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Developing a case-based experiential learning model at a program level in a regional university: Reflections on the developmental process

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This article reflects on the developmental process of a case-based experiential learning model: the Federation University model, in an undergraduate community and human services program at a regional university. There is abundant literature that addresses the use and need for introducing experiential learning at the subject/unit level in community and human services/social work content. However, despite the expansion of research on experiential learning, there is limited literature that bridges the gap between course/program level teaching philosophy and using experiential learning activities in individual subjects. The article will demonstrate how Kolb's four stage cycle (Kolb, 1984) and case-based experiential learning were integrated to develop curriculum at a program level. It will also demonstrate how a move to experiential learning facilitated better alignment with face-to-face and online learning. As a way of argument, we suggest that case-based

experiential learning is very relevant and useful to human services/ social work education because of its emphasis on bridging the theory and praxis nexus and providing graduates with an opportunity to work effectively in a complex, fluid and ever-changing sector.

Keywords: *welfare education and pedagogy, case-based experiential learning, experiential learning in a regional context*

Introduction

Literature on experiential learning has grown significantly in the last three decades (Banach, Foden, Brooks, 2018; Clem, Mennicke, Beasley, 2014; Glennon, 2004). There is a number of strands. Some authors focus on the pedagogical use of experiential learning in practice-based professions (Humphrey, 2014; Teater, 2011), others with the definition and theorising of experiential learning and its applicability as a pedagogical design (Georgiou, Zhan, Meria, 2008; Neuman & Blando 2000), whereas a few are interested in its applicability at a program level (Gray & Gibbons, 2002). Social work educators have been active in adopting various components of experiential learning at the unit level to teach group work, field-based learning and advocacy skills. Despite the use of different experiential learning designs in social work/human service education, what is common in the application is the continuous learning cycle in which students learn and the unique subject position students bring to their analysis, reflection and evaluation of cases and/ or problems.

Until recently, the focus has been on the use of technology and Learning Management Systems (LMS) in social work/human services education, primarily concerned with distance or online learning (Holmes, Tracy, Painter, Oestreich, & Park 2015; Allwardt, 2011; Wolfson, Marsom, & Magnuson, 2005). The efficacy of the flipped classroom in a recent study suggested that there is potential to enhance and promote shared learning and increase active collaborative work among students (Holmes et al, 2015). Other studies (Ross, Lathouras, Riddell, Buchanan, Puccio, 2017) investigate the value of immersive technologies and authentic case studies and argue that there is scope to build further knowledge in this space. Thus, there is potential strength in the use of LMS

and other technologies in order to facilitate experiential learning in both on-campus and distance modes of study. Interestingly, what is common across all strands of the literature is that much of the focus is on designing learning materials at a unit level. For the purposes of this paper, unit level refers to individual subjects taught (for example, 'Advanced counselling' or 'Group work') and program/course level refers to all core and elective subjects that are taught within a degree program (for example, 'Bachelor of Community and Human Services'). As such, there is limited research that reports on using experiential learning as a teaching philosophy at a program level. In order to address this gap, this article reports on the development of an experiential learning framework in an undergraduate community and human services program at an Australian regional university. Before we turn to the literature review that informed the development of an experiential framework, we will provide a brief context to the undergraduate program at a regional higher education institution.

The undergraduate community and human services program is offered through multi-modal delivery across three campuses. The undergraduate program underwent an internal review that involved input from staff, students, industry collaborators and independent benchmarking against the Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) standards. The key findings were:

a) the absence of a consistent pedagogical framework at the program level and the unit level;

b) the need to introduce active learning materials, such as cases based on real world scenarios, into weekly activities;

c) a strengthening of course content that encourages critical reflection as part of the integration of theory to practice;

d) assessments that are scaffolded and clearly benchmarked against the learning objectives;

e) consistency in the structure of the teaching and learning materials to cater to multimodal forms of delivery (fully online and blended).

The findings relate to the design of the teaching and learning materials in units, the assessments and consistency of program philosophy and learning experiences between modes of delivery. From this basis, the curriculum development team set out to create a new learning

framework at the program level, in order to address these findings and meet the challenges present in the current higher education and community service sector environments.

Literature review: Experiential learning in community and human services education

Within social work and community and human service education, there is a variety of learning models and strategies used that can be described as occurring within an experiential learning framework. Extensively used in social work education since the 1990s across the United States and United Kingdom, experiential learning has also been described as active learning and/or experience based learning (Venema, Ravenhorst Meerman, & Hossink, 2015; Huerta- Wong & Schoech, 2010). Experiential learning is characterised as a continuous learning cycle in which students learn by relating, observing and reflecting upon abstract concepts (theory) and applying these to concrete experiences.

Experiential learning values the unique subjective base each student brings to a situation and encourages critical thinking and the reflection and analysis of each learner's own biases (Lee & Caffarella, 1994). It encourages learners to connect their existing beliefs and knowledge to the new knowledge and information they are presented with (Lee & Caffarella, 1994). Consistent amongst understandings of experiential learning is a move towards more active methods of teaching that engages the student as an active agent in their own learning and in a process of critical reflection.

The values and philosophy of experiential learning along with the suggested teaching strategies are congruent with education practices traditionally considered fundamental to community and human service education, such as case studies, clinical vignettes and role-playing (Clem, Mennicke, & Beasley, 2014; Gray & Gibbons, 2002). Community and human service work, like social work, is a practicing profession and graduates require education and learning that provides them with knowledge and skills they can apply in practice (Teater, 2011). The most obvious use of an experiential learning strategy in community and human service education is the connection of course content with field placements in the sector, a longstanding practice in community and human service education (Jewell & Owens, 2017). Increasingly though,

the learning outcomes achieved in these real-world placements are being replicated through classroom-based experiential learning.

Use of experiential learning in human service education units

Experiential learning is currently applied within human service education coursework in a variety of ways. Experiential learning is employed as a strategy in the development of practice values in students. DeLuca and Benden (2019) used active and experiential learning to foster learner's empathy towards marginalised and disadvantaged groups in the community and as an impetus for students to understand their own power and privilege. Similarly, Clem, Mennicke, and Beasley (2014) suggest that experiential learning increases student learner engagement, practical skill development and improvements in student ethical reasoning and judgement (Clem, Mennicke & Beasly, 2014). Glennon (2004) identified that active learning methods can be delivered within a variety of pedagogical frameworks. He utilised active learning methods to teach students social justice as a foundational principle of social work. He identified that experiential learning can be applied to the teaching of social justice where a transformational approach that questions the status quo is required (Glennon, 2004).

Howarth and Thurlow (2004) used experiential learning solely as a way to facilitate the use of evidence-based practice in child welfare services and explicitly to increase student's ability to apply theory to practice in complex work environments. In this case, there was no element focused on student values or beliefs. In contrast, Rocha (2000) used experiential learning primarily to increase student ability to undertake policy related tasks and to increase knowledge of the link between policy and social work practice. Rocha (2000) also had a third intended outcome of increasing student's participation in democratic community change activities, incorporating a value component into the application of experiential learning outcomes.

Another area of community and human service practice that has documented the use of experiential learning is in the teaching of group work (Banach, Foden & Brooks, 2018; Humphrey, 2014). Banach et al (2018) found that applying an experiential learning model to group work increased the confidence of students in facilitating groups and in the development of group work skills. These findings supported those

from Humphrey's (2014) study on the use of experiential learning in group work that also demonstrated an increase in skill development and student confidence. A notable difference between the two studies was an increase in student's cultural competency achieved in Banach, Foden and Brooks (2018) study.

The use of experiential learning to affect attitude change in community and human services education is again evident in the work of Quinn (1999) who used an experiential learning framework to challenge student's beliefs and values related to ageism. Similarly Cabiati and Folgheraiter (2019) used experiential learning based activities with students in the first year of social work study to develop empathy. They used an activity where students were invited to nominate and undertake their own change activity to better understand the process of change from client and community perspectives (Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2019). This was a voluntary opt-in activity and not required to be undertaken by all students and students who undertook the activity reported it was insightful and were able to draw connections to how they would use this experience to inform their future practice work (Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2019).

Additionally, experiential and active learning is identified as a model that is adaptable, and this includes the potential to support the use of technology (Holmes, Tracy, Painter, Oestreich, & Park 2015). Huerta-Wong and Schoech (2010) found that experiential learning was the preferred teaching technique for social work students in both face-to-face and online environments. Holmes et al (2015) suggest that technology is used as a means to facilitate student's active participation in their learning rather than as a replacement for face-to-face learning, thereby potentially creating greater synchronicity between the learning experiences of online students and campus-based students.

Use of experiential learning at the program level

Despite abundant literature on the applicability of experiential learning at a unit level in human services/social work education, the only identified implementation of an experiential learning model at a social work or community and human service program level study that the authors were able to identify was undertaken 17 years ago by Gray and Gibbons (2002). They reported on the implementation of an experience-based learning model across the social work program at a regional

Australian university. Students in this program reported feeling that it equipped them with skills in critical thinking and group work. They also reported being strongly aware of the theory to practice process and were confident in their abilities to traverse the challenges of praxis. Gray and Gibbons (2002) did note that the implementation of experiential learning models did cause difficulties for staff and students. This generally focused on student and educator's ability to transition to a new way of learning to one that promoted critical thinking and required learners to be self-directed.

This challenge encountered by students and educators alike transitioning to experiential based learning to adapt to a new and different way of learning is worthy of consideration. However, its use at a program level shows promise. A criticism of experiential learning is that if it is implemented as a series of activities or strategies the experience for students can be disjointed and confusing (Itin, 1999) and experiential learning is best approached as a teaching philosophy and implemented as larger curriculum change versus a range of teaching strategies or activities. This supports the use of experiential learning at a program level, rather than simply being used for specific learning activities only.

To summarise, the research indicated an eclectic application of experiential learning across community and human service education to achieve a wide range of learning outcomes. This highlighted the importance of experiential learning approaches needing to be implemented and evaluated to ensure correlation between curriculum intentions and learning outcomes. The research also drew attention to the potential for experiential learning to meet the needs of community and human service educators in a wide range of areas of human service and social work practice. However, there is limited research that bridges the gap between program level teaching philosophy and using experiential learning activities in individual units. As such, there is a need to develop a model that connects the teaching philosophy at a program level with principles that underpin the development of experiential learning activities at the unit level. In other words, to link the epistemology, ontology and praxis together into a consistent overarching teaching philosophy. We address this gap, next through reflecting on the developmental process of the University Model.

The Federation University model

This section will examine the process of development of the new teaching model at a regional university. The process of developing the model occurred iteratively, however, it is presented here in a linear process for ease of discussion. The section is presented in three parts:

a) Conceptualisation of the teaching model - the thinking;

b) Principles guiding the development of the teaching model – the doing; and

c) Blended and online learning and the Active Learning Framework – the acting.

Conceptualisation of the pedagogical model – The thinking

A review of the literature in the aforementioned section suggests that experiential learning as a potential philosophical approach to teaching can strengthen linkages between learning outcomes and teaching strategies and promote consistency across delivery modes. The development of experiential teaching philosophy is linked to the work of Kolb who suggests that, (cited in Georgiou, Zahn, & Meira, 2008, p. 810) "[T]o understand knowledge, we must understand the psychology of the learning process, and to understand learning, we must understand epistemology – the origins, nature and methods and limits of knowledge". So understanding the epistemologies is important in structuring learning in programs. Therefore, the next step for the curriculum development team was to undertake the thinking behind the new model, in order to consider the approach from the epistemological level.

The prominent influences that have shaped pedagogies in designing the community and human services curriculum is social constructivism. Constructivists argue that individuals learn through the creation of "cognitive structures that include the established concepts and principles of the domain" that are also a "function of culture, values, background and experiences" (Neuman & Blundo 2000, p. 25). So learning through meaning making among individuals is not only based on "cognitive structures" but by what von Glasersfeld (cited in Cobb 1994, p.14) argues, "constitutive activity [that] occurs as the cognising individual interacts with other members of a community". Combining,

the constructivist and social elements in our teaching pedagogy allows for the development of ways of knowing at a more micro-level but also the adaption of how socially constructed and/or situated meanings inform an individual's thinking. (Franklin cited in Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 24).

Such an experiential model assumes that individuals create "unique cognitive structures" and/or individual interpretations that are based on values and norms (Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 25). These values and norms are situated in broader "environmental, social and historical context" (Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 25). This means an experiential model assumes that learner's individual experiences combined with an emphasis on developing a student's critical thinking and decision-making skills (Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips, & Keary, 2006) will allow them to manage complex multi-factorial and multi-layered real-world situations in the human services sector.

This framework informs the instructional methodology of experiential learning of case-based teaching. Briefly, case-based teaching is an instructional method that relies on challenging learners to absorb, share, process, analyse and apply cases based on real-world scenarios (Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips & Keary, 2006). Learners are introduced to real-world scenarios through cases that are simple, structured and/or scaffolded. The structure and the content of the cases play an important educational role. We will now turn to case-based teaching as an instructional tool to consider the doing phase of the process – the operationalisation of the new teaching model.

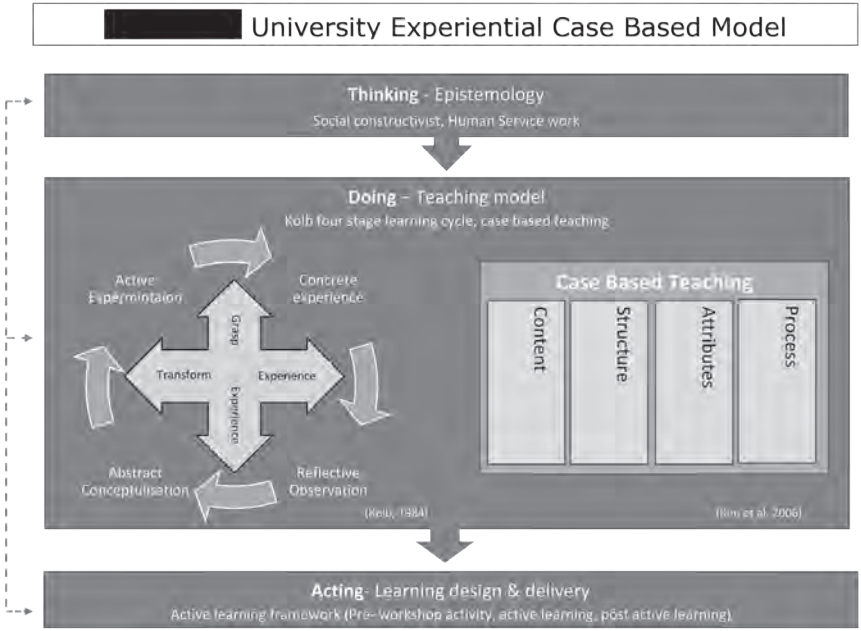
Principles guiding the development of the experiential case-based teaching model – the doing

To operationalise the teaching philosophy into practice, the curriculum development team moved from consideration of the epistemology of the approach, to the pedagogical principles used to guide teaching practices. The University experiential case-based learning model suggests that learning as a continuous process in which students are able to bring, relate, observe, reflect and develop an understanding and/or interpretation of knowledge. Kolb (1984) calls for an integrated, holistic approach that structures learning. Some of the guidelines based on Kolb (1984) that determined the development of curriculum are:

1. Experiential learning allows learners to connect with "the existing knowledge, beliefs and affective characteristics" (Lee & Caffarella, 1994, p. 43) to the new knowledge and/or information they are presented with.
2. Each learner brings a unique experiential base to the instructional situation (Lee & Caffarella 1994).
3. Learning takes place in the context of a multi-dimensional approach that is the capacity to bring one's own concrete experience, observe, review, reflect, analyse abstract conceptualisation and apply it to respond to real world scenarios or cases (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb, 1984).
4. The power base shifts from the teacher to the learner. The learner assumes greater responsibility for their learning and teachers act as facilitators (Lee & Caffarella, 1994).

The University Model uses the aforementioned guidelines in conjunction with Kolb's (1984) four-stage cycle. Kolb and Kolb (2009, p, 1–2) argue that an integrated holistic perspective allows the learner to "touch all the bases' – experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting – in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned". The four stages are; Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and, Active experimentation (AE) (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). This recursive process, *inter ilia*, is based on understanding how the four stages can be operationalised using case studies from real world scenarios.

A framework for operationalising the University case-based learning was developed and this framework is interdependent on integrating theory and praxis. Figure 1 explains the pedagogical framework of experiential learning as articulated in Kolb's four stage model and the instructional tools of cases to achieve this at the program level. The learning process within this framework should be interpreted as continuous and iterative. Kolb and Kolb (2009) argue that concrete observation and abstract conceptualisation allow for providing a link to grasping experience while, reflective observation and active experimentation allow for transforming the experience (Fig. 1).



The instructional tool that allows the two emergent properties of deductive and inductive learning is case-based teaching (Fig.1). Case-based teaching challenges learners to analyse, evaluate, review and develop assessments to real worlds and complex situations (Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips, & Keary, 2006). Whilst, there are different approaches on how to organise cases (see Shulman, 1992), the approach used in the University Model is based on the preparation of well-constructed problem cases (Kim et al. 2006; Georgiou et al., 2008). The cases are relevant to various fields of practice, including mental health, child and family services, social supports, disability, family violence and aged care. Problem cases, following Kolb's cycle allow the learners to experience, reflect and develop solutions for practice. The process employed in the construction of these cases as instructional tools (Fig. 1) is based on the conceptual structure developed by Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips and Keary (2006). The cases use the following conceptual elements to structure the information:

a) content (levels of the learner, goals and objectives, setting of case narrative, distractors, authenticity, multiple perspectives, rich case content, difficulty);

b) structure (gradual disclosure of the cases, branching of content, case structure and multiple cases);

c) attributes (relevant, realistic, engaging and challenging); and

d) process (instructional, assessments, feedback) (Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips, & Keary, p. 869).

An integration of Kolb's four-stage model and experiential case-based learning allows us the development of learner's skills for reflective practice that engenders in learners the skills to integrate thinking, being and doing or the three streams of knowledge constructions namely, epistemology, ontology and praxis.

Blended online teaching and the Active Learning Framework (ALF) – the acting

As the major purpose of the new teaching model was to provide consistency and quality teaching across all modes of delivery, it was important for the curriculum development team to consider how the teaching model would be implemented in online and blended environments. There is a growing trend in the use of online technologies to deliver experiential pedagogy (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Ayala, 2009). Combining online technologies with face-to face and traditional education has been trialled in social work foundational units at the Bachelor and Master's level programs (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011) as well as in interviewing skills (Ouellette, 2006). A study by Gates and Dauenhauer (2016) reported that a comparative study between face-to-face and blended learning suggested no comparable difference in the learning outcomes for students.

Using these insights and definitions blended learning, in the context of this study, refers to combining several instructional methods, including digital resources, scaffolded learning through the structured organisation of individual and group tasks and importantly shifting the role of the teacher from the expert and/or product of knowledge to the facilitator (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). It also allows students to conduct self-paced and collaborative learning (Singh cited in Güzer & Caner, 2014).

In the next phase of the development process, the team considered the acting, or the tools to assist teaching practices and developed the Active Learning Framework (ALF). This assisted in integrating the learning content with the learning design and delivery. In the online and blended

learning space, the Learning Management System (LMS) provides an important foundation for the online teaching practices that follow. The LMS used at the University is Moodle[i]. The ALF is divided into three components, namely, pre-workshop learning, active workshop learning and post workshop consolidation. This represents a move away from a lecture-tutorial model to an active learning based model for face-to-face and online learning. These three components work towards integrating structured learning activities that reflect the iterative process of Kolb's cycles and the case-based framework. Each component of the learning framework has principles guiding the development and organisation of the learning materials on LMS.

Pre-workshop learning

Pre-workshop learning replaces the current one-hour lecture format. The delivery of content, core knowledge or didactic learning is based on one to three short videos of up to 20 minutes combined with learning activities that use different types of case-based teaching. Resources developed as pre-workshop material combine abstract conceptualisation (AC) including discussion of key concepts/features/ definitions/ ideas/ perspectives/ theories with questions or activities that allow learners to reflect on concrete experiences (CO). These learning activities include quizzes, discussion forum questions and reflective journal entries or blogs designed to assist with understanding weekly content and as part of scaffold learning to address assessment tasks.

Active workshop learning

The active workshop learning component consists of learning activities based on core disciplinary knowledge or weekly content using varied case-based teaching models. Some cases are simple and direct and in other scenarios, a single, complex case can be embedded through the 12-week teaching period in a structured and scaffolded way across the weekly modules. Activities developed for active learning support learners to unpack and apply theories to case examples (reflective observation (RO) to active experimentation (AE)) and to draw out competing theoretical positions and the implications for practice (abstract conceptualisation (AC) to active experimentation (AE)). Educators use activities such as in-class or online forum debates, individual and collaborative group work and journals to consolidate learning.

Post workshop consolidation

Post workshop consolidation provides students the closing link in the iterative cycle once they complete a weekly module. It consists of either questions to test if students have achieved the learning objectives for the week or activities that use the knowledge learnt to evaluate, integrate and provide solutions (moving from CE-RO–AE-AC). The ALF works to meld the development of a range of reading materials and discussions that are accessible to both face-to-face and online students. Simultaneously, it allows students (face-to-face and online) to continue the process of critical thinking and engagement outside the classroom through ongoing discussion that occur in the online environment (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011). It also encourages students to engage in active learning through exploring, sharing, processing, generalising and applying (University of California, 2011) in all stages of learning with the teacher being the facilitator.

Practice implications

The establishment of the University Model has a number of implications for curriculum development and general teaching practice in the human services/social work context. The first of these implications, relates to the development of a coherent teaching philosophy across a program area (Itin, 1999). The University Model explicitly and deliberately explains the link between knowledge, the learning process and epistemology (Kolb cited in Georgiou et al., 2008). This is done through identifying the social constructivist elements of the teaching model (Neuman & Blundo, 2000) and the integration of the learning process (Kolb's four-stage cycle) with case-based experiential activities (Kim et al, 2006). The model allows educators to integrate knowledge production (i.e. experience of phenomena), the learning process (the way in which learners interpret, reflect, relate to the phenomena) and practice (cases that allow learners to develop solutions for practice). In other words, it integrates three aspects of the knowledge making process, namely, *thinking, doing and acting*.

A further implication relates to the development of the how and what, that is the instructional tools and resources needed to implement the model. Much of the literature identified in the literature review section focused on discussing findings at the unit level through an examination

of instructional tools and there is very little literature that directly relates to developing a model through which learning and teaching activities can be structured. The University Model is able to explain how we know what we know (epistemology) and develop instructional tools that speak to how and what (acting/doing).

The experiential case-based tools speak to the how and what of curriculum development. An experiential teaching philosophy needs to be congruent with the development of instructional methods and the learning activities (Georgiou et al., 2008). Georgiou et al. (2008) argue that the nature of case-based teaching has consequences for the way experiential teaching activities are designed. Combining insights from Kim et al. (2006) and Georgiou et al.'s (2008) work, the University Model develops guidelines for the development of scenarios that are open ended and require learners to work through the various stages of Kolb's cycles. The continuous and iterative process of learning with the educator as a facilitator of this process allows graduates to gain insights and awareness of practice as well as expose them to varied meanings and the contested nature of social constructions.

Additionally, the *how* and *what* of the curriculum relates to melding the active learning framework with the LMS (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Ayala, 2009). The University Model outlines the ways in which the ALF is integrated into design and delivery in order to lessen the gap between face-to-face and online students. Experiential and active learning is valued as a model that facilitates the use of technology. The ALF is integrated with learning design to facilitate online student's active participation in their learning rather than as a replacement for face-to-face learning. This potentially creates greater synchronicity between the learning experiences of online students and campus based students (Holmes, Tracy, Painter, Oestreich, & Park, 2015).

A further implication related to the acting component of curriculum design is the role of the instructor. In experiential active learning models, the power base shifts from the teacher to the learner. The learner assumes greater responsibility for their learning; facilitates better "establishment of student ownership and voice in the learning process; and recognition of the importance of self-awareness" which leads to the transformation of hierarchies (Lee & Caffarella, 1994; Neuman & Blundo, 2000, p. 29).

In reflecting on the developmental process of the University Model, we suggest that the model deliberatively works towards developing experiential teaching philosophy using blended learning at the program level by linking *thinking, doing and acting*. This provides a clear and consistent teaching approach across the program for online and face-to-face learners. The University Model is being implemented throughout the Bachelor program in community and human services in 2019 and will be evaluated using student surveys and interviews to ascertain the effectiveness of the model in contributing to student learning and effective discipline based professional education[ii] .

While, evaluation of the teaching experiences of designing the curriculum, and student experiences of studying within the new case-based experiential learning will add important insights, it is too soon to collect valid and meaningful data. Anecdotally we are aware that the new model has had positive and negative impacts for teacher and student experiences. As 2020 is the second year of the new design, the next stage of the project will focus primarily on the implications of case-based experiential design from the teacher and student's standpoint.

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[i] The learning management system at Federation University is Moodle. Moodle is described as providing 'a convenient place for students to access lecture materials, but has been designed around social constructivist teaching principles that allow staff and students to communicate freely and share understanding through the use of activity plugins. Assessment tools are also available to provide progress quizzes, assignment drop boxes, plagiarism checking and rapid feedback' (Federation University https://federation.edu.au/staff/learning-and-teaching/elearning-hub/moodle-lms).

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