

# Management Laboratory in the Light of Experiential Learning and Service Learning Theory

## *Laboratório de Gestão à Luz da Teoria da Aprendizagem Experiencial e Service Learning*

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### ABSTRACT

This article is the result of a study that sought to propose the creation of a management laboratory in the light of Experiential Learning, specifically in-service learning, for students of the Administration Course at the Federal University of Sergipe. This proposal aims to create a bridge between university and society by designing a learning space focused on experience with a view to technical, critical and civic training of students by connecting students and entrepreneurs through intervention projects for free. That said, it appears that there are different audiences that could benefit from this proposal, the student, the entrepreneur and the University.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning. Service learning. Learning. Management. Experiences.

### RESUMO

Este artigo é fruto de um estudo que buscou propor a criação de um laboratório de gestão à luz da Aprendizagem Experiencial, especificamente aprendizagem em serviço, para alunos do Curso de Administração da Universidade Federal de Sergipe. Tal propositura tem o intuito de criar uma ponte entre universidade a sociedade ao conceber um espaço de aprendizagem focado na experiência com vistas à formação técnica, crítica e cívica do discentes ao conectar estudantes e empreendedores por meio de projetos de intervenção de forma gratuita. Isto posto, depreende-se a existência de diferentes públicos que poderão se beneficiar com essa proposta, o aluno, o empreendedor e a Universidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizagem experiencial. *Service learning*. Aprendizagem. Administração. Experiências.

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## Introduction

Teresa is excited, as she has just graduated in Business Administration and will finally be able to apply what she learned at university in a real company. “I am a business administrator!”, she exclaims. However, when looking for job opportunities, Teresa is unable to find a job in the field, given that she lives in a city where family businesses predominate, known for their lack of professionalism and with management being carried out by family members themselves.

However, she does not give up as she knows she can use her knowledge to carry out other activities within a company, though the job posts require practical experience and Teresa has not been able to do an internship, as it was not part of her university curriculum. With this, she decided to provide services through intervention projects. Nonetheless, when she started working, she found that many of the theories and methods she had learned in the classroom were not suited to the context of small businesses. What should she do?

In the same city is Maria. A housewife who decided to start her own food business. The business started small, and she was responsible for everything, from buying materials to food delivery. Maria has built up a good clientele and her business is doing well. Though, as she has no management skills, she has struggled to improve the performance of her business and promote sustainable growth. Maria knows she needs help, but she cannot afford to hire a professional to help her. What should she do?

These stories were told in order to present a lighter version of the reality of many students and entrepreneurs in the Brazilian State of Sergipe, which inspired this research. The fundamental proposition of this study is a cooperative solution to help both audiences, given that while the former lack practical experience in their training process, the latter need help with managerial knowledge.

That said, while the theory-practice dichotomy present in business teaching is clear, it can also be counterproductive. Nevertheless, there is a constant attempt, within and outside academia, to articulate this supposed dichotomy (FRANCO, 2006). Thus, certain theories have been disseminated which highlight student experience, such as experiential learning and service learning (SL), which are the theoretical bases for the present work.

Besides this dichotomy, another important issue lies on the fact that knowledge in the field is often imported from other countries. Thus, being incompatible with the local context in Brazil and inefficient, as well as being geared towards large companies (NICOLINI, 2003). However, the teaching of Business Administration has peculiarities that emerge from regional and local characteristics. However, bringing these particularities into the classroom is a complex task. Therefore, teachers, pressured by the *status quo* of the management model, present students with an idealized executive profile that is inconsistent with the reality of the Brazilian Northeast (LIMA; SILVA, 2017).

It should also be noted that, although much of the literature focuses on large companies, small businesses play an important role in the national economy. Nonetheless, the death rate of enterprises in the country is still high. According to SEBRAE (2016), in 2012, the survival rate of Brazilian companies of up to two years old was of 58% (excluding small businesses, MEI in Brazil). The main factors associated with this mortality can be divided into four groups: the entrepreneur's situation before starting a business (opportunity vs. need); business planning; management training and the administration of the business itself.

It is worth highlighting that small enterprises also play an important role at a local level in the Brazilian Northeast. Presenting data from the Federal Revenue Service, DataSebrae (2020) shows that in the state of Sergipe approximately 97% of companies are small businesses (MEI, ME and EPP).

The theoretical justification for this work is based on the scarcity of studies, especially in Brazil, which address the service learning of business students in a real environment. The aim of this research is to contribute to understanding the subject, as well as to stimulate future studies that deal with the pedagogical impacts and the professional lives of students. The practical justification stems from the high mortality rate of small businesses in Brazil, despite their great importance to the economy. However, little attention has been paid by researchers to understanding, exploring and proposing alternatives for these companies (SANTOS; ALVES; ALMEIDA, 2007).

Furthermore, it is believed that the creation of a Business Administration research laboratory is important not only for the undergraduate course in businesses administration and for the state of Sergipe, since there are other contexts that can benefit from this work. For instance, other Brazilian states are also characterized

by the predominance of small businesses, which are present throughout the national territory.

In view of the above, the aim of this work is to propose the creation of a research laboratory aimed at Experiential Learning, specifically service learning, for undergraduates enrolled in business administration at the Federal University of Sergipe.

## Teaching and Research in Business Administration in Brazil

Higher education in Business Administration in Brazil has often been widely criticized. Among other issues, the literature is considered to be imported, reproductive, with the prevalence of theory-practice dichotomy.

According to Nicolini (2003), teaching in this field has been characterized from the outset by the transfer of management technology, especially from the United States, which has a different context to Brazil and is often inadequate for solving local problems.

On this subject, Aktouf (2005) states that business schools are focused on reproduction, since the logic adopted is to observe leaders, learn from their actions and reproduce their behavior, thus training administrators and theoreticians who are likely to reproduce the same models and ways of thinking, i.e. acting as clones.

Despite having been made some time ago, Nicoli's (2003) and Aktouf's (2005) criticisms still reverberate and apply today, as shown in the study by Boaventura *et al.* (2018). When analyzing the curricula of Business Administration courses at Brazilian universities, as well as the competencies worked on by these courses, besides comparing them with the training of universities in the USA, these authors realized that the Brazilian curricula still used the American pedagogical model. However, the content did not seem to have been adapted to the local reality, nor had it kept up with latest societal changes.

Regarding the integration of theory and practice, Nassif, Ghobril and Bido (2007) advocate that this combination requires a new teaching model that should not be limited to the classroom. When considering the context in which profession-

als work and will work, the traditional teaching model is no longer satisfactory, being thus necessary to reflect on current teaching approaches, not only in relation to curricula, but also regarding lecturers' practices (ARAÚJO *et al.*, 2014).

This dichotomy is also reflected in management research. Lima and Wood Jr. (2014) characterize the social impact of management research as being little relevant. According to Kirschbaun, Porto and Ferreira (2004), this may be due to the distance between the objectives of academia and the market. This situation strengthens the debate on the rigor and relevance of academic research in Business Administration in Brazil.

In view of the above, the field of Business Administration, especially in Brazil, is still considered to have shortcomings, namely the distance between academia and the market, which extends to teaching. Such shortcoming contributes to fragmented learning, consequently leading to the emergence of gaps in the learning process. However, emerging teaching methodologies and strategies, including experiential learning and service learning, have sought to bridge these gaps.

## Experiential Learning And Service Learning

Based on the work of 20th century scholars such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire and others, who emphasized experience in their learning theories (KOLB; KOLB, 2005), experiential learning theory (ELT) has as its main assumption the use of material experience in the teaching-learning process (KRAKAUER; SANTOS; ALMEIDA, 2017). Thus, according to these authors, the models proposed deal with how individuals, through their experiences, transform their knowledge.

According to Bispo (2015), this approach differs from traditional practices as it does not place the student as a passive subject. In line with this, Bell (2015) explains that experiential learning differs from traditional learning due to its active nature and focus on action orientation, solving, project-based learning and peer assessment.

Nonetheless, Pimentel (2007) emphasizes that not any experience will produce learning. According to the author, learning production should appropriate the knowledge originating from this experience, thus requiring continuous processes of action and reflection.

According to Dewey (1976, p. 92), quoted in Vitório's work (2001), "to reflect is to look back on what has been done and extract the positive meanings that will constitute the capital for dealing intelligently with subsequent experiences". In this regard, the author considers reflection to be fundamental in the learning process, as it is through reflection that the individual constructs meanings to deal with future experiences (VITÓRIO, 2001).

In the context of higher education, many programs have adopted ELT in an attempt to reconcile theory and practice. Similarly, Kisfalvi and Oliver (2015), citing Sheehan *et al.* (2009), point out that experiential learning has gained popularity in university contexts, especially in the context of executive education (BERGGREN; SÖDERLUND, 2011).

As a result, Erez *et al.* (2013), based on authors such as Chen, Donahue and Klimoski (2004), Graen, Hui and Taylor (2006) and Kark (2011), state that, in recent years, educators have agreed that business students must experience workplace realities at university, thus preparing them for future job positions.

For Bell (2015), this situation has led to the use of a wide range of new active and creative solutions to problems and learning, such as business simulations, meetings and interviews with entrepreneurs, the development of business plans, among others. Araújo *et al.* (2017) reinforce that teaching Business Administration is a challenge, as that the skills required to practice the profession are not fully transposable in the form of theories, methods and models. In this regard, alternatives such as case studies, junior companies and curricular internships have been used to place students in an atmosphere that better reflects the working environment, while at the same time reflecting on what is learned in the classroom (FRANCO, 2006).

Examples of the use of such methods can be found in the literature, including in Brazil, reporting on experiences using active teaching methods, especially simulating real enterprises. The results of these studies not only highlight the acceptability of students regarding the inclusion of more practical activities, but also corroborate the argument that experiences help to retain academic concepts and develop skills other than technical ones (NASSI; GHOBRIEL; BIDO, 2007; PARENTE *et al.*, 2009; MOTTA; MELO; PAIXÃO, 2012; ARAUJO *et al.*, 2014; DIAS JUNIOR *et al.*, 2014); ARAUJO *et al.*, 2017; SILVA; SOARES; PEREIRA, 2020; OLIVEIRA, MELO, 2020).

However, these techniques may not be as efficient in the teaching-learning process. Araújo *et al.* (2017) argue that, despite its benefits, a simulated company lacks the realism and precision of reality, which can limit student learning or even lead students to conceive false or distorted views of reality.

Thus, although the growing popularity of experiential learning in management education brings new opportunities, it also carries challenges for educators (KIS-FALVI; OLIVER, 2015). In particular, experience-based education is a complex relational process in which teachers need to balance the content and students' attention while also balancing reflection on the meanings of the ideas and the skills needed to apply them (KOLB *et al.*, 2014).

However, it is worth noting that this approach does not disregard traditional teaching methods. In this sense, Holman (2000) reinforces that advocates of this approach acknowledge that experience alone does not safeguard learning without access to theories, i.e. not having theoretical knowledge can impoverish learning. Furthermore, despite the central role it plays, not all experiences can be considered as a source of learning, as explained above. Therefore, the central issue in experience-based learning is to select experiences that are useful for teaching students (HOLMAN, 2000).

In this vein, Kolb and Kolb (2005) argue that valuing experiential learning in the context of higher education can be achieved by creating learning spaces that provide experiences that help students to grow academically. In other words, it is important to consider the existence of specific research spaces for activities aimed at experiential learning, which can be safe either inside or outside the classroom (KOLB; KOLB, 2005; EREZ *et al.*, 2013; HIGGINS; ELLIOTT, 2011 and CHAVAN, 2011).

Nonetheless, Kolb and Kolb (2005) argue that setting up such spaces requires a change of vision from institutions, as implementing the principles of a learning space (as presented in Table 1) requires a holistic educational program of institutional development. Such program requires developing a curriculum, faculty, students, administrative staff and resources. Similar to Kolb and Kolb (2005), the aforementioned authors state that these safe experiential learning spaces need to be intentionally designed, as they will not emerge on their own.

**Table 1.** Principles of experiential learning

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
<b>Respect for students and their experience</b>	Making students feel that they are part of a learning community and that they are known and respected by their teachers and peers and whose experiences are taken seriously. Furthermore, not only direct experiences should be taken into account, i.e. that associated with the subject studied, but also the students' total experiential life space.
<b>Start learning from the student's experience in the subject</b>	As it is a constructivist cognitive theory, it is assumed that the construction of an individual's knowledge is based on their previous experiences. Thus, in order to learn experientially, students should value their experience, as this will allow them to analyze and modify their previous creation of meaning based on new ideas.
<b>Creating and maintaining a hospitable learning space</b>	Creating and maintaining a learning space that embraces differences and offers support to students. This requires the creation of a supportive environment or culture that creates a sense of trust in students, thus enabling good communication between teachers and students.
<b>Making room for conversational learning</b>	Create a space for conversation in which there is no predominant side, as in a traditional classroom, for example, where the teacher speaks and the student listens, as individuals are better able to reflect on the meaning of their experiences through conversation.
<b>Making room for expertise development</b>	Designing a learning space where students can deepen their knowledge according to their needs and in line with their life purpose.
<b>Creating Spaces to Act and Reflect</b>	A space in which students can test their knowledge, given that action and testing are important elements in the learning process.
<b>Creating Spaces to Feel and Think</b>	Allowing students to express their emotions, as feelings and emotions influence their learning process. Thus, it follows that just as positive feelings of attraction and interest can be essential for learning, while negative emotions can block learning.

**Making room for learning from the inside out**

Creating a space for learning from the inside out. In other words, linking educational experiences to the interests of students in order to provoke intrinsic motivation and increase the effectiveness of learning.

**Making room for students to take control of their own learning**

Designing a learning space in which students take control and responsibility for their learning can significantly increase their ability to learn from experience.

**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2021), based on Kolb and Kolb (2005).

The ideas and arguments presented stress the importance of associating the element of experience with traditional teaching methodologies so that students can make the most of the teaching-learning process. However, for this to happen, it seems essential to have learning spaces that are planned and suitable, enabling experiences to take place in the most didactic and safest way possible.

This is the background to the business administration research laboratory model proposed in this work. The aim is to provide students and teachers involved with an environment where they can experience and reflect on their experiences, besides promoting the construction of a learning and research network.

Furthermore, it is understood that experiences should not only be aimed at deepening technical and objective concepts, but also at developing socio-emotional skills, as well as contributing to the formation of a professional with civic awareness, i.e. the formation of an agent of social transformation. In this sense, the service learning (SL) approach emerged as a branch of experiential learning.

SL is a structured learning experience that links academic activities and community services to fill gaps by creating a bridge between science, universities and communities (UDAGAMA; WIJAYANAMA; VITHANAPATHIRANA, 2019).

In this regard, Tapia (2019, p.10) lists three characteristics of service learning that are considered essential:

1. actions of solidarity designed to meet real and felt needs within the community in a limited and effective way,
2. actions actively carried out by students, from planning to evaluation,

3. intentionally planned activities integrated with the learning content (curricular content, reflection, development of socio-emotional skills, work and research) (cf. Tapia, 2009 a: 37-67).

Furthermore, according to Tapia (2019, p.10), SL projects seek to follow the pillars of the 21st century proposed by UNESCO in the report “Education: a treasure to be discovered”. These are:

- **Learning to learn:** seeking to ensure that solidarity activities increase motivation and allow learning to take on new meanings, apply theoretical knowledge in real contexts and generate new learning.
- **Learning to do:** field activities should enable the development of basic skills for life, work and active citizenship, such as working as part of a team, making decisions in unexpected or difficult situations, taking responsibility and communicating effectively.
- **Learning to be:** solidarity activity and systematic reflection on the values and attitudes involved in the activity, aimed at fostering the development of pro-social attitudes and the capacity for resilience; that is, to face difficulties, overcome them and be positively transformed by them.
- **Learning to live together:** aims to develop training for social participation in a practical and direct way. Solidarity projects generate opportunities for positive interaction both within the school group and in the interrelationship with people, organizations and different social realities (DELORS, 2010).

According to Brower (2011), based on the work of Gordon and Howell (1959); Pfeffer and Fong (2002); Porter and McKibbin (1988); Steiner and Watson (2006), business administration education can thus benefit from this approach. The course has been widely criticized for not preparing students to the job market, thus preventing them from making a significant contribution to society.

However, although SL is increasingly being implemented in business disciplines, it is not easy to make structural changes to the curriculum (ANDREWS, 2007). This is particularly challenging in business administration undergraduate courses, whose curricular content is usually technical and standardized, due to the need of linking academic courses and community services, meeting service goals and simultaneously achieving learning outcomes.

However, these barriers need to be overcome given that organizations require professionals who, for example, have critical thinking, work well in teams and have leadership skills. Such skills cannot be effectively acquired by listening to a lecture

or in a textbook, thus remaining a challenge for business schools, teachers and administrators (MADSEN; TURNBULL, 2006).

Regarding the beneficiaries of a SL program, the following can be highlighted: students, the community and the university, as shown by Campos and Richardson (2006). According to the authors, service learning is beneficial for students as it helps them develop both academically and personally.

Citing the findings of Eyler and Giles (1996), they point out that the majority of students report improved learning, being able to remember better and understand the content of the lessons more deeply after having had the experience of applying classroom content to real life applications. Besides recognizing the complexities of social issues, students also claim to be more motivated in SL classes than in regular classes, and report that the power of this approach is based on the personal relationships that are created and the execution of work that has a positive impact on people's lives.

The community is considered a beneficiary. By sharing information with students, the latter can develop solutions that aim to meet the immediate needs of the community, thus contributing to the achievement of long-term objectives (CAMPOS; RICHARDSON, 2006).

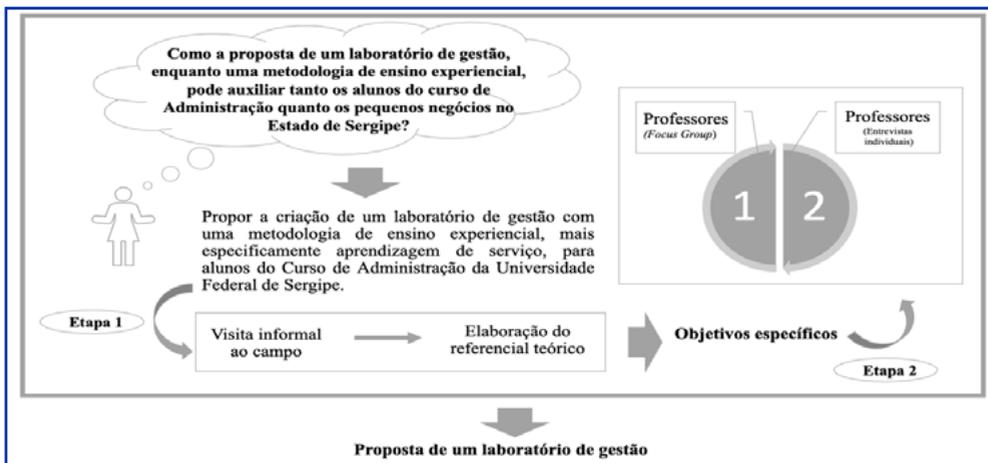
On the other hand, universities also benefit, given that SL fosters academic production, as long-term involvement with communities and non-profit organizations can lead to ongoing research and local development. In addition, SL enables the introduction of new ideas and methods into the traditional curricula, fostering synergies between teachers and students as partners in the teaching-learning process (CAMPOS; RICHARDSON, 2006).

In view of the above, the following aspects can be highlighted: (i) the existence of a wide range of benefits resulting from the use of SL, especially in higher education, enabling undergraduates to take these experiences on to the job market; (ii) a variety of audiences that can be reached and that can enjoy such benefits; and (iii) an interdependence between the different beneficiaries.

## Methodology

The research was planned and structured in two phases: an exploratory and a systematic phase. Based on a systemic process, it began by defining the research question. The general objective was then stipulated, which initiated the exploratory phase, followed by the specific objectives. Figure 1 illustrates the study design.

**Figure 1.** Study design



**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2021).

In the exploratory phase, the authors carried out preliminary research by carrying out a literature review on the subject. This enabled to informally visit the research scenario in order to gather introductory data that would help to deepen and better direct the work.

Interviews were then conducted with business administration undergraduates and with entrepreneurs, helping to reflect on their undergraduate experiences. Based on the information collected in the initial stage, a questionnaire was drawn up and sent to undergraduates. The aim of this initiative was to analyze, from the students' point of view, the influence of practical activities on their learning process and their perception of this study's proposal.

In addition, in order to gain a better understanding about the subject and learn about applications of SL within Brazilian educational institutions, one of the researchers took part in an online certification course at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), called Learning by Experience: Service Learning, Real Problems and Social Entrepreneurship, led by Professor Maria Flávia Bastos and Professor Wilson Marchionatti.

After completing the certification, the same author contacted Professor Maria Flávia Bastos and, in an informal online interview via *Google meet*, the professor helped to elucidate issues still lacking in the odious project. In addition, the book *Education and Social Entrepreneurship: an encounter that (trans)forms citizens*, resulting from the teacher's dissertation, was carefully and reflectively read, in which she explains the aforementioned project and the methodology used.

The systematic phase was characterized by the formal collection and analysis of data and was subdivided into two qualitative, complementary and sequential phases, undertaken with the teachers, the first of which used a focus group as a data collection tool, while the second phase involved individual interviews.

## Proposal for a Business Administration Laboratory

This proposal consists of a structured roadmap for the implementation of a learning environment with an experiential service-learning approach in the Business Administration undergraduate course at the Federal University of Sergipe. The proposal aims at exposing students to a safe learning environment and to a professional experience by giving them the opportunity to propose solutions to existing problems in real businesses through intervention projects for small entrepreneurs.

The research laboratory will be governed by the principles of experiential learning presented by Kolb and Kolb (2005), giving students autonomy and encouraging them to share their experiences.

It was conceived in the format of an extension project, as it is understood that this will more effectively meet the objective of the proposal. It is worth noting that it was created not only as a way of integrating theory and practice through an intervention project for small businesses, but also for developing academic research as a result of this interaction between the university and society.

In addition, the activities are not held in a regular class format. Thus, they can be carried out over a longer period of time and with a focus on an interdisciplinary experience, providing opportunities for the participation of teachers and students from other departments if necessary. Such exchange of experiences would not be easy to reconcile within the traditional classroom space and with other compulsory activities of this format.

In order to be able to implement this proposal, a number of premises must be considered, as presented below.

## Premises

### INSTITUTIONAL INVOLVEMENT

For the project to be carried out properly, institutional support is needed, including bodies such as the rectorate, department heads and professors, since they will be responsible for building networks and structures that will support the LS at the institution. In addition, it is important to engage the students, since the laboratory will be set up with a view to providing them with an all-round education.

The people involved and the roles that each will have to play are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Stakeholders involved and their roles

Participant	Activities
<b>Rectorate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To help disseminate information in the press, contributing to the legitimization of the laboratory in the academic and community spheres.</li><li>• Supporting an increase in the laboratory's scope of action, encouraging its implementation in other courses, increasing its reach within the university and, at the same time, promoting interdisciplinarity in the solutions provided to the community.</li></ul>

<b>Departmental Council</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To take institutional responsibility for the laboratory and thus be responsible for making strategic decisions.</li><li>• Being responsible for ensuring the infrastructure and materials needed to carry out the activities, allocating funds and providing support to the teacher coordinating the laboratory.</li></ul>
<b>Teachers</b>	Mentoring students in the process of developing viable solutions.
<b>Students</b>	Engagement and participation in activities and commitment to them.

**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2021).

It is expected that the teachers involved in the project will be able to act as:

- **Coordinating teacher:** responsible for running the lab, mediating relations between students and entrepreneurs, as well as with other teachers. In addition, this teacher will be responsible for maintaining the contact with the project's stakeholders, as well as seeking funding from science incentive bodies. As a result, the teacher will have to dedicate a few hours to the project, beyond regular classroom hours. We suggest 4 to 6 hours a week.
- **Project specialist teacher:** a teacher who is a specialist in a particular area, such as planning, people management, production, finance, marketing, who can act as a supervisor where the subject of which they are an expert is predominant.
- **Collaborating professor:** any professor, belonging or not to the Business Administration department, who wishes to contribute to the project.

## TEACHER TRAINING

With teachers playing a leading role, inspiring students to truly engage in the lab's activities, it is necessary to motivate and prepare teachers to deal with the new teaching environment, which is more complex than traditional teaching.

In this sense, we recommend creating strategic actions aimed at teacher integration, training and development, such as building partnerships with institutions and/or teachers who deal with active teaching methodologies to provide training and/or lectures. Moreover, meetings should be held to enable an exchange of experiences, collaborate on ideas, report on situations and concerns.

It is understood that once teachers are involved in the project, they should seek out information and experiences on experiential learning and service learning. This will enable them to delve deeper into the subject and feel more confident in carrying out their activities in the laboratory, as well as being able to develop other projects that can be taken not only into this space, but also into the classroom.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND STRUCTURE**

The existence of a physical space, separate from the traditional classroom, helps to create a different atmosphere, focused on practice, as well as strengthening the feeling of belonging. It is thus understood that this space will be a room that needs to hold at least 25 people, being equipped with support materials such as office supplies, a cupboard to store office supplies, a filing cabinet to store important documents, a notice board, a whiteboard, laptops with internet access, a printer, a projector, as well as round tables with six chairs for group meetings.

Round tables were chosen as they show a balance between the participants, with no position representing prominence or authority. Furthermore, one of the advantages of this format is the possibility of accommodating more people at the table if necessary. These characteristics communicate the propositions of experiential learning and service learning, which remove the teacher from the focus of the teaching-learning process and presuppose sharing and involvement with the community.

In the same vein, the use of a chair with wheels for the teacher is proposed so that they can move between the tables, which conveys the message of support and movement. The role of the teacher in the lab is to interact with the students, giving suggestions and promoting interaction between the participants, while also opening up space for the students to act and lead their learning experience.

Moreover, a table and chair are needed for the student monitor to sit at during their work. Regarding the minimum number of computers, considering a

group of 20 students (4 groups of 5 people), one computer is suggested for each group of students, besides one to be used by teachers and student monitors, i.e. five units.

## PEOPLE

In order to ensure that teachers are not overloaded and can focus their attention on the students and their proposals, it is necessary to rely on the help of a student monitor. The student monitor will be responsible for looking after the space to avoid waste and/or damage, as well as for activities such as controlling the use of equipment and materials, registering companies, receiving and sending e-mails, welcoming people into the laboratory, technical assistance such as connecting equipment, as well as helping to organize events.

The student monitor must be a student at the institution, whether or not they are in their fourth undergraduate year (eighth academic term), being expected to receive a scholarship for 4 hours of work a day, totaling 20 hours a week, as well as a certificate of participation in the program. In addition, students who do not fit the criteria as consultants are expected to participate in the laboratory on a voluntary basis, carrying out support activities as a way of taking part in the program. These students can contribute to the program by providing complementary skills such as graphic design, spreadsheets, among other activities that can be useful to the different groups in the class.

There are students who, due to previous market and business experience, can voluntarily act as mentors for the class, bringing insights and helping teachers. These students can be undergraduates or even masters' students. In the latter case, this is interesting as it promotes the integration between undergraduate and post-graduate courses; an item included in CAPES' quadrennial assessment.

These volunteers will receive certificates for their participation in the program, which will be considered as complementary hours for the Business Administration course. It should be noted that before these volunteers start working, they will have to attend a first meeting during which the mission, objectives, principles, rules and operation of the laboratory will be explained, similar to students in the intervention project class.

## RESOURCES

In order to enable carrying out the proposed activities, it is necessary to secure financial resources. Such resources may originate from calls for tenders and partnerships with private companies, not only for setting up the laboratory, but also for its maintenance, since office supplies and printing documents will be essential for the students' work routine. Besides, events held to receive and hand in students' works may act as an additional source of income.

## CONTRACT LETTER AND CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

The contract letter will be a document that establishes the responsibilities of each of the parties. It should explain the objectives of the program and the resulting product, i.e. what the entrepreneur will receive. Two copies should be produced and signed by the coordinating professor, the student consultants and the entrepreneur as a way of ratifying the partnership between the latter and the program.

The confidentiality agreement will be a document in which those involved undertake to protect and safeguard the information shared. This helps to create an atmosphere of trust for the entrepreneur, who can feel more confident in passing on the best information to students and teachers, contributing to the creation of better solutions. These documents should be filed among the lab's documents and are contractual in nature.

## CHOOSING ENTREPRENEURS/SMALL BUSINESSES AND PROMOTING THE LABORATORY

Criteria should be adopted to select entrepreneurs. The authors suggest the following: (i) being a small business, in this case, informal, inserted within the Brazilian denomination of MEI; (ii) selling products and/or providing services within the law; (iii) committing to providing the necessary information to carry out the project; (iv) providing at least one person who attends meetings at the university and is responsible for maintaining contact with students and teachers during the program; (v) being open to actually applying what was proposed in the project by the students.

In addition, the space should be open for potential entrepreneurs, giving students the opportunity not only to solve problems, but also to create business plans

- a topic covered in the entrepreneurship subject. Other criteria can be added, depending on the learning objectives of the teachers responsible.

These companies/entrepreneurs will get to know the laboratory by publicizing it in local and university media, such as websites and newspapers, at the invitation of teachers or the students themselves. Putting students in the position of nominating companies contributes to greater involvement with the project and the community. It is also a way of exercising observation and a critical eye. Those selected shall be informed of their acceptance at least one month before the start of the program.

With regard to dissemination, the laboratory should set up digital media accounts to publish the activities being carried out with the community, with the aim of increasing the laboratory's visibility and having closer contact with the students and teachers taking part in the program, as well as students from other institutions. The lab monitor will be responsible for managing these networks.

## **WORKLOAD**

The program should last one semester, i.e. approximately four months. It will be organized as follows: 5 meetings to get acquainted and build knowledge; 1 meeting to present the companies; 5 meetings to put knowledge into practice by drawing up the diagnosis and action plan; 1 meeting to present the action plan to the companies; 4 meetings to draw up a scientific research paper.

Meetings in the laboratory environment should take place once a week, with an expected duration of 2 hours a week, so that students acquire a routine associated with this activity. However, it should be noted that during the knowledge-building period student workload may increase, as they will have to attend asynchronous classes available on an online education platform. It is suggested that, at this stage of the process, undergraduates dedicate 4 hours a week to the program's activities.

## **STUDENTS' SELECTION CRITERIA TO THE PROGRAM**

In order to enable students to really enjoy the experience and generate good results, it is understood that they must have taken part in most of the course subjects. Besides, students who wish to participate in the laboratory should be in their 8th academic term.

In this internship, students are expected to be more mature. A necessary characteristic to carry out the activities that are proposed, since associating the study routine of the regular course with working in the laboratory requires wisdom and responsibility to deal with the number of assignments and extensive reading required, being thus a challenging experience.

It should also be emphasized that choosing students at this stage of the course can help in the preparation of their final course work, bringing greater scientific relevance to it, since the students' experiences can inspire this research.

## REFLECTION

Reflection is of the utmost importance when it comes to learning through experience. That said, there are two ways of reflecting on laboratory activities: group reflection and individual reflection.

Group reflection in class meetings is important to foster discussions and debates on the problem situations they are witnessing in companies, enabling them to exchange experiences and connect the cases with the subjects covered during the course.

Individual reflection with the use of a field diary (digital or not) in which the student must report on their daily experiences during the project and how they have affected them as a student and citizen.

Another form of reflection is the preparation of scientific articles to be handed in at the end of the program, since students will have to think about topics related to their experiences in the field, requiring reflection on their experiences during the project. These articles can be written individually or together with other students, whether or not they are part of the team. The article should be written with the help of a teacher who will also be one of the authors. The product resulting from this research, which may be theoretical or empirical, will be formatted and written with a view to publication in a scientific journal.

## EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluating the project is an essential activity, as it enables to contrast what was planned with what is actually being done, emphasizing the mistakes and successes during implementation, i.e. a critical analysis of the project's

development. The results of these evaluations, after a systematized analysis, will serve to guide any changes that may prove necessary for a better development of the program.

Two types of evaluation are suggested: (i) periodic evaluations that will be carried out monthly through group discussions or individual interviews with students and teachers to analyze perceptions and possible problems that are occurring; and (ii) a final evaluation carried out at the end of the semester with all those involved in the project through questionnaires with open and closed questions.

## The Process

The laboratory will act as a bridge, connecting the university and the community through products in the form of projects, thus contributing to local development. It is therefore divided into seven stages, as summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Stages

N	Stage	Activities
1	<b>Ambiance:</b> Welcome Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An icebreaker dynamic to generate interaction and start the presentations by teachers and students;</li><li>• Presentation of the project (objectives, principles, operation, learning journey, monitor and volunteers);</li><li>• Presentation of videos on the importance of teamwork;</li><li>• Presentation of the companies selected for the project;</li><li>• Developing teams and assigning companies to each team;</li><li>• Making a collective pact of commitment to the project and the companies involved.</li></ul>

2 **Building Knowledge:**  
Inverted Classroom

- Online workshops covering the main guiding themes of the project: what an intervention project is and how it is developed, project management, managerial skills, planning, people management, production, finance and marketing for small businesses and public speaking; to be attended by students asynchronously and which can be consulted throughout the project.
- Face-to-face meetings where students can ask questions and teachers can bring in local cases, or even cases from the companies selected for this class, to discuss the topics.

3 **Presentation:**  
**Meeting the**  
**Companies**

- Teachers introduce the entrepreneurs to the teams responsible for the company;
- Entrepreneurs present their company and its difficulties, which have already been analyzed by the teacher or team of teachers, to the group responsible for the intervention project;
- Signing a contract letter and confidentiality agreement;
- Students make use of a semi-structured interview script drawn up by the teacher, though ensuring that the students play a leading role, they can go further and ask questions that they feel are pertinent to a better understanding of the problem situation;
- The mentor teacher accompanies the student during the interview

4 **Hands On:** Students  
Start Developing Their  
Intervention Projects

- Based on the theoretical knowledge and information provided by the entrepreneurs, students undertake the intervention project, drawing up a diagnosis and an action plan.

5	<b>Project presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reception of the entrepreneurs by the students;</li><li>• Presentation and delivery of the project in seminar format;</li><li>• The material produced is delivered to the entrepreneur in a printed form;</li><li>• Application of a questionnaire to evaluate the entrepreneurs' experience;</li><li>• Closing coffee break and networking.</li></ul>
6	<b>Academic Research</b>	<p>With a view to developing research with greater academic relevance and encouraging undergraduate research, this stage aims to integrate the practical activity carried out in the laboratory with the production of academic articles. These can be theoretical or empirical, on a topic that has arisen from experience in the laboratory under the supervision of the mentor teacher.</p>
7	<b>Check-out</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presentation and delivery of articles;</li><li>• Program evaluation and student self-assessment;</li><li>• A round of conversations to discuss experiences;</li><li>• Presentation of a video with the main moments of the project;</li><li>• Handing out certificates;</li><li>• Closing coffee break.</li></ul>

**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2021).

In conclusion, this proposal was built on primary and secondary data collected during the research process. That said, the literature, through the findings of applied and consolidated experiences, helped to build the foundations of this project, while the vision and positions brought by teachers and students of the Business Administration undergraduate course from the Federal University of Sergipe contributed to its refinement according to the local reality.

It should also be noted that elements and suggestions made by graduates and entrepreneurs who took part in the research informally during the exploratory stage were taken into account, as well as the views of the present authors.

In this regard, this proposal was designed and structured taking into account the pillars of the 21st century, as proposed by UNESCO (TAPIA, 2019). That is, proposing activities in the field, aimed at applying theoretical concepts in real contexts while helping others (learning to learn); allowing the development of important skills for students' personal and professional life (learning to do); solidarity actions aimed to promote a systematic reflection on values and attitudes that develop pro-social behavior and resilience in students (learning to be); promoting student interactions with other individuals, thus developing an environment beneficial to social and citizen training (learning to live together).

In addition, the characteristics of service learning listed by Tapia (2019) were also taken into account. These include the activities carried out in the laboratory, planned so as to integrate the contents of the academic curriculum, the development of socio-emotional skills, research and reflection, thus effectively meeting the real needs of small entrepreneurs, even if to a limited extent. Such actions must be actively carried out by students from the outset.

However, the role of students does not underestimate the role of teachers, whose main role is to guide them through this process. This is an elementary role when it comes to teaching quality, since teachers, based on their knowledge and background, will select those experiences that can best teach these students. This is because experiences alone do not promote learning (PIMENTEL, 2007). Thus, it is necessary to choose those that are appropriate and fruitful for teaching (DEWEY, 1938 *apud* KOLB; KOLB, 2005).

Furthermore, in order to achieve rich learning, it is necessary to have access to theories and theoretical knowledge (HOLMAN, 2000); a function which will be performed by the teacher who will bring the concepts needed to solve the problems presented. This explains the inclusion of the inverted classroom strategy in this proposal.

The format suggested for its application, i.e. an extension activity, was firstly chosen- because of its conceptual suitability, as can be seen in the University's resolution. Moreover, it was also considered given the challenges of implementing structural changes in the course curriculum, as pointed out by Andrews (2007) and corroborated in the statements of the teachers interviewed in this research, despite the examples of SL application found in business subjects and even in the curriculum of some courses.

As previously mentioned, an experiential approach and SL itself differ from the traditional teaching approach, as the former is action-focused and project-based (BELL, 2015). In this regard, being applied in the format of extension activities, students are expected to have more time to dedicate themselves. Besides, they will be able to look at the problems presented in a comprehensive and multidisciplinary way, which would have been difficult in an isolated course subject focused on specific and standardized topics.

The creation of a specific space to carry out this project is believed to be relevant in order to create an environment that is different from the traditional classroom. Besides, it is expected to awaken in students a sense of environment geared towards carrying out professional activities, as well as being able to create an environment capable of awakening a sense of belonging, thus increasing student motivation.

However, not only physical structure elements are required for this to happen, but also the creation of an atmosphere based on trust, respect, sharing, as well as the deferral of attitudes that indicate censorship or judgment (KISFALVI; OLIVER, 2015). Teachers are primarily responsible for this, which highlights yet another challenge for them.

Thus, it is recognized that even though this is a project that will not interfere with the formal structure of the course, it is a proposal that requires a strong commitment from all parties involved, especially the teachers' department. Teachers are essential to ensure that the actions are carried out, since their role is not only to help the students with the activities of the intervention project and the construction of proposals, but also to ensure that the learning actions within this space can be carried out in a safe and fruitful manner.

Students can learn and apply their knowledge to real cases, while local entrepreneurs will have access to knowledge and tools that can boost their businesses and the university. As Campos and Richardson (2006) advocate, students in the field can foster intellectual production given their close relationship with the community, leading to continuous research and contributing to local development. According to the authors, it also stimulates synergies between students and teachers in the teaching-learning process.

However, despite the advantages presented, a safe space for experiential learning such as this will not emerge on its own. Thus, it needs to be implemented

in a planned and intentional manner (KOLB; KOLB, 2005; KISFALVI; OLIVER, 2015). This is why this proposal was created and structured.

REFE

## Final Considerations

This work is the result of the perception of one of the authors when she was an undergraduate in Business Administration and defended the need to include practical activities in a real context, with the aim of providing a more robust and holistic education.

Later, in the author's professional work with small entrepreneurs, she realized that they had difficulties in managing their businesses, with limited resources to seek qualified advice. Such experience emphasized the gaps experienced by both sides - students and entrepreneurs - since the former acquires knowledge through study though lacks practical experience to test it. In turn, although the latter strives to make their business successful, they often lack managerial knowledge.

This gave rise to the guiding research question of the present work. The main objective of the research was to propose the creation of a Business Administration research laboratory in light of Experiential Learning, specifically service learning, for Business Administration undergraduates from the Federal University of Sergipe.

It is understood that this work contributes to the discussion on experiential learning and service learning in the context of higher education in Business Administration. In addition, it encourages debate on the need to foster the creation of learning spaces which promote the union of theory and practice in a real context, based on relevant experiences and with the help of teachers, while also making a significant contribution to society, bringing university knowledge to the community and developing research applied to the local management context.

This proposition is corroborated by the fact that the Business Administration course has a rigid and functionalist curriculum. Moreover, much of the content is still transmitted in a traditional and passive way, based on a foreign theoretical framework, coming from a context geared mainly towards large companies. This results in administrators who, as newcomers to a job market characterized by an abundance of small companies, do not feel safe to act.

It is understood that devising strategies to remove the theory-practice dichotomy could be beneficial for students, universities and small businesses, as academic work, such as undergraduate theses, could achieve greater rigor and relevance, given the existence of an interdependent relationship between researchers/students and companies/entrepreneurs. For instance, the former could help the latter in their businesses through studies carried out on site, generating work with greater applicability and social impact. This proposal could also be applied to other institutions in Brazilian states where small businesses are prevalent, such as in Sergipe.

The authors hope that this project may be effectively applied at the institution studied and will serve as an incentive for teachers to better know the local business context, as well as motivating students to take part. Ideally, the laboratory should be seen as a continuum of training, in which students, after going through the theoretical subjects of the course, get involved in its activities, aiming to actively apply and deepen their knowledge in a real company while also developing socio-emotional skills and civic thinking. The ultimate goal is for students to leave the university not only as professionals, but as citizens concerned about the well-being of society, especially as administrators are decision-makers who often have an impact on their surroundings.

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