Developing student's skills and work readiness: an experiential learning framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper outlines a contemporary conceptual framework for the embedding of experiential learning into a business consultancy module. Experiential learning is a fundamental teaching approach that allows students to apply theory into a working business context.

Design/methodology/approach – As a conceptual and not an empirical paper, the methodological approach was to draw upon the literature reviewed and to build a framework to support student learning through a business consultancy module.

Findings – Exploration of the literature suggests that there are four elements critical to student learning in experiential learning environments: action, reflection, social and context. A framework has been developed utilising these elements with the interaction between the factors being key to developing learning.

Research limitations/implications – So far, the framework is conceptual, and further research is needed to explore its use when staff members are developing these types of modules and to understand the interaction of the factors over the course of the student learning experience.

Originality/value – The originality comes from the intersection and interaction between the core factors in experiential learning, which enables this framework to move thinking beyond more static models and hence work in a more fluid student learning environment.

Keywords Experiential learning, Business consultancy module, Conceptual framework, Action, Reflection, Context

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

As educators, we face the biggest challenge and opportunity of our generation in providing the inspiration, optimism, confidence, enterprising skills and tools which will enable students to start or resume their lives and careers beyond university, and to contribute to economic and social regeneration. Every student needs to be flexible, adaptable, confident of their abilities, resourceful – in short, enterprising. Enterprising learning is a vital capability which can help students become more self/employable in this new era. More enterprising people are more likely to thrive in times of economic change and uncertainty (Rae, 2009, p. 290).

Over the past 20 years, there has been an acknowledgement that higher education (HE) has a dual role to play in the development of graduates. In addition to providing intellectually stimulating learning, they are also required to produce work-ready individuals with the necessary skills to thrive in today's ever-changing workplace and global markets (Tymon, 2013). The need to find ways to put students in touch with the realities of what is being studied, and their future workplace has never been as important (Davies and Pillay, 2000) as the employability agenda within HE continues to gain relevance (Bennett, 2019).

An established vehicle within the UK business schools to make this happen is through a business consultancy module that has experiential learning at its heart. This pedagogic approach provides students with the opportunity for both the contextual practice of skills and the demonstration of the application of theory. The learning opportunity comes from students working on a "real-world" live problems or challenges that have been provided by external organisations or businesses. This has been demonstrated to support student engagement and gives learners the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment (Shore *et al.*, 2010; Pittaway *et al.*, 2015). Reflection within this contextualised environment allows the learner to develop almost instantly and reapply developed skills or theories until honed within the environment to which said skills are most applicable (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). Whilst this context may be live (organisational or work-based learning) or simulated, experiential learning is most focused when a contextual element is included. In addition, active learning approaches such as "live projects" have been previously described by scholars to foster enterprise and employability skills (Rae, 2010). This skill-/competency-based approach has become one of the most significant changes seen in education, in which competencies becomes the core element of the learning experience (Ferreras-Garcia *et al.*, 2019).

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2020), which is based in the USA, highlights the role of business curricula and educators in helping businesses respond to the profound changes taking place today. By introducing experienced-based modules within the syllabus, we can create a challenging and inspirational environment, which through the contextual practice of skills provides clear opportunities for learning and development. One key element of this way of learning is to enable students to judge their own skill level as research suggests that students may over judge what they can do resulting in a mismatch of student and employer expectations (Dinning, 2017). Furthermore, in the context of management education, these experience-based modules provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation.

Bacigalupo *et al.* (2016), writing from a European perspective, highlight that given the current economic and post-pandemic environment, it is imperative that graduates are provided with the opportunity to develop skills and competences, thus enabling them to secure a brighter economic future for themselves whilst being able to demonstrate they are able to contribute to the business recovery through innovation and creativity.

The need to upskill students becomes more important as universities navigate through the landscape in order for their graduates to be successful in the jobs market as we enter the 5th industrial revolution. In 2020, the World Economic Forum predicted that there would be an increase in the need for skills associated with active learning, learning capability and creativity. Equally, the need to develop a student's digital capital should not come as a surprise; over 10 years ago, scholars were predicting a changing landscape of graduate roles (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010), preparing students for jobs that currently do not exist is also nothing new; it has been captured in academic writing over the last decade (Neck and Greene, 2011). In 2012 the Wilson Report in the UK suggested that graduates do not have the necessary skills to meet the needs of today businesses, making it imperative for universities to ensure that student profiles include an employability and enterprise aspect and accept it as their responsibility (Neck and Greene, 2011). This paper develops an experiential learning framework which has been drawn from the principles, concepts and theories within the literature base of experiential learning, learning in context and reflection alongside the experiences of the authors who have each worked in this field of education for over 15 years. Whilst there is already extensive research in the area of experiential learning and business activity, the framework aims to move thinking beyond a static model by considering how four distinct elements in the student learning experience interact, through the process of

undertaking a business consultancy project. In addition, it is a timely reminder of how business management education must continue to evolve if business schools are to continue to operate in a rapidly changing world. As a conceptual paper, the authors now provide a clear review of the literature to underpin the development of the framework.

Literature review
Experiential learning
Experiential learning is a term used by many authors and presenters to describe pedagogy that is different from the usual didactic information deliverance commonplace in HE (Rae, 2009). Some use the term to describe a form of learning that happens outside of the classroom – learning "through" experience or "learning by doing" (Corbett, 2005; Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Reynolds, 2009; Bergsteiner *et al.*, 2010). Experiential learning not only is recognised as an important contributor to HE (Kruger *et al.*, 2015) but also has been demonstrated as supporting student engagement and giving the learner the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment.

Although it is unclear as to when the term experiential learning was first used – indeed many refer back to Confucius circa 500BC – the modern field of experiential learning has focused around two key authors: namely Kolb and Schön. From the late 1970s, these two developed theories, based on related experiments and writings on reflective learning (Dewey, 1938), experiential learning (Lewin, 1946) and the theories and stages of cognitive development (Piaget, 1976). While Schön developed his theory of double loop learning and focused on reflection, Kolb has dedicated his work to a spiral of learning developing a theory of learning styles that fits alongside that of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which in turn built on the work of Carl Jung. This history builds a picture of the wide variety of work that is associated with the term experiential learning. It goes some way to explaining why there is such a depth of definitions and interpretations within the field. Contrary to much of the work that sites Kolb, Dewey (1938) labels all learning as experiential learning, and this can be justified within Kolb's learning cycle: A learner receives an experience, reflects on this experience, forms a concept/theory, applies this theory in experiment and thus receives a new experience from which the cycle may begin again.

Experiential learning is often described as a tool for developing skills and competencies (Leal Rodriguez and Albort-Morant, 2019), and teamwork is cited as one of those skills/competencies. Payne *et al.* (2011) use a team-based component to enable the development of teamwork and communication skills, amongst other cited skills, through a contextualised, action-based (as well as competitive) process, whilst a classroom-based approach to developing teamwork through experiential learning can be found in the work of Marasi (2019). The objectives set out by Regev *et al.* (2009 p. 273) were "(1) to ease the transition of students into the workplace, (2) to give students an understanding of enterprise architecture issues". Kayes *et al.* (2005) focus on the application of an experiential learning approach to team learning in order to overcome negative factors associated with teamwork. They discuss the importance of "the self-analytic group" (Lewin, 1946) where members reflect on and talk about their experience together through a "conversational space" to develop a "shared self-image". It is recognised that the description of group work is very much in line with that of experiential learning, whereby "learning is the social process of transforming experience into knowledge" (Lewin, 1946, p. 77).

Six functional aspects of team learning are presented by Kayes *et al.* (2005), namely learning about purpose, learning about membership, learning about roles and role leadership, learning about context, learning about process and learning about action. Joshi *et al.* (2005) and Rae (2009) also look to incorporate what they call "a social dimension" to their studies. The social learning that occurs within teams could be considered as a system of processes of

reflection, both externally amongst participants but also internally as an individual experiment with their own ways of interacting and behaving with the rest of the group and then reflecting on the results. Finally, we draw on Saenz and Cano's (2009) review of learning, which suggests that learning comes from three principal sources: learning from content, learning from experience and learning from feedback.

The relationship between experimental learning and the development of teamwork is two-way, each can impact on the other (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). This action-oriented process of co-participation can be best reflected through students working in teams on real problems that do not have clear solutions (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999). So, working in a team promotes action, reflection as well as contextualisation within a social environment.

Simulation is often used in a classroom environment in order to address the challenge of teaching a complex and changing subject area (Payne *et al.*, 2011), but at the same time is often cited as a safe way to practice real-world processes (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). This is common with those studies that focus on entrepreneurial learning, notably in an HE environment. Here, it is "the important interaction between theory and practice and the need to create a learning environment where students are able to experiment with theoretical knowledge gained during their academic studies" (Pittaway and Cope, 2007, p. 214). Simulations can create an artificial environment where the individual can apply knowledge and skills with relatively low-risk that contextualise the learning objectives and allow for the development of new knowledge and skills through a process of experience and reflection (Pittaway *et al.*, 2015). While standing the test of time, this concept of simulation through using live-case studies or computer programmes to simulate a real-world scenario is motivated partly by a quest to engage the individual with an aim to improve the effective learning environment for the sake of the learner (Daly, 2001).

Alongside the literature on experiential learning, other associated literature references action and active learning. Rae (2009, p. 290) describes action learning as "a structured and collaborative process of enquiry undertaken through questioning, acting, sharing experience and reflecting on problem-solving in practical situations"; however, it is noted by Pittaway and Cope (2007) that the contextual part of the learning process is missing. Also, despite a clear definition of action learning from Rae (2009), there is a blending of terms in the literature with the use of the word active instead of action, which opens new contexts of interpretation. Bonwell and Eison (1991) offer that active learning involves students in doing activities and thinking about what they are doing. This blending of action and reflection as action inquiry is noted as sharing common ideas to experiential learning "by eliminating the traditional gap between inquiry and action, a more efficient, effective and legitimate form of experiential learning can be achieved" (Meyer, 2003, p. 356).

Whilst the literature review so far provides an indication of what experiential learning does, it does not tell us what experiential learning is, or how it is obtained. Much attempt has been made to fit new models with that of the Kolbs (1984) experiential learning cycle (ELC) (Kolb and Kolb, 2012) (Figure 1).

Bergsteiner *et al.* (2010) display an adaptation of Svinicki and Dixon's (1987) model, who assign various teaching methods across the bimodal axes of concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation and reflective observation (see Table 1).

Similarly, Daly (2001) provides experiential exercises that highlight how each one meets four key elements. Of note here is the reference to "real relationships" (social) and "real consequences". The latter element of "real consequences" could be interpreted as being part of the contextual framing that will be discussed in the next section. More recently, a criticism of Kolb's ELC is that it failed to specify the nature of a concrete experience (Morris, 2019). Morris proposes a revised model that remains untested, but all the same, it includes the need for a contextually rich concrete experience, critical reflective observation and pragmatic active experimentation.
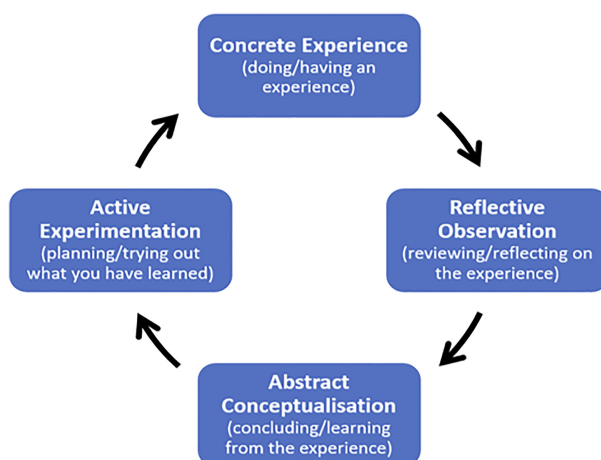
Source(s): Figure courtesy of Kolb and Kolb, (2012)

Figure 1.
Kolb's (1984)
experiential
learning cycle

Node	Teaching methods
Concrete experimentation	Direct experience, recall of experience, in-class experience (lab), simulations, film/tapes, lecture examples
Reflective observation	Rhetorical questions in lecture, thought questions for reading, discussion, brainstorming, logs, journals
Abstract conceptualisation	Lecture analogies, descriptions, text reading, model critiques, paper/project proposals, model building exercises
Active experimentation	Field work, labs, projects, homework, case studies, simulations, lecture, examples

Source(s): Table courtesy of Corbett (2005)

Table 1.
Nature of student
involvement in various
teaching methods

Learning in context
The concept of learning in context is one that has been repeated throughout the literature, and it is a key aspect in the experiential learning paradigm. The positioning of such context varies, depending on the focus of practice, namely, entrepreneurial learning, organisational learning, work-based learning and service learning, with the last three in this list seemingly merging in their definitions. So much so, whilst providing a work-based learning case study, Kevin and Ann (2012, p. 26) focus on organisational learning: "the coming together of individuals to enable them to support and promote each other's learning, which will eventually benefit the organisation". Skills development appropriate to the contextual environment is a key driver on the increased employability of the learners involved through the development of concrete experience (Daly, 2001), or employer-relevant skills acquisition (Green and Farazmand, 2012), developing an understanding of enterprise architecture and easing the transition of students into the workplace (Regev *et al.*, 2009). More recently, Rohm *et al.* (2021) positioned student skills at the heart of their research suggesting that the development of meta skills is critical for graduates to ensure their work readiness. Clearly, the contextual focus of the programmes being delivered is seen to influence the future employment of the participants.

Community service learning is defined as the carrying out of "needed tasks in the community with intentional learning goals and with conscious reflection and critical

analysis" (Kendall, 1990, in Seider *et al.*, 2011, p. 290). Pittaway and Cope (2007) refer to "communities of practice" which "emphasizes that learning is linked to the conditions in which it is learned" (Brown and Duguid, 1991, p. 219). This "authentic work practice" helps students "'pick up invaluable "know-how" from being on the periphery of competent *practitioners*" (Pittaway and Cope, 2007, p. 219). Wiese and Sherman (2011, p. 48) suggest that service learning "is a form of experiential learning in which students are asked to participate in learning activities connected to community service". In this case, it is clear that there is a contextual element to the students' learning outcomes with reference to clear learning goals and inclusion in the curriculum. Tracey (2012) suggests that work-based learning is a practice that enables the student to focus on application and acquisition of knowledge through work-related opportunities to achieve a specific set of learner outcomes.

Notable in the literature is the common occurrence of participation in an activity that is directly linked to the focus of study (be it within a university course or a specific work-related skill) that is applied and reflected upon to promote development or learning. Sometimes, context is not clear within an activity or an event, and Meyer (2003) attempts to address the lack of context within outdoor adventure training (when used as an experiential learning activity). They refer to Baldwin and Ford (1988) and Cheng and Ho (2001) when discussing the need to transfer training back to the organisational setting. Standard methods involve post-activity stages of reflective observations or debriefings for example. The article talks about learning taking place either "near", where the experiential learning (or application of a skill) is of a situation directly related to the desired future application, or "far", where the experiential learning is of a situation unrelated and focuses on general skills improvement for future applications. Specifically, outdoor adventure activities are identified as meeting the "far" criteria, and more general skills such as personal development, interpersonal communication and creative problem-solving are developed. This second concept of "far" learning develops only general skills, where active learning did not necessitate an application to context and therefore could risk any potential learning being unfocused. Context then is a concept that allows learning to focus on desired learning outcomes, giving the learner the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment.

Reflection

Reflection within this contextualised environment allows the learner to develop [learn] almost instantly and reapply developed skills or theories until honed within the environment to which said skills are most applicable (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). This reduces the effect of any mismatch and self-overrating that a student can typically make when applying skills in the workplace (Dinning, 2017). Sometimes, this context may be live (organisational or work-based learning) or simulated, but it is clear from the studies reviewed that experiential learning is most focused when a contextual element is included. If Schon (1984) reflective model is then considered, it suggests that any reflection needs to take place during the action, and it should not be viewed as a retrospective process. Singh (2008) draws upon the Schon's model and further argues that such reflection in and on action is best served as an oral assessment, thus allowing for a fair and valid form of assessment that can be administered during the event. More recently, research on assessment in enterprise education supports Schon, claiming that reflection needs to be ongoing and not just something that the student is asked to think about at the end of a module (Dinning, 2018).

Methodology

An abductive approach was adopted to develop this conceptual framework. Central to this methodology is the ability to form arguments and opinions from observation and experience (Ward *et al.*, 2017), which is why it is significant in the construction of the conceptual

framework. More recently, Davidsen and Hojlung (2022) report similarities between abduction and concepts in entrepreneurship as both allow for researchers to foster and develop hunches and experiments. Both authors have over 15 years' experience developing student learning experiences focusing on experiential learning and enterprise education. Thus, due to the personal interests and experiences of the authors, a focus of enquiry was established related to how experiential learning can be best placed in a business consultancy module and what underlying key elements were needed to support the experience for all stakeholders.

The development of a conceptual framework includes synthesising existing literature (Imenda, 2014) which was the first stage in this process where the authors explored the literature around experiential learning, learning in context and reflection. These were the key terms the authors believed would enable them to draw out the elements needed for the framework. After much discussion, the authors then started to develop the framework which is laid out in the findings and discussion section. The starting point was Kolb's model and associated teaching methods which allowed the authors to consider the nature of student involvement in their learning. Active experimentation was chosen to be the foundation of the framework. Through three academic cycles working with approximately 200 students in each cycle, the authors experimented with other elements noted in the literature such as reflection, social and context. Utilising student and staff feedback, the authors decided on the elements to include in their framework and then explored though the aforementioned feedback, if the chosen elements would be mutually exclusive to each other, completely aligned or partially aligned. The findings and discussion report on how the model was created by the authors.

Findings and discussion
Introduction to the model
Through analysis and a helicopter view of the literature, four factors appear critical to developing student skills: action, reflection, social and context. These four elements form the foundation of the framework proposed within this paper. However, these are not stand-alone factors, learning occurs through the interaction and this needs to be built into any teaching, learning and assessment experience. Each element will now be discussed through the example of a business consultancy module to show how this framework was developed.

Action. In the context of the module, students take action by responding to a brief set by an external organisation. This requires students to develop a response to problems or challenges set by an external organisation or business. The student will be required to take action.

Reflection. For learning to take place whilst the students respond to the brief and action is taking place, the literature suggests that this should not be mutually exclusive to reflection. Indeed, there can be reflection throughout the period of action as well as at the end resulting in the first part of the framework (see Figure 2).

Social. The literature evidences that there is a requirement for some form of a social interaction if students are to learn, and in a business setting, this can be achieved through the students working in teams or action workgroups. The social interaction occurs when the teams are taking action, although the framework also needs to reflect that students will take action independently, so the social element needs to be a subsection within action. The social element also needs to cut across the reflection. Students who are taking action need to be encouraged to reflect in their teams as well as independently (see Figure 3). Therefore, the social interaction needs to cut across action and reflection, with the understanding that both can take place independently.

The inference to be taken from Figure 2 is that social interaction can happen on its own; however, unless aligned with action or reflection, learning is not likely to occur. For social interaction to be the most effective, it needs to occur during action and/or reflection (see Figure 4).

Context. Context is either simulated through artificial creation of a "real" environment or through the lived experience. Learners are taking action, are solving problems and are either encouraged to reflect, or do so through the social interactions that they participate in. Therefore, the three elements already discussed need to be set within the context. Figure 5 represents the final conceptual framework.

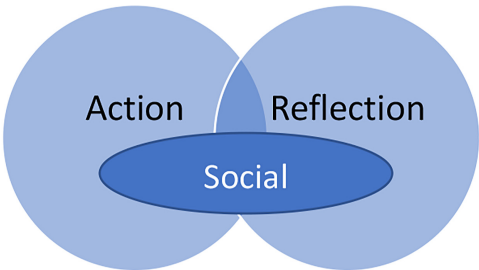**Figure 2.**
Phase 1 of developing the conceptual framework
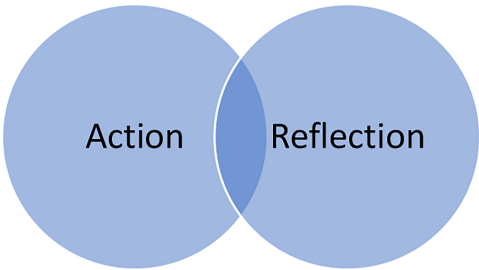
Source(s): Authors own work

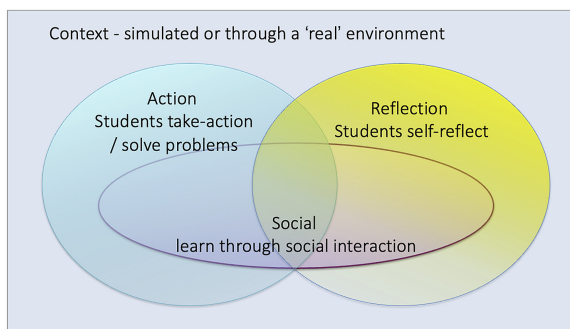**Figure 3.**
Phase 2 of developing the conceptual framework
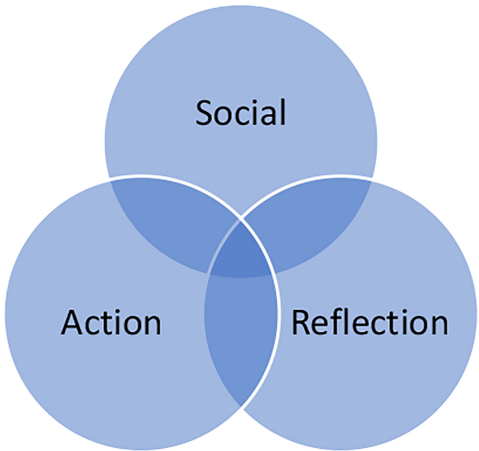
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Figure 4.
Phase 3 of developing the conceptual framework

Source(s): Authors own work

Context - simulated or through a 'real' environment

Action
Students take-action
/ solve problems

Reflection
Students self-reflect

Social
learn through social interaction

Source(s): Authors own work

Conceptual framework in practice

The authors consider that the conceptual framework developed can be applied to any number of learning experiences. An example of the framework in practice is its use across a business consultancy module. Such a module operates to give students the opportunity to work on a real piece of consultancy work for an external organisation or business. The business clinic operates to work with organisations and businesses to source projects for said module. With support from the academic tutors, students will undertake a research/consultancy project in a self-selecting group of 4–6 individuals which puts the students in a position where social interaction will take place. In this case, the social aspect will be between the students, between external project host and the students and between the students and academic tutors. To enact the context and action element, each group of students should be provided with a project brief that has been procured from outside the university. The students are then given time to undertake primary research to address the business problem, generating an improvement plan driven by data and academic analysis [action]. Within the module, this could be between 8 and 12 weeks, where students work on the project as a group enabling action and social learning over a period of time.

Students are taught the art of reflection and encouraged to reflect whilst taking action in the group or working independently and then again at the end of the project. Having specific points of reflection ensures this happens over the course of the 8- to 12-week project. Ideally, over time, the art of self-reflection will become a habit that is automatically included in their day-to-day practices.

Conclusion

It is important that management educators and business school leaders continue to draw upon the lessons from entrepreneurship education, in particular experiential learning in developing curricular and pedagogy that are better able to produce highly skilled graduates for the future workforce and business development. In this paper, the authors have explored four elements which are key to student learning within modules linked to external organisations, these being action, reflection, social and context. These have been used to develop a framework for learning for such modules within but not limited to the business environment. The key element within the framework is the interaction as the students move between taking action, reflecting and working together, which all happen within the context of the situation they have been given.

Now that a framework has been proposed, it is open to be challenged; hence, the need for it to be tested both in terms of its suitability for student learning and also the value and social impact of this type of learning. The next stage for the authors of this paper is to explore how

the framework develops the learning experience for a cohort of students. This will include supporting the module team to utilise the framework in their module design alongside following a cohort of students undertaking the module tracking and exploring the interactions between the four concepts. There is also a question as to how such a business consultancy module can be transformed into a broader pedagogical approach of clinical practice, across a whole range of teaching methods.

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