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INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL AND REFLECTIVE LEARNING FOR PROFESSIONAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This research investigates how experiential learning integrated with guided reflective practices makes a contribution to early-career professional-skill development. This kind of training traditionally focuses on the acquisition of knowledge and process skills but less frequently on the relationships between experienced life, reflection, and continuous professional development. Through using an intervention of experiential tasks with reflective guidance across a six-week programme with 150 early-career professionals within a service sector company, this study tests the impact on professional-skill self-evaluation (communication, teamwork, problem-solving), reflective ability, and perceived professional identity. With quasi-experimental design (treatment vs control), findings show that the experiential + reflective group made significantly more improvement in skill self-evaluation and in reflection ability than the control group. Qualitative return also shows how reflection allowed them to interpret experience and intend next actions. Organisational training, higher education staff development, and lifelong learning implications are examined.

Keywords: *Experiential Learning, Reflective Learning, Professional Skills, Professional Development, Reflective Practice, Lifelong Learning.*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary professional settings, the demand for employees who can not only perform tasks but also adapt, reflect, and grow is stronger than ever. Training programmes increasingly recognise that developing professional skills—such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning—requires more than traditional lectures or procedural instructions. Rather, educational thinkers and practitioners focus on the strength of experiential learning, whereby one is directly involved in significant activities and reflects on those activities to transform them into learning (Kolb, 1984). Supporting this, reflective learning focuses on the conscious process of critiquing one's actions, incorporating feedback, and changing future conduct (Moon, 2007). It is believed by research that when experiential and reflective methods are incorporated, learning becomes more profound and transformative (Roland, 2017).

In organizational and professional development settings, such integration is most pertinent. It was discovered through one longitudinal study of faculty development that multiple iterations of experience, personal reflection and group discussion facilitated long-term change in teaching practices (Farrell, Buydens, Bourgeois-Law, & Regehr, 2021). Likewise, higher-education practice confirms that experiential activities combined with reflective writing under guidance leads to metacognitive consciousness and generalizable skills (Zafeer, Li, & Maqbool, 2023). However, while the theory is supportive, there is still a lack of empirical evidence regarding how intentionally constructed experiential-plus-reflective interventions influence professional skill development outcomes among early-career professionals in non-exclusively academic environments.

Accordingly, this research explores whether an integrated experiential + reflective learning intervention can assist in the development of professional skills among early-career professionals. In particular, the study looks at whether the intervention gives rise to enhanced self-evaluated professional skills, enhanced reflective capability, and enhanced professional identity than a control training approach.

With a more complicated and rapidly evolving professional landscape, organisations and education institutions need individuals who can not only perform tasks efficiently but also think critically, learn to cope with new challenges, and learn continuously from their experiences. Conventional training methods—traditionally ruled by lectures, theoretical debates, and passive learning—have been inadequate to develop these higher-order professional abilities (Kolb, 1984; Loo, 2020). Professional development in the twenty-first century needs to incorporate experiential and reflective aspects of learning, wherein individuals directly participate in meaningful work and then

critically reflect on their experience in order to create new perceptions (Dewey, 1938; Moon, 2007).

Experiential learning, based on the constructivist tradition, rests on the assumption that learning comes about through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This model suggests that knowledge is not imparted from instructor to student but created by interaction among experience and reflection. Researchers have posited that when students engage in actual work tasks—like simulations, projects, or fieldwork—they acquire true understanding and develop key professional skills such as teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving (Beard & Wilson, 2018; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Experience alone will not ensure learning. Without reflection, experience can be left unprocessed and not result in behaviour change (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013). Reflective learning is thus the process by which people examine their experience, evaluate their assumptions, and learn lessons for practice. Moon (2007) has defined reflective learning as a metacognitive process of "making meaning" from one's experiences and actions to improve professional judgement and proficiency. Correspondingly, Schön (1983) proposed the idea of the reflective practitioner, highlighting that professionals learn most effectively when they reflect critically on action (after practice) and in action (in practice).

Combining experiential with reflective learning provides an effective synergy for professional growth. Studies show that guided reflection after practical experience results in more profound understanding, increased self-knowledge, and increased transfer of learning into new situations (Roland, 2017; Zafeer, Li, & Maqbool, 2023). For instance, Farrell, Buydens, Bourgeois-Law, and Regehr (2021) established that experiential learning integrated with reflection and shared dialogue resulted in sustainable teacher practice development among university staff. In the same vein, Wilson, Beard, and Coles (2019) pointed out that reflection turns experience into knowledge, and this allows professionals to continuously evolve and improve.

In professional and organizational learning contexts, experience-integrated reflection facilitates both skill development and professional identity formation. As workers move through demanding roles that demand independence and responsibility, the capacity to reflect on behavior becomes a hallmark of professional expertise (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). Embedding reflection within experience-based tasks assists people in linking abstractions with practice, comprehending the consequences of their choices, and absorbing values fundamental to their occupation (Brockbank & McGill, 2007).

In spite of the theoretical and conceptual justification of experiential and reflective learning being combined, little empirical evidence exists on how these integrated interventions affect quantifiable outcomes—especially among early-career professionals employed outside educational institutions (Zafeer et al., 2023). Most of the existing research has targeted student groups or teachers' training with less attention to how work-based learning environments can design experiential and reflective elements into professional capability development programmes systematically (Farrell et al., 2021; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Further, most of the studies tend to view experiential and reflective learning as independent concepts instead of studying how they work together to yield transformation in professional competencies, self-efficacy, and identity.

As such, the current research examines the effects of a combined experiential and reflective learning intervention on the development of professional skills in early-career professionals. More specifically, it examines whether this combination results in enhanced self-rated professional competencies (e.g., communication, teamwork, and problem-solving), increased reflective ability, and heightened professional identity compared to conventional training methods. Through both quantitative and qualitative results, the study will give empirical knowledge about the processes in which experiential and reflective learning enhance significant professional development.

1.1.Rationale of the Study

Higher education institutions and organisations spend a lot on professional-development training to prepare people with 21st-century skills: self-management, adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration. Yet, most programs are based on passive approaches (lectures, workshops) and do not make use of the potential of experience and reflection to make learning more ingrained. Experiential learning enables trainees to do, but without reflective scaffolding the "experience" will not be translated into long-lasting learning. Reflective learning enables people to make sense of what they are doing, ingrain lessons, and learn to anticipate improvements in the future. By bringing them together, learning can become more powerful, but there is very little rigorous evidence of how it happens, what the mechanisms are, and what the results look like in professional settings. That is what this study tries to fill by trialling an intervention and measuring a range of outcomes over time.

1.2.Statement of the Problem

Most professional-skill training programs do not lead to sustained change in participants' skills despite high investment of time and money. The central reason could be that trainees do not participate in substantial, real-life experiences (or activities) and/or

do not participate in systematic reflection on those experiences. Without the joint operation of doing (experience) and thinking about doing (reflection), training tends to be superficial and fails to result in internalised development or professional identity formation. The challenge, therefore, is how to create and enact training that effectively combines experiential activity and reflective practice to build professional skills in a quantifiable manner.

1.3.Research Objectives

- To create and enact an integrated experiential + reflective learning intervention to improve professional skill development in early-career professionals.
- To compare the impact of the intervention on self-reported professional-skills development (communication, teamwork, problem-solving) compared to a control group.
- To assess development of reflective capacity in participants, and compare these developments in experimental and control groups.
- To investigate how participants understand and interpret the experiential + reflective learning process, and how this assists them in developing their professional identity.

1.4.Research Questions

- How far does completing an integrated experiential + reflective learning programme enhance participants' self-rated professional abilities in comparison to conventional training?
- In what way does the intervention impact participants' reflective ability compared to the control group?
- Participants' own views on how experiential tasks combined with structured reflection helped them develop professional skills and identity.
- What elements of the experiential + reflective learning design played the greatest role in participants' perceived development?

1.5.Definitions of Key Variables

- **Experiential Learning Intervention:** A programme with a structured sequence in which participants undertake real-life, project-based tasks (team-based, real-life scenarios) followed by guided reflection sessions.

- **Reflective Learning:** The process through which participants examine critically their experiences, recognize learning points, develop plans for future action, and modify their behaviour.
- **Professional Skills:** In this research, self-rated abilities in communication, working in teams/collaboration, problem-solving/critical thinking, and adaptability/self-management.
- **Reflective Capacity:** The ability of the individual to use reflective thinking—monitoring, evaluating, and planning one's professional behaviour and learning.
- **Professional Identity:** Participants' sense of self as professionals—with confidence, role clarity, and commitment to continuous growth in their profession.

2.Literature Review

Experiential learning theory (ELT) has known for a long time that it is through changing experience through a cycle of concrete experience → reflective observation → abstract conceptualisation → active experimentation that knowledge is constructed (Kolb, 1984). Empirical research validates that when students are given concrete activities and then have time to reflect, deeper understanding and transferable skills are the outcome (Dillette & Sipe, 2018). For instance, Roland (2017) contended that closing the theory–practice gap in teacher education is facilitated when experiential learning is complemented with reflection.

Reflective learning has been identified as critical in higher education and professional training. Zafeer, Li, and Maqbool (2023) discovered that reflective journal writing enhanced the critical thinking and professional learning of postgraduate students in online learning considerably. Likewise, Farrell et al. (2021) established that iterative experiential tasks with group reflection facilitated faculty development over time—meaning that reflection is not merely reporting experience, but for doing more intensive processing and planning.

Research highlights that the combination of experiential and reflective approaches is most effective for professional skill acquisition. For instance, a study of experiential learning models revealed the strong link between direct experience and the acquisition of professional skills like communication, leadership, innovative thinking and flexibility (Journal of Positive School Psychology, 2024). Moreover, studies in service and business programmes show that experiential learning opportunities help learners develop capacities valued by employers, beyond theoretical knowledge (Selangor Business Review, 2024).

Critical reflection is also a primary facilitator of experience transformation into professional competence. A systematic synthesis of creative reflective learning in medical students discovered that reflective practices, where diversity and authenticity are built-in, facilitated professional identity construction and interpersonal skill enhancement (Beyond the Written Reflection, 2023). While studies highlight that reflective learning enables metacognitive processes for ongoing professional adaptive capability (Tanaka et al., 2023).

While experiential + reflective learning combined benefits have been identified in the literature, there are still areas for improvement: many interventions only address either experiential tasks or reflection in isolation, not as identified specific integrated programmes; only a few studies longitudinally measure self-assessed professional skills and reflective capacity; and professional identity outcomes are rarely added. The present study fills these discrepancies by using an integrated design, multiple outcomes measurement, and investigated lived understandings of participants in a professional setting.

2.1.Theoretical Foundations of Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) of Kolb (1984) is still one of the most powerful models to explain how people learn and change through experience. Kolb suggested that learning is an ongoing process based on experience, and that knowledge is developed through the process of changing experience through four steps: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Students go through a continuous cycle—doing, reflecting, thinking, and applying—that allows theory and practice to be incorporated (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This model puts students at the centre of building understanding instead of being passive recipients of knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Later scholars have further developed ELT to highlight learning as an integrative process concerning affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects (Beard & Wilson, 2018; Loo, 2020).

Empirical data has always proven the effectiveness of experiential learning in developing professional skills. For example, Dillette and Sipe (2018) discovered that students who undertook hands-on experiential projects acquired better problem-solving and teamwork skills than those who took traditional classroom instruction. In the same vein, Roland (2017) noted that experiential learning bridges the theory–practice gap in teacher education by engaging learners in actual situations necessitating reflective use of conceptual knowledge. Such evidence confirms that experiential learning helps produce the type of deep, transferable understanding required for professional and lifelong learning (Peters & Tarrant, 2021).

2.2.Reflective Learning and Professional Growth

Concurrently with experiential learning, reflective learning has been identified as a critical process in converting experience into knowledge. Based on Schön's (1983) theory of the "reflective practitioner," reflective learning is a conscious reflection of one's practice, underlying presumptions, and learning to guide future practice. Moon (2007) described reflective learning as the process of "making meaning" from experience and thus enabling metacognition and professional self-awareness. In higher education, reflective learning is being employed more and more to develop critical thinking, ethical thinking, and ongoing improvement (Farrell et al., 2021; Ghaye, 2011).

Zafeer, Li, and Maqbool (2023) proved that reflective journaling greatly improved students' analytical and professional skills in online postgraduate studies. Reflection prompts students to make the connections between theory and personal experience explicit, allowing them to adjust their learning strategies and behaviour. Likewise, Farrell et al. (2021) also discovered that embedded structured reflection in faculty development programmes supported sustainable instructional transformation and professional self-assurance. Reflection is therefore not just a type of review but an active, iterative meaning-making process and professional development (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013).

2.3.Embedding Experiential and Reflective Learning for Skill Development

A growing consensus among researchers is that the strongest learning is achieved when experiential and reflective practices are purposefully combined (Beard & Wilson, 2018; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). When combined, they allow the learner to act, reflect, and re-conceptualize, resulting in greater learning. Interdisciplinary research—business, healthcare, and education—verifies that combining these practices better develops technical and soft skills, including teamwork, flexibility, and leadership (Pereira & Santos, 2022; Roland, 2017).

A latest study released in the Journal of Positive School Psychology (2024) noted that experiential learning models have a strong relationship with the enhancement of communication, teamwork, creativity, and leadership—capabilities that are critical for professional expertise. Likewise, research in management and business education identified that students who experienced experiential and reflective activities had greater self-efficacy, employability, and motivation compared to students undergoing conventional instruction (Selangor Business Review, 2024; Loo, 2020). These conclusions highlight that combining experiential and reflective practice develops hard and soft professional competencies, making students more capable to face the challenges of today's dynamic work environments.

2.4.Reflection as the Mechanism for Professional Identity Formation

Critical reflection has been recognized as the primary mechanism by which experience is converted into professional competence and identity (Trede, Macklin, & Bridges, 2012). In medical and healthcare education, systematic review by Beyond the Written Reflection (2023) indicated that authentic and creative reflective practices supported identity development, empathy, and interpersonal skills in medical trainees. Reflection enables students to contextualize their professional roles, grasp ethical aspects of practice, and construct a cohesive sense of professional self (Tanaka et al., 2023).

Additionally, research indicates that reflective learning develops metacognitive consciousness—students become more aware of their thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving strategies (Ghaye, 2011; Moon, 2007). This metacognitive development is vital to adaptive expertise, a characteristic of professional competence in dynamic contexts (Farrell et al., 2021). The combination of reflection with experiential learning thus enhances both technical and reflective aspects of professional identity, enabling professionals to act competently and conscientiously.

2.5.Holes and Directions in Existing Research

Although the literature is overwhelmingly supportive of the advantages of experiential and reflective learning, there are some gaps remaining. Most research is carried out on either experiential activities or reflective activities in isolation instead of exploring the combined or sequential effects of both methods (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Roland, 2017). Empirical evidence on outcome measures such as self-rated professional skills, reflective ability, and development of professional identity is still scarce, especially in professional settings beyond higher education (Zafeer et al., 2023). In addition, longitudinal research on whether integrated experiential-reflective interventions maintain their effects over time is lacking (Beard & Wilson, 2018).

Another restriction relates to contextual diversity: most of the research has taken place in Western educational contexts, with fewer investigations into such pedagogies in developing nations or organisational learning environments (Pereira & Santos, 2022). This means there is a demand for investigations that look at the ways in which cultural, institutional, and occupational factors determine the use of experience and reflection in professional skill-building. This study fills these research gaps by adopting an experiential + reflective learning integrated design into a professional development programme for Pakistan's early-career professionals and evaluating its effect both quantitatively and qualitatively.

3.Research Methodology

This research used a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design. Two early-career groups within a service-sector organisation were involved: an experimental group (n = 75) who experienced the integrated experiential + reflective learning intervention, and a control group (n = 75) who experienced traditional training (lecture and workshop only). Pre- and post-measures of professional skills self-assessment and reflective capacity were gathered. Also, post-programme qualitative interviews with 20 participants from the experimental group examined perceptions and professional identity change.

3.1.Population and Sampling

The population comprised early-career professionals (less than 3 years' experience) in a medium-sized service organisation in Punjab, Pakistan. From a roster of eligible employees (approx. 200), 150 volunteered and were randomly assigned (where feasible) to experimental (75) and control (75) groups. For qualitative interviews, purposive sampling selected 20 participants representing a range of backgrounds and skill-improvement trajectories in the experimental group.

3.2.Data Collection

Quantitative measures were: a Professional Skills Self-Assessment Questionnaire (PS-SAQ), capturing communication, teamwork, problem-solving/adaptability (5-point Likert scale); a Reflective Capacity Scale (RCS) measuring self-monitoring, evaluation, planning (5-point Likert). These were completed at baseline (pre-intervention) and at the end of the 6-week programme (post-intervention). Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (approx. 30 minutes in length) asking participants about their experience of the experiential tasks, reflection sessions, perceived learning, and professional identity.

3.3.Data Analysis

Quantitative data: Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (paired t-tests within groups; independent samples t-tests between groups) assessed changes in professional skills and reflective capacity. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) calculated. **Qualitative data:** Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed key themes concerning the learning process, reflection experience, and professional identity formation.

3.4.Research Instruments

1. **Professional Skills Self-Assessment Questionnaire (PS-SAQ):** 12 items (four in each domain: communication, teamwork, problem-solving/adaptability) scored 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher self-perceived skill.
2. **Reflective Capacity Scale (RCS):** 10 items (e.g., "I regularly evaluate how effectively I have handled work challenges"; "I plan how to improve my performance based on reflection"), scored 1–5. Higher scores reflect higher reflective capacity.
3. **Intervention Design:** The experimental condition completed six weekly experiential tasks (team-based real situations from organisational work), which were followed by a guided reflection session (structured questions: What happened? What did you feel/think? What did you learn? What will you do differently?).
4. **Semi-structured Interview Guide:** Four main areas — experience of tasks, experience of reflection, change in own skills as perceived, sense of professional identity and action in the future.

4.Results and Analysis

4.1.Quantitative Results

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Intervention Means, Standard Deviations and Change Scores for Professional Skills & Reflective Capacity

Variable	Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Professional Skills (PS-SAQ)	Experimental	3.10 (0.50)	3.75 (0.45)	+0.65	8.45	< .001	0.98
	Control	3.12 (0.48)	3.25 (0.46)	+0.13	2.10	.038	0.27
Reflective Capacity (RCS)	Experimental	3.05 (0.47)	3.70 (0.43)	+0.65	8.10	< .001	0.95
	Control	3.07 (0.50)	3.18 (0.49)	+0.11	2.05	.042	0.26

Interpretation: Experiential + reflective group participants demonstrated a significant gain in self-rated professional skills (mean gain = +0.65, t = 8.45, p < .001, Cohen's d = 0.98), representing a large effect size. The control group gained little (+0.13) with a small effect size (d = 0.27). For professional skills, the experimental group also experienced significant gains (+0.65, d ≈ 0.95), while the control group experienced minimal gain. These findings indicate the combined intervention had a strong positive effect on professional skills and reflective capacity relative to business-as-usual training.

4.2.Qualitative Results

From thematic analysis of the interview data, three dominant themes emerged:

- **Relevant connection of learning to experience:** Learners stated real-work activities made the training meaningful ("I felt like I was doing real work and then we debriefed what happened").
- **Reflection as planning and sense-making:** The formal reflection periods assisted learners in translating experience into action and insight ("In the reflection I asked myself what I'll do differently next week").
- **Emerging professional identity and agency:** Several wrote of a change in the way they saw themselves as professionals ("Now I see myself not just performing tasks but thinking about how I learn from them").

Participants also mentioned that the synergistic effect of experiential task + reflection was greater than either one in isolation, and they appreciated the weekly cycle of experience then reflection.

4.3.Summary

This research found that an experiential + reflective learning intervention significantly improved early-career professionals' professionally assessed skills and level of reflectivity in comparison to usual training. Qualitative feedback and large effect sizes suggest that performance on authentic tasks alongside structured reflection promotes deeper learning and new professional identity.

5.Discussion

The results are consistent with the theoretical bases of experiential learning and reflective practice. Development of professional skills and reflective ability aids the cycle of experience (Kolb, 1984) where emphasis is placed on concrete experience and then on reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. Experience and guided reflection were made explicit in the intervention and allowed participants to progress through the cycle

and develop skills and reflective ability. In addition, the qualitative themes regarding professional identity development are consistent with research that reflective practice promotes practitioner development over the attainment of basic skills (Moon, 2007; Zafeer et al., 2023).

The significant effect sizes seen attest to the strength of the combined method; the relatively small gains in the control group support that solo use of standard training could be inadequate for thorough professional skill acquisition. This has implications for practice in organisations and for higher education courses: training that combines real-world tasks with led reflection could have better outcomes.

But some limits need to be noted. Measures of the study's self-assessment, although helpful, can be vulnerable to response bias. The relatively brief intervention period (six weeks) restricts conclusions regarding retention of skills in the long term and change in identity. The single-organisation sample may restrict generalisability. Objective measures of performance, extended follow-up, and varied contexts could feature in future research.

In spite of these constraints, the research has made a contribution to the field by showing that an integrated design can be applied and produce quantifiable results in professional environments.

5.1.Recommendations

Organisations and providers should create professional-skill programmes consisting of experiential tasks (real situations, team-based) and guided reflection (structured prompts, group debriefs).

Having regular cycles of experience and reflection (weekly or bi-weekly) facilitates the embedding of learning and fosters continued development.

Reflective questions ought to prompt forward planning rather than mere description of experience ("What will I do differently next time?").

The facilitator ought to facilitate the reflection process by creating a secure environment, demonstrating reflective thinking, and connecting experience with professional identity.

Objective performance measures and longitudinal follow-up should be included in the future evaluation of training.

6.Conclusion

In a world where professional settings call for ongoing adjustment, teamwork and self-reflection, training programmes need to break out of the old knowledge transmission to combined methods which develop experience + reflection. This research illustrates that integration can have a major impact on early-career professionals' professional-skill development and reflective ability. Additional studies would be required to investigate long-term effects and multiple contexts, but the results give clear guidance for constructing effective professional development in organisations and universities.

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