



Experiential Learning: How Undergraduate Field Trips Support Applied Learning and Psychological Capital Development

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning has been embedded in different learning models such as service learning (Brower, 2011), problem-based learning (Gurpinar et al., 2011), action learning (Keys, 2013), adventure education (Fuller, 2012), and simulation and gamification (Taylor et al., 2012). Well-being has become a key sustainable development goal (SDG) and a fundamental requirement for good health, according to the United Nations. Experiential learning plays an important role in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), particularly in encouraging students to engage deeply with sustainability challenges (Fullan et al., 2018). Recent perspectives regard individuals' psychological well-being as a form of 'capital' that can enhance performance and contribute to competitive advantage (Luthans et al., 2007). Psychological Capital (PsyCap) functions in synergy with other forms of capital to enhance the overall optimisation of resources and is understood as reflecting individuals' motivational tendencies rooted in positive psychological constructs like self-efficacy (Luthans et al., 2007). The PsyCap framework is also referred to as the HERO framework as it involves having the confidence (efficacy) to engage with challenging tasks and putting in the effort needed to succeed; maintaining a hopeful vision (hope) towards achieving current and future successes; being adaptable in reaching goals (optimism) while remaining persistent and able to recover from setbacks (resilience) to achieve overall success (Luthans et al., 2007).

OBJECTIVE

There is limited research on the effectiveness of teaching non-cognitive skills in higher education (da Costa et al., 2021), and this study aims to demonstrate that Psychological Capital can be taught at a university level. Specifically, we explore how field trips, as a form of experiential learning within ESD, promote students' educational and cognitive development.



RESULTS

Broadening Horizons to develop 'Hope'

Findings from the Liverpool trip indicate that experiencing aspects of a familiar city from a new perspective impacted the way students reflected and felt about their life after graduation. The Liverpool Port trip made students reframe their career aspirations. Reflection inputs of included considering further education pathways. (i.e postgraduate degree).

Developing Empathetic Future Leaders to foster 'Efficacy'

During the London trip the stark differences between the quieter, smaller home city and being in the centre of the nation's capital did result in indications that feelings of extended purpose and value were emerging. Multiple students commented that being taken to London had helped realise that it was possible to travel independently for hours. The trip to Spain provided opportunities for daily micro-experiences and free time during which the student group self-planned and explored the city in the evenings with their peers, developing their self-efficacy.

Promoting Relational Learning to build 'Resilience'

Exposure to unfamiliar cultural environments significantly deepened students' cultural awareness and enabled a level of personal development unlikely to be achieved within a traditional classroom environment. This shift away from a classroom-centric model reduced peer pressure and potentially alleviated feelings of embarrassment. The Liverpool trips made students gain a deeper understanding of the skills required for success in their chosen fields.

Fostering Open mindedness to sustain 'Optimism'

The Liverpool Bus tour resulted in feelings of encouragement and growth of possibilities. Some students said they reframed their employability aspirations after the trip. Upon reflection on the Valencia visits to various workplaces student claimed that there is no absolute truth and everyone should do some research to form an opinion. Students appreciated the value of collaborative multi-stakeholder working as part of leveraging solutions to complex sustainability issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study explores how to design field trips in a way that effectively cultivates learning and scaffolds the development of psychological capital (resilience, optimism, hope, self-efficacy) among undergraduate business students who study sustainability.

Liverpool John Moores University Business School (LBS) is used as a case study, selected for its strong civic mission and commitment to serving communities both locally and beyond.

This study focuses on students pursuing degrees in Business Management or Business with a specialisation in International Business, Marketing, or Finance. In particular, the study examines field trips offered to LBS students as extracurricular activities at various levels throughout the academic years 2022-2025, that were fully funded and linked to sustainable management education. More specifically, level 4 students were invited to participate to a **day-long guided bus tour around Liverpool** to explore elements of sustainable cities and culture; level 4 students were also invited to a **5-day trip to Malaga, Spain**; level 5 students were invited to join a **day trip to central London** to attend a talk from the UK and Ireland Special Representative to the World Bank in London, and participate in a guided city bus tour; and level 5 students joined a **trip to the Liverpool Freight Port** for a guided bus tour with stops to walk around different areas of the Port as appropriate; and level 6 students were invited to a **5-day trip to Valencia, Spain**. This included time off the bus to focus on large equipment like cranes and specialist departments including IT and risk management to learn about process and increasing use of AI as part of Port operations. Finally, level 6 students were offered the opportunity to join a 4-day trip to Valencia, Spain to explore the application of social innovation and sustainability in international context while enhancing their cultural awareness. Consequently, this has been a case study with "more than one unit of analysis" (Yin 2009, p.50).

Students were asked to complete structured questionnaires that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling an analysis of their learning outcomes, engagement levels, and overall satisfaction. The surveys aimed to assess the effectiveness of field trips in enhancing subject understanding, fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness, and making connections between the theoretical understanding of terms and concepts with their application in real work environments.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data.

CONCLUSIONS

A scaffolding approach to psychological capital development

prior to accumulating Psychological Capital students benefit from a pre-stage of scaffolding skills, which then can lead to stronger correlation with areas of the current framework. Adding 'stage' into the existing model of PsyCap acknowledges a prerequisite phase or pathway that individuals must traverse before demonstrating the development of psychological capital. Our findings indicate that PsyCap is not static but rather an evolving and staged process that requires continuous self-reflection, adaptation, and learning. We argue that field trips can serve as a microcosm of a learning community that promotes personal growth.

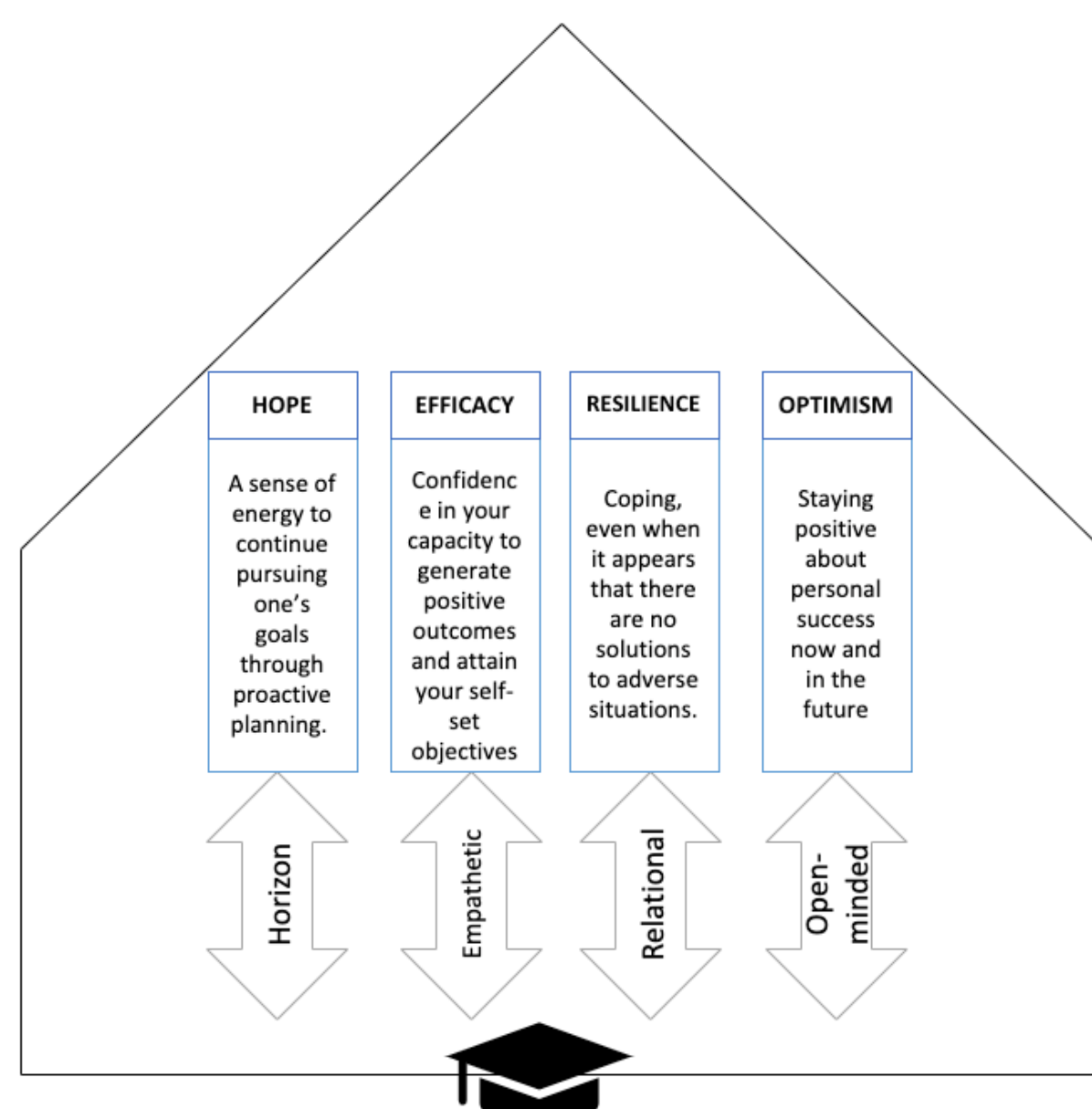


Figure 1: Revisiting the HERO framework: a scaffolding approach (Skritsovali et al., 2026)

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