

Beyond the Classroom: Industry-Mentored Experiential Workshops Transform Interior Design Education

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Abstract

Bridging traditional design education with real-world engagement aims to foster deeper human understanding for post-graduate success in the interior design field. This study examines a series of experiential design workshops facilitated by industry professionals. Conducted outside the traditional studio environment, the workshops attracted students from all academic levels, fostering vertical integration and peer learning. Students collaborated through interdisciplinary teams, framed by a hybrid pedagogical model combining Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Experiential Learning, to design a secondary school facility in the United States. With professionals serving as facilitators and mentors, their involvement grounded the project in true-to-life practice, exposing students to realistic, interconnected design influences, including empathy for the client's needs and the importance of communication while achieving solutions through the creative process. Cross-disciplinary collaboration was embedded through the participation of education student majors portraying the “client” and providing user perspectives and goals. The structure reinforced inclusivity through multiple voices and ethical design practices of active listening and accountability to the user. Assessments from surveys, reflective feedback, and observational data revealed a significant pedagogical impact, with 71% of participants reporting that the workshops influenced their preferred learning style. Qualitative findings showed enhanced understanding of end-user needs, appreciation for multiple perspectives gained through collaborative teamwork, and boosted confidence in managing complex, real-world projects. The study suggests that integrating PBL with experiential, industry-led workshops offers an effective model for an enhanced educational experience: expanding learning beyond the studio, strengthening professional connections, and preparing interior design students for career demands in complex, client-centered practice.

Keywords: project-based learning, experiential learning, interior design, cross-disciplinary collaboration, industry professionals

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Introduction

The aim of an undergraduate educational process is to develop students into professionals. The integration of collaboration between design professionals and academics helps interior design students achieve an appropriate level of core and generic skills critical to success upon graduation (Rashdan, 2017). One opportunity to ensure effective and valuable training for students is to develop positive partnerships with professionals through extracurricular activities (Roberts & Design, 2007).

The purpose of this research is to examine how educators can bridge traditional design education with real-world industry engagement, with the goal of fostering deeper human understanding and interdisciplinary collaborative learning that prepares students for success after graduation. To implement this goal, a series of five experiential design workshops was developed and facilitated primarily by interior and architecture professionals with support from faculty. Over the course of two semesters, undergraduate students from across all class levels of education collaborated in interdisciplinary teams. The study was framed using a hybrid pedagogical model combining project-based learning with experiential learning, and the vehicle for delivery was a current, tangible design challenge provided by industry experts involving the design of a secondary school facility in the United States. The research aims to explore three questions: (1) How does combining project-based learning (PBL) with experiential learning affect student engagement and comprehension in interior design education? (2) In what ways do industry professionals leading design workshops enhance students' transferable, real-world readiness, particularly empathy and client-centered thinking? and (3) Does relocating design learning activities outside the traditional studio environment influence student motivation, creativity, and engagement with the design process?

Literature Review

Experiential Learning in Design Education

Experiential hands-on design studio projects in partnership with industry professionals serve as a pedagogical tool to prepare students for real-world design problems. Literature reveals that learning is maximized when it is self-directed, motivated, and grounded in practical experience that complements formal instruction, particularly when it embraces real-world design (Knowles et al., 2025; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005;). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a framework to illustrate how people learn through experience and how this process supports improvement in one's development (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2026). ELT focuses on transforming experience into knowledge through a cycle of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015). Studies show that problem-solving involved in hands-on learning activities significantly boosts students' creativity and peer-to-peer learning (Ayob et al., 2012; Buchal, 2011; Vail & Ellis, 2023). A case study with interior design students collaborating with a professional design firm to create a museum found that students enhanced their learning through a better understanding of the design process and professional workflows (Asojo & Vo, 2021).

Project-Based Learning as a Pedagogical Tool

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is defined by The Buck Institute for Education (2019) as a method of teaching in which students actively engage in real-world projects. Students build

self-awareness of their own learning by exploring multiple perspectives within a collaborative activity (Tamim & Grant, 2013). From a review of the literature, when compared to direct instruction, a PBL approach in teaching has a more positive impact on students' academic achievement (Guo et al., 2020), increasing learned knowledge and skills (Grossman et al., 2019; Wobbe & Stoddard, 2023). The objectives of PBL are to encourage students to collaborate and engage in in-depth inquiry. This approach promotes the development of creativity and critical thinking skills, as well as connections across different subjects. Promoting active participation through PBL aids students in building relationships with the community and increases job placement (Wobbe & Stoddard, 2023). One study with landscape architecture students engaged in a course integrating PBL found students improved their comprehensive ability and increased their motivation to learn when successfully completing project tasks with group interaction (Xi & Wang, 2022). Student perspectives from an additional research study found that, through the PBL process, their motivation for self-directed learning increased. Plus, the teamwork created collaboration and the exchange of knowledge, with insightful feedback from their peers (Tamim & Grant, 2013). The Buck Institute of Education (2019) created a model to aid educators in evaluating and improving PBL practices to help students reach their learning goals, as outlined in Figure 1, through the use of seven essential elements.

Figure 1

Gold Standard PBL – The Seven Essential Project Design Elements



Note. 2019 Buck Institute for Education

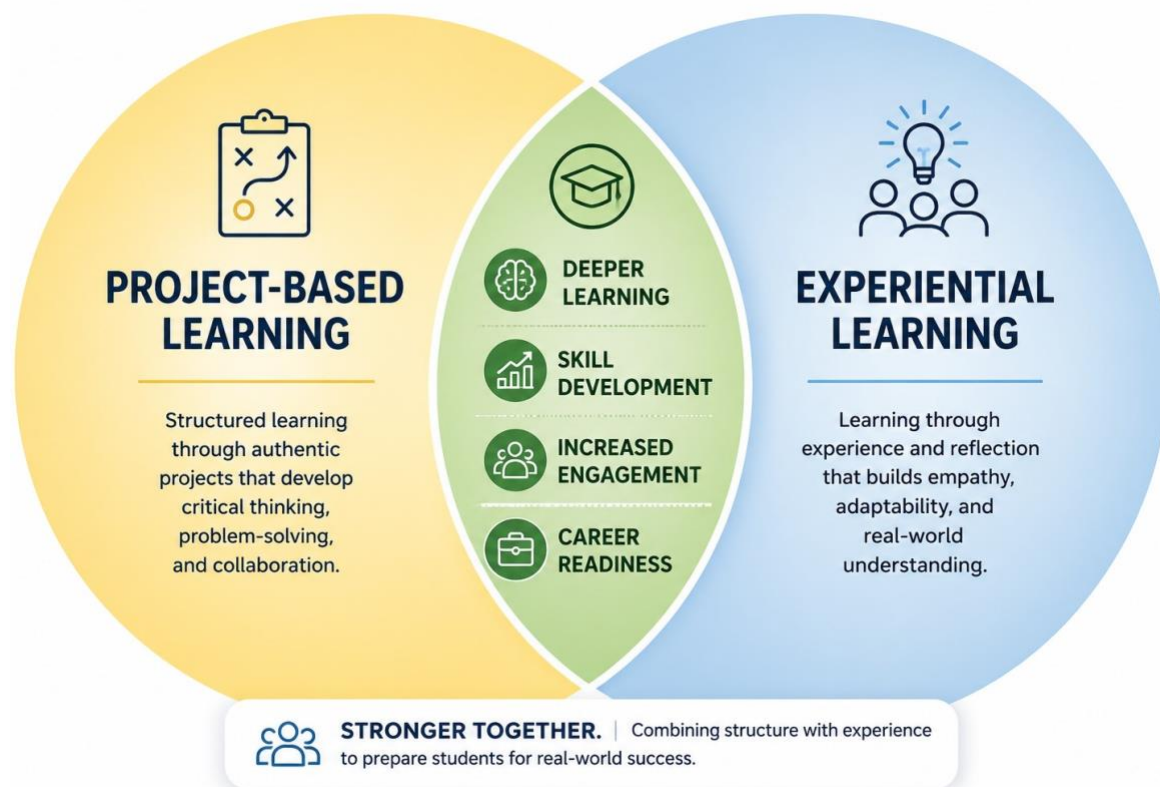
Methodology

Research Design

The study's design was based on Maxwell's (2008) interactive model of qualitative research, which views design as an ongoing process allowing for the researcher's goals, framework, questions, methods and validity to continually interact, rather than a fixed linear line of steps. This qualitative approach allowed the researchers to explore how educators can use a series of industry-led workshops as a framework to answer their research questions surrounding student engagement, motivation, creativity and comprehension of transferable knowledge and skills from classroom to real-world applications. In keeping with previous studies that sought to explore the benefits of experiential learning with industry design professionals engaged in student instruction, this research combined experiential learning and project-based learning into a single coherent model where experiential learning provided the content and context of students working with real-world professionals, clients and constraints, and project-based learning served as the vehicle for a structured project to drive sustained inquiry and creation. Together, as illustrated in Figure 2, they generate deeper learning by connecting theory to practice, developing skills through authentic problem-solving, increasing engagement by tapping into real-world relevance, and building career readiness through industry-relevant exposure.

Figure 2

Outcomes for Combining Project-Based Learning With Experiential Learning Theory



Participants and Context

This study was conducted at a public university in the United States, with students enrolled in an interior design program within a college of visual arts and design. Students participated in

a series of five design workshops, focused on educational design. From the current curriculum, the students had previously been exposed to a generic understanding of corporate commercial design but had little knowledge of the education industry segment. The workshops were led by industry professionals, held over the span of one academic year, independent of any course offering. The professionals guided students through the arc of designing a secondary educational facility and the workshops were structured to mirror the actual phases a professional design team moves through on a real project, including sessions on visioning, space planning, project coordination, selection of furniture, fixtures and finishes, plus branded environments. On average, 50 undergraduate students participated in each workshop, with attendance spread fairly evenly across class levels: 29% first-year, 29% second-year, 13% third-year, and 29% fourth-year students. Leading the workshops, the project partnered with 18 design professionals through the Association for Learning Environments, which is an interdisciplinary design association of architects, interior designers, and engineers. Furthermore, 10 manufacturing and multi-line representatives from the furniture, fixture and finishes industries joined the workshops, bringing physical components to instruct students on the impact of this added layer of reality into the design evolution of an environment. An additional ten students from the university's education, art education, design communication and user experience/user interface programs attended the workshops to serve in the client role for the project and lend their vision, needs and expertise to the design discussion. During the workshops, the researchers recorded observations, and at the conclusion of the series, a survey questionnaire and one-on-one interviews were conducted to capture student participants' learning experiences to address the research questions.

Project Development and Implementation

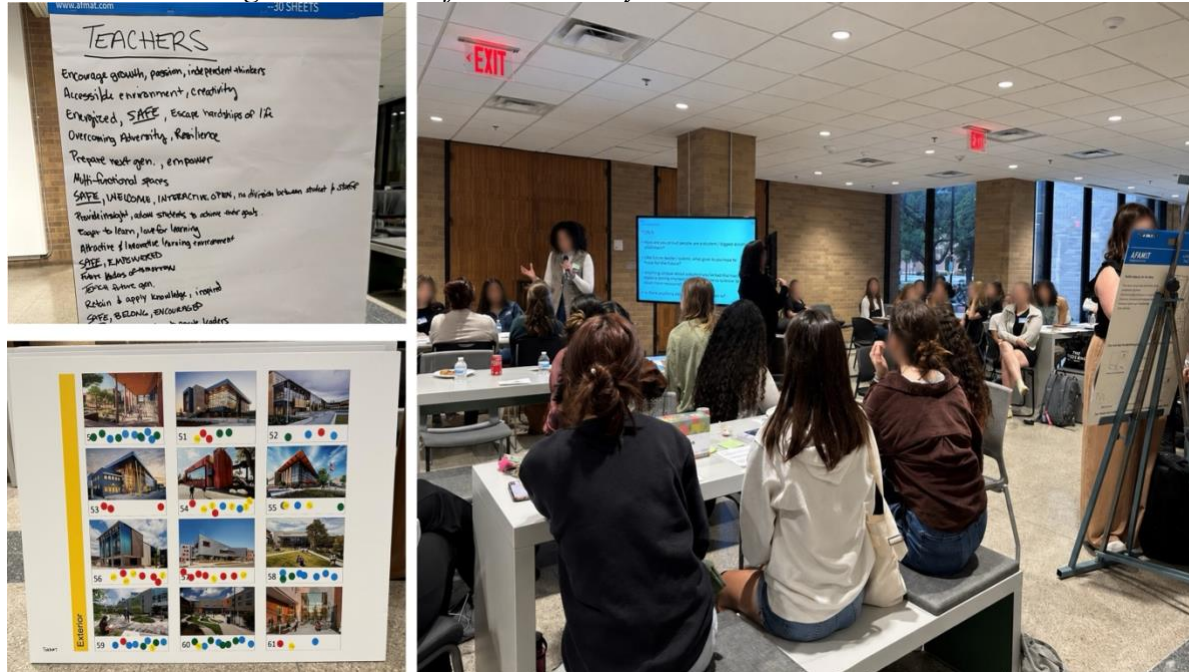
Instead of students designing for an abstract user, the project focused on designing a facility for a real high school located 50 kilometers from the university and recently destroyed by a tornado. This school's demographics include a 99% minority enrollment with 81% of students economically disadvantaged, and 66% of the population at risk of dropping out. Students were tasked with creating designs for a real, vulnerable community that was healing from trauma, requiring students to design with empathy and encouraging them to better understand the experiences of the people who would use the building.

Workshop One

The first workshop focused on Visioning and laid the groundwork for the workshop series. Students were introduced to their "client" and given the key factors about the high school and the reason for necessitating the renovation: the tornado, but also demographics, past history of the school, and their core values. Students were split into groups that they would stay with for the full workshop series. Comprised of varied grade levels and other majors, portraying the "client," to ensure they were gaining real-to-life experience as much as possible. In firms, design teams are made up of a vast range of experience, disciplines, and personalities; thus, this workshop was structured to best replicate that experience. The groups were tasked with answering questions as either an educator, staff member, or student, and placing themselves in the shoes of the clients described, while also using their foundational knowledge of being students and potentially future educators and designers. They were asked to identify goals and foundational needs, as well as envision wishes and dreams for the school and each space within. As pictured in Figure 3, students were additionally led through a red dot/green dot exercise that is often conducted with clients to gauge their design style and see what they gravitate towards or away from. They were given images of exteriors of schools, libraries, classrooms, and

cafeterias. For each category, students placed a red dot on images they did not like and a green dot on images they loved. This culminated in group sharing of design drivers and vision statements that would carry through to the following workshops and guide their designs.

Figure 3
Students Presenting Their Visions for the Facility



Workshop Two

Space Planning was the focus of workshop two. The students were reminded of their vision statement and then, at random, given a classroom wing of the school with a specific area of focus: Career and Technology Education, Science, Art, or Special Needs. The goal was to encourage students to think outside of their existing knowledge, while showing that despite using the same basic elements - for example, classrooms, restrooms, and teacher workrooms - every solution would look different but also potentially shine light on commonalities of their space planning and discuss convergence points in their decision-making. While every group was required to use the same core planning blocks, at realistic square footage, they were also given design freedom in allowing for additional “specialty” programming that they determined their user might need or want based on their vision. Figure 4 shows students working in teams to develop their design for their given space. Education majors in each group grounded the ideas, and interior design majors pushed boundaries and used their prior space planning experience to make a case for each decision-making component. Just as in the prior session, and all that would follow, the students shared their work and were required to justify their decisions in the “why” that they had crafted for the client and their unique user group.

Figure 4

Student Team Activity to Develop Space Planning Options per User Group



Workshop Three

Workshop three took a break from the activity-based model, and instead students engaged with a multidisciplinary panel of consultants comprised of key design partners in the architectural and interior design field. The panel consisted of an audio-visual theatrical designer, a structural engineer, an electrical engineer, and a mechanical and plumbing engineer. The goal of this panel was to open students' eyes to the reality of design and that all these consultants, framed correctly on a project, are teammates, collaborators, and deeply important to the design process. They were able to discuss how their individual specialties work with and affect interior design, what project timelines look like, the cost, and how important it is to see them all as true partners in the design process and to engage with them early and often. The goal was to expose students to more real-world functions of the design process that they may not have encountered in a traditional studio project and better position them for the day they walk into a firm and collaborate with these specialties.

Workshop Four

The fourth workshop was a hands-on vendor showcase and interior design-focused session. Vendors who represented flooring, lighting, furniture, tile, and fabrics were present with samples appropriate to use in a secondary school environment. Students reviewed their space plans and vision statements before visiting vendor tables to inquire about the best options for their spaces, focusing on more than just aesthetics. As shown in Figure 5, they were encouraged to ask about the durability of products in their specific environment and for their intended user group, as well as about the sustainable features of each item. This not only gave them tactile experiences but also a realistic interaction with vendors who they would be interfacing with in the future. Building on their iterations, they were tasked with sketching furniture layouts into their space plans, crafting elevations or perspectives of key areas, and then taking the finishes they had gathered along with their plans to craft a board showcasing their choices. Groups

presented their designs to simulate client interior finishes and furniture presentation, where they were able to receive instantaneous feedback from industry mentors and the vendors who donated their time and materials to this workshop.

Figure 5

Hands-On Vendor Showcase of Furniture, Fixtures and Finishes



Workshop Five

The final workshop focused on branded environments, with an expert from the industry presenting on how a designer can layer in signage, wayfinding, donor recognition, graphics, and placemaking into a space and how interior designers can collaborate with such a specialty. This final step in the design showcased how this layer of branded environments elevates the interior designer's story to the next level, making an entire experience in a space cohesive. Students were tasked with incorporating everything they had created in the prior workshops, including research, space planning, user needs and materiality, to develop a holistic package for how branded environments could layer into their design for the school. This final workshop took the students back to the big picture of the school as a whole and showed how far they had come in this series. Students had now walked the full arc of a real design process, from research and visioning to detailing and branded storytelling, all guided by working professionals who design such spaces on a daily basis.

Results

Through the analysis process, the data collected from the survey, interviews and observational field notes were triangulated to confirm emerging themes and reduce the risk that findings reflected a single data method (Maxwell, 2008).

During the workshops, observations by the researchers found that the student participants were instantly engaged in the activity, demonstrated creativity and a willingness to listen to the industry professionals and their peers for new perspectives on the design proposal. Results from

the post-workshop survey revealed that 50% of all participants attended all five workshops, which demonstrates a strong retention rate for a voluntary, co-curricular series spanning two semesters. Common goals students shared for participating in the workshops were to enhance their cross-disciplinary collaboration skills, learn more about educational design, and gain insights into the practices of real-world firms.

To answer the second research question, examining ways industry professionals leading design workshops enhance students' transferable, real-world readiness, particularly empathy and client-centered thinking, the survey revealed that students with little to no knowledge of the educational design industry showed increased interest in this field after attending the workshops. Specifically, 86% of the participants expressed attraction to this specialized career path as a result, and further findings noted that 86% of students said the workshops were helpful in advancing their educational goals. From a student interview, when asked what the student learned, they responded, "it was eye-opening to see how a real design firm handles a real-world project, how they navigate competing ideas and constraints and that getting that insider look ahead of an internship was incredibly valuable." Confirming that industry mentorship increases knowledge and shifts career trajectories.

The third research question was whether relocating design learning activities outside the traditional studio environment influences student motivation, creativity, and engagement with the design process. The survey found that 71% of students developed a new preference in how they like to learn about interior design. From the open-ended questions in the survey, one student noted, "Because I generally don't enjoy group work, the workshop changed my perspective and made me realize the importance of having multiple perspectives and ideas." Another shared, "I felt like I was able to understand other people's perspectives as well. It's great to learn from others." And a third reflected, "I got to see new perspectives on how we can collaborate and create a space." Input from one of the student interviews revealed that working on design solutions within the vertical collaboration among peers pushed the student to branch outside their normal circle of friends and see a real range of design perspectives and personalities. In summary, the findings indicate that the workshops not only facilitated knowledge content but also shifted students' understanding and value of the learning process.

In reflection of the first research question, how the combination of PBL and experiential learning impacts engagement and comprehension in interior design education, one comment from a student interview summed up a repeated observation made by the researchers over the course of the workshops. The student expressed how they overcame their fear of speaking up, due to lack of confidence, but the workshops opened their eyes to the idea that no question and no idea is wrong, and instilled confidence in their presentation and communication skills. Such an outcome can be difficult to manufacture in a traditional lecture-and-critique studio model. It requires sustained, repeated, low-stakes exposure to real professionals and real peer collaboration over time.

Discussion

Tying together industry professionals, cross-disciplinary perspectives, and vertical student integration into one design project is difficult for faculty to replicate in a classroom setting. The results of the project-based, experiential learning workshops demonstrated that professionals bring real-time project knowledge and process to the students, easily replicating complex, client-centered professional practice. Students displayed a high level of engagement in the activities plus a willingness to listen to the professionals. This raises a real institutional

question of how academia could formally recognize, structure, and sustain these industry co-educator roles within curriculum design, rather than treating them as occasional guest visitors.

In addition, student reflections consistently pointed to working alongside education majors, communication designers, and art educators as a transformative part of their experience. Mixing students of different education levels, plus different majors, broadened perspectives, led to peer-to-peer mentorship, leadership development for older students and confidence building for younger students. This invites a broader conversation about whether cross-disciplinary and vertical student collaboration should be formally embedded as a required learning outcome across all years of interior design education.

Given the workshops were conducted as a voluntary extracurricular activity, some students may not have been able to attend due to personal circumstances, such as work. Finding opportunities, such as scaling down the workshops to bring such an experience into the classroom, would create equity of access for all interior design students.

Since these workshops were specifically designed to prepare students for complex, client-centered professional practice, the natural next step in this research would be to assess whether participants in future studio courses or as they enter careers demonstrate a deeper development of empathy for a client, reach across disciplines for design collaboration, or develop a stronger professional performance.

Conclusion

This study revealed that integrating project-based learning with experiential, industry-led workshops offers an effective model for enhancing design education. It expands learning beyond the studio walls, strengthens professional and peer connections, plus prepares interior design students for the realities of complex, client-centered practice. The qualitative data, triangulated across surveys, interviews and researcher observation, converge on similar themes, with students describing gains in confidence, communication skills and deeper empathy for end users and with 50% of students attending all five workshops, suggests a level of sustained engagement. Worth noting is the 71% participant shift in preferred learning style and 86% career-trajectory shift. The presented research highlights the potential for transformative learning experiences that benefit students by fostering a deeper connection between theoretical knowledge and real-world application and preparing students for career demands.

Given the study's limitations, including findings from one interior design program in the U.S., generalizability across institution types and disciplines is limited. Furthermore, with participation as voluntary, the sample could be skewed toward students already inclined toward collaborative, hands-on learning. Despite these limitations, the research provides a foundation for educators seeking ways to integrate experiential learning with industry professionals meaningfully into design curricula.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author(s) used Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, to proofread the manuscript for grammatical accuracy, proper verb tenses, and spelling errors. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and

discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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