

DISCOVER INDIA: An Immersive Experience for Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

In higher education the need for engaging outside the classroom in an immersive experience cannot be emphasized enough for students to understand and wet their feet in the realities of the world. In the contemporary world of today, students have to be quick learners, absorbing and processing the changes of the ever-evolving work and life environment. Experiential learning can help bridge the gap between theoretical understanding that occurs in the classroom and learning the practicalities of life. Immersion at the grassroots and in the world outside the four walls of the university brings in newer perspectives and lenses to view the world.

This article delineates the contours of experiential learning at FLAME university – the Discover India Program. This program is a mandatory four credits co-curricular program which engages students outside the university by providing them an immersive experience in exploring the real India. We have 170 plus research projects undertaken by students over the past decade. Undergraduate students actively engage in researching any aspect of Indian society and culture by designing research, conducting on-field data collection and analyzing the data for a constructive report on the chosen topic. Their field immersion is supervised and guided by a faculty mentor and the faculty mentors help the students navigate the research as well as the field experience.

This article will also highlight the changes which had to be made to the Discover India Program during the COVID-19 pandemic and will examine the ways in which students had to make do with the restricted learning without the actual on field experience.

KEY WORDS

Experiential Learning, Educational Travel, Field Immersion, Student Research

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions over the last few decades have consistently undergone rapid change to keep up with the fast-paced, technology-driven, dynamic world of today. In higher education the need to engage outside the classroom for an immersive experience for students has been emphasized to understand and wet their feet in the realities of the world. In the contemporary world, students must be quick learners, absorbing and processing the changes of the ever-evolving work and life environment. Experiential learning can help bridge the gap between the theoretical understanding that occurs in the classroom and learning and understanding the practicalities of life. Immersion at the grassroots and in the world outside the four walls of the university/college brings in newer perspectives and lenses to view the society we live in.

In 1984, David Kolb, an educational theorist, developed an experiential learning module. He believed that any new learning can be drawn from new experiences. He introduced a four-stage learning module that many universities including Ivy League colleges like Harvard implement. The stages include Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation of That Experience, Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation (McLeod 2023). This learning process helps a learner understand a concept of any lesson by themselves, and they are merely guided by the educator, while the experience is truly their teacher. Kolb strongly advocated the need for experiential learning programs across the world. Harvard Professors even customize Kolb's four stages to meet their program outcome requirements (Austin 2021). Many such programs can hone the student's ability to face real-world challenges. Even if the student fails at a task in any experiential program, they are equipped to face failures in the outside world. It is no longer about success or failure, for Kolb it is about learning from any experience that can result in a concrete conceptual understanding.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Higher Education, apart from a degree-offering sector, provides access to jobs, and is a gateway to the world which is likely to offer a stable life. Higher education prepares students to face the realities of work life in addition to becoming socially conscious, knowledgeable citizens, and the key to this is a holistic education. Higher education must aim to develop thoughtful and well-rounded individuals. Many universities across the globe highlight a holistic educational experience with job-ready skills. How can these be achieved within a short span of in-class teaching-learning experiences? Learning theories and reading about society will not suffice to gain an in depth understanding of work and its culture. Students need to be able to practice and hone their skills in a real-time situation. There are specialized degree programs that may not encourage college students to engage with the outside world while they study, which is why immersive experiences are essential to enable students to experience the real world outside the "walled" college education. Experiential learning is an immersive learning process whereby students "learn by doing" and reflect on their experience. Experiential learning activities can include, but are not limited to, hands-on laboratory experiments, internships, practicums, field exercises, study abroad, undergraduate research and studio performances. Well-planned, well-supervised and well-assessed experiential learning programs can stimulate academic inquiry by promoting interdisciplinary learning, civic engagement, career development, cultural awareness, leadership, and other professional and intellectual skills.

THE DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM AT FLAME UNIVERSITY

The Discover India Program, the experiential learning program at FLAME University, was designed to provide an immersive experience for students undertaking their undergraduate studies. The objectives of this program are (i) to enable students to explore and understand aspects of the

cultural-historical, ecological heritage of India and equally, to understand nuances associated with its unique social and economic institutions, livelihood practices and ways of life; (ii) to develop a critical approach to studying aspects of society; (iii) to introduce students to research methods; (iv) to train students in team-work and group strategy; (v) to enable students to communicate and present data in creative ways; (vi) to train students in methods of project formulation, written and visual documentation and presentation. This program was designed to connect students to the historical and socio-cultural realities of India with a focus on exploring and experiencing diverse aspects of Indian society such as communities, habitat, wildlife, ecology, fine and performing arts, historical monuments and architecture, social customs, religious traditions/practices, festivals, rites, sports, entrepreneurial practices, media, agricultural practices, political systems, etc. The highlight of this program is the field visit to the area of research study and the week-long stay there to collect data while immersing in the real world. Through this program, students learn to connect classroom learning with the real world and draw connections, and this enhances their understanding of the ground realities of society.

This program is a mandatory four-credit co-curricular group-based program for second-year undergraduate students at FLAME University. This program is held concurrently with other courses for second year students. The students actively engage in researching any aspect of Indian society and culture by designing research, conducting on-field data collection and analyzing the data for a constructive report on the chosen topic. In addition to the report the student groups are expected to create a documentary on the topic and to make a final group presentation. Students' field immersion is supervised and guided by a faculty mentor, and with the help of the faculty mentors the students navigate the research as well as the field experience.

Students conduct secondary research and create an extensive literature review before visiting the chosen site to collect primary data and get a first-hand experience of the field. DIP is purely exploratory in nature which allows students to develop critical insights as well as to learn basic methods of project formulation and written and visual documentation. Before they visit the field for their research, students are trained through masterclasses on research methods, ethics in research, account keeping, planning logistics and report writing, and they undertake documentary and photography workshops. Once back from the field, the students are expected to write a research report, create a documentary and give presentations on the researched topics. The significance of preparation before embarking on their field work cannot be emphasized enough. The masterclasses on research methods cover topics on proposal writing, constructing a literature review, research methods both qualitative and quantitative and report writing. The students are encouraged to form groups with members from different disciplines with varied skill-sets as the project is undertaken in groups, with the expectation that each student contributes to the research project. The main requirements of the program are active participation in all stages of the program. The program is announced for students in their second year in September and the final deliverable is in April, so this is an eight-month long course spanning two semesters. The following are brief stages and timelines for the students.

Table 1:

DIP Timeline for Students	
SEPTEMBER	Announcing DIP
	Orientation for Students
	Orientation for Faculty Mentors
OCTOBER	Student-Group Formation, Faculty Mentor-Group Pairing and Topic Submission
	Masterclass 1 – Proposal & Report Writing: Basics

	Masterclass 2 – Conducting Research & Digital Ethnography
NOVEMBER	Masterclass 3 – Qualitative & Qualitative Research Methods
	Masterclass 4 – Research Ethics, Sensitivity & Field Etiquette
	Research Proposal Submission
DECEMBER	Moodle Test on Research methods
JANUARY	Masterclass 5 – Photography
	Masterclass 6 – Documentary Making
	Masterclass 7 – Editing
	Masterclass 8 – DIP Accounts & Logistics Planning
FEBRUARY	Pre-Field Group Presentation
	DIP Fieldwork Week (8-9 days)
MARCH-APRIL	DIP Report Submission
	Documentary Submission
	DIP Finale: Presentations & Documentary Screenings

The field engagement and immersion are 8-9 days which includes a train journey to and from campus to the chosen site which could be in a different state of India. The final deliverables are group based, however the research methods test on Moodle, reflection essay and on-field and off-field contribution are individual grading components. The final presentations and documentary screenings are a university-wide event wherein the extended university community – faculty, students, staff and parents – is invited to witness and encourage students.

Apart from DIP faculty mentors, the DIP committee and the university provide support and facilitate the execution of DIP programs of this scale. The students are expected to do a thorough search for key informants, hospitals and clinics for emergencies, and to be prepared for any exigencies while on field. Though not mandatory depending on the topic and the place where the students conduct their research, students have shared their suggestions as possible policy recommendations with local government bodies or published their reports on platforms for undergraduate research (for example, “Stepping into Patan: A Case Study of Gentrification in Tier-III Cities”, a DIP 2021 project, was published as a paper in ORF [Observer Research Foundation] <https://www.orfonline.org/research/pathways-to-gentrification-in-india/>).

Over the past decade 180 plus research projects have been completed by the students of FLAME University. To illustrate the diversity of topics covered by the students, the following two projects are briefly explained:

Bandhavgarh National Park

Students traveled to this park located in Central India in the state of Madhya Pradesh (2017-2018). The Bandhavgarh National Park is a game preserve turned national park with a rich cultural and mythological past. With conservation of tigers among other wild animals being one of their main goals, it has one of the highest tiger densities in the world. The sociological, ecological and economic impact of the park was analyzed through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, such as members from seven village communities settled in and around the park, forest department officials and local guides. Apart from other research components the report comprised an

understanding of the policy related to National Parks in India and the suggestion of a preservationist approach to human-animal conflict, studied through DIP.

(<https://dip.flame.edu.in/projects/bandhavgarh-national-park-from-guns-to-cameras/>)

Mud and Mirror Work

Students conducted their field research in western India in the Kutch region (2014-2015). Mud and Mirror Work, an art form found in the region of Kutch, is one of the many art forms in a land of varied handicrafts. This research revolved around understanding and documenting the practice and evolution of *Lippan* (the practice of applying a mixture of dung and mud onto various surfaces) and *Chittar Kaam* (mud and mirror) in homes across the communities practicing it. Further, it focused on the cultural contribution of *Chittar Kaam* in the *Rann Utsav* and the role of the government and NGOs in the preservation and promotion of the art form. The report also tried to examine the impact of the 2001 earthquake on the art form and the changes brought to it by the advent of commercialization.

(<https://dip.flame.edu.in/documentaries/>)



Figure 1: Mud and Mirror work in a hut in the village



Figure 2: Students experiencing how embroidery work is done and sold

The program outcomes are met through the process of planning, researching, field trips, collective creation of reports, documentaries and presentations. Getting an opportunity to solve or face on-field challenges and problems and to work in teams despite differences of opinions and differing views are the major advantages of DIP. Students' learning goes beyond the outcomes of the programs and their experiences are unique to the region of study, which cannot be replicated in a virtual format. Can we visualize an experience of this kind without going on field in groups – or indeed, if the world had to face another lockdown, how could we continue to conduct a program of this nature?

EXPERIENTIAL PROGRAMS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: REALIGNING AND MODIFYING THE PROGRAM

The challenges faced by educational institutions when the world was under the lockdown due to COVID-19 impacted the students' learning significantly. Experiential learning suffered greatly while all teaching and learning transitioned to virtual formats. With our university's Discover India Program having to go completely online, the alternative was to continue the group research through desk research and hope that the students would at some point get an opportunity to visit the field. The challenge was to provide some sort of real-life experience, which with the global lockdown seemed next to impossible.

For two years DIP had to be done online without the real-world involvement. Desk research could in no way substitute the on-field practical experience. Moreover, students had to work in groups remotely from their respective homes and that led to a different set of challenges. Students had to manage and come up with practical solutions to remote working conditions. One of the groups, I mentored worked on the Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya with a focus on change and continuity in the community. This region of India lies in the North Eastern part of the country which is generally cut off from rest of the country due to its terrain, and initially the students thought they would end up doing only secondary research. Here is an excerpt written by students who undertook their DIP online. This excerpt is from the FLAME University magazine "IGNITE" in which the students are reflecting on the adjustment and acceptance of the situation in which they were deprived of experiencing field work:

Once we were familiar with the literature and our secondary sources were established, we undertook the search for primary sources. In a world before the pandemic, we would have had the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews. Through on-field immersion, we would have been able to gather information not only through our interviews but also through constant observation of the participants and the surroundings. Being able to visit Meghalaya would've broadened our horizons and allowed us to explore spheres of their community that are indiscernible due to the online nature. Nevertheless, our reality is the pandemic. With the new normal, we resorted to the only option available to us during these times: online interviews. (Tibrewala and Wanigasekera 2021, 21)

The student groups working on different topics remotely were unfortunately not able to experience the program holistically, thereby defeating the very purpose of experiential learning. However, the students managed to conduct secondary research with some online interviews and produced a research report on their chosen topics.

In case, in the future, it is once again impossible to undertake real world immersion, are there alternatives to create similar experiences and learnings? The pandemic led to innovative and alternative ways to combat the challenges of a lockdown. This has led to considering virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) as sources of alternative methods. Can these modes help drive experiential learning and be a substitute for real immersion? They can definitely recreate a scenario

using high-grade graphics and technology almost perfectly and help a student hone their skill-sets in a safe environment. While AR and VR can become the new age experiential learning platforms, this still poses significant drawbacks. It cannot effectively stimulate careers that rely heavily on human interaction. Technology such as AI or AR/VR can be very expensive to implement across the globe, especially in third world countries. Indeed, for all students in India and for developing countries, having access to this technology seems like a distant dream. Yet, many studies point to how immersive technology can result in the attainment of procedural knowledge more effectively. For a better understanding of the stakeholders', teachers', educators' and students' views on this form of immersive learning, more research in the same field is required which can result in data on the implication of VR and its effectiveness in delivering experiential learning better than traditional ways of teaching (Makransky and Petersen 2021). It can also help solve post-pandemic education problems. Most schools are trying to increase the time of learning post-pandemic to make up for the lost time which has resulted in learning fatigue among the students. In fact, most minority students in the U.S. are worried that they have fallen behind in school (Anderson, Faverio and McClean 2022). In India, unfortunately thousands of children did not have access to online learning, given that tablets and smart phones are still luxury goods and not within the reach of common person struggling to survive. Technology can aid and support learning, but cannot substitute learning by experiencing. Experiential learning, now more than ever, can help bridge this unfortunate gap in learning. Through proper experiential learning modules, students can expose themselves to all roles available. If created keeping the objectives and outcomes in mind, experiential learning modules can result in students having to communicate, think critically, collaborate and work on their interpersonal communication and experience team work.

CONCLUSIONS

The Discover India Program has over the years fulfilled several objectives from field immersion to understanding on-field research, from group building and team work to learning how to work within a limited budget and most importantly getting a holistic immersive experience. Based on David Kolb's four stages it is demonstrated that DIP does facilitate concrete experience and reflective observation on that experience through the visit to the field site, wherein students are not only exposed to a different geographical location, but have to navigate the geography, local culture and language (which may be different from their own). Throughout the travel and on-field engagement the students are encouraged to have journals or diaries to record their observations and incorporate these in their reflection essay to be submitted towards the end of the program. The entire experience can be challenging for students as well as the committee facilitating travel and research on such a large scale, however the experiential learning that students receive through this program is invaluable.

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BIOGRAPHY

Poonam Gandhi is an Associate Professor of Sociology at FLAME University in Pune, India. She currently holds the positions of Assistant Dean, Experiential Programs and Chair, International Relations at FLAME University. She has a keen research interest in Sociology of Art and Culture, Sociology of Gender and Family, Urban Heritage, and Social Gerontology. She has to her credit several research papers, chapters in edited books and has published a book, *The World of Contemporary Fine Artists: An exploration in Sociology of Art*. She received the best presentation award at an International Conference held in Washington DC, U.S., and the best research paper award at an international conference on "Women empowerment: Global perspective" in India. She has worked on projects funded by the Ford Foundation, SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) and NACO-National Aids Control Organization. She was a co-investigator for a prestigious project on primary education commissioned by a state government in India. More about her work can be viewed at <https://www.flame.edu.in/faculty/poonam-gandhi>