

# The Transformative Impact of Experiential Learning

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Associate Dean Dianne Bevelander gives her expert insight into why experiential learning is a powerful tool for Executive MBA programs, in this interview with QS TopExecutive Editor Dawn Z Bournand.

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**Dianne Bevelander** is Professor of Management Education and the Associate Dean, MBA Programs at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM). Dianne has held several successful strategic leadership positions and is currently responsible for a multi-million euro revenue portfolio. Her international experience spans the globe, with

successful recruitment initiatives and strategic alliances on every continent. She is a member of the Executive Management Committee of the RSM.

Dianne teaches personal leadership development at the RSM and at various other Business Schools internationally including the OneMBA program. Furthermore, she is leading the drive for Women empowerment at the RSM and increasingly within the broader Erasmus University. Leading through innovation, Dianne designed a Women's only elective at RSM focusing on the empowerment of women aspiring to leadership roles using the mountain (Mount Kilimanjaro) as an outside classroom. She also develops and runs Women in Leadership Executive courses and Master classes. In 2014 she will be launching the Erasmus Centre for Women and Organizations. Furthermore, she is on a number of International Educational Boards and is constantly included in conference organization, keynote addresses and plenary talks. She has an MBA from the University of Cape Town, South Africa and a PhD from the University of Lulea, Sweden.

You have created a retreat for women that is very much an experiential learning adventure. Can you explain what this is exactly and why you chose to offer this opportunity?

The Kilimanjaro Leadership experience is a fantastic women's only leadership elective. The women who participate are pursuing an MBA and have definite career aspirations.

What I have found through my research was that while women connect well to each other in work and team situations, and they also like to socialize with one another, that they prefer to work with men when there was an element of risk involved. So I decided to put an elective together that included a significant element of risk, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. The elective brings together a group of highly intelligent, motivated women who all want to grow into leadership roles. They come from many different business sectors and backgrounds and need to work together to attempt to summit Kilimanjaro – a challenge that definitely involves risk.

This is the fourth year doing the elective is running and it is always insightful. I've gathered substantial data from the participants and will



soon have completed a research paper on the lessons learned and the benefits gained. It is truly a transformational experience. The participants go from the rainforest straight up and in a few days, encounter the ice, the cold, and the barren terrain. They have to sleep in tents. The mountain is the classroom and is used as a metaphor for business. The women work together and lead each other through difficult terrain to push past physical and mental barriers in their trek to the 5,895 meter summit.

Every year since launching the elective we've had men in the MBA classes ask about gender-balanced leadership. Some question why they cannot participate in the elective and suggest their exclusion is discriminatory. But, the core learning for them comes from their questions about gender-balanced leadership and why we were doing the elective. I believe that this is a very good unintended consequence of the project.

### What do you feel you can gain from an experience like this that you can't gain in the classroom?

I'm very much into "experiential learning". Teaching in class can be done in an engaging way using cases, role plays, and the like. This is to be encouraged. However, sometimes we need to go further. We need to create an environment where students have to enact the behaviors we are trying



to develop. If we want our students to become more mindful as leaders, we need them to enact mindfulness! We need to place them in a situation where they experience an emotional attachment to that desired behavior so that the experience stays with them much longer.

**You are using quite a bit of experiential learning at RSM and with the One MBA program. Do**

### you see this becoming a bigger part of education in general?

Absolutely. I think education has to change. You can't put students in a classroom and just lecture to them anymore, even if this involves encouraging classroom dialogue amongst students and with the professors.

We talk about scholarship of engagement and enactment. Students actively engage in learning when you give them a case and you say, "This is what happened in the case. What would you do?" And of course their responses become personal in saying, "Oh, if I was Madeline Assenberg, I would do X, Y, and Z." But, we need to go further. We need to place students in real world contexts or situations where we ask them to take action (enact) rather than just engage with the material. If we cannot always do this then simulations can be employed that have an element of the theory underlying them and that also provide the opportunity to see how students actually behave under the pressure of the simulated environment.

Engagement and, more particularly, enactment improve learning because students better internalize and understand what they experience. With experiential learning students make actual mistakes and see the consequences of their actions. They experience what happens when they are not mindful – this is what truly helps them appreciate the value of considered, reflective processes rather than hasty and instinctive decision-making.

You can actually see it. There's really a change. Experiential learning is more powerful and more sustainable than what might be seen as traditional approaches. If you look at young people today, the way they are learning, through social media, MOOCs, and online videos, it becomes self-evident that we have to really change the classroom.

In twenty years' time, things will have changed even more. Jobs that will be available in twenty years' time—we haven't even thought of yet while some of today's jobs will have disappeared completely. Tomorrow's contributors to organizations and societies will have to be increasingly flexible. We have to teach people about impact. We have to teach people about competencies. These things are important and that's what the whole leadership course at RSM is actually all about and it ends, for those who want to go, with the Mindfulness retreat.

### Let's talk more about the Mindfulness retreat. Can you share a bit about the experiential learning aspect?

The Mindfulness retreat is not for everyone. You



go into a nature reserve in the Karoo that is stunningly beautiful. The nature reserve belongs to Princess Irene (of the Netherlands). Students have access to electricity only two hours a day. There is only vegetarian food—no alcohol, no Wi-Fi, no connection to the outside world. And for a whole week—so you can imagine it is an adjustment for the students. They live in a world where they may know relatively little but where they are always connected to everyone and, seemingly, everything!

Some of them have never been into nature. Some have lived in New York, or in big cities, and maybe seen a bird or squirrel on a tree. And here they are in this absolutely stunningly part of South Africa putting their feet in mud. This is true experiential learning. As leaders they have to understand what impact business has on nature, and here they truly connect with nature. The experience moves them to consider such questions as, "Wow, when I put up a factory somewhere, what are the consequences for the environment around me?" If you've never experienced nature, how can you understand the impact you may have on it—I don't believe you can develop this understanding by reading a book or seeing nature on TV?

I recently took ninety students on another experiential learning trip. As part of the trip the group went into a township in South Africa and worked with micro businesses or NGOs. By working with the micro-businesses and trying to understand the challenges many of these wonderful people face—how they survive, how innovative they are—the students gained a far deeper appreciation of sustainable business. Students loved the experience because they met great people and learned about poverty. They saw the challenges people face at the bottom of the pyramid and also experienced our common humanity. Through experiential learning, they met people who are innovative and creative, and who have a lot of knowledge and insight to transfer. This is transformative for the students.

So, when you put students in a learning situation where they can experience, and even better where they can enact and be mindful while doing so, and where they touch someone else in a positive way or learn from a situation they never envisaged, it is extremely powerful. This is experiential learning at its best.