

## APPLYING KOLB’S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY TO AN EVENT MANAGEMENT COURSE: PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS

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While experiential learning is well established in higher education, several scholars called for more studies on how to embed it for event management students. This article aims to answer these calls by investigating student and instructor perspectives on delivering a live event for a postgraduate course in an English university. It uses primary as well as secondary data from previous studies to suggest how to plan an experiential learning course. Findings provide practical recommendations to educators in relation to four elements: teaching content; resources and support; assessment; and links to employability. While doing so, Kolb’s cycle is reviewed and a new model of experiential learning for event management students is suggested. Thus, this article expands the current debate on experiential learning and suggests practical guidelines for event management educators.

**Key words:** Assessment; Employability; Event management; Experiential learning; Kolb; Teaching; Support

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### Introduction

Experiential learning (EL) was developed in the 1940s as a group training technique to solve inter-racial and religious challenges and in the 1950s it became a technique to foster effective leadership in group working (Seaman et al., 2017). EL was later used in adult education to promote self-actualization and social change, and is now employed as a general theory of learning (Seaman et al., 2017). Experiential learning focuses on “the central role that experience plays in the learning process” (Kolb

et al., 2014, p. 227) and “combines direct experience that is meaningful to the student with guided reflection and analysis. It is a challenging, active, student-centred process” (Chapman et al., 1995, as cited in Kim et al., 2015, p. 383). One of the most used theories is Kolb’s (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009) EL cycle. It has become an important teaching method and an extensive body of work has explored how to plan, deliver, and evaluate it, since it is “one of the most important components of the modern university curriculum” (Drummond, 2003, p. 1). For example, studies on EL have been conducted

in several disciplines, from nursing (Hill, 2017; Rodríguez-García et al., 2018) to veterinary (Barron et al., 2017; Meehan & Menniti, 2014), interior design (Ebbini, 2022), and agricultural education (Mahoney & Retallick, 2015).

Contemporary higher education policies increasingly focus on employability and the development of competencies that meet the needs of industry. Specifically, in events there seems to be a disparity between expectations regarding practice and what academia offers (Walters, 2021). To bridge this perceived gap between education and the event management industry, some activities, such as EL, can be used (Ruhanen, 2006). EL is considered “an effective education method used to bridge the gap between classrooms and the real world” (Kim et al., 2015, p. 382). Consequently, there is growing interest in research on EL for students enrolled in event management courses. Past researchers explored how students planned and delivered events such as a 5K road race (Bower, 2014), Wolf Awareness Day (Byrd, 2009), golf scramble (Bower, 2013), school conference (Kim et al., 2015), exhibitions and charity events (Sangpikul, 2022). EL for event management students can include activities such as hosting live events (Walters, 2021) and internship placements (Venske, 2018). EL is a learning experience integrated into the academic curriculum that allows students to develop skills and knowledge and reflect on their future careers.

Scholars have called for more studies on how to plan EL in higher education, specifically for event management students (Garlick, 2014; Lamb, 2015; Ruhanen, 2006; Venske, 2018). For instance, Lamb (2015) argued that “although, there is a dearth of literature in the social sciences on experiential learning, the same debate within event management education is sadly lacking” (p. 73). Similarly, Garlick (2014) claimed that the issue of how EL is planned and utilized still needs to be better understood. More recently, Venske (2018) also identified a lack of research on event management students’ perspectives on EL activities. There is therefore a need to better understand how to plan EL for event students (Ruhanen, 2006), including the role of educators as mentors (Venske, 2018) and how to plan EL assessments (Garlick, 2014).

This article responds to these calls by applying Kolb’s (1984) EL cycle to identify good practice to

assist academics in planning EL for event management students. Kolb’s EL cycle has been selected as being one of the most recent and widely used models, especially in recreation and tourism (e.g., Bower, 2013; Lourenço et al., 2022). While there have been some practical suggestions on how to plan EL in previous research (Byrd, 2009; Olson et al., 2021; Sangpikul, 2022), these are scattered across several studies and recommendations are partial. To date, no overarching study has been conducted to explore how EL should be planned and delivered in the context of events management. This article uses previous literature and a case study where Kolb’s (1984) EL cycle was applied to a postgraduate conversion event management course at an English university. It draws on both student and instructor perceptions on the EL activity (planning and delivering a live event: a sustainable craft market) to create guidelines for planning EL in event management curricula. This study proposes guidelines on how EL should be planned without aiming to be exhaustive. Specifically, this study considers: 1) the lecture content, 2) resources and support, 3) assessment, and 4) links to employability. While doing so, this article also reviews Kolb’s cycle and argues that *Reflective Observation* is not only a phase of the model, but it underpins the entire EL cycle. This study therefore reviews Kolb’s theory and suggests that, instead of *Reflective Observation*, the last phase should be called *Action Plan*, as it focuses on postevent evaluation and creation of future actions. Thus, implications are both practical and theoretical.

## Experiential Learning for Event Management Students

### *Experiential Learning*

EL is “a flexible instructional tool, adaptable to suit most courses” (Wright, 2000, p. 116). It involves learning by actively participating in an activity and reflecting on the experience. The concept was first theorized by Dewey (1938), according to whom EL is a cycle that includes: 1) the social environment (e.g., instructor, participants, vendors, etc.), 2) knowledge and content organization (covered in lectures and seminars), 3) learner readiness and experience (learning activities and the live event),

and 4) learning outcomes (e.g., planning and delivering the event, and reflecting on the lessons learned) (Bower, 2014). EL was also included in Lewin's (1946) framework for solving intergroup conflicts and was later developed as a theory focusing on personal growth, transformation, and self-improvement (Seaman et al., 2017). More recently, Kolb (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2009) modified the EL cycle to include: 1) concrete experience (having an experience), 2) reflecting observation (questioning what happened), 3) abstract conceptualization (drawing conclusions), and 4) active experimentation (planning for future experiences). Kolb's cycle has been widely used, but it has also been expanded and criticized. For instance, Morris (2020) claimed that the *Concrete Experience* lacks clarity. Scholars also argued that it is too unrealistic (Race, 2005, cited in Lamb, 2015) and descriptive (Atherton, 2005, cited in Lamb, 2014). Others critiqued the graphic syntax (Bergsteiner et al., 2010), the philosophical underpinnings of the cycle, and how it can be implemented in adult education (Schenck & Cruickshank, 2015). Schenck and Cruickshank (2015) reviewed Kolb's theory and conceptualized the new Co-Constructed Developmental Teaching Theory using cognitive neuroscience and Dynamic Skill Theory.

Following Dewey's and Kolb's interpretations, EL has been conceptualized differently and has incorporated several approaches, from active learning to role-play, problem-based and project-based learning (Garlick, 2014). Active learning, which was formulated by Lewin (1946), refers to real-life simulations, such as role-plays and debates, where students are not passive learners. Problem-based learning is when students are divided into small groups and investigate a problem, while project-based learning takes a step further and requires students to develop a project (Garlick, 2014). Finally, other types of EL include service-based learning where students develop their skills during volunteering activities, and place-/work-based learning (e.g., through internship placements) (Garlick, 2014). Overall, EL has been used successfully in management education to promote deep learning and support different learners (Lamb, 2015). However, Seaman et al. (2017) argued that, despite evolving conceptualizations of EL, there is limited knowledge regarding how it can be implemented

in practice. This article aims to contribute to this debate.

### *EL in Higher Education*

Researchers have studied undergraduate and postgraduate EL courses. For example, Wright (2000) argued that short-term EL activities are better than long-term ones for undergraduate sociology courses. EL can be useful to foster teamwork and promote communication and technological skills in undergraduate business courses (Hagan, 2012), as well as helping students to apply their knowledge and foster creative synthesis in interior design courses (Ebbini, 2022). However, there are fewer studies on postgraduate programs and there is a paucity of information on EL in postconversion courses. For instance, Hicks (1996) evaluated the success of EL in a postgraduate project management program where students enhanced their interpersonal skills. More generally, EL has been recognized as a teaching method to promote teamwork and cohort building (Seed, 2008) and to encourage students to become better citizens through critical thinking (Heinrich et al., 2015). Despite all these studies, there is a significant need to explore how EL can be effectively implemented in practice, including its planning to assessment (Heinrich & Green, 2020). Additionally, scholars have argued that event management students need to develop hard (career-specific) and soft (interpersonal) skills during their studies (Walters, 2021). Particularly in the current post-COVID-19 scenario, graduates are required to possess skills such as digital, communication, innovation, and leadership (Werner et al., 2022). EL has been identified as a key activity to "develop, practice, and enhance leadership skills . . . including communication, commitment, strategic planning, and accountability" (Padron & Stone, 2019, p. 927). EL was included in the Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education's (QAA, 2019) subject benchmarks and in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2023).

### *EL and Event Management Students*

Most of the studies on EL for event students focused on students' perceptions of it and its benefits (Olson et al., 2021; Venske, 2018). For

instance, Walters (2021) investigated event students' reflections on the benefits of EL and identified three main impacts: links between event knowledge and practice, development of personal attributes (e.g., leadership and confidence), and professional skills (e.g., communication and problem solving). Walters (2021) argued that EL is beneficial for event students and they are able to recognize the value of it in relation to employability. Sangpikul (2022) also analyzed students' perceptions of two EL activities in relation to their learning and skills development, identifying similar findings to Walters (2021): students learned about theories as well as practical elements, which was useful for their future careers. Sangpikul (2022) analyzed the value of planning multiple-event EL projects, stressing that activities should be realistic and challenging. In terms of resources and tools, it has been suggested to use a variety of "event management project management tools, such as Gantt charts, Event Canvas Design" (Olson et al., 2021, p. 291). Moreover, sufficient group work needs to be programmed into the course to give students enough time to develop the live event (Olson et al., 2021). Instructors also need to be careful in selecting the clients and the activities, so the objectives were within the students' abilities (Garlick, 2014). Other studies offered further suggestions on how to plan EL. For example, communication needs to be "clear and constant" (Byrd, 2009, p. 153), especially if there are external stakeholders involved. Furthermore, EL should involve real people, face current issues, and be planned in an unfamiliar physical environment (Garlick, 2014).

### *The Role of Educators*

Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) suggested that EL instructors should: have a less teacher-centric role; explain the aim of the EL activity to the students; provide support; and clarify student and lecturer roles. Specifically in event management, researchers have started to explore the role of educators as tutors and mentors in EL, because they are one of the main components to facilitating learning (Sangpikul, 2022). For example, Venske (2018) analyzed students' feedback on academic supervision during EL and argued that students need coaching, and that mentorship strategies with academic or industry

supervisors are crucial. Instructors should be tutors and facilitators: "they should be there to guide and assist the students find their own way" (Garlick, 2014, p. 12). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to allow students to make mistakes and correct those errors during experiential learning activities (Byrd, 2009; Fulton, 2021). Moreover, according to Venske (2018), academic mentors during workplace-based EL internships should utilize coaching techniques to support a number of areas. These include: 1) goal setting (e.g., helping to identify a clear set of objectives); 2) emotional intelligence awareness (e.g., by encouraging students to keep a reflective diary); 3) conflict management (e.g., providing information on ethical responses and behavioural etiquette); 4) identifying talents and strengths (e.g., by encouraging self-audits of competencies); 5) self-management (e.g., by supporting well-being); 6) empowerment (e.g., through supporting knowledge and skills development); and 7) provide feedback.

### *The Role of Students*

Studies suggested paying attention to students' background before planning EL, because they can possess different abilities. For event management, "it appears that students who enter the program do not tend to have leadership skills at the star" (Dressier et al., 2011, p. 45). Moreover, student engagement with several aspects of event planning and delivery has been considered crucial for their future career (Venske, 2018). Therefore, students should be involved in all the event development and delivery stages, from planning and decision making to evaluation of the outcomes. Additionally, if students select their own event teams, additional time should be dedicated during initial stages for them to make crucial decisions—for example, concerning the use of tools such as the Learning Style Inventory, to help create effective working groups (Kim et al., 2015). Support in assigning a leader is also important, as sometimes the true leader is not the title leader and this can cause ineffective teamwork (Kim et al., 2015).

### *Assessments*

Some initial suggestions on how to plan EL assessments have also been given in past research.

EL assignments should focus on assessing students' progressive learning and reflection rather than judging their performance or the event's success (Ven-ske, 2018). Lategan and Williams (2019) explained that reflection is an important part of EL and should be included in assignments. For instance, reflective portfolios are useful to promote deep-learning and critical thinking (Griggs et al., 2018; Zubizarreta, 2009). The value of reflective practice has been widely recognized in several fields of study—for example, nursing (Canniford & Fox-Young, 2015) and occupational therapy (Andrews, 2000). However, even if clear and systematic reflection can help students to understand the practical experience, there are no specific guidelines on how to structure it (Lategan & Williams, 2019). Assessment criteria should focus on the learning process and students' ability to critically reflect on the activity and to create an action plan (Garlick, 2014). There can be marks for attendance in class and participation in the event, but this needs to be combined with graded individual/group assignments and reflective portfolios (Garlick, 2014). Kim et al. (2015) also recommended that the first assignment should not be scheduled within the first 4 weeks of the course to ensure that effective group dynamics and processes are embedded to support learning.

To conclude, disparate practical suggestions have been made in previous studies, but to date there have not been attempts to consolidate recommendations on how to plan EL. This article's aim is therefore to expand the current debate and create guidelines for instructors on how to plan EL for event management students when hosting live events.

### The Course

This article uses a module of a postgraduate conversion program as its empirical setting. Participating students did not have previous knowledge, experience, or training in event management and chose this program to change their career path. The module included active learning and was built with a project-based experiential learning approach, where the students had to deliver a real live event. Similar to Bower (2013), this module incorporated Kolb's Experiential Model into the course; as Figure 1 shows, students: 1) reflected on theories/

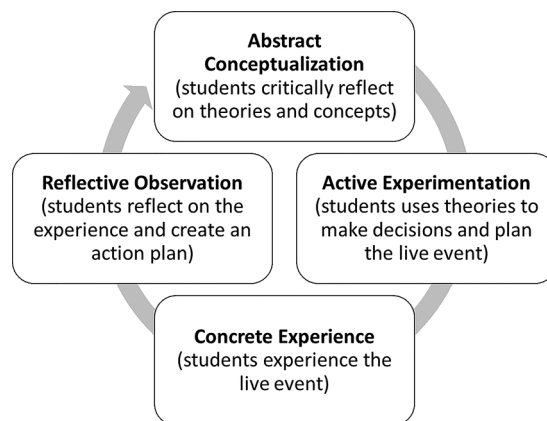


Figure 1. Adaptation of Kolb's experiential model to the course (adapted from Bower, 2013).

concepts during and after class; 2) used theories to plan the event; 3) delivered their live event; and 4) critically reflected on the experience.

The course was delivered in Semester 2 and it built on a Semester 1 module where the students received a theoretical introduction to events. There were eight students enrolled, from different countries and with diverse levels of preexisting knowledge and skills regarding event management. Each week included a 1-hr lecture and 2 hr of seminars. The focus of the module was on developing understanding of the relationships between strategy, decisions, and outcomes for an event and its stakeholders. The student worked on a client brief that asked them to plan and deliver a sustainable craft market for students and staff on campus. A small budget was provided by the university. Thus, the EL activity was in line with the subject benchmarks (QAA, 2019), which says that courses should “involve a range of different types of learning opportunities and different approaches for the assessment of learning with a mixture of theoretical and applied approaches” (p. 3). Specifically, the QAA statement (2019) includes activities such as “real-time practical activities, live performance and events” (p. 3). EL was also used to achieve the postgraduate learning outcomes that included the application of theories to professional events situations, implementation of events management principles in practice, and exercise of personal autonomy and responsibility. As such, EL was “an effective way to meet outcomes while using the

real-world, hands-on, experiential learning methods that students often prefer” (Mahoney & Retallick, 2015, p. 319).

The teaching content (during the *Abstract Conceptualization* phase, see Fig. 1) included topics such as: sustainability and how to deliver sustainable events, event theming, project management, marketing, finance, crowd management, visitor safety, equality and diversity, and skills development. This was delivered by the course instructor, with additional guest speakers from the university (e.g., from the Health & Safety, Marketing, and Environmental departments), since the event had to take place on campus. An external expert was also invited to provide guidance on planning sustainable events. This helped the students to create a responsible proposition that incorporated the principles of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Triple Bottom Line framework. Furthermore, the EL activity included references to institutional and professional frameworks, such as EMBOK (<https://www.embok.org/>) and A Greener Festival (<https://www.agreenerfestival.com/>), which helped the students to develop their professional values, standards, and behaviors in line with the Association of Event Organisers Code of Conduct [[AEO-Code-of-Conduct.pdf \(asp.events\)](#)].

Resources (during the *Abstract Conceptualization* and the *Active Experimentation* phases, see Fig. 1) were provided in class (through discussions, interactive exercises, guest lectures, tutorials, etc.) and online (utilizing a video tutorial to explain the module and the assessment, and links to online students’ resources—e.g., concerning well-being; a communication protocol to be followed during the event planning phase; the students’ event virtual space where they could share drafts and materials such as the Work Breakdown Structure, risk assessment, and marketing materials).

There were two assessments (related to the *Reflective Observation* phase, see Fig. 1). Coursework 1 was an individual written Post Event Evaluation Report. Here the students needed to reflect on the planning and delivery of their event (not the success) and draw conclusions on lessons learned and how to plan the same event in the future. In the report they needed to analyze the entire event, not only their individual allocated areas of responsibility (e.g., marketing). A suggested template and specific marking criteria were provided.

Coursework 2 was an individual written online reflective journal. This was a personal diary that the students had to build throughout the module. In their online journals, students needed to create regular weekly entries on their lessons learned and further reflections on the event industry. Students also needed to apply a reflective thinking theory in their journal entries (e.g., Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984, 2014). There were deadlines for formative (written and verbal) feedback, including tutorials, office hours, and weekly in-class feedback. Both coursework components were submitted at the end of the module.

During the *Active Experimentation* and the *Concrete Experience* phases, students had to work collectively as a group, but they were divided into smaller teams with different roles and responsibilities. Group 1, the Marketing Team, was in charge of the Marketing audit (including SWOT and PESTLE analysis) and the Marketing plan (including stakeholders’ analysis and promotional strategy). Group 2, the Operations Team, was responsible for elements such as the work breakdown structure, venue selection, and human resources. Group 3, the Logistics team, was responsible for several tasks, including event décor, and health and safety. Finally, Group 4, the Sustainability Team, was in charge of, among other things, the triple bottom line sustainability plan and the event evaluation strategy. The students could share their drafts, plans, and materials via the university virtual learning environment. In week 6, they had to pitch their event idea to the instructor to finalize the plan, at which point they received verbal feedback and asked further questions.

#### *The Event: The Concrete Experience Phase*

As noted above, the students had to work with a client brief to plan and deliver a sustainable craft market for both students and staff members. The event was held on campus in March 2022. It was a free event, where several vendors displayed their sustainable products, such as clothes, soaps, jewellery, and household items. There was also a space for the university’s Sustainability Society to educate visitors about responsible environmental practice. The students decided that the purpose of this event was to educate students and staff about environmental sustainability, specifically about ocean pollution. The decorations were all handmade,

created by the students with recycled materials, and focused on ocean conservation.

Methodology

The philosophical underpinning of this study was interpretivism. This study adopted a qualitative approach to understand different points of views regarding the social phenomena (Thomas, 2016; Yin, 2016). This qualitative design is particularly appropriate for asking “How” questions (Yin, 2016), such as this study’s main research question: *How to best plan EL for event management students?* The methods used included: anonymous questionnaires [Q]; anonymous midsemester temperature survey [M]; written anonymous module final evaluation [E]; and teacher’s reflections [T]. Participants were postgraduate event management students, recruited during class and via the university virtual learning environment. Thus, eight students were targeted and

the questionnaire [Q] was administered online via an anonymous Google Form in week 11. Ethical approval was obtained for carrying out the research. Both the questionnaire and the module evaluation received seven responses, which was almost the full cohort for this run of the module. The midsemester temperature [M] check was administered in weeks 5 and 6, and received seven responses. The three surveys were useful to understand the student perspectives and to identify future suggestions on EL activities. They included both open and closed questions. The closed questions were in support of the open questions and encouraged the students to complete the surveys. The teacher’s reflections [T] used written notes that the instructor took throughout the module, usually after class. Reflection was important and helped to create an action plan for future classes (Gibbs, 1988).

The author of this article was the instructor (teacher) and in order to ensure that participation

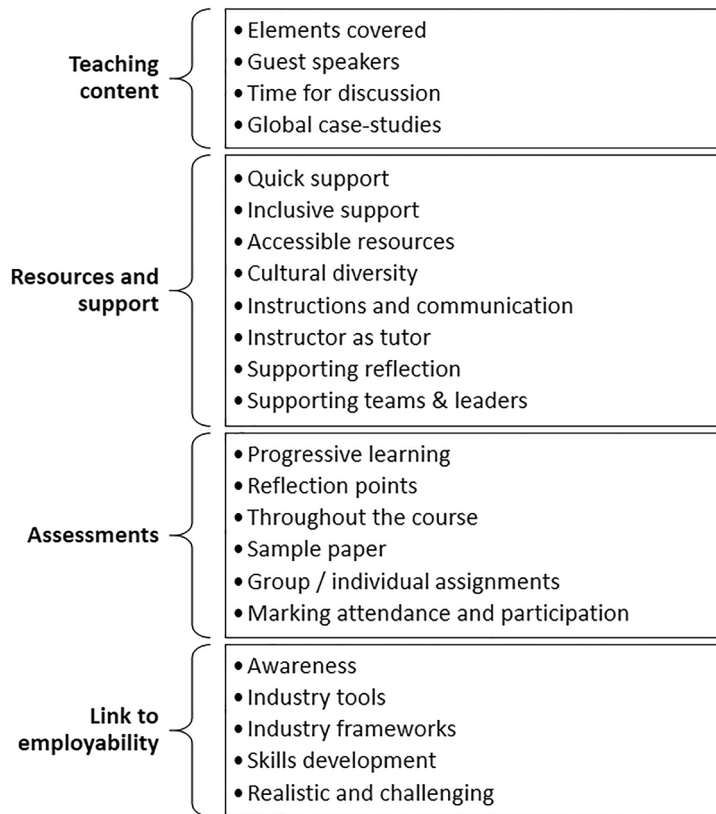


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes.

was entirely voluntary, and not influenced by the teacher–student relationship, during the recruitment the researcher specified that participation was voluntary and that it would not impact students’ grades. This was also explained in the participant information sheet and all the surveys were anonymous. Student and teacher voices were needed to answer the main research question of this study.

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis. After coding, four themes were found (Fig. 2): 1) Teaching content; 2) Resources and support; 3) Assessment; and 4) Links to employability. The themes were created to fill the gaps in the literature and will form a new model for understanding Kolb’s (1984) EL application specifically for event management courses. The following sections present and discuss the findings according to the four themes. All this will be used to critically reflect on Kolb’s cycle and to create a practical guide to assist academics in planning EL for events students.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Reflections on Kolb’s (1984) EL Cycle

While identifying practical guidelines for educators, this article reflects on the application of Kolb’s

(1984) cycle and the EL outcomes. Primary data and previous studies generated a new model for understanding the application of EL (planning live events) in event management courses (Fig. 3). As the model shows, *Reflective Observation* underpins the entire EL cycle. As such, the findings and previous studies suggest that critical reflection needs to be constant and structured during the entire course—for example, with the use of “Reflection Points,” class discussions, and assessments that encourage evaluation pre, during, and postevent [T]. Reflection underpins all of Kolb’s EL phases, including *Concrete Experience* because “critical reflection acts as a mediator of meaningful learning” (Morris, 2020, p. 1064). For instance, Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2017) named EL “practical reflexivity.” Hutchings (1988, p. 73, as cited in Padron et al., 2019) also argued that “the capacity for reflection is what transforms experience into learning” (p. 935). Instead of *Reflective Observation*, the new EL model includes *Action Plan* as the last phase that focuses on postevent evaluation and creation of an action plan. Indeed, students need to learn about “event monitoring and evaluation,” as they are important skills for graduates to possess when they enter the industry (Werner et al., 2022, p. 869).

Additionally, the new EL model showcases that the possible outcomes include personal,

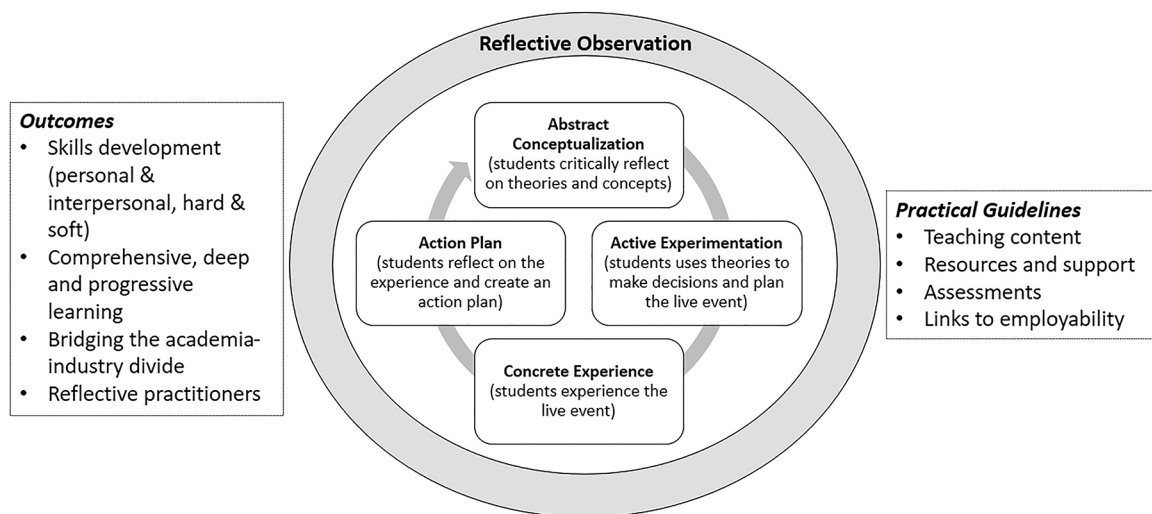


Figure 3. EL model with practical guidelines and possible outcomes for event management courses, based on Kolb’s (1984) cycle (source: Author).



interpersonal, soft, and hard skills development (Hicks, 1996; Seaman et al., 2017; Seed, 2008), alongside comprehensive, deep, and progressive learning on the topic (including all the elements of event planning and delivery) (Lamb, 2015). EL is useful to bridge the divide between education and the requirements of the industry (Kim et al., 2015; Ruhanen, 2006; Walters, 2021) and with EL students can become reflective practitioners. This study's implications are therefore practical (guidelines for educators) as well as theoretical (the new model of EL for event management courses). The following sections explain the practical guidelines in detail.

### *Teaching Content*

The findings in relation to *Abstract Conceptualization* (Fig. 3) reveal that students enjoyed the teaching content: the best part of the module was the “teaching session” [E]. They particularly liked the “practical information about what tasks needs to be done” [M]. They also enjoyed learning “about different aspects and branches in the event management field” (e.g., event logistics). Thus, the students engaged with academic theories, which corresponds with the view that EL is “an effective pedagogical method for event education” (Lei et al., 2015, p. 358). As Sangpikul (2022) and Walters (2021) argued, during EL students can learn about academic theories, industry frameworks, and practices. The first suggestion to plan EL is therefore to cover all aspects of event planning and delivery (e.g., project management, marketing, finance, crowd management and visitor safety, and equality and diversity) in lectures and seminars and provide practical information. Students need to learn and be involved in all elements of event planning and delivery aspects (Venske, 2018) and understand concepts and principles (Hicks, 1996). In this way students will engage in comprehensive learning.

Moreover, students enjoyed the “guest lecturers” [E]. In the module evaluation [E], a student highlighted that the best aspect of this module was the “involvement of other staff members.” It can be beneficial to invite several different guest speakers, especially stakeholders linked to the venue. This is particularly important when the students are not

familiar with the resources and services available in the event location. In this case study, several university resources and stakeholders (e.g., in relation to marketing, sustainability, health, and safety, etc.) were introduced to the students. One of the lecturer's reflection notes states: “the students do not know the university and the services well [and since they are planning an event on campus], it is good for them to have guest speakers from the university.” The type of the event, the location, and the guest speakers were carefully chosen, as suggested by Garlick (2014).

Findings also suggest that the instructor needs to plan lectures (to deliver content) as well as seminars (to allow students to work in class, discuss, and ask questions). Seminars are an important part of the learning process, and students liked the fact that “we did get time to discuss a lot during the seminar sessions” [Q]. This supports the view that time for group work is essential and needs to be programmed into the course (Olson et al., 2021). It also strengthens the importance of discussions and constant critical reflection throughout the module (see Fig. 3). Seminars were also important to promote and teach reflection with individual and group discussions on progress made week by week [T]. This fostered comprehensive and progressive learning and is useful to further understand how to structure systematic reflection (Lategan & Williams, 2019). Some activities asked the students to apply a reflective thinking theory (e.g., Gibbs, 1988) to a specific part of the event plan, such as the marketing strategy. There is evidence in management education that teaching reflective learning techniques can foster critical thinking (Griggs et al., 2018).

Finally, the students gave recommendations on how to improve teaching and learning. Despite including several case study examples in the lectures, they suggested including even more “real-world in-depth case studies” [E] because they wanted “to look at different requirements for different events, particularly more global ones” [Q]. They wanted to know the differences in event policies and regulations across countries because they were “international students” [T], who can potentially work in other countries. However, this is challenging in a 12-week module. Global examples can be used in exercises (e.g., marketing and event

safety), but it is only possible to cover a limited range of international policies. This can be partially addressed by including links and resources that the students can read after class if interested.

### *Resources and Support*

Another theme that needs to be addressed while creating a practical guide to assist academics in planning EL relates to resources and support linked to all EL phases (see Fig. 3). Findings confirm that it is important to provide online, in-class, and after-class support (e.g., via office hours) (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). If support is quick, it is well perceived by students. Overall, the students reported that the supervisory support was: “very good and quick,” “good,” “great” [M]. Similar findings were collected in relation to the support provided in fostering inclusivity and supporting students with different needs and backgrounds. Thus, EL instructors need to facilitate inclusivity and accessibility. There are different types of learners, and educators need to create inclusive teaching and learning environments for all students, including those with disabilities (Jordan et al., 2010). For instance, sharing particular resources can be helpful in the *Abstract Conceptualization* and *Active Experimentation* phases (see Fig. 3). Resources shared with the students included the template and examples of risk assessments, instructions for COVID-19 protocols, the venue plan, list of contacts, communication protocol, health and safety information, and a skills matrix to reflect on their event roles. There were also direct links to further university resources, such as language support, academic development resources, alongside enterprise, career and well-being support. All this strengthens the importance of establishing a self-management coaching technique in EL (Venske, 2018).

The ways these resources are shared were also important: they were all easily accessible online, including a video tutorial about how to find them. This fostered an inclusive learning environment (Hockings et al., 2012). Additionally, event management students can possess different levels of skills and abilities at the start of the course (Dressier et al., 2011). The findings suggested that if students have different previous experiences of event management, it can be useful to provide additional

resources (e.g., readings and podcasts), to further their understanding of some topics.

Moreover, it is important to consider cultural diversity and the different identities of the student cohort. For instance, examples and case studies from diverse contexts (US, Ireland, Japan, UK, etc.) were used in the lectures and in the exercises. Language barriers should also be considered. For example, an instructional video was provided on the university virtual learning environment and appeared to be useful. The video included information on the assignments, the module handbook, resources available, and the virtual learning environment. All this helped them to understand the purpose of the course and the value of EL. The link to the university’s language support resources was also directly added on the course page to facilitate language support for international learners.

Another aspect of planning EL related to communication. Data revealed that it was crucial to explain the structure of the module, learning objectives, assignment brief, expectations, and deadlines from the start. It was also important to clarify the aim of the EL activity to the students, and the roles of students and lecturers, as Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) suggested. From week 1 tasks and responsibilities were explained, including the University’s values, the implications of procrastination and plagiarism, alongside the resources available and expectations. The client brief and the event roles were also introduced in conjunction with the different team responsibilities. This was linked to the goal setting and conflict management coaching techniques (Venske, 2018). Students also needed to feel ownership of the activity (Hicks, 1996). The instructor clarified that the students were in charge of planning and delivering the live event, but decisions needed to be checked with the lecturer. Open dialogue and constant support were established between the students and the instructor from the beginning of the module. This was underpinned by the view that communication needs to be constant (Byrd, 2009) to facilitate EL throughout all the phases (see Fig. 3).

The instructor created a communication protocol that included how to send emails to stakeholders and the most important contacts that the students needed in order to plan the event. As the reflective note suggested, “it took a bit of time for them to

understand and implement the communication protocol, but then it was fine” [T]. The communication protocol was perceived as useful and helped communication to be clear (Byrd, 2009), especially since there were several stakeholders involved.

The role of the instructor as tutor/mentor was also revealed to be important. Some students argued that they wanted to have received “a bit more guidance as to some of the things . . . need[ed] to be done for the event” [M]. However, an important part of EL is for students to make mistakes and to learn from them (Byrd, 2009; Fulton, 2021). For instance, students “took some decisions very late” (regarding the budget) [T], which influenced key aspects of the delivery, especially concerning marketing. However, it was useful for the students to make that mistake, reflect on it, and determine how they could have done it differently. Guidance was provided by supporting the students throughout the module—for example, regarding where to find resources and contacts, what documents were needed and to whom they needed to send them, when to contact vendors, what to prepare for the event and when. All these were supporting skills and knowledge development, related to the empowerment coaching technique that EL tutors should perform (Venske, 2018). The instructor also explained to the students that the EL was an “exercise” before entering the real world so it was fine to make mistakes.

Students were not marked according to the success of the event, but on their reflection on how it went and how they could have improved it. This corresponded with the view that lecturers should facilitate and guide students, allowing them to make mistakes and learn from their errors (Byrd, 2009; Fulton, 2021). Supporting constant reflection is very important in EL, as previously explained (see Fig. 3). This was further applied with Coursework 2, the online reflective diary, which asked students to keep a reflective journal to foster emotional intelligence awareness (Venske, 2018).

During the *Active Experimentation* phase, students could choose their own event teams, which allowed them to take ownership of the event and their learning experience. Following Kim et al.’s (2015) recommendation, they had 2 weeks to finalize the teams. In terms of tools for creating the teams, the students had a Skills Matrix that helped them to

reflect on their preexisting skills and employability plans. This was similar to Kim et al.’s (2015) suggestion to use the Learning Style Inventory. Venske (2018) recommended that academic mentors should help students to identify their talents and strengths. The use of a skills matrix helped the students to reflect on what skills they needed to develop. Moreover, a teaching note reported that “there was one *on-paper* and one *actual* event leader” [T], reflecting Kim et al.’s (2015) observations regarding the realities of leadership in practice. Despite students initially nominating an event leader, in practice another student led the group decisions. This can cause ineffective teamwork (Kim et al., 2015), but allowing the students to choose their leader was arguably beneficial for them to learn how to plan teamwork more effectively [T]. This reinforced the value of EL in promoting self-actualization and personal growth (Seaman et al., 2017). The instructor also observed that sometimes there was “poor communication between teams (e.g., marketing and logistics)” [T]. Encouraging students’ interaction was important (Garlick, 2014) and, as the students suggested, “team building [exercises]” [M] were beneficial to enhance team spirit, clarify team roles and communication. This supports the argument that EL in postgraduate courses allows students to enhance their interpersonal skills (Hicks, 1996) and promotes cohort building (Seed, 2008). All the above also reinforced the value of EL in supporting different learners and fostering deep learning (Lamb, 2015).

### *Assessments*

The assessment strategy was considered appropriate by the students. For example, almost half of them rated it 4, in a Likert scale from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*very high*). In the final module evaluation, students also reported that the assessments enhanced their learning. This reinforced the proposition that EL assignments should focus on assessing students’ progressive learning via critical reflection and not their performance or the event’s success (Garlick, 2014; Venske, 2018). Moreover, reflective practice via learning portfolios was valuable in student assessments (Zubizarreta, 2009). The e-portfolios used for Coursework 2 reinforced the importance of constant critical reflection throughout the entire

EL activity (see *Reflective Observation* in Fig. 3), which was not only utilized in one phase of the cycle, as Kolb (1984) suggested. Reflection was useful to develop reflective practitioners as students tend to apply their learning and reflective practice in work environments (Griggs et al., 2018). To help the students, there were “Reflection points” during the course that worked well [T], where the students used Jamboards [online coworking platforms] to document elements that went well, the challenges they experienced, and what they could have improved. This was followed by a class discussion with the instructor, who checked if and how the challenges had been overcome or if the students had a plan to overcome them in the future. Fostering critical reflection was fundamental in the EL assignments (Lategan & Williams, 2019). This suggested that Kolb’s (1984) *Reflective Observation* phase was crucial and it actually incorporated the other three phases, since critical reflection occurred before, during, and after the delivery of the live event. Importantly, the entire EL activity encouraged critical thinking. This also helped to overcome previous critiques claiming that Kolb’s cycle was unrealistic and too descriptive (Lamb, 2015).

Some students suggested having more assessments during the module and not only at the end of the semester. However, Kim et al. (2015) explained that assessments should not be scheduled within the first 4 weeks of the course to enable the group dynamics to evolve sufficiently. Students also recommended: “[having a] sample paper” [E]. Instead of a sample paper, a suggested template was included in the assignment brief, which gave enough guidance (e.g., word count, indicative structure, etc.). They also suggested that “the event itself could have been part of the assessment” [Q]. Marks for participation could have been used, but they needed to take into consideration reasonable adjustments for inclusivity (e.g., in case a student could attend the event delivery week). In addition, Garlick (2014) claimed that marks for participation should always be combined with reflective assignments.

### *Links to Employability*

As previously explained, EL could be used to bridge the gap between education and the needs of the event management industry (Ruhanen, 2006;

Walters, 2021). The instructor explained to the students what EL is, the value of class reflections and the skills development in relation to their future careers. This was an important part of EL that allowed the students to understand the importance of the module in relation to employability (see also Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). Students enjoyed “creating something from our ideas” [Q]; “the creative aspect” [Q]; “hands on experience” that fostered “the experience in events . . . relevant to what we will be doing in our future careers” [Q]. Similarly, in the midsemester survey they said: “this [activity] will be useful, because it helps to figure out what we should do in the future,” “if I become an event planner” [M]. This supports the view that EL can be a very important part of university curricula (Drummond, 2003). A student also explained: “I feel that I learnt a lot more through actually physically doing an event, . . . and gives us experience to talk about when applying for jobs etc.” [Q]. Consequently, they were aware of and appreciated the links to employability. Students also used project management tools, such as Gantt charts and work breakdown structure tools, which can be useful for their future career (Olson et al., 2021). All this supported students’ transferable and digital skills development. It also suggests that it is not appropriate to claim that today’s conceptualization of EL is very different from the first few theories based on human relations and personal growth, as Seaman et al. argued (2017). Moreover, the experience helped the students to understand the industry framework (<https://www.embok.org/>) as well as to further develop professional standards and behaviours [[AEO-Code-of-Conduct.pdf \(asp.events\)](#)].

In the questionnaire, almost half of the students answered “4” to the question: *From 5 (very much) to 1 (not at all), how much do you think that delivering a live event helped you develop transferable skills?* The EL activity was therefore perceived as useful for acquiring employability skills, such as “team working” [Q]. They also claimed: “we learnt a lot of skills and understood better what some of the difficulties of running an event are,” and this “is useful for my career, especially in planning the event.” This was all part of *Active Experimentation, Action Plan and Reflective Observation* (Fig. 3), and in line with previous studies, such as Sangpikul (2022). During the activity, students also developed

personal skills, such as “confidence” [Q], as Walters (2021) observed. They also learned that some ideas were unfeasible, as a teaching note reports: “some interesting ideas (e.g., drone or flash mob) from the marketing team but [they are] not feasible.” Thus, overall, there was evidence that EL allowed the effective bridging of the gap between academia and the requirements of the events industry (Kim et al., 2015; Ruhanen, 2006; Walters, 2021).

Students suggested planning a “bigger” event [E] with “more budget” available [E], to be located outside the university [Q]. This can be linked to the “learner readiness and experience” element in Dewey’s EL conceptual model (Bower, 2014) and was in line with Sangpikul’s (2022) argument that EL needs to be realistic and challenging. The event they delivered addressed real-world problems (i.e., environmental sustainability awareness and ocean pollution education), included real people, and used an unfamiliar physical environment as an event venue, which were all important aspects of EL (Garlick, 2014).

### Conclusions

This study analyzed student and lecturer perspectives of planning and delivering a live event in the context of a postgraduate conversion module. The purpose was to contribute to current debates regarding the practicalities of embedding EL for event management students. This study responded to current calls for practical guidelines on how to plan EL (Lamb, 2015; Ruhanen, 2006), including information on the role of educators (Venske, 2018) and EL assessments (Garlick, 2014). It considered primary data as well as previous studies to provide several recommendations concerning four elements: teaching content; resources and support; assessment; and links to employability. It also identified EL outcomes and reviewed Kolb’s (1984) cycle suggesting that the *Reflective Observation* phase was incorporated across the other three phases, as it was a crucial part of the entire EL activity for event management students. It also suggested that the last EL phase should be called *Action Plan*, which focuses on postevent evaluation and the creation of an action plan.

The value of this article is therefore twofold. First, practical guidelines were identified and clustered into four themes related to how best plan EL for event

management students. Second, a revision of Kolb’s (1984) cycle was suggested. Overall, a new EL model for event management courses was proposed, which includes practical guidelines and possible outcomes, based on Kolb’s (1984) cycle. The model (Fig. 3) shows the four key themes for practical guidelines, which are summarized as the following:

### Teaching

- The teaching content needs to cover all aspects of event planning and delivery to foster comprehensive and deep learning.
- Global real-world case studies should be used in discussions and exercises.
- Links to global event management policies can be added for independent study.
- Guest speakers should be invited, especially stakeholders linked to the venue, who need to be carefully chosen.
- There must be a mix of lectures (to deliver content) and seminars (to allow students to work in class, discuss, and ask questions).
- Providing time for discussion, reflection, and teamwork is essential and promotes progressive learning and reflective practitioners.

### Resources and Support

- It is important to provide online, in-class, and after-class (e.g., office hours or tutorial) support, which needs to be quick and should foster inclusivity and accessibility.
- All resources should be easily accessible online. A video tutorial on how to find resources can be useful.
- Students’ cultural diversity also needs to be considered, for example by providing direct links to language support resources.
- Communication needs to be constant. A communication protocol can be beneficial to support teamwork and clear communication.
- Assignments, expectations, resources, event guidelines need to be explained from week 1, and the tutor needs to help students to set goals.
- Student and instructor roles need to be clear.
- The instructor needs to be a tutor/mentor and needs to allow students to have ownership of their event—for example, by allowing them to

- choose their own teams, the event leader, and to make mistakes. This promotes responsibility and personal autonomy.
- Supporting critical reflection and emotional intelligence awareness is crucial in EL.
- It is appropriate for students to choose their own event teams within the first 2 weeks to support the development of group dynamics.
- The instructor should encourage student interaction, for example with team building exercises, and help students to identify their talents and strengths (e.g., with a Skills Matrix). This promotes reflective, interpersonal skills development.

### Assessments

- Students need to reflect on their progressive learning.
- Grades should not reflect the success of the event, but students' evaluation and critical reflection.
- Critical reflection and progressive learning are crucial parts of EL assignments. "Reflection points" should be included throughout the course.
- Assessments can be scheduled throughout the course, but not in the first 4 weeks to allow team dynamics to evolve.
- Sample papers are not necessary but templates can be provided.
- There could be individual and group assessments throughout the module.
- Marks for participation can be used but this approach needs to consider reasonable adjustments for inclusivity purposes.

### Links to Employability

- It is important to critically evaluate the links between EL and employability with the students and to help them understand the rationale behind the EL activity for their future careers.
- Instructors should include industry frameworks (e.g., EMBOK) and professional standards and behaviors (e.g., Association of Event Organisers Code of Conduct) and ask the students to use industry tools (e.g., project management tools) and, if possible, industry software.
- It is important to help students to become aware and to reflect critically on their transferable hard and soft skills development.

- EL for event management students' needs to be realistic, using real problems, venues and people.

This study does not aim to provide a final set of recommendations, but rather seeks to suggest guidelines on how EL should be planned and on how Kolb's (1984) cycle can be applied in event management courses. There are some limitations to this study. First, it includes only one study case with a small number of participants. Future studies should include more case studies and a bigger cohort of students. Second, the live event was delivered on campus, but future research could compare EL on and off campus. Moreover, future studies could explore how and when formative feedback can be collected and given. More research on the operational elements related to experiential learning (e.g., health and safety) is also needed. Comparative studies could also evaluate different types of EL (e.g., hosting live events versus internship placements). Finally, this study was conducted in a Northern European, Anglophone cultural context. Corresponding to Walters' (2021) suggestion, future research could include multiple case studies from different countries to identify cultural factors and use those insights to develop best practice recommendations for planning and delivering EL activities for international event management students.

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