

In his work Experiential learning, David A. Kolb states that John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget are the founders of the experiential approach. Kolb draws upon the Lewinian tradition of action research as well as Dewey’s work to ground his own model. It has been concluded that Kolb generalizes a historically specific and somewhat unilateral model of experience feedback sessions in group training into a broader, general model of learning.

Kolb’s theory of experiential learning is frequently cited and invoked by educational practitioners and researchers and is widely applied within higher education frameworks and developments. He used the term “experiential learning” to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process, rooting his ideas in the works of Dewey and Lewin. Kolb graphically presents the learning conceptions of these three theorists. He states that he does not intend to develop an alternative theory of learning, but rather, through experiential learning theory, to propose an integrative and holistic perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior.

There is a strong argument supporting the idea that structured learning experiences can enhance internship experiences if they are effectively integrated and utilized within the broader learning framework. The framework proposed and modified by Kolb aims to produce conscious change by improving the internship experience in order to minimize or eliminate its problems and deficiencies, as revealed by the literature review and the current state of knowledge, together with the experiences of all stakeholders. Kolb formulated a comprehensive definition of learning, viewing it as a process through which knowledge is constructed by transforming direct experience into understanding and meaning. According to him, experiential learning is characterized by six fundamental principles:

Table 1. Basic principles of experiential learning, adapted from Kolb [7]**; Stirling** [15]

Learning is a process.	- Acceptance of knowledge from learners’ prior formal and informal learning. - Students’ learning is seen as continuous. - Encouraging the exchange of ideas or techniques applied during the learning experience.
Learning is based on experience.	- Carrying out learning experiences at an appropriate pace and progression. - Changing learners’ conceptions through new experience, theory, and reflection.
Learning involves mastering all four modes of learning.	- Providing students with the opportunity to experience, reflect, theorize, and apply.

Learning is a holistic process of adaptation.	- Addressing current feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors throughout the practical experience.
Learning occurs when a person interacts with the environment.	- Familiarizing students with direct experience from the real environment (e.g., the labor market).
Knowledge is created through motivation and learning.	- Learning should be individualized for each student. - Assigning responsibility for themselves and for the learning process.

David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory describes learning as a four-stage cycle consisting of:

- *Concrete experience* – the dimension of feeling, in which the intern must be willing to play an active role in the experience;
- *Reflective observation* – the dimension of reflecting/watching, in which the student intern must be able to reflect on their experience;
- *Abstract conceptualization* – the dimension of thinking, in which the intern must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience;
- *Active experimentation* – the dimension of doing, in which the student must have decision-making and problem-solving skills in order to apply the new ideas gained from experience.

Each stage, also referred to as a learning mode adaptation, provides the foundation for the subsequent stage of learning. Learners may enter the cycle at any stage; however, effective learning requires the development of abilities associated with all four stages [7].

Kolb clarified the role of concrete experience within the learning process by identifying the other three learning modes as reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He emphasized that reflection is the most important element for the internalization of knowledge. According to Kolb, reflection helps define experience when individual students are able to connect it with their learning objectives.

Subsequently, numerous other pedagogical approaches have emerged that can be used to facilitate student learning through experience. See the figure below for a synthetic overview of the main approaches.

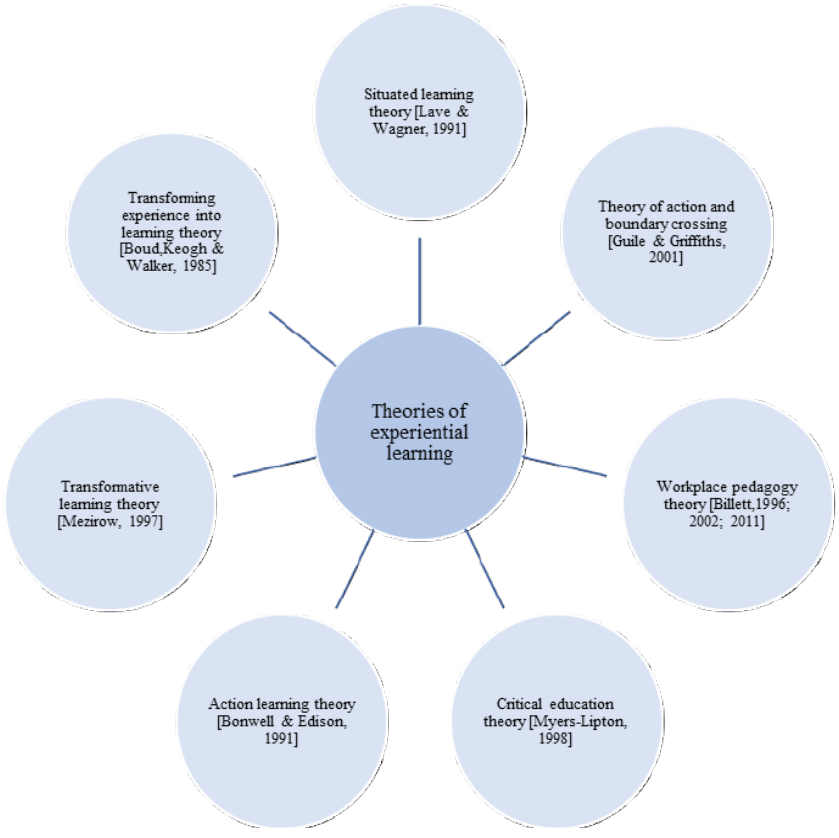


Figure 2. Theories of experiential learning, adapted by Sattler [14]

Situated learning theory – emphasizes the role that environment and context play in shaping learning and knowledge. Learning is not an abstract process detached from reality; rather, it occurs through active participation in “communities of practice.” Knowledge is constructed through interaction with the social and professional environment, and the gradual integration of the intern into the community becomes essential for competence development [9].

Theory of action and boundary crossing – focuses on an approach to learning and knowledge production through work experiences that break down barriers created by different contexts. The emphasis is placed on the individual’s capacity to navigate between diverse contexts and to integrate formal learning with professional learning [6].

Workplace pedagogy theory – conceptualizes the quality of workplace learning as resulting from direct engagement in professional activities, mentoring and guidance provided by experienced practitioners, as well as the deliberate organization of knowledge transfer and application in different situations. Thus, the workplace becomes a structured pedagogical space [1].

Critical education theory – introduces a transformative dimension that seeks to reshape educational goals, purposes, and scope in order to enable individuals’ progressive growth through cultural and social transformation [11].

Active learning theory – is learner-centered, maximizes student participation in the process, motivates them, and encourages students to move beyond superficial approaches, relying on concrete facts and actions [2].

Transformative learning theory – involves experiencing a profound structural shift in the basic premises of thinking, feelings, and actions. It represents a transformation of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly changes one’s way of being in the world [10].

Reflection and the transformation of experience into learning – emphasizes the importance of learners’ prior experiences and the need to provide opportunities for active engagement in what they learn [3].

Service-learning theory – aims to ensure equal focus both on the identified community need being addressed and on the learning that takes place, integrating academic objectives with meaningful community involvement.

Overall, these theories converge toward an integrated vision of experiential learning in which context, active participation, reflection, collaboration, and the transformative dimension become essential elements. Applied to internship settings, they support the idea that effectiveness does not depend solely on physical presence in a professional environment, but on the quality of participation, pedagogical mediation, and the capacity of experience to generate meaning, competence, and personal development.

The integration of the classical theories of experiential learning – John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and David A. Kolb – in relation to the Framework Regulation on the organization and conduct of internships approved by the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova highlights the profound theoretical foundation of the normative framework [16].

Dewey argued that authentic education occurs through experience; however, not every experience is educational, but only that which is consciously reflected upon and integrated. The Framework regulation on internships translates this idea into practice by organizing internships in real work contexts, establishing learning objectives (point 9 of the Regulation) and professional competencies, and requiring an internship report and reflective evaluation. Thus, the internship becomes a pedagogically structured experience, not merely an isolated practical activity.

The model developed by Kurt Lewin, grounded in the dynamics of experience and learning through social interaction, is reflected in the coordination and mentoring mechanisms provided by the Framework regulation on the organization and conduct of internships. The student acts within the professional environment, receives feedback from the mentor, and thus adjusts behavior and performance. This sequence mirrors the Lewinian experimental cycle and the social dimension of learning achieved through collaboration and integration into the professional community.

The theory of David A. Kolb offers perhaps the clearest structural correspondence with the organization of internships, namely through:

- Concrete experience – direct participation in professional activities;
- Reflective observation – analysis of the activities carried out;

- Abstract conceptualization – correlating experience with the theories studied;
- Active experimentation – applying new understandings in subsequent situations.

The framework regulation operationalizes this cycle by establishing the stages of the internship, ensuring monitoring by the university internship coordinator and the mentor from the host institution, as well as through evaluation and integration of results into the academic pathway.

While modern theories explain the contextual, transformative, and social dimensions of practice, the theories of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and David A. Kolb provide the foundational conceptual architecture of experiential learning. The Framework regulation approved by the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova may be interpreted as a normative transposition of this paradigm: it offers the institutional framework through which professional experience becomes a structured, reflective, and competence-oriented educational process.

Situated learning theory, developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, is reflected in the provisions requiring internships to take place in institutions and organizations relevant to the field of study, either through institutional partnerships or selected individually by the intern in accordance with internship objectives. The integration of the student into a real professional environment, under the coordination of a mentor, corresponds to the concept of a "community of practice," where learning occurs through progressive and legitimate participation.

The theory of action and boundary crossing, proposed by David Guile and Toni Griffiths, is reflected in the partnership between the educational institution and the host organization, formalized through the collaboration agreement [16]. The normative document facilitates articulation between the academic and professional environments, creating a formal framework for knowledge transfer and co-construction across different contexts.

Through provisions concerning the role of the university internship supervisor and the mentor from the host institution, the Regulation operationalizes workplace pedagogy theory developed by Stephen Billett. The emphasis on guidance, evaluation, and active involvement in authentic tasks reflects the idea that the workplace becomes a structured pedagogical space.

The reflective and evaluative dimension of internships (internship report, self-assessment, feedback) is consistent with the theory of transforming experience into learning developed by David Boud, Rosemary Keogh and David Walker, as well as with transformative learning theory formulated by Jack Mezirow. The Regulation does not aim merely at the execution of activities, but at integrating experience into a process of critical analysis and personal and professional development.

Elements related to social responsibility, professional ethics, and community contribution can be correlated with Critical education theory advanced by Scott Myers-Lipton and with service-learning theory, particularly when internships involve activities with community impact. Thus, internships become not only mechanisms of professional training but also instruments of civic engagement and social transformation.

Finally, the active, applied, and student-centered character of internships, as provided in the Regulation through clearly defined objectives, reflects the principles of active learning theory developed by Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, where the student is an active participant rather than a mere observer.

Conclusion

In contemporary higher education, internships represent an essential bridge between academic knowledge and professional practice. Universities are increasingly required to move beyond traditional models of knowledge transmission and to create learning environments that allow students to develop not only theoretical understanding but also practical competencies, critical thinking, and adaptability. Within this framework, experiential learning becomes a key pedagogical approach that supports the transformation of theoretical knowledge into meaningful professional skills.The theories of experiential learning developed by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and David A. Kolb provide a solid conceptual foundation for organizing and improving internship programs within universities. Their perspectives emphasize that learning occurs through the interaction between experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. When applied to internship contexts, these principles ensure that students are not merely observers in professional environments but active participants who engage in reflective practice and gradually develop professional competencies.

In the university environment, the effectiveness of internships depends largely on their pedagogical structuring and on the collaboration between higher education institutions and host organizations. Through clear learning objectives, mentoring systems, reflective activities, and evaluation processes, universities can ensure that internships become structured educational experiences aligned with academic goals. In this sense, the regulatory framework governing internships in the Republic of Moldova provides an institutional mechanism that translates experiential learning principles into concrete educational practice.

Ultimately, internships contribute significantly to strengthening the relationship between universities, the labor market, and society as a whole. By integrating students into real professional contexts, universities support the development of competent graduates capable of responding to contemporary challenges. Therefore, internships should be viewed not merely as practical requirements within academic programs but as central components of experiential learning strategies that enhance students' professional development and contribute to the modernization and relevance of higher education.

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