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Conceptual Article

Learning from the Lessons: Developing Experiential and AI-Safe Activities and Assessments for Tertiary Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual analysis of experiential learning is framed in the context of a recent Experiential Education Initiative at Auckland International Campus. Our study is based on emergent themes from student activities submitted by lecturers in Applied Management, Construction and IT. From this qualitative data, four key concepts of activity design (context, interaction, process, product) and four phases of learning experience (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation) were identified. The article analyses each of these separately and conjointly from a pragmatist perspective aimed at informing the practice of lecturers, facilitators and activity designers in vocational tertiary education. Attention is given to the application of the above concepts and phases through a non-discipline specific enquiry focused on authentic activities and non-exam assessments which are, by virtue of their design, both AI-resilient and AI-tolerant, and thus deemed AI-safe.

Keywords: tertiary vocational education, experiential education, assessment design, AI-resilient assessment, AI-tolerant assessment

INTRODUCTION

In June 2025, Auckland International Campus (AIC) launched an Experiential Education Initiative to create a learning and teaching framework for the organisation and conduct a systematic review of all assessments across its campus. The underlying purpose of this initiative is threefold: 1) embed employability and work readiness more deeply within the organisation's culture; 2) develop new, varied and authentic learning activities and non-exam assessments that enable the "safe" use of GenAI and prevent its misuse by students; and 3) raise awareness of experiential education among students, lecturers and other staff. In due course, everyone at AIC should be able to benefit from well-integrated experiential education both in terms of the employability values it espouses and the vocational programmes it delivers.

This article reports on an activities survey which was conducted among lecturers to support the AIC initiative and provide material for the analysis of effective experiential learning in this context, with the aim of answering the following questions:

- What are the key features of good practice in experiential learning design?
- What common pitfalls are involved in designing experiential activities?
- What conceptual principles underlie effective experiential learning design?

After a brief description of the methodology involved, the study will outline its qualitative findings and exemplify the answers to these questions in accordance with the terms of its project approval from the AIC Research Ethics Committee. By addressing issues that relate to experiential learning both in theory and practice, we are hoping that our insights and recommendations will be of use to educators in Applied Management, Construction and IT, as well as tertiary vocational programmes more generally.

BACKGROUND

AIC has a vision of developing New Zealand's most employable graduates and its experiential approach to learning and teaching is central to the strategic planning and implementation of this vision. Its approach is based on a broad view of employability, as redefined by Oliver (2015, p.58) for the "disrupted economy" where "employment no longer necessarily means winning or keeping for the long term a traditional, full-time position in a company, organisation, small business or institution." This concept can be readily applied to the disruption brought about by the Covid pandemic and the advent of public AI. Oliver's proposal for graduate employability in such circumstances may be summarised as a) developing discipline-specific or work-related skills, b) as well as more generic (transferable) skills, and c) practising them in context d) in a way that promotes self-efficacy and self-awareness. Until now, this conception of employability has mostly been articulated at AIC in terms of Otago Polytechnic's Learner Capability Framework (Otago Polytechnic, 2021), aimed at providing evidence of work-readiness to supplement students' academic qualifications. The Experiential Education Initiative offers an opportunity to fully integrate learner capabilities such as communication, leadership, teamwork, independence, critical thinking, adaptability and resilience to the student experience and assessment of learning.

As an assessment design project, the initiative also allows for innovative solutions to the serious problem that GenAI now poses for the validity and reliability of non-exam assessments on which a great deal of vocational education depends. Whilst experiential learning as a pedagogical approach is open to different interpretations, its most appropriate version for tertiary level programmes at the AIC campus will be based on authenticity (Gulikers et al., 2004). Authentic assessment was not only recommended for employability skills but also, years before the availability of GenAI to students around the world, for ensuring academic integrity (Sotiriadou et al., 2019). As well as being work-related, well-designed authentic tasks in "contextual problem-based assessments" Ifelebuegu (2023, p.4) remain too complex and multi-layered for students to complete simply by means of prompt engineering. Conversely, the protection afforded by this type of design enables the use of AI for professional purposes in student assessment work. Hence the term "AI-safe" is used here to describe assessments which can resist AI misuse and tolerate legitimate AI use (Balducci et al., 2025).

Beyond safeguarding the security of its assessments, AIC will be endeavoring to grow a study environment where students are not only self-aware but able to articulate the role of experiential learning in their own personal and professional development. For this end to be realised, a co-ordinated campus-wide approach to the guidance and support of every learner from orientation to graduation will be required. Thus, as well as lecturers, learning support and employability, The Experiential Education Initiative will address other staff members whose work will be impacted in different ways. The Association for Experiential Education defines this approach as "a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" Roberts (2016, p.23). Whilst obviously generic, the definition can be refined and expanded for the purposes of AIC's initiative. Of particular importance here must be the nature of the engagement generated by means

of this philosophy, one in which the role of the educator is shared with learners and where students "purposefully engage" with each other in tasks and projects that mirror the collaborative environment of the workplace. Another point of interest from the AIC perspective is the inclusion of work-related communities of practice in the meaning of those "communities" to which students will contribute.

METHOD

As previously mentioned, a survey was conducted with academic staff to collect samples of experiential activities they had used in their teaching during the previous year. For the purposes of this survey, these were defined as work-related, face to face, group activities either modelled on real work practices or designed as interactive learning activities aimed at preparing students for real-world tasks and/or work settings (i.e. intended to feel like real work situations). The template for providing such activities included the course in which it was used, its main aim, its learning outcomes and a description of the activity itself. This was sent out on 9th June 2025 to all academic staff (in Applied Management, Construction and IT) and the final submission date was 26th June.

The next step was to analyse the qualitative data by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We worked independently to code the activities in different colours every time a specific feature emerged. We then compared our results and discussed differences of analysis in order to identify how these could be resolved. Finally, once we had reached a consensus, all emergent features were grouped into different themes on the basis of their commonality. Throughout this process, we paid close attention to the alignment of course aims and learning outcomes with the detail of each description and relations between the stages of the activity. No assumptions were made about any gaps in the descriptions or about their potential for being adapted and developed into more experiential activities.

Having completed this analysis, we set about interpreting our data from a pragmatist rather than a positivist perspective. Pragmatism has been described as "focused on an attempt to identify what is practically useful" Newton et al. (2020, p.4) and "the view that reality can be changed for the better" Prochner and Godin (2022, p.7). As well as the rigour of scientific expertise, this is a philosophy which values the judgements and knowhow of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983). It is from this perspective that we looked at the data material that we had collated. By taking internal evidence into account and evaluating the degree to which the claims made in each description were substantiated, it was possible for us to address our research questions. We were able to identify good practice, common pitfalls and conceptual principles in effective experiential learning design.

ANALYSIS

Overall, the survey generated a very high level of response, with forty-one lecturers submitting eighty-three activities from fifty-three courses across all the campus departments combined, ranging from NZQA levels 5 to 9. These activities involved various forms of commodity, building or system design, calculation, data analysis, enquiry, consultation, evaluation, problem-solving, decision-making, report and other professional writing, project management, role-play or simulation. In all, eight themes or aspects of experiential activities were identified through our analysis, these being equally divided between activity design and learning experience (see Table 1 below). We labeled the themes according to the best terminology that we could find to capture their essence in each case, whether or not these terms were actually used by the survey respondents.

Table 1: Thematic analysis

Activity Design	Learning Experience
• Context	• Concrete experience
• Interaction	• Reflective observation
• Process	• Abstract conceptualisation
• Product	• Active experimentation

For a balanced picture of how these different aspects may contribute to experiential learning design, we are going to deal with each one in turn so as to 1) outline what it may consist of, and 2) report on good practice, pitfalls and further conceptual implications. The connection between experiential education and AI-safe assessment also needs to be brought out in relation to activity design, whether in terms of resilience and security, or tolerance and authenticity.

Context

Context includes scenarios, situations and audiences for a specific task that students are required to undertake. These may be real or hypothetical, depending on the nature of the activity. Some contexts are designed as complete and unchangeable, whereas others allow for individualised elaboration by students on the basis of their research and/or experience, for example during work placement. However, whether fixed or flexible, the context for student activity should ultimately specify in appropriate detail where, when, how, and why any given task is to be done, as well as who for (e.g. the organisation, the client, and the manager or colleagues directly concerned). Only then can the authenticity of the context be fully established. What is more, the number and continuity of contexts also have to be carefully considered. While the same context can be used for a wide range of creative, innovative, personalised outputs by students, differentiated contexts are usually needed with more standardised outputs, if only to discourage plagiarism and avoid academic integrity issues. Therefore, contextualisation for the same task needs to be equivalent across the student group to which it is given, and this equivalence must be maintained throughout a complex activity with multiple tasks. For our purposes, a further characteristic of a good context is that it should be "lived" in some way as part of the student's learning experience and not simply postulated in the abstract, whether through direct contact with industry, interaction with real-world experts, engagement with authentic situations, etc. The integration of this context to the activity process is likewise essential, as described below. Examples of good practice in our database revealed an awareness of some of the factors outlined above, notably those which promote integrity.

Meanwhile, AI-misuse and the dependence on GenAI can be prevented, at least to some extent, by limiting the context to local rather than national, international, industry-wide problems to solve, or perspectives to apply (Balducci et al., 2025). All too often, task designers draw from case studies which are widely available online or closely resemble such material. Safer strategies include the creation of new case studies (e.g. based on the designer's own professional experience) or inventing scenarios which involve physical and social realities in the learners' own environment. However, the main pitfall that we observed was a lack of authenticity overall. Although work-integrated learning in a real-life context is rightly regarded as the best way to enhance employability skills (Jackson, 2014), this does not mean that educational activities are necessarily inauthentic. It is possible to simulate the conditions, methods and workflows of a real work environment with varying degrees of authenticity in IT-design, construction planning or management strategising. As Gulikers et al. (2004) remind us, the authenticity of a task in relation to real-world practice is not an absolute but a matter of degree.

Interaction

It was explained above that context can be summarised in terms of where, when, etc. Interaction, on the other hand, relates to *who with* (as opposed to *who for*). This raises the question, first of all, about the mode of interaction through which the task is to be performed, i.e. independent work or teamwork. In a classroom (or blended) setting, this usually translates into individual work, pairwork or groupwork. It must be noted, however, that even independent work within an organisation is done for a colleague or entity such as a line manager or committee to whom the person doing this work is accountable. These relations can be replicated in various ways in class, involving the lecturer, other students, or an external party like another teacher or a guest lecturer. There are of course implications for assessed activities if any of these actors participate in some way towards achieving the task outcomes. A well-thought-out assessment rubric should always discriminate between the work of the person being assessed and that of anybody else involved. This also applies to assessment work undertaken within a team of some sort, so that individual student performance remains the focus of assessment. Examples of good practice that we noted included direct observation, tracking documents and individual responsibilities or outputs which could be used for the purpose of assessment. As for problematic attempts at groupwork, these tended to emerge from task designs which could be carried out more effectively by individual students and would not in fact be done collaboratively in the workplace.

An important distinction here is the one between cooperation and collaboration. Both are of course aimed at common objectives, but whereas a cooperative activity is divided into separate sub-tasks which are then allocated to different team members, a collaborative activity requires participants to be working more closely together on the same output throughout (Han & Ellis, 2021). Some form of task division is still needed so that students' individual efforts may be assessed, but now the process as well as the outcome should be taken into account, thereby making assessment more AI-resilient. Collaboration is also highly valued by employers as a capability (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Child and Shaw (2016) have devised a six-part framework for assessing this collaborative process, consisting of 1) social interdependence, 2) conflict resolution, 3) introduction of new ideas, 4) sharing of resources, 5) task division, and 6) communication. The application of a framework like this one necessitates that lecturers have been trained to use appropriate performance criteria when assessing individual student behaviour. A further implication is that, as well as behaviour, the framework offers a significant window for the assessment of personal attributes and soft skills or employment capabilities.

Process

If context provides both the purpose and rationale for doing an activity, and interaction clarifies the social setting in which this work is to be done, then the process defines how students are to proceed in order to reach the desired outcome. Bozkurt et al. (2024) see the shift to process-oriented education as more AI-resilient, while Moorhouse et al. (2023, p.493) emphasise its authenticity: "Allowing or even requiring students to use GAI [GenAI] at various stages of the assessment process would, in fact, enhance the authenticity of assessments." As a structural principle in assessment design, the process should be anticipated as fully as possible by the designer, even when a student task or project is conceived as flexible in the achievement of its final outcome. A well-planned process will contribute to the validity of this outcome and therefore of its assessment. The more complex the activity, the more its process needs to be detailed and elaborated for the achievability and realism of the work involved to be evaluated. Educators must also identify the skills and knowledge that are prerequisite as well as developed through each stage of the process and consider how these stages in a learning or formative activity are reflected in summative assessment. Finally, the

social and communicative interaction on which the process depends can only be effectively integrated and managed by advanced planning.

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The major problem we encountered was a lack of attention to this process, whether due to a lack of information on how students were expected to work on completing the activity, the assumption that this process was self-evident, or the belief that providing general instructions and task requirements would be sufficient to explain it. Judging from the data we collected, there seems to be a tendency to let the process "take care of itself" by means of unprompted student action and behaviour, except perhaps when circumstances require intervention by the lecturer concerned. As noted earlier, it is good practice to monitor and document student progress within group activities for assessment purposes. Productive task facilitation also requires the lecturer to manage the process in a supervising capacity, in a classroom (or blended) setting for the most part, so as to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach a successful outcome. This entails knowing at every stage how each student is actively engaged and how their work will ultimately contribute to such an outcome being reached. Since no lecturer can be expected to do this from memory with a larger cohort, the use of technology becomes essential for recording and tracking individual performance. These are all strategies to ensure the implementation of a planned process that is intended to deliver the expected outputs. Following such a process will, in addition to the advantages previously mentioned, have the added benefit of minimising the risks of AI-misuse, just as the accountability and transparency of groupwork can impose limits on what an individual student may or may not do.

Product

The notion of product also emerged from our thematic analysis as output or outcome and even occasionally as result or consequence. It is important to note that what we have identified as a product here should not be confused with a marketable commodity, although it may sometimes be a commodity. It is simply the result of a process where humans act as participants, irrespective of this result being a physical thing (like a 3-D construction model), a virtual thing (like a website), or a performance (like a management consultation). But it is important to remember that in vocational education, a product needs to be more authentic than academic (apart from a few exceptions). It should resemble the kind of output that would be produced in a relevant work situation. Furthermore, in a well-designed activity, product and process are closely connected. What students produce needs to come about as the direct outcome of a clear and managed classroom (or blended) process that is purpose-made for generating the intended product, with or without the use by students of AI tools and agents. It was because they were explicitly related to a staged and practical, work-like process that the best examples of products in our database were both achievable and authentic, as well as AI-safe.

One distinct problem with a number of products in the activities submitted for the survey was their overly academic approach to the realities of contemporary practice in their field. As noted earlier, however, the main issues in activity design arose from the evident lack of attention to process. As well as creating opportunities for academic misconduct in all its forms, this obvious neglect also raises the concern of potentially insufficient skills development and employability training in generating the required output. The ability of students to get results from engaging in cooperative or collaborative work depends on their trust and confidence in the corresponding process. Active learning in experiential education is aimed at shaping a direct and lasting awareness of how things are done, or can be done, and not simply at the doing of those things. Whilst independent-minded students are often able to learn from unstructured activity, their autonomous approach and freedom from teacher dependence does not in itself guarantee a successful outcome. As for more dependent students who are used to didactic forms of teaching, they are likely to seek out easy and quick-fix solutions to the problem of producing the deliverables that are demanded of them. All in all, requesting products without training learners to participate in relevant processes will not greatly enhance their employability.

Learning experience

The themes of learning experience are the four phases of the Kolb cycle (Kolb, 2015), namely: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This was the only model of experiential learning which was explicitly used by lecturers, many of whom drew from the terminology above. Kolb himself describes the experiential learning process as follows Kolb (2015, page.51):

> Immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for actions can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences.

While concrete experiences can be variously interpreted, for the purposes of active learning in a vocational classroom (or cohort) such experiences will consist of student-centred work-related tasks. For these to be meaningful in the context of learning experiences, they should be pitched slightly above the students' current level of knowledge and competence to ensure a successful but imperfect outcome that could be improved. Lecturers will be able to gauge

from their initial needs analysis and their knowledge of student or class profiles whether and to what extent the tasks themselves will need to be scaffolded. These may either be focused on the production of one or more outputs (such as a SWOT analysis, a construction cost breakdown, or an ERD diagram), or may in fact be more of a by-product than the central focus of the activity (e.g. meeting notes, information tables, brainstorming flip charts).

Depending on the learning outcomes and objectives of the course, the subsequent reflective observation may address multiple aspects of this initial task, in terms of its process, its product, interpersonal relations, etc. Reflection can also look forward as well as back, encouraging students to think about how they would do the task differently in future, or even how it might contribute to a greater outcome (like a project goal, for instance). But one important factor to remember when designing a reflection stage in an activity is that students cannot be compelled to reflect. Just telling them to "think about" something is not enough to guarantee that post-activity discussions will be sufficiently focused to be useful. On the other hand, providing too much guidance with questions to answer or forms to complete might simply result in teacher-led reflection as opposed to independent thought. What is needed is one or more structured opportunities for reflection where students have the freedom to make up their own minds about what has been experienced in a way that is constructive and helps them to learn from doing an activity in the first place.

Whether it is a full-blown academic theory, a set of related concepts or an operational model, the nature of abstract conceptualisation must be understood as a progressive continuation of what came before. In the quotation above, Kolb describes the link between this phase and the preceding reflection as one of assimilation and distillation into concepts or abstract ideas. Here, continuity is essential to the learning process. Whereas abstract theorising merely consists of words (or symbols, images, etc), what is most innovative about experiential learning is that such abstractions are introduced after, and not before, an activity. This practice-first approach may be counter-intuitive to people whose whole education was built on theoretical foundations. Language itself appears to exclude the possibility of a reverse order, since we talk about theory and practice but not practice and theory. The pedagogy of theory-first education rests on the assumption that practical activity cannot be understood for what it is without a theoretical filter. In simple terms, learners need to know what is being experienced in order to understand it. Yet, although seemingly reasonable, this assumption does not take into account the fundamental purpose of human action, which is not necessarily about gaining understanding. We tend to do things in order to get results. Practical activity can therefore be quite meaningful to learners provided its objectives are clearly established. What subsequent theorising can do is to broaden and generalise that meaning, so that new knowledge may be deliberately applied in future. The main reasons for proceeding in this way, meanwhile, are two-fold: motivating students to learn, and narrowing the field of potentially relevant theory, thereby reducing the cognitive load.

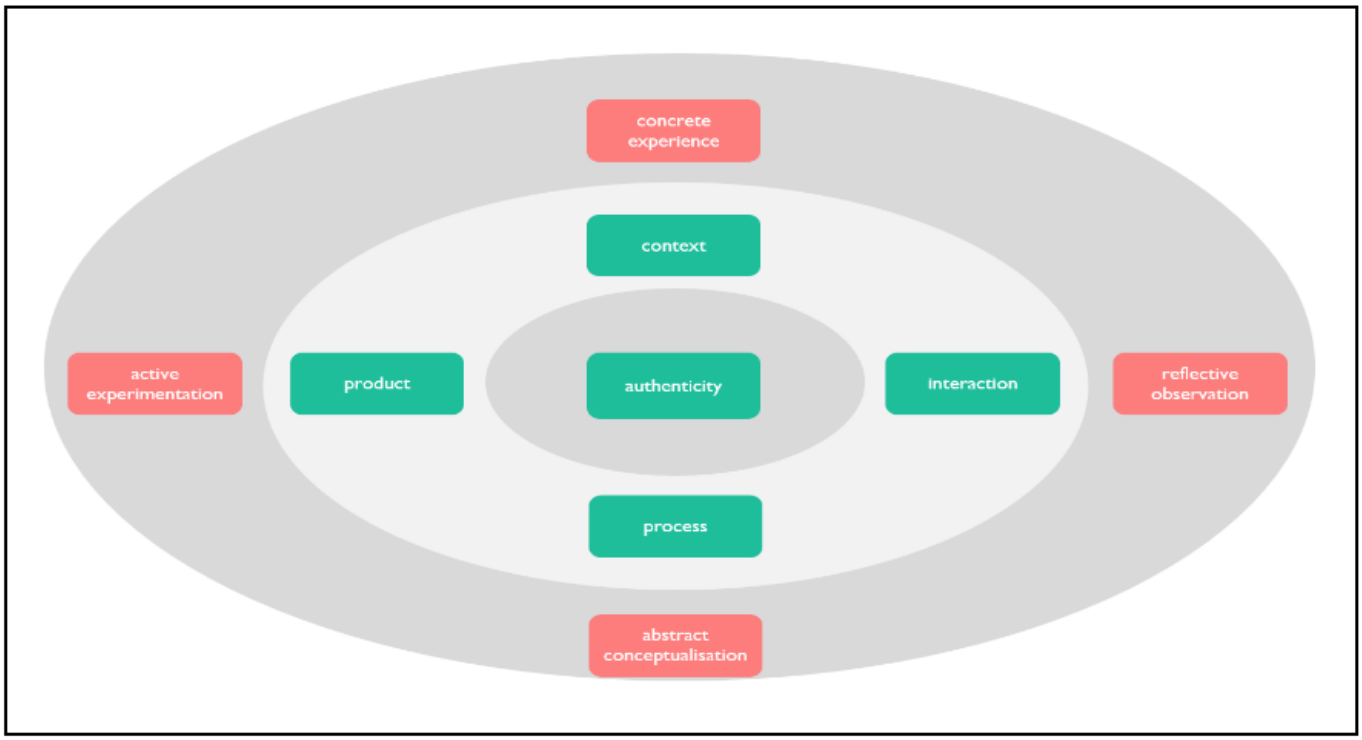
As the final phase of the learning cycle, active experimentation can be seen as revisiting the original activity or doing something new – a return or a departure. In either case, the aim is for learners to understand their experience in a new light. Their progress may be moderate or extensive, depending in part on the scope of the activity and its relation to a wider sequence within the course or programme, but learning remains as cumulative as it is in more traditional forms of education. What is different about it, in addition to the sequencing, is the greater opportunity for trying things out. By prioritising practice, educators can also valorise the importance of mistakes, misconceptions and false starts in the learning process. Overall, practice-first enables learning to become more memorable. It will also be apparent this approach at once demands and fosters greater levels of engagement from learners, or at least a different attitude to their own learning. Qualities like autonomy, adaptability and resilience now come to the fore.

In the best activities from our survey, each phase of the Kolb learning cycle was included in a separate stage with

a different sub-aim, and all the phases were fully integrated into a coherent and progressive whole designed for achieving the main aim(s). Above all, it was immediately apparent from the linking of ideas in the lecturer's description that students would benefit from a work-like, vocational focus throughout, leading to the achievement of useful outcomes. At the other end of the scale were activities in which the use of terminology (such as references to concrete experience or just experience or reflection or the application of learning) did not really seem to be warranted by the description provided. In other words, there was no clear evidence that the language of experiential learning had been used appropriately. Where there was experiential validity in the work done by students, this might in fact be limited to parts of the Kolb cycle that featured as discrete, standalone tasks. Some descriptions listed experiential things for students to do without explaining how these would be connected. Others tried to link them together without any thought given to the context, or the process, or the product, or all three. Mention was made of establishing a theoretical grounding without prior experience or reflection. Students were described as actively applying their learning, not by means of tasks with specific outcomes and tangible outputs, but simply through general topic-based discussion.

More than anything, what seemed to be missing from significant parts of our data was a clear indication that experiential learning activities are most likely to be aimed at real-world problem-solving (or difficult issues to be addressed). As noted earlier, well-designed authentic tasks are problem-based (Ifelebuegu, 2023). From the perspective of the Kolb cycle, such an approach to activity design would help lecturers to identify appropriate learner experiences within their field of subject matter specialism. Instead of establishing foundational knowledge for teaching their courses, they could investigate current business or industry needs through credible sources in order to develop relevant case studies or other problematic situations that stand in need of resolution. A typical design for a student activity would start by attempting to deal with this problem, then to reflect on this initial attempt, then to

Figure 1: Activity Design and Learning Experience



generalise from personal reflection, and finally to apply what has been learned to the same or a similar problem or issue. Figure 1 provides an overview of these learning phases in conjunction with the key concepts of activity design.

CONCLUSION

Experiential education in a tertiary vocational context is built on a concerted effort by all parties involved to engage in appropriate, work-related or work-based activities in a learning cycle where different skills and types of knowledge are prioritised according to the relevant learning outcomes and objectives. Complex, multi-layered activities are generally more suitable for these purposes both from the point of view of authenticity and resistance of AI-misuse or tolerance of legitimate AI use. To ensure that such levels of complexity and AI-safety are achieved, it is recommended that context, interaction, process and product are applied in sufficient depth and detail in the design of activities. Meanwhile, for students to gain memorable and useful learning from their education, it is also advised to integrate all four phases of the Kolb cycle so they may be empowered to make use of what they have learned in new and unpredictable ways in the future.

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