Alternative Learning Experiences
Co-creation of knowledge in new contexts

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Abstract

This paper discusses learning processes when students are doing fieldwork for 'real-life' tasks set by an external stakeholder. We find inspiration in Kolb's learning Circle (1984; 2014) and draw on literature, which develops arguments based on experiential learning (Dewey 1938). When students are learning outside the classroom the notion of 'context' is crucial, in this case, we brought learning processes to a small town in Cuba. We draw from a case with a group of students going to the field and unfold how their learning process is inspired by the field, setting the field, and how learning is a process where students gradually break free from classroom thinking. Furthermore, students start to develop their own research process, inspired by the context in which they are situated. We use Kolb's Learning Circle to discuss peer learning and shared learning and co-creation of knowledge by arguing that learning is not only an individual process. We argue that deep, and shared, learning is reached collectively and in collaboration with peers. Thus, learning builds on practice by students' cooperation and responsibility for their own learning process through Problem-based Learning (PBL). This leaves instructors with an additional role; not only as facilitators but as resource persons.

Keywords: Problem-based learning, experiential learning, context, co-creation of knowledge, learning processes, deep learning, blended learning, peer learning, shared learning, fieldtrip

Introduction

"We had some assumptions before going to Cuba. A pre-understanding of Cuba, but when we actually got into the context, we had to adapt to it in a radical way – not just small changes but a whole new way of thinking, which was good. And it helped to shape our semester project" (Student E, March 30th 2017)

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These are the words of an Aalborg University student, who went on a trip to Cuba arranged by the Master Programme at Tourism Studies at Aalborg University-Copenhagen (henceforth AAU). Our paper uses fieldwork the authors conducted before, during and after taking the students to Cuba. The purpose of the trip was twofold: one purpose was for the students to work with a challenge set by a North American tourism organisation. Students were expected to prepare a consultancy report on how to innovate existing tourism products in a sustainable way for the organisation, with recommendations within different fields. The second purpose was to give students possibilities for gathering data for a 15 ECTS point written project at the university, evaluated at an oral group exam at the end of the semester. The trip was a part of an 'Innovation Camp', which has been common for master students of the Tourism Programme at AAU to participate in. The 'Innovation Camp' is designed to move the learning experience from classroom to 'real life' environment. AAU teaching is heavily inspired by the Problem-Based-Learning model' (PBL), and through their education at AAU, students are used to this form of learning through working with semester projects on 'real life problems' in project groups and using field work as an embedded method in their studies (Kolmos et.al. 2004; Chemi and Krogh 2017).

The paper discusses how and why taking students on study tours with an academic *and* practical purpose can rise academic levels by qualifying students' reflections and experiences. This leads to an awareness among students to take responsibility for own learning process which will be of use after graduation (Yorke 2006; Gomez-Lanier 2017; Chemi and Krogh 2017).

We base our theoretical point of departure on the importance of experiencing as an element in the process of learning (Kolb 1984; Dewey, 1938; Atkinson and Murrell 1988, Kolb and Kolb 2009; Chemi and Krogh 2017) and we will discuss experiential learning in the context of the trip to Cuba. Our main research interest is to analyse how context demands, and assists in shaping, the co-creation of knowledge in PBL.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning

Learning as a dynamic process is central to Experiential Learning Theory, because engaging students in processes enhance their learning (Kolb and Kolb 2009; Kolb 2014). We have found inspiration in Kolb's model of Experimental Learning (fig.1): Transformation in the learning process starts within the learner's immediate experience, which through the learning process transforms to observations and reflections. These observations and reflections are, again through the learning process, condensed into a conceptual and/or theoretical discovery, which presents itself through learning, and ideally, this new theory/concept/finding can be operationalised and 'tested' in order to create new experiences or observations. It is a spiral process (Kolb 2014:61), where each new beginning signifies a higher level of abstraction in the learning process.

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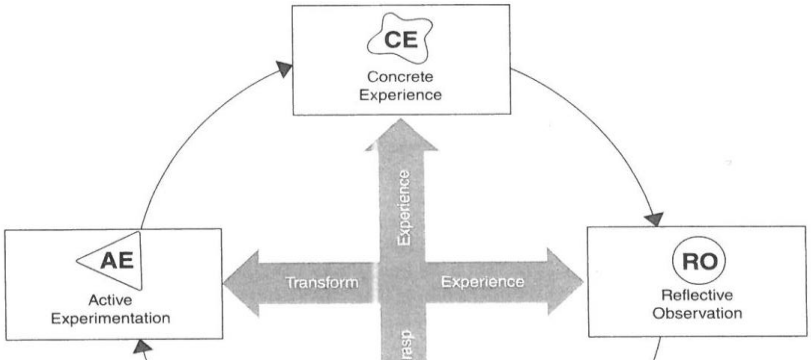

Figure 1. Kolb's Learning Circle (Kolb 2014:51)

Experiential learning theory is itself a process, since new aspects are added and it is critiqued and discussed widely in academic literature on learning (Kolb and Kolb 2009:63; Kolb 2014: 52). Vince criticises the learning circle for being too broad: "Part of the broad attraction of the cycle is that it accommodates both deductive (moving from abstract concepts to testing their implications) and inductive (concrete experience leading to reflective practice) approaches to theory in [..] education, thereby providing a bridge over the divide between objectivity and subjectivity, positivism and phenomenology" (Vince 1998:306).

Kolb and Kolb (2005) analyses what happens in the process of experiential learning as 'deep experiential learning' and argues for why curricula should be accommodated, so students can obtain this form of learning: "Such deep learning is facilitated by deliberate, recursive practice on areas that are related to the learner's goals (Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs 2002). The process of learning depicted in the experiential learning cycle describes this recursive spiral of knowledge development. Space needs to be created in curricula for students to pursue such deep experiential learning in order to develop expertise related to their life purpose" (Kolb and Kolb 2005:208). Learning in teams (groups of students) is central in experiential learning. "To learn from their experience, teams must create a conversational space where members can reflect on and talk about their experience together" (Kolb and Kolb 2009:52). Kolb and Kolb argue that teams develop by following the experiential learning cycle (2009:53), and this argument develops further within the problem based learning literature (Egelund Holgaard 2017; Chemi and Krogh 2017)

Problem Based Learning (PBL)

Teaching at Aalborg University is based on problem-based learning (PBL) through project work. "The main idea beyond both project work and problem-based learning is to emphasise learning instead of teaching. Learning is not like pouring water into a glass; learning is an active process of investigation and creation based on the learners' interest, curiosity and experience and should result in expanded insights, knowledge and skills" (Kolmos 1996:141). Problem orientation is

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central within problem-based learning. Problem orientation is taking its point of departure in theories, methods and knowledge related to a specific problem identified by students. Thus, students are participants in the learning process by identifying a problem and choosing the methods and theories they will apply (Chemni and Krogh 2017). In PBL, students are 'self-directed learners' (Egelund Holgaard et al. 2017) taking on responsibilities for their own learning. Professors are facilitators and supervisors – or resource persons, as we argue for in our analysis here. Another key concept is collaborative and co-creative learning (Chemi and Krogh 2017). The co-creation of knowledge, in our case, is between students and professors in the initial phase of preparing for the trip and students among each other during their fieldwork by use of shared files and group meetings – informal and formal.

Cross disciplinary learning

Gomez-Lanier (2017) discusses how taking students on study tours increases their level of reflection. Through study tours, students are able to use tools learned in class for projects, working with fashion designers on two different study tours to New York and China.

Bosman and Dredge (2014) discuss how presenting students with 'real life problems' crossing disciplinary divides enhance and strengthen their analytical skills in solving problems of planning management in different sectors (here tourism, environmental planning, economic development and land-use planning). Bosman and Dredge did their research over time by studying consecutive classes of students doing studio teaching (and learning). This teaching model was "a holistic post-disciplinary studio teaching approach which has self-directed problem-based learning about 'real' problems as its central feature" (2014:276).

Smith et al suggest the notion of 'blended learning', in their case by the use of mobile technology, to "augment and mediate the way people learn in new places; allowing not only for 'learning on the go' but also opening up new forms of learning that follow from direct experience" (Smith et al 2017:2). Our paper discusses approaches to do this by way of experiential learning, in our context; PBL, inspired by Dewey (1938) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model. Another important skill in PBL is the ability to learn 'how to do' as opposed to 'learning about' (Blichfeldt et al 2017). Being both cross- and interdisciplinary is an important element in PBL. Dredge and Bosman argue that professionals, in their case within tourism planning, must be able to cope in very different circumstances addressing a number of issues: "The education of future professionals who have responsibility for managing complex, dynamic landscapes must extend beyond narrow fields and disciplinary divides" (Bosman & Dredge 2014).

Background and Case Description

The study programmes at AAU involve classroom lectures based on curriculum, evaluated by an exam, and semester projects written in student groups of 2-6 persons.. Both lectures and teaching for semester projects is based on PBL. During semester projects, students are in charge of decisions within the project groups, they are responsible for own learning, and a supervisor from

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the academic staff is allocated to each project group. The projects are evaluated during an oral group exam with the supervisor and an external examiner.

Learning within PBL is 'self-directed', meaning that students (ideally) are in charge of their own learning process. PBL requires a different curricula structure than lecture-based courses, indicating that semesters have a different outline than lecture-based university teaching (Kolmos 1996). In our case, PBL meant integrating a trip to Cuba in the curriculum and schedule. Students were encouraged to take charge of what they decided to be important for their learning process and production of outcomes (tasks and semester projects). The students are from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds, and bring with them their own contexts and learning resources. AAU students' awareness of their own background increases significantly while being on fieldwork in a different context, which also forms part of their learning process:

"*… We thought that we would go there and do some research and be able to tell Cubans how 'the real tourism industry should be' but we really learned a lot more than we could teach them. It was different from what we expected"* (Student K, June 6th, 2017).

Being away from the classroom and having new roles as both researchers and consultants, simultaneously gathering material for semester projects and reports, created new learning processes for students who are used to staying within the university, and defining their roles in that context.

The notion of 'work-ready graduates' (Gomez-Lanier 2017) is an important issue for university programmes today. It calls for new ways of teaching and learning to equip graduate students with tools to facilitate their way from university to first job. We designed a learning process where university students went on the field trip in order to use their capabilities within their field of studies thereby increasing their work-readiness. In other words; instead of bringing the world into the classroom, we brought the classroom (students) into the world, as discussed in the work by Smith et al (2017).

The Trip

We were inspired by different attempts at altering learning contexts (Gomez-Laniér 2017; Bosman and Dredge 2014; Smith et al 2017), when we took students to Viñales, Cuba, to do fieldwork based on a challenge posed by a North American non-governmental organisation with the goal of creatingsuggestions for innovative sustainable tourism activities in the town. Thus, this was more than a 'study tour' arranged by professors. The organised part of the trip consisted of providing the students with an introduction to a selected segment of tourism stakeholders in Viñales upon arrival. This more pragmatic approach made it possible for the students to engage with the location/field immediately. We did this because of our specific context in Cuba, which, in this case, required a little more preparation from professors, than is normally seen within PBL, where initiatives are almost completely dependent on student initiative. Despite these special circumstances, we will argue that the major part of fieldwork was left for the students to make own encounters. The students were supposed to use acquired knowledge from their university courses/modules before arriving in order to solve the challenge set by the tourism organisation.

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Furthermore, they could benefit from conducting fieldwork which related to research for their semester project.

The students who travelled to Cuba consisted of 17 8th semester graduate students from AAU. The Tourism Programme is taught in English so the group of students consisted of both Danish and international students. Five of the students speak Spanish, but since we went to tourist areas, which are investing in the tourism industry, many people there spoke English, so students were able to communicate with most Cubans in the small town. All in all the students had 10 days for their work.

Before coming to Cuba, the professors had given lectures on topics relevant for the fieldwork on social entrepreneurs, tourism market strategies, community development and qualitative methods. Thus, students came prepared academically. Coming back to Denmark, the students presented results from their reports to the organisation setting the challenge, and to the Cuban Ambassador in Copenhagen. Thus, students had a 'real life' challenge to solve in addition to gathering material for their semester projects.

Students lived in smaller groups in the villages' 'Casas Particulares', which are private owned family houses, which have obtained a licence from the state to operate as bed and breakfasts for tourists.

There are different types of Casas Particulares, and in Viñales they are located throughout the village and the rural areas closest to the village. AAU students were using their experiences in the Casas as part of their fieldwork, since some of them were studying this particular type of tourist housing. They all shared knowledge obtained as tenants in the Casas.

Method

Students divided into groups (of their own choice and according to research interest) before going to Cuba. We interviewed the students before leaving for Cuba about their expectations for the trip through open written questions, and through discussions in class.

During the trip, sum-up sessions took place every afternoon, which we recorded for field data. At the sum-up sessions, we were discussing academic and practical experiences after a day of fieldwork, and the students' own experience of their learning process. Students knew, before arriving to Cuba, that we were doing research on experiential and problem based learning (Kolb and Kolb 2005, Kolb and Kolb 2009, Chemi and Krogh 2017) and they accepted that we could use data from our research for dissemination.

Part of the purpose of the trip was, as mentioned above, to deliver results to a partner, the North American non-governmental tourism organisation, who had asked for reports on different topics related to sustainable tourism in Viñales. The North American organisation was a stakeholder setting a 'real life task' for the students (Bosman and Dredge 2014). After coming back to Copenhagen, the students knew that they were expected to present findings to the Cuban ambassador to Denmark, another stakeholder. When the students had delivered their recommendations to the organisation and presented their product to the Cuban Ambassador in

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Copenhagen (at an event at AAU), we interviewed them about their learning experiences when engaging with non-university collaborators. These interviews were video-recorded and transcribed.

After the students' project exams in June, we interviewed them about their expectations and experiences about the study tour related to their project work (and results) and to expectations for after-university work-life. We recorded and transcribed the interviews. We have used the material gathered for our research project in our teaching, and we have engaged student instructors, who participated in the trip to Cuba, as instructors in our classes. This way, new students on semesters following the Cuba trip semester have benefitted from the material we gathered and used as professors, as well as gaining from peer-to-peer learning by older students teaching parts of the classes. In general, the process has been an ongoing learning and research one within PBL (Chemi and Krogh 2017).

Discussion and Findings

Learning processes

During the trip to Cuba, students did not only learn from individual experiences and reflections of these experiences, which Kolb refers to in the experiential learning circle (Kolb 1984). They also learned by being divided into smaller work groups, or teams (Kolb and Kolb 2009), and by sharing their experiences during afternoon sessions where all students and professors participated on equal terms. To illustrate this point, one student commented when asked to reflect on the trip after she has come back to Denmark:

"*This was the first time for me collaborating in this way. Not [the first time] collecting my own data but how to work in a big group of people, all working with the same subject, but collecting different types of data, discussing it and then reflecting upon the interpretations and how it has actually been perceived by different people" (Student H March 30th 2017).*

Students who went to Cuba did not only experience a process of learning by experiment. We argue that they took this learning to a new level, since being in a new context and being challenged on preconceived notions not only strengthened their learning process but constructed a new experience (Vince 1998).

"You really have to experience the destination to understand 'what is this location', 'who are these people', 'what is the situation here'. And without understanding the context you cannot even begin to produce anything, like a product or report" (Student C June15th, 2017).

We saw this during afternoon sessions where students after two or three days began to reflect, not only on their daily experience with gathering data, but also began to link their observations to theories presented in class before the trip and to the theories we presented for them during mini-lectures during the first days in Cuba. The level of abstraction was thus formed by three elements: Lectures in Copenhagen before going, lectures given while being situated in the context, including students' own observations and reflections doing their fieldwork, and not the least, discussing their

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observations with each other during afternoon sessions. During these afternoon sessions we experienced a rather steep learning curve when it comes to gaining blended and situated knowledge (Smith et al 2017). Throughout the first session, we facilitated by directing questions to the students' presentations, trying to make them reflect on their experiences as researchers. This was done because we had limited time in Viñales. Ideally students would have had more time to reach new levels of abstraction by themsemves, but due to the context we had to guide them somewhat in the beginning. For instance, we asked directly about their experiences that day, and who they had been talking to, and if they had any challenging experiences. They continued discussing among themselves; not all agreeing on the different experiences, but this only spurred more discussions among students as the field work progressed. Our impression is that students during these first days acted more as tourists, they had not become aware of their own biases yet e.g. wondering about why the guides did not perform or provide the way they as tourists expected. Rather, they discussed whether it was nice or annoying experiences they have had during the day. They did not discuss further or challenge these experiences at this stage. They admitted later, that this had in fact been the case.

However, the third day our role during the afternoon sessions changed to being resource persons that students would consult during the discussions they had with each other about material gathered that day. As resource persons, we were, to a larger degree, encouraging the students (rather than asking them questions) to follow up on their doubts of asking informants about their views and ideas. This was to give the students time and opportunity to let the contexts 'capture' them, and to bring in the awareness that the people they met have very different attitudes and knowledge about tourism. Moreover, they were driven by curiosity and asked each other about impressions or ideas regarding specific thoughts related to a theoretical issues. The situations and information the students presented the first couple of days had equal importance, they were rather un-critical and had too little selection of key factors, whereas students the third day began to use theoretical concepts in their discussion about, for example, the entrepreneurial skills, social capital and collectivity they discovered among people in Viñales. Statements like "people know how to manage", "they are sharing resources" were heard combined with use of concepts like 'social capital', 'entrepreneurship' and 'community development'.

"We also discussed limitations and creativity because they have a lot of limitations here resource-wise and politically speaking but that also leads to a lot of creativity, as we can see around here. You see some creative solutions because they are limited in the way they can do things (…) They are a local, integrated community but they also know how to use the resources they have, what they have on hand" (group session March 7th 2017).

So students had begun to analyse their results during discussions in the afternoon. They also challenged their existing knowledge about methodology, as well as theoretical knowledge, realising, for instance, the difficulties in conducting an interview due to the Cuban worklife in a tourism setting. Cubans are not able to(?) pause for half an hour or one hour to answer questions and the students then had to rethink their knowledge acquired from scholarly literature. Observations and reflections created formation of abstract concepts and generalisations, which again leads to testing new concepts (and methods), creating a new level by knowing what matters

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and by gaining an understanding of the field's complexities (Kolb 1984; Kolb and Kolb 2009; Vince 1998, Gomez-Lanier 2017). Students build on these analytical skills after returning to Dennmark through working on their semester projects. Contemplating on what being in a 'real life' context meant for students' understanding and whether this was reflected in their semester project, a students says:

"I would say yes because we could elaborate on our project more and think through the theories, what could be relevant for us and what could be relevant for the analysis. So, we changed our theories and decided on our research approach. We actually changed the basic idea of the project." (Student L, June 16th 2017)

As resource persons, we realised that another push was necessary to inform their discussion within this specific field (Cuba). The context was challenging for students and we decided that we had to take on a more active role in order to facilitate the students' self-directed learning, by informing them about certain aspects of the 'Cuban reality'. The development perspective was particularly interesting, and one of the teachers gave a mini lecture on development perspectives creating a more complex understanding of reality for the students, and thereby pushing them into further reflections about the Cuban practices and societal structures. These gentle pushes from resource persons contribute to an engaging environment by broadening the understanding of the context they were part of:

"You really have to experience the destination to understand 'what is this location', 'who are these people', 'what is the situation here'. And without understanding the context you cannot even begin to produce anything, like a product or report" (Student C, June 15th 2017).

Our findings fall in line with Gomez-Lanier's observations (2017) of increased level of reflection when students go on study tours. However, we argue that the students not only took concepts to 'the real world' and got a new understanding of reality. Students also learned to work analytically with concepts – and criticise them after going back to the university working with their semester projects. When asked whether the trip to Cuba and presenting results to stakeholders helped students gain specific skills or understandings in the PBL process, one student answers:

"Yes. Making the [semester] project has made us reflect on how the PBL approach has affected our project, our work, the empirical data we have collected, our pre-understanding and more. So, we have been in touch with the context both while in Cuba and while handling our data and doing our analysis".(Student E, June 15th 2017)

Cross-disciplinary learning (Bosman & Dredge) gives students important knowledge:

"I have realised to a higher degree that of course all the areas and subjects that we have dealt with these past two semesters exist in any career choices that you might make. You will never just choose 'I want to work with policy'; everything will be a part of it. So, you might choose a focus but you have to have a wide knowledge of all the subject matters" (Student C June 15th 2017).

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Sharing knowledge

Our experience during the trip to Cuba was that students were gradually entering into the process of deep learning. After several days of fieldwork they themselves realised, that they had gotten to another level of insight. As outlined above, this was based on their knowledge of theories and concepts presented to them before going, and during, their stay in Viñales. But it was also based on insights obtained during afternoon sessions, where they discussed among themselves, shared knowledge and insights, and thus obtained deeper learning (Kolb & Kolb 2005). One student commented during an afternoon session that the first couple of days he perceived himself as a tourist when he went around in Viñales. After some days, he had obtained insights into the context and was using his analytical skills. He says, as a group they were to a higher degree perceiving themselves as researchers (Student B – afternoon session March 5th 2017). This is revealed in the following quote from a presentation during an afternoon session the fourth day:

"[…[We talked about […] different understandings of expectations. With the tours, for example, we expect a two-hour tour and then we are given a four-hour tour. For them, it may be a good service to provide but for us it may be annoying (…) there can be differing understandings between what the tourist actually wants and what the host thinks that the tourist wants" (Student B, group session March 7th 2017).

This is an example of the process of learning, in particular deep learning (Kolb & Kolb 2005), and sharing of knowledge, which in our experience is difficult to reach in the classroom when meeting stakeholders there. The last days during the afternoon session, students were divided into groups to discuss specific theoretical concepts, and how their experiences and information could inform these. After 30 minutes, they presented their ideas to peers and discussed further, all the time going back and forth exchanging, contesting and challenging each other's information and observations made during the whole week. That way we aimed to capture or push them towards deep learning. We argue that students gain deep learning through an engaging environment of fieldwork, co-creation and knowledge sharing amongst themselves over a longer period. We did not 'lead' this process. Instead, we created a learning environment, which enabled students to be in charge of their own learning process, taking it to new depths. Therefore our role shifted from instructors to resource persons as the days went on. An observation made by one of the authors illustrates this: Students were living in Casas Particulares quite close to each other and often met on the porches of a Casa. One night, passing by a casa, where students were gathered, one of the authors overheard them discuss a mini-lecture on the concept of 'development' given the same morning. Students were discussing the implications of 'development', what it meant to a place like Viñales and how the concept could be used to comprehend what they were experiencing there.

"Being in Cuba was the most informative experience of the 8th semester and it gave us the opportunity to see how theory does not always apply to real life. It taught me more than only attending class did" (Student K, March 30th 2017).

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"It gave us a lot of information, which you cannot find in any literature or look up. It also gave us knowledge about the importance of always trying to 'go local' and engage as much as possible with the locals. Since our research focused on casas particulares and the community, it was very good to be able to go there and be a part of it" (Student J, March 30th 2017).

Taking the classroom to the world (Smith et al. 2017) can thus challenge (and improve) students' learning process, since students acquire new knowledge – and share it with each other (not necessarily with the professors). This is also the case after returning to the university, where students shared documents through file share, giving all project groups access to the material gathered in Cuba.

'Learning by doing'

The notion of 'work-ready graduates' (Gomez-Lanier 2017; Yorke 2006) is important for university programmes. It calls for new ways of teaching and learning to equip graduate students with tools to facilitate their way from university to first jobs. We designed a learning process where university students went on the field trip in order to use their capabilities within their field of studies. In other words; instead of bringing the world into the classroom, we brought the classroom (students) into the world, as discussed in the work by Smith et al (2017). Smith et al suggest the notion of 'blended learning', in their case by the use of mobile technology, to "augment and mediate the way people learn in new places; allowing not only for 'learning on the go' but also opening up new forms of learning that follow from direct experience" (Smith et al 2017:2). This paper has discussed ways to do this by way of experiential learning, in our context; PBL, inspired by Dewey (1938) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, and suggestions to expand this learning model (Vince 1988; Kolb and Kolb 2009; Smith et al 2017). Another important skill in PBL is the ability to learn 'how to do' as opposed to 'learning about' (Blichfeldt et al 2017; Chemi and Krogh 2017). Being interdisciplinary is an important element in PBL (Egelund Holgaard et al.). Dredge and Bosman argue that professionals, in their case within tourism planning, must be able to cope in very different circumstances addressing a number of issues: "The education of future professionals who have responsibility for managing complex, dynamic landscapes must extend beyond narrow fields and disciplinary divides" (Bosman & Dredge 2014)

Key skills and core competences are essential to university education. Key skills are defined both in the description of education programmes on university homepages and in description of courses students can chose from during their education. However, these skills are in many cases obtained during classroom teaching. We argue, in line with others (Bosman & Dredge 2014, Blichfeldt et al 2017, Gomez-Lanier 2017), that skills are best obtained through real life experiences, where students have hands-on experience with solving problems and obtaining new insights. However, in our experience, it is important for students to have some knowledge about the place they are about to enter as their 'field'. Before going to Cuba, students already had lectures on topics like sustainable tourism, community based tourism, pro-poor tourism and entrepreneurship. This helped in their analytical understanding of the 'reality' experienced in Viñales. On the other hand, it also showed students, that you only reach a certain step in the analytical process using desk-

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studies. Having theoretical and conceptual insights do not always help you when you are in a new context. When asked what the visit to Cuba did for her learning process, one student answered:

"I feel like it turned things around. […] It really highlighted the importance of context because you can read texts but you cannot necessarily apply them in all contexts." (Student J, March 30th 2017)

Students thus obtained a more holistic perspective on all the complexities involved in studying tourism in Viñales.

"Well, the first one is, as already mentioned, that the theory does not fit with Cuba and that was the main problem the whole time we did this. We always had to reconfigure the theories or broaden them so they were to fit more … all the time critiquing them. I think that was the biggest challenge." (Student D 15th of June, 2017)

and

"Being hands-on with the cases, how to approach the cases and adapt to the cases and the situated contexts. I think that will be a useful skill later on because you may have a lot of ideas while you sit at your desk and do theoretical work but when you get into a context, you have to learn to adapt to it, how to handle it and take care of it" (Student E, 15th of June, 2017)

Our experience as professors, and later resource persons, in this process was seeing the students grow not only within a learning context/process but also in their self-esteem. By the end of the fieldwork, several students said that it had given them a lot of confidence to be able to openly discuss doubts, suggestions and ideas without feeling "foolish" or shy, as the context was different for all the students and everybody asked questions. They would certainly not be shy to ask questions in the future, not even in the classroom, where it before often had been very difficult to ask, what they themselves thought as "stupid" questions.

Concluding Remarks

So, does taking the classroom into the world make a difference for student learning? According to one of the AAU students it certainly does:

"Yes, because in school we mainly work with sustainability theory whereas in Cuba, while talking to people about sustainability and while writing the project, looking into the policies and the knowledge we got from Cuba … we learned how it really worked in reality. In my opinion, I learned the importance of thinking in a bottom-up kind of way, to also include community members in decision-making processes" (Student M, 15th of June 2017)

This paper has focused on the discussion of how students learn. According to our research, students learn by doing, much in line with Kolb's model for experiential learning. However, we argue that learning is more than an individual process beginning from concrete experience towards observations and reflections, followed by formation of abstract concepts and generalisations to

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testing implications of concepts in new situations, which again leads to a new form of concrete experience (Kolb's Learning Circle). We argue that students gain by learning and sharing knowledge in groups in a different/engaging context (not university classrooms) in line with Kolb and Kolb's arguments of team learning (2009). We suggest including peer learning and reflections as part of the circle in line with Kolb and Kolb's expansion of the model (2009). We distinguish between team learning (learning together in teams) and peer learning (learning from each other). We argue that peer learning (in groups) is opening up for further reflections, since the students use each other to take knowledge and learning to a new level, which they could not have obtained had they been alone in the process. Students learn to cooperate in groups. They become aware of research methods by discussing among each other and by realising that different study-groups have different perspectives on the same material.

By changing and unfolding learning environments, we do not suggest taking students on field trips to an exotic context in order to succeed. Creative learning environments can be established on many levels. An attractive context does not necessarily need to be a town in Cuba, more importantly, it must be an engaging context for the students – which encourages inspiration and allows them to engage in a context in order to understand the different challenges in solving or analysing a certain 'problem'. Two students put it like this:

"I think our [semester] project specifically shows how context is so important, having a specific problem. As our project also dealt with, the existing theories do not really fit very well so in this case context was so important. Having a specific case to work with was really important" (Student D 15th of June, 2017).

And:

"I think a very important part of our [semester project] is the methodology section. Not because of the traditional methodology we are learning from books but actually being able to, in a classroom, explain how it is once you get into to the field. So, it is fine to be sitting at home reading about how to do an interview or how to do participant observation but then getting there you realise that everything changes when you are in a new cultural setting." (Student H, June 5th 2017).

"Getting there" can be anywhere – in the world outside the classroom.

Key Findings and Future Research

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is essential for our work as researchers and professors at AAU. We find that it is necessary to develop PBL continually and our experiment in Cuba has brought us new insights on how to challenge and revise PBL teaching and work.

We presented *experiential learning theory* and Kolb's learning circle as our main theoretical inspiration for this article. The learning circle is widely discussed (see f.ex. Kolb and Kolb 2009; Kolb 2014), but we will argue that the elements in Kolb's model provide a suitable theoretical

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framework for our analysis once we locate the learning circle within peer and shared learning and reflections. This will not challenge the circle but, we argue, add to the use of the circle as an ideal type for learning.

Collaboration with *stakeholders and graduates' work readiness* are important in PBL. By working with real life tasks in Cuba addressing results to stakeholders outside the university environment, students have used their learning process and the resulting outcomes in preparation for problem solving in their post-university work life.

We have underlined the importance of *context* in learning processes. This is relevant both in classrooms and outside classrooms. Experiencing a new environment opens up for new insights, but these are not of much relevance unless students are aware of the specific context within which they are located. We argue that resource persons/supervisors must create a basis for understanding context in order for students to accomplish informed analyses, especially when there is limited time for fieldwork, as was the case for students going to Viñales.

In the case discussed in this paper, we took students to Cuba. In future research we would like to unfold insights obtained in different settings, not necessarily 'exotic' places. What is important is that students are away from the comfort zones, which universities present to them.

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