

## Experiential Learning via Intervention Programme in Teaching and Learning Human Rights Subject

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### Abstract

*The main objective of this paper is to critically evaluate the application and effectiveness of experiential learning approach in teaching International Law and Indigenous Peoples subject at the Faculty of Law, UKM through an Intervention Programme. The Intervention Programme was conducted to identify the problems and difficulties that the Temuans at Rancangan Penempatan Semula (RPS) Kampung Sungai Bilut, Raub, Pahang have encountered due to their relocation after their ancestral land was reclaimed by the government for the Kelau Dam project. Pursuant to the above objective, the article explains the theory of experiential learning (EL) that underpins this research. Secondly, the article analyses the application and the effectiveness of the experiential learning approach. The evaluation will be based on four main aspects namely lessons from the community throughout the programme, the form of intervention or knowledge the respondent transferred to the community, the effect of experiential learning and suggestions to improve the programme should a similar program be conducted in the future. To achieve the objective, a survey was administered onto 33 respondents who were the committee members of the Intervention Programme which comprised 23 undergraduate students and 10 postgraduate students. The article concludes that the experiential learning is an effective approach in teaching human rights subject.*

**Keywords:** *Experiential learning, intervention, Orang Asli, human rights*

### 1. Introduction

Participation of students at the "Intervention Programme on Awareness and Leadership among Indigenous People" (Intervention Programme) is part of the teaching and learning technique adopted by the lecturer for Advanced International Law and Indigenous People postgraduate subject (UUUK 6325) at the Faculty of Law, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The two -day programme was held on 17 and 18 May 2014 involving the Orang Asli from Temuan community of RPS Sungai Bilut, Raub, Pahang who were affected by the proposed Kelau Dam construction project. The Kelau Dam project is a plan under the portfolio of the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water involving the transfer of raw water from Pahang to Selangor. This project involved relocation of the Orang Asli after their ancestral land was reclaimed by the State government for the Kelau Dam project. The Intervention Programme was organised and conducted by 10 postgraduate students who enrolled for UUUK 6325 in Semester 2 2014/15 Session at

the Faculty of Law, UKM to assist the community to adapt with the changes after their relocation to the new land.<sup>1</sup> As part of the planning the student committee (comprising 10 postgraduate students and assisted by 23 undergraduate students) had visited the community prior to the actual programme to understand their problems and made proper arrangements to ensure the smooth-running of the programme.

This article discusses the objective, conduct and outcome of adopting an experiential learning approach in teaching human rights law at the Faculty of Law, UKM. The specific experiential learning approach in this case is through the Intervention Programme. However, before dealing with the said approach in practice, this article will examine the position of experiential learning in theory in the following paragraphs.

## 2. Experiential Learning in Theory

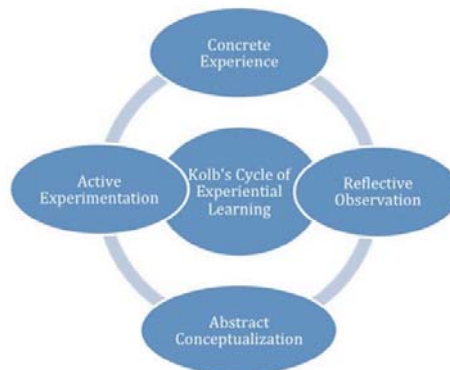
As the name suggests, experiential learning is learning from experience. Experiential learning has been defined by Lewis and Williams as:

Learning from experience or learning by doing. Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking.

According to Schwartz (2013), students would 'learn by doing', apply knowledge to experience in order to develop skills or new ways of thinking. Experiential learning in the opinion of Hoover (2007) exists when a personally responsible participant spiritually, cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterised by a high level active involvement.

Through the effort of John Dewey, learning through experience has been appreciated as a significant element in the formal education setting. An academic philosopher and proponent of educational reform, Dewey had in 1894 started an experimental elementary school. Later in 1919, Dewey co-founded the New School for Social Research. Dewey challenged educators to develop educational programmes that do not isolate from real life experience. The work of many psychologists, sociologists, and educators flourished in the 1960's and 1970's who believed in the value of experience in addition to theory and lecture. (University of California, 2013) Dewey believed that learning should be active and his idea was that school should give real and guided experience which fostered students' capacity to contribute to the society.

Another educational psychologist, Carl Rogers as cited by Cooper (2013) considered experiential learning as 'significant' compared to the cognitive learning that he called as 'meaningless.' In more recent development, David Kolb, an American psychologist and educational theorist has provided the groundwork of learning theories based on experiential learning. He developed Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning, whereby learning is described as a multi-dimensional process. Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning is summarised in Figure 1 below adapted and designed based on Kolb's Experiential Learning. (Kolb, 1984) In his book, Kolb recognized the early work on experiential learning by scholars including Rogers, Jung and Piaget. Kolb's theory of experiential learning takes a more holistic approach and stresses on experiences, cognitions, environmental factors, and emotions influence the learning process. (Cherry, 2014)



**Figure 1:** Diagram of Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning.

**Source:** David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*.

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on Orang Asli plight in protecting land rights in Malaysia, see Nordin & Witbrodt, 2012 and Nordin et al, 2012.

The cycle begins with concrete experience, to reflective observation, then to the abstract conceptualisation, and to active experimentation. As can be seen in Figure 1, Kolb described two different means of gaining experience namely; Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization. He also recognised two ways of transforming experience which are Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation. Concrete experience provides the information that serves as a basis for reflection. From these reflections, student assimilates the information and form abstract concepts. Student then uses these concepts to develop new theories about the world, which will then be actively tested. Through the testing of ideas, student once again gathers information through experience, cycling back to the beginning of the process.

According to Miller (2014) experiential learning provides equality whereby all participants are equal in their knowledge about the task given. Secondly, it also develops quickly because the participants are interacting in close proximity while working on the new challenges. It involves efforts, cooperation, collaboration and communication to meet the challenges (Miller, 2014). Luckner and Nadler wrote that in experiential learning relationships are developed; between learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large. (Luckner & Nadler, 1997) As explained by Moon (2004) successful experiential learners can reason for themselves, have clarity of purpose with task they undertake, possess self-management skills to work alone or in group, are open minded, are able to work with people of different views, can identify the role of emotion in their learning and reflect on how they come to their new knowledge.

Experiential learning is not new at many law schools. One of the key features that set UKM's Law Faculty apart from other law faculties is the distinctive approach to experiential learning and the professional development of students as they progress through their degree programme. For undergraduate studies, UKM's Law Faculty adopts extensive variety of learning experiences available to students outside of the classroom environment. Some of these opportunities include being part of our legal clinical programmes and gaining valuable practical experience from the industry through practical training. For postgraduate studies, lecturers are at liberty to adopt any approach to experiential learning. As for UK 6325 subject, the lecturer and the students have agreed in consensus to adopt experiential learning in learning on international law and indigenous peoples through the Intervention Programme with the Orang Asli community in PRS Sungai Bilut.

Despite the above advantages, it cannot be said that experiential learning has no flaw. Among its disadvantages is that it is costly. (Nordin *et al*, 2014) To organise and run the Intervention Programme for instance, the students have to travel to an isolated location in the jungle and it cost a lot of expenses on transportation, accommodation and food. In addition, too much unnecessary outside exposure may result in lack of focus in learning especially when the students meet new people and is burdened with the organisation of the project.

As with the Intervention Programme, experiential learning was not only confined to the two days of the actual event. It was actually being implemented since the very beginning when the students (respondents) met many times discussing various things, from the content of the programme to every single detail of accommodation, transportation and the management of each activities. Hence, obtaining feedback from the students is a significant element to studying the application and effectiveness of experiential learning in teaching law subject.

### **3. The Study on Experiential Learning in Teaching and Learning International Law and Indigenous Peoples Subject**

The objective of this study is to examine the application and effectiveness of experiential learning based on the Intervention Programme. In meeting the objective, a questionnaire was administered to 33 respondents who were the student committee members of the Intervention Programme which consisted of 23 undergraduate students and 10 postgraduate students. Four open ended questions were asked to the respondents which allow an unlimited number of possible answers and permit the respondents to answer in detail. (Neuman, 2006) This methodology is appropriate to collect reliable data for evaluation of the application and effectiveness of experiential learning approach in teaching human rights subject. The questionnaire survey consisted of four open ended questions to give the respondents freedom to answer and express their opinion. Issues asked to the respondents were; what they have learnt from the community throughout the programme; the form of intervention or knowledge they transferred to the community; the effect of experiential learning; and their suggestion to improve the programme should a similar programme be conducted in the future. Answers for each question will be discussed separately in this article. Answers to the four questions are a written reflection of what they have experienced during the programme and their observation post the programme. Most of the answers were valid with only a few being not contextualised and did not directly answer the question. These types of answers were ruled out to ensure the validity of the analysis.

### 3.1 Results and Analysis of the Study

Below are the analyses of survey results of four questions namely:

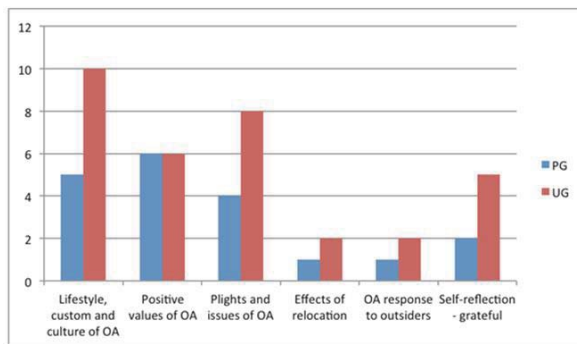
Question 1: What have you learnt from the community throughout the Intervention Programme?

Question 2 – What is the type of intervention/contribution/knowledge that you have transferred to the community throughout the Intervention Programme?

Question 3 – How does the experiential learning helps you in your learning process and understanding the subject taught and shaped you to become a better person?

Question 4 - What are your suggestion for improvement if similar programme to be conducted in future?

### 3.2 Question 1: What have you learnt from the community throughout the Intervention Programme?



Graph 1. Lessons learnt from the Intervention Programme

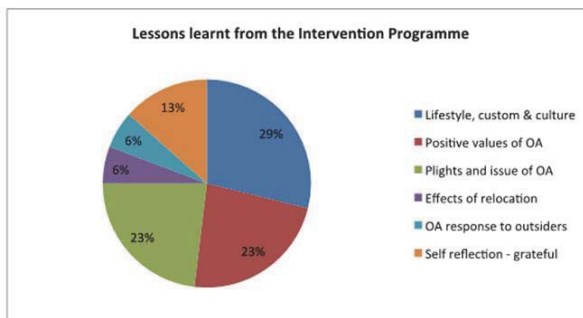


Chart 1.1. Lessons learnt from the Intervention Programme

The first question focuses on the respondents' reflection on what they have learnt throughout the Intervention Programme. Graph 1 and Chart 1.1 clearly showed that 29 percent of the responses said that the Intervention Programme was an eye opener to the unique lifestyle, custom and culture of the Orang Asli community. This is a new knowledge and experience to all committee members, except for the four respondents who belong to Orang Asli community. Although the Temuan community still maintains some of the traditional lifestyles, however one respondent observed that the community's standard of living is enhanced due to the government assistance and attention to the cause of Orang Asli, thus he was not able to experience the 'real' lifestyle of Orang Asli.

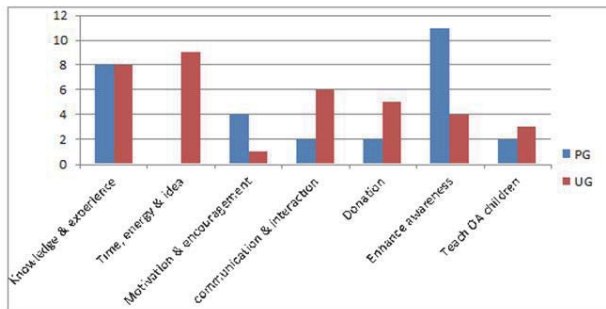
The Orang Asli community is always associated with backwardness, being shy by nature and other negative characteristics. However, during the two-day programme, 12 respondents learnt that the community has many positive values and attitudes including cooperation, honesty, modesty, unity, strong bonding and teamwork as well as enthusiasm to learn new things. One respondent, an undergraduate student wrote; "I get to know that they are so keen to learn new things" while another postgraduate student said; "the Orang Asli here (in Sungai Bilut) is always united and helping each other."

Another 23 percent of the responses opined that through the programme, they identified the plights and issues faced by the Orang Asli community. Among the major problems of the community are violations of their right to land, discrimination and lack of awareness on the importance of education, secured employment and cleanliness. According to one respondent, some Orang Asli children conveyed to her that they felt discriminated and unwanted at school.

One of the interesting facts analysed is that 13 percent of the answers said that the Intervention Programme has taught them to be grateful for what they have. That was the feeling after they had spent two days with the self-sustaining community who seems to be underprivileged but still care about each other. One respondent wrote *“I learnt to appreciate all the convenience that I enjoy”* while another respondent said: *“we should be thankful for what we have for the Orang Asli who have a lot less, are always grateful.”* It illustrates that through experiential learning, the respondents have learnt from the experience and hardship of the Temuan community and reflect on their life.

Three respondents said that the programme made them aware of the effect of relocation on the community. The relocation has negatively affected the traditional lifestyle of the community and their sources of income. Finally, three respondents felt that through the programme they were able to observe the community's acceptance to outsiders. The three respondents believed that this analysis is significant to prepare for future programme with the community.

3.3 Question 2 – What is the type of intervention/contribution/knowledge that you have transferred to the community throughout the Intervention Programme?



Graph 2. Intervention, contribution and knowledge transferred during the Intervention Programme

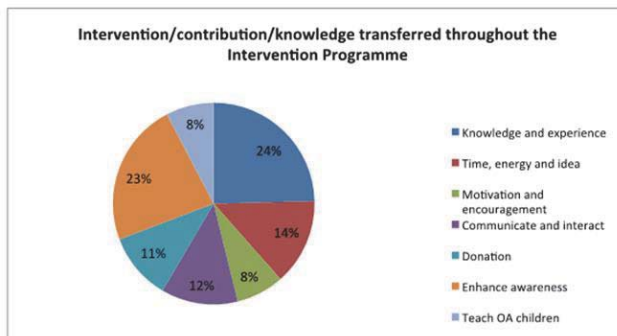


Chart 2.1. Intervention, contribution and knowledge transferred during the Intervention Programme

The main objective of the Intervention Programme is the transfer of knowledge as it is through knowledge and awareness, the community can be empowered. The activities included talk by representative of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) and Labour Department, motivational talk, sharing session with Orang Asli icons and also indoor and outdoor games aiming at transferring formal and informal knowledge to the community. Question 2 emphasises on assessing the respondents' opinion on the form of intervention, contribution and knowledge that they have transferred to the Temuan community.

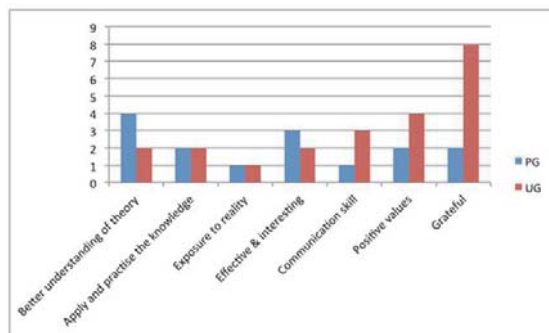
Graph 2 and Chart 2.1 represents an analysis on the form of intervention, contribution and knowledge transferred

during the Intervention Programme. The study found that eight undergraduate and postgraduate students answered that throughout the Intervention Programme, they have transferred their knowledge, information and experience to the community. One postgraduate student answered; *"I have informed them information on the rights of Orang Asli and NGOs that can help the community"* while another said; *"I have contributed my knowledge and whatever that I have learnt about the community."* The respondents also enhanced the community awareness on their rights and the importance of education and secured employment. The analysis reads 23 percent of the answers said that they have put effort to enhance awareness among the Orang Asli. According to one respondent, she had shared with the community on the importance of education and securing a job. This data indicated that overall, the biggest form of intervention by the students is through sharing of knowledge, experience which enhances awareness among the community which scores 48 percent.

Graph 2 and Chart 2.1 also show that nine undergraduate students considered spending time, energy and idea as a form of contribution but none of the postgraduate students think so. Eight respondents contributed by way of communicating and interacting with the community. One respondent wrote: *"I communicate with the Temuan community spending most of my time with them talking."*

Considering the importance of education, a number of five respondents said that they have educated the Orang Asli children on the specific knowledge and skill such of reading, counting and study techniques. Finally, a total of five respondents elaborated that they have motivated and encouraged the community to improve their life. One of the answers includes *"I encouraged the young generation of Orang Asli to look for better job to assist their family,"* while another respondent said, *"I gave them a sense of being included in the society, motivation and encouragement."*

3.4 Question 3 – How does the ‘experiential learning’ help you in learning process and understanding the subject taught and shaped you to become a better person?



Graph 3. Effect of experiential learning on learning process

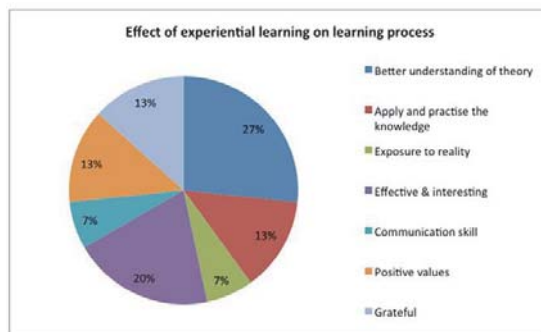


Chart 3.1. Effect of experiential learning on learning process

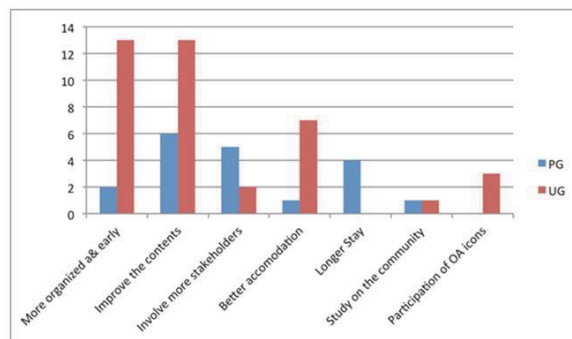
Graph 3 and Chart 3.1 revealed the respondents’ opinion on the effects of experiential learning on their learning process and understanding of the subject taught during lectures as well as its impacts on their self-development generally. From the analysis, it was evident that 10 respondents felt that the experience they gained during the Intervention Programme

taught them to be more grateful and appreciate everything that they have. This data showed that the personal experience the respondents gained through rich interaction and communication with the Temuan has taught them to reflect upon themselves to appreciate everything that they have. The data also proved that the element of learning by experience has engaged the respondents emotionally and socially with the community. The respondents participated completely with their intellect, senses and feelings fully involved in the programme.

Six respondents positively responded that the experiential learning improve their understanding of the subject while five respondents perceived that the experiential learning mechanism is more interesting and effective compared with the traditional classroom setting. Among the answers were; *"unlike the classroom learning, the experiential learning is more practical, realistic and effective"* and *"it [experiential learning] is more effective, we are able to know the Temuan lifestyle, which is so different from what we read in books."* Four respondents said that this method of learning gave them opportunities to apply the theory as it was said by one respondent; *"This method is suitable for student to understand and apply the knowledge of the subject."* This proved that the experiential learning has integrated theoretical and practical elements of learning and give them opportunity to apply what they have learnt in lectures or from books. The experiential learning through Intervention Programme has taken their learning beyond the campus and provided them with first-hand experience.

Six respondents felt that experiential learning instil positive values in them such as teamwork and leadership. Three undergraduate students and one postgraduate student opined that the experiential learning helps them in practising their communication skill. One respondent answered; *"this (experiential learning) is different from learning in classroom because you have to practice communication skills to get to know the problem faced by the community."* These data indicate that experiential learning is a training ground for students and provides opportunities for them to stand out. The environment let them to build up cooperation and teamwork, to express idea, and polish their leadership and management skills. Finally, experiential learning according to two respondents exposed them to the reality of the society whereby they get to know the life of others, make personal contact with the community and connect with the real world.

### 3.5 Question 4 - What are your suggestions for improvement if a similar programme is to be conducted in future?



Graph 4. Suggestion to improve the Intervention Programme

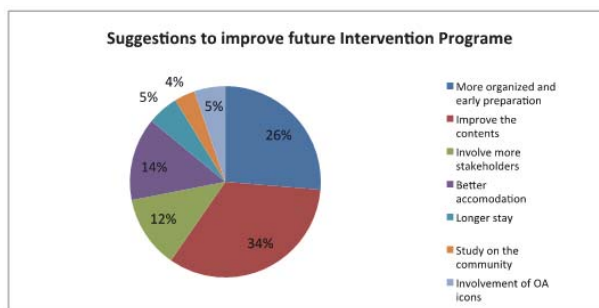


Chart 4.1. Suggestion to improve future Intervention Programme



An important element in experiential learning is the ability of making critical reflection. Question 4 aimed at understanding the respondents' observation and encouraged them to critically express their opinion. Graph 4 and Chart 4.1 show that 34 percent of the responses suggested the improvement of the contents of the programme. The improvement includes making sure that the type of activities conducted caters for the need and interest of the community. The activities should not be limited to talks but must be varied and suitable to Orang Asli elders and younger generation as well as children. Among the suggestions are to include more sports or game activities, drawing and colouring competition, interactive programmes and religious activities for adults.

A number of 15 respondents suggested that there is a need for better organisation and early preparation. An early promotion will help to gain more participation in the activities conducted. As put by one respondent: "*There must be early preparation and promotion of the programme to ensure more participation of Orang Asli, hence the input can be delivered to them.*" This analysis reveals that 26 percent believe that the future programme will be better with an emphasis on early preparation and promotion.

Eight respondents wanted a better accommodation while seven of them suggested the involvement of more relevant stakeholders in the programme such as government agencies, private institutions and non-governmental institutions. Involvement of more Orang Asli icons in the opinion of three respondents will make the programme more effective. Three postgraduate students proposed a longer stay with the community to know them better. One respondent wrote: "*students should stay longer with the community to understand them better and know their real life.*" The last 4 percent highlighted the need to conduct a study on the community prior to the programme.

#### 4. Conclusion

Experiential learning is a significant mechanism to add value to the traditional method of learning. Learning by experience exposed the students to the real world and gave them opportunity to turn knowledge into experience. Unlike traditional learning in classroom whereby knowledge is transferred by lectures, experiential learning allows the students to explore by themselves. Besides, this type of active learning also develops relationship among the students and students with the society. When they interact among themselves and with the society they learn the importance of teamwork and cooperation, respect, and nurturing their leadership skills. These have been demonstrated through the responses of the respondents in this survey. Generally respondents have learnt many aspects that could have not been learnt in the classroom. They have also developed special relationship with the Orang Asli community and transferred some important knowledge to the community. Through their participation and involvement in the Intervention Programme, their understanding on the relevant subject, namely, Advanced International law and Indigenous Peoples improved.

#### 5. Acknowledgement

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