

**Beyond the Classroom: Experiential Learning Models that Drive Career Readiness in Event Management  
Education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The meetings, exhibitions, and events industry is experiencing rapid transformation driven by technological innovation, sustainability imperatives, and evolving workforce needs. Preparing graduates for this dynamic environment requires more than classroom instruction—it necessitates experiential learning that bridges theory and practice. This paper examines how internships, client-based projects, and classroom simulations shape student career readiness.

Drawing upon Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Readiness Competencies (2022), this study proposes the Forest-Tree-Branch-Leaf model as a framework for scaffolding experiential learning within curricula.

## **LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

Prior research (Cleaver, 2025) demonstrates how students connect theory and practice through layered experiences, highlighting both skill development and the formation of professional identity. ELT emphasizes the cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, while NACE competencies provide benchmarks for critical thinking, teamwork, leadership, and digital literacy.

Qualitative research was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to explore how experiential learning experiences influence career readiness and professional identity. This allowed interpretation across student, faculty, and industry perspectives.

## **METHODS**

This study builds on dissertation research (Cleaver, 2025) that utilized semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and graduate event management students. A total of thirty students were initially recruited; twenty met the selection criteria, and thirteen ultimately chose to participate. Participants reflected varied academic years, identities, and interests across events, sport, tourism, and hospitality. Interviews focused on students' perceptions of career preparedness, skill development, and the influence of experiential learning on professional identity formation.

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which supported the identification of patterns across student narratives. This provided a rigorous yet flexible approach to interpreting student experiential learning in academic and professional contexts.

### **Experiential learning was examined across three primary formats:**

- **Internships** – Structured, immersive placements in professional environments that emphasized mentorship, networking, and guided reflection.
- **Client-Based Projects** – Live collaborations with industry associations such as PCMA and PRLA, where students created event proposals, marketing strategies, or program plans to address authentic organizational needs.
- **Classroom Simulations** – Interactive experiences, including roleplays, RFP negotiations, and crisis-management scenarios, designed to mirror professional challenges. These simulations were especially beneficial for students with limited access to traditional internships, offering equitable pathways to applied learning.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

These findings align with dissertation themes (Clever, 2025), highlighting confidence, identity, and collaboration as central outcomes. **Five themes emerged:**

1. **Layered Learning Builds Competence** – Students gained confidence through a progression from broad industry exposure to specific, applied skills, aligning with Kolb’s ELT cycle.
2. **Career Identity Formation** – Experiential projects accelerated students’ transition from “student” to “emerging professional,” enhancing belonging in the industry.
3. **Industry Collaboration as Differentiator** – Authentic partnerships with associations and corporations provided students with meaningful deliverables while addressing industry needs.
4. **Soft Skills Drive Readiness** – Reflection fostered NACE competencies, including communication, teamwork, and leadership—skills employers consistently prioritize.
5. **Equity and Access** – Classroom simulations and scalable client projects provided inclusive alternatives to internships, ensuring equitable learning opportunities.

The **Forest-Tree-Branch-Leaf framework** visualizes this scaffolding:

- **Forest** (Program Level): Exposure through site visits, career workshops, and speaker events.
- **Trees** (Course Level): Courses anchored by experiential objectives.
- **Branches** (Project Level): Industry-linked applied projects.
- **Leaves** (Task Level): Target skill-building exercises.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Experiential learning should be seen as a curriculum-wide ecosystem rather than a single course or capstone.

Recommendations include:

- **Curriculum Alignment:** Map outcomes to NACE competencies for measurable skill development.
- **Pedagogical Design:** Use Kolb's ELT cycle to scaffold reflective, applied learning.
- **Industry Engagement:** Position universities as innovation partners for associations and corporations.
- **Equitable Access:** Incorporate classroom simulations to ensure that all students benefit from applied learning opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Experiential learning remains one of the most effective strategies for preparing students to thrive in the evolving events industry. By integrating Kolb's experiential cycle, applying Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis for evidence-based insights, and aligning outcomes with NACE career readiness competencies, educators can design programs that advance academic learning while directly addressing workforce needs.

The Forest-Tree-Branch-Leaf model embeds experiential learning across levels, from program exposure to task-level skills. This layered approach not only builds technical and professional competencies but also fosters adaptability, innovation, and equity in student preparation. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that embedding intentional, scaffolded experiential learning practices ensures that graduates are not only academically accomplished but also truly future-ready to lead and innovate within the meetings, exhibitions, and events industry.

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