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RESEARCH BRIEF

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The REAL Experience

Does It Work?

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THE RETAIL EXPERIENCE FOR ACTIVE LEARNING (REAL) project was implemented in Singapore with support from local retailers. The project was a pilot test to find out if students learn better when immersed in authentic learning environments where they can make meaningful connections between their school curriculcum and their experiences. One hundred Secondary 3 Elements of Business (EBS) students voluntarily participated in the programme to experience a real customer service setting where the lessons learned in the EBS classroom could be applied at the workplace and vice versa. REAL students reported higher levels of engagement in the EBS classroom and perceived their learning environments as being more constructive. Qualitative data was also showed students' ability to transfer the knowledge and skills learned between the classroom and workplace. Implications of integrating a work attachment experience to complement classroom lessons and recommendations of strategies for integration for all students are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The GCE N-level subject, Elements of Business Skills (EBS), for Secondary 3 students in the Normal (Technical) stream was first implemented in 2008 and the revised syllabus will be implemented next year. The syllabus is designed to provide foundational knowledge and skills in the service sector, with specific focus on the frontline operations of the retail, travel and tourism, and hospitality industries. Learning opportunities such as the Retail Experience for Active Learning (REAL) project, business incubation workshops and learning journeys are incorporated to reinforce students' conceptual understanding of knowledge of the business environment and the application of skills like marketing and customer service.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Experiential learning attachments are effective in enhancing students' perception of the EBS learning environments.
- Students gained greater confidence and became more self-aware of their emotions after their REAL attachment.
- Students' experiences help them make relevant connections between knowledge, skills and values learned in the classroom and workplace.

Co-operative education has been used as an extension of classroom learning where students apply their knowledge in the workplace (Frazee, 1997). The learning model created by Kolb and Fry (1975) consists of four elements: concrete experience, observation, reflection, and formation of abstract concepts. They argued that while learning can begin at any one stage in the cycle, learning is not complete without all stages.

Workplace learning attachments can provide concrete, practical experience in authentic learning environments to complement students' academic studies. Observation and reflection upon these experiences can then lead towards the formation of new abstract concepts.

Workplace learning attachments can also promote a shift in students' perception of their school–work world. By taking students out of the comfort zone of their classroom, placing them into real-world locations with real-world experience, and allowing them to explore in a manner that is structured, monitored and accessible, students operate within their Zones of Proximal Development and increase towards the next level of awareness through independent problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

It is hoped that by attaching students to real workplace environments, they will be more motivated and engaged in learning on the job and applying what they learn in classrooms to work situations. In this research project, we focused on the learners' perspectives of their learning environments, in particular if REAL learning attachments were effective in (1) enhancing EBS learning environments, and (2) enhancing engagement among EBS students vis-à-vis their attitudes towards the subject, beliefs about performance, and motivation in the EBS classroom. We also studied the nature of the transfers of business knowledge and skills exhibited by the REAL students during their various attachment experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

This study involved 100 Secondary 3 EBS students from 25 secondary schools who voluntarily participated in the project. REAL participants experienced two periods of learning attachments to retail outlets in local shopping malls in June and November.

Survey Instruments

To measure if the REAL learning attachments enhanced the learning environments and level of engagement among EBS students, two survey instruments were used:

Modified Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES)

The modified CLES contained 20 items in total, with 4 items in each of the five scales. The five scales are Personal Relevance, Uncertainty, Critical Voice, Shared Control and Student Negotiation. It was reduced from the original 30-item CLES to avoid repetition and for parsimony.

Attitude towards Subject Questionnaire

This questionnaire contained 16 items on three scales and was designed to capture students' attitudes towards EBS. The three scales are Enjoyment of EBS Lessons, Self-efficacy and Motivation. The development of this questionnaire was guided by the Test of Science Related Attitudes (TOSRA; Fraser, 1981). Items were modified to make them more relevant to students in Singapore and to EBS.

Project Procedures

REAL students completed two learning attachments and were monitored by their workplace mentors,

Table 1. Timeline of the REAL project.

Period	Description of activity
Mar	Briefing for students, teachers and industry mentors on learning objectives and activities for the REAL project.
May/Jun	REAL students job-shadowed workplace mentors for 2 weeks and learned various aspects of retailing. Research team visited students at their workplaces to gather feedback from students.
Nov/Dec	REAL students completed 4-week internship as retail assistants. Research team visited students at their workplaces to gather feedback from students.
Jan–Mar	Quantitative data collected from REAL students and two comparison group: (1) classmates of REAL students and (2) EBS students in classrooms without REAL participants. Focus group discussions with REAL students, and with representatives from retail outlets to gather feedback.

teachers and research team. The procedure is summarized in Table 1.

KEY FINDINGS

Students' Perceptions of EBS Learning Environments

Data was collected from three groups of EBS students: REAL students, classmates of REAL students, and EBS students in classrooms without REAL participants. Their actual and preferred learning environments were compared. Figure 1 shows a summary of the average scores on a 4-point scale.

REAL students tended to perceive their EBS learning environments most positively, compared to their peers, across all five scales on the modified CLES. REAL students unanimously preferred the workplace as the ideal learning environment for EBS. This was supported by the consistently more positive student perceptions of the EBS learning environment reported by REAL students. The hands-on approach in the workplace meant that students were able to test out the business knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. During the focus group discussions, REAL students commented that lessons came alive at the workplace.

Students in both comparison groups tended to perceive their actual learning environments less favourably than their preferred learning environments. This is in contrast to REAL students' perceptions that their actual learning environment was more constructive than their preferred learning environments on three scales—Personal Relevance, Shared Control and Student Negotiation. Thus, REAL students have been rather successful in transferring business knowledge and skills from the classroom to the workplace and vice versa, such that they are able to make meaning connections between their everyday and learning experiences.

REAL students noted that they observed an improvement in their levels of self-confidence. While they were shy at the beginning of their learning attachments, they found themselves gaining confidence as they became familiar with approaching customers and communicating with them. Some students were also able to clearly articulate the customer service philosophies of the organizations they were attached to.

Students also gained insights on the way they managed their emotions. They expressed that when they had to handle difficult requests from customers, they had to control their anger, frustrations and impatience. With the guidance and role-modelling of their workplace mentors, they learned how to exercise self-control to better manage their emotions.

The workplace also provided dynamic real-world challenges which required the students to think on their feet in order to interact with customers. They had to think of solutions and make decisions, sharing the locus of control for problems that occur in the workplace. In addition, the guidance of their supervisors and interaction with co-workers provided invaluable on-the-job training and just-in-time learning, while developing their self-confidence and motivation towards excelling at the workplace.

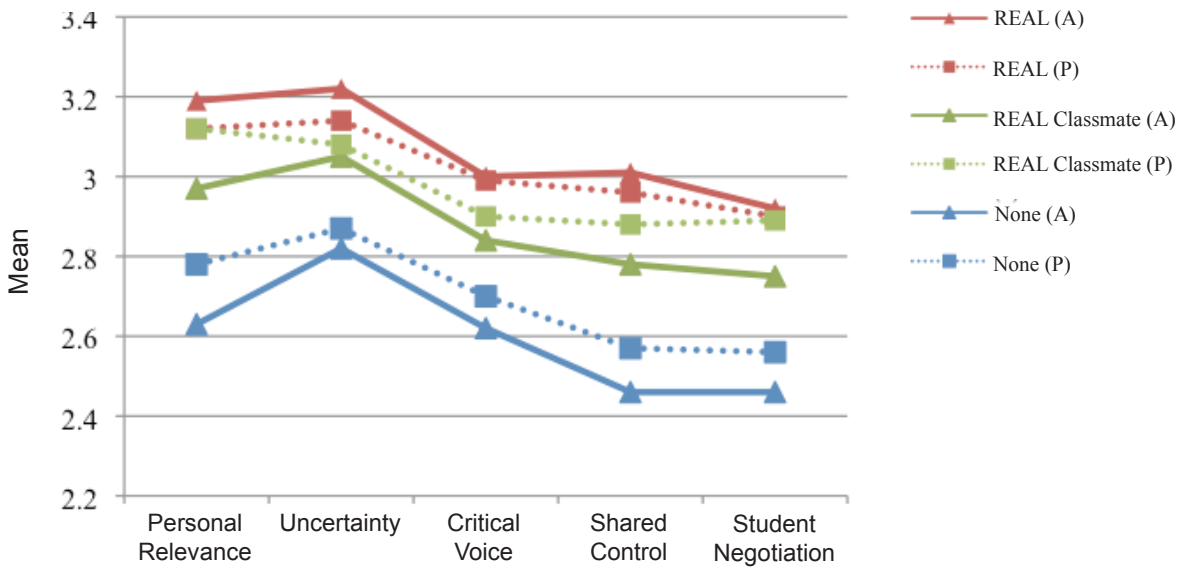

Figure 1. Comparison of students' actual and preferred learning environment on the modified CLES.

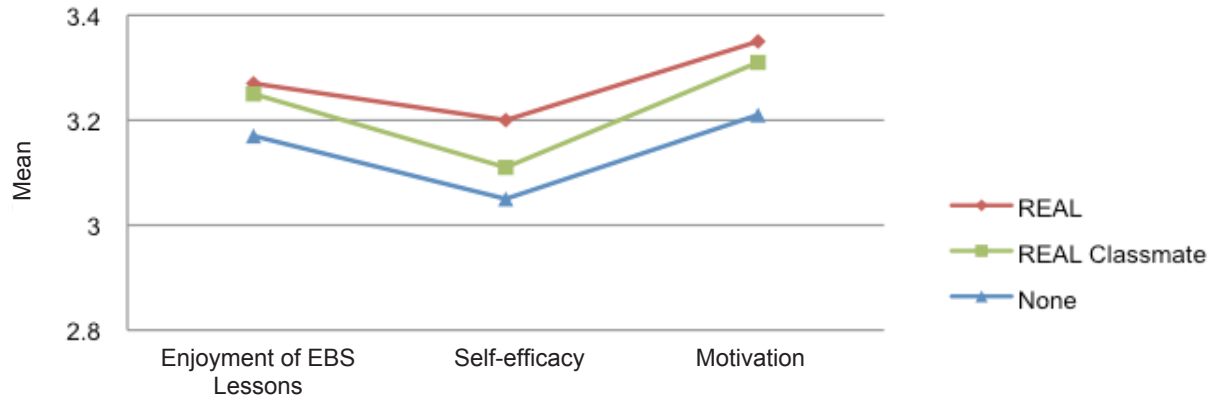

Figure 2. Comparison of students' attitudes towards EBS.

Students' Attitudes towards EBS

While REAL students tended to have more positive attitudes towards EBS, this difference was not statistically significant. This implied that while different groups of students perceived their learning environments differently, they generally enjoyed EBS lessons and were motivated to do well. However, students tended to be less positive about their performance in the EBS classroom. Figure 2 shows a summary of the average scores on a 4-point scale.

IMPLICATIONS

REAL students consistently reported the highest scores and better congruence between their actual and preferred learning environments as compared to their peers. This suggests that experiential learning attachments are effective in enhancing the EBS learning environments. However, future studies could focus on understanding the processes through which the transfers of knowledge and skills take place between the classroom and workplace. This could impact teacher training in Singapore.

EBS students can also be encouraged to take up a learning attachment at a workplace to experience an authentic workplace setting and to benefit from the business knowledge learned. The practical experience will help EBS students make relevant connections to help them in their academic pursuits, increasing their self-efficacy towards EBS.

Various models of work attachments for students in authentic learning environments could be explored. EBS students could be allowed to work regularly, perhaps 1 day a week, at a retail outlet to hone EBS content knowledge, skills and values, as well as communication and interpersonal skills. Different models could be studied and compared. With evidence to show that this scheme contributes towards motivating the learner and enhancing learning, it could be adopted by MOE for schools.

Besides learning attachments in the retail industry, students can also be attached to the hospitality industry to gain experience and to compare the similarities and differences between industries to develop business knowledge and skills. At the same time, students can develop a better understanding of self and their career preferences from the opportunities available.

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