

Enhancing the Teaching of Informatics through Engaging Experience

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Abstract: There are plenty of learning approaches today, which are based on well-known educational theories, and which try to encourage students to active participation in the educational process. Educational activities designed to acquire knowledge from experience lead students to make own abstract or mental models. This paper describes a set of experiments being conducted in the delivery of computer science courses using the experience to supplement or replace the traditional model of the lectures. Using physical computing concepts allows students to develop concrete, tangible products. According to our experience, we should conclude that children really learn from their attempts and errors even in computer science classes. Our vision is closest to the experimental learning model do – reflect – apply supported by using well-designed questioning. Abstraction and conceptualization are preceded by the visualization and manipulation of the objects or commands. The great benefit of “getting physical“ is a holistic view of computer science which encourages creativity, promotes learning by doing and even engaging the whole mind and body. We conclude that relatively simple teaching aid, mobile devices, special hardware, and well-designed online programming activities could help to explain even abstract computer science underlying concepts through the experience sometimes more effectively than through instructional model.

1 INTRODUCTION

The student’s disengagement is a huge problem and challenge for teachers everywhere. When we think of student engagement in learning activities, it is often convenient to understand engagement with activity as being represented by good behaviour, positive feelings, and, above all, student thinking (Fredricks, 2014). The engagement takes an important role also for achievement, performance, motivation and also for intellectual development. When students are fixed only for the preference of getting a good grade, they often select less challenging or somewhat familiar tasks. Contrary, students with different goal preferences select tasks that will enable them to improve their abilities and skills even if it means being faced with mistakes (Chen and Pajares, 2010). We need to develop the internal motivation of the young people and sustain their interest in acquiring required skills (Skalka and Drlík, 2018). Modern technology, such as drones can be used as a motivational tool for engaging students (Voštinár et al. 2018). We assume the goal preferences of students are influenced by the level of

engagement and participation during the school years. Students need to be encouraged to carry out the responsibility and doing all without worries to make mistakes. In science, and also especially in computer science, it is critical to the success of the educational process that students become actively engaged in it, rather than passive recipients of the presented knowledge.

In spite of that, the critics believe that constructivist methods may result in potential misconception, a modern learning theory takes place in problem-solving situations when the learners developed new knowledge on their past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new truths to be learned. In contrast to the transmissions models, students may likely remember more concepts and knowledge discovered on their own.

Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to describe several experience-based activities designed for the teaching computer science topics at the primary and secondary schools, which are based on the several main characteristics of the most known learning theories and approaches. This paper

describes a set of experiments being conducted in the delivery of the content using experience-based learning approach to supplement or replace the traditional model of the lectures. Students interact with the world by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments.

2 LEARNING BY EXPERIENCE

There are plenty of learning approaches today, which are based on well-known educational theories, and which try to encourage students to active participation in the educational process. The following approaches can be considered as examples of learning approaches, which are common in computer science: Problem Based Learning (BL), Project BL, Discovery Learning, Guided Discovery Learning, Design BL, Student-Centered Learning, Inquiry BL, and Experience BL. The distinctions between these approaches are in some respects quite fine. Computer science is well-suited for the majority of mentioned learning approaches. The discipline itself is changing so rapidly, that it is difficult to introduce students to it without involving them into the creative process (Foley, 1999).

The 5E model (Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate) encourages students to explore science concepts and phenomena, construct their understanding through self-reflection and interaction with peers, and relate those understandings to other science concepts so that they can reconsider and appropriately change the way they understand reality (Bybee, 2015). In the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), the teacher plans learning experiences in which students construct knowledge through exploration and investigation. The framework envisions that students will gradually deepen their understanding of scientific ideas over time by engaging in practices that scientists and engineers use (NGSS). Despite the positive result of using the 5E learning model science in facilitation and retention in natural science courses (Ajaja and Urhievwejire 2015), constructivist learning environment may not cause the same effects for each (Feyzioğlu and Ergin, 2012).

In Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory the experience from natural that observation something is happening, and reflection on that are then incorporated into the theoretical knowledge that the person already possesses. Kolb defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is

created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). Effective learning is seen as when a person progresses through a cycle of four stages: having an individual experience followed by the observation and reflection on that experience, which leads to the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) which are then used to test hypothesis in future situations, resulting in a new experience. Experience learning theory is intended to be a holistic adaptive process on learning that merges experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour. It is based on a set of assumptions (Boud et al., 1996) that experience is the foundation of, and the stimulus for, learning; learners actively construct their own experience; learning is a holistic process; learning is socially and culturally constructed; learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs. Experimental learning theory provides a solid foundation for leadership education (Guthrie and Jones, 2012).

The experience-based learning (EBL) is based on assumption, that the experience of the learner occupies a central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators.

A key element of experience-based learning is that learner analyses her experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, sometimes both) in order to draw meaning from it in the light of the prior experience (Foley, 1999)

Students need to be encouraged to engage and to participate. This is important because authentic engagement may lead to higher academic achievement throughout student life (Zyngier, 2008). According to Schlechty (2001), students are engaged when they are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work.

The deepest levels of learning, according to Bloom's Taxonomy, happen when students are constructing, creating, and getting hands-on with learning materials. The great benefit of "getting physical" is a holistic view of computer science (across hardware and software) which encourages the creation of projects (crafting), promotes learning by doing and engaging the whole learning mind and body (Jin et al. 2016). The combination of physical construction with computer science and coding has a variety of aspects and outcomes including creativity (Sentence et al. 2017), cognitive load (DesPortes et

al. 2016), student perceptions (Dafai et al., 2014) and motivation (Kaloti-Hallak, 2015). Physical computing as we call a process of creatively designing tangible interactive objects or systems using programmable hardware (Sentence et al. 2017), even helps students to gain confidence in programming (Rubio et al.). It can be much more positive than a more traditional screen-based experience because of the focus on ideas, rather than restrictions (Sentence et al. 2017), students appreciate building real, tangible devices and report that physical computing platforms stimulate their creativity (Hodges et al.)

2.1 Methodology of Learning through the Experience

The significant aspect of the learning model based on experimentation is that explanation follows experience. Students are involved in more than listening and reading. They are developing skills, analysing and evaluating evidence, experiencing and discussing, and talking to their peers about their own understanding. Teachers need to adjust not only the educational materials but also the way of leading the course. Our suggestion is followed.

Firstly, the main goal of the activity must be stated. The content of the current lesson needs to be divided into well-designed parts with specific goals, according to the current level of knowledge to all students. The goals of each part must be clear and reachable. Reaching of each specific goal must lead to generalization. The sequence of activities based on experience, that involves "doing something", should be used to gain general knowledge (Figure 1). The targeted questioning of students is the most important and mandatory either at the beginning (open question) or at the end (generalize question) of the experience.

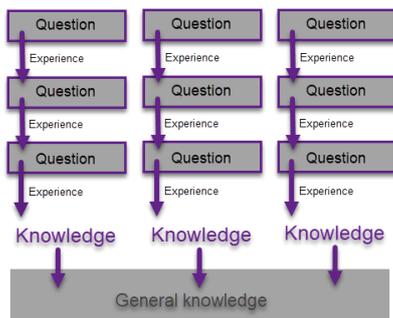


Figure 1: Experience as a part of developing knowledge.

Students experience is a precondition for answering the predesigned questions important to fluent transition to the next lesson topic.

The knowledge gained by specific activity must be developed during the followed, more abstract activity. For example, if we want to explain how 3D technology works, we will do some short activities to explain several facts about the eyes, brain, filters, and stereoscopic illusion. Students discover the principles of 3D by their own reasoning. Our vision is closest to the experimental learning model “Do – Reflect – Apply” supported by using well-designed questioning. Abstraction and conceptualization are preceded by the visualization and manipulation of the objects or commands.

The main goal of the paper is to present how to manage the lessons to achieve student’s engagement by experimenting with hands-on material or tangible devices. This process was evaluated several times, we observe how to ask the question and which activity need to be followed. We present the description of this question-experience-knowledge process on different types of activities.

3 EXPERIENCE BASED LEARNING IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

When we design learning activities, we should take more aspects into account. The learning activities varied in their contents, educational goals of the learning activities, various teaching/learning methods and using a various aid such as physical objects or digital devices (Lovászová et al. 2015).

The main purpose of this section is to describe a set of well-designed learning activities that tried to motivate and engage the students in improving their level of knowledge. The activities were evaluated during the regular lessons, non-formal workshops or summer camps. They were designed to foster computational and logical thinking.

3.1 Hands-on Activities

Elementary school children are too young for the traditional approach to teaching concepts. We need to encourage them to visualize the problem and use their imagination in deriving the solution (Edwards, 2004). Students could develop their ability to understand and apply the fundamental principles on which computers and networks operate through Computer Science Unplugged Activities. It is a collection of free experiential learning activities that teach Computer Science through engaging games and puzzles that use cards, string, crayons and lots of

model has been widely spread out in Slovak schools. The kit contains the small computer that was programmable only via cable connection with a computer. Even a basic project uploading to the main brick took more time that was needed to be engaged. Plugging and unplugging the robots was boring and discouraging at the beginning of the learning, keep in mind that not all children were purely interested in programming. The situation was dramatically changed when the EV3 version, programmable using the mobile technology, was released. All teaching aids should be mobile, connected wireless via Bluetooth. So the lesson should be more interactive organized even outside the computer lab.

The researched questions for students are followed. Use the mobile application to observe the input and output data from ports. *Question:* “Could you estimate the units in which the sensors collect the data?” Students may manipulate with motors and sensors, change the surrounding of the robots and reactions are immediately shown on the tablets. *Question:* “How the motors behave when the robot goes forward (backward), forward left/right or just rotate on the spot?” They learn practically how motors behave via interactive remote control. *Question:* “How to move the robot without the remote control?” A programming environment is iconographic based on drag and drop strategy. Touchscreen technology allows students to interact with tablet computers in a more natural and immediate manner. They experience several commands for a robot moving. *Question:* “Which commands and in which order do you need to simulate a car is going out of petrol?” They must change the power of motors, experience how to change the displayed picture and played sound. Application highlights the currently executed command, so students can easily follow the program flow and experiment with the command which freezes the execution flow. *Question:* “How to move the robot forward until it comes to white colour? How does the robot know that the sensor is crossing the white colour?” The students need to come with the theory we do not know the length of the moving in advance. The motor must switch on before and switch off after the moving. They learn how to implement the waiting for data from different sensors.

The students manipulate directly with the robots connected to the tablet via Bluetooth without the knowledge of any theoretical bases (Figure 3). It is intuitive and easy to use. The response is quick, so students could experiment more times during the

lesson. The more tries they have, the more knowledge could be inquired by own experimentation, without receiving the specific instructions on how to finish their tasks.

We conclude that after finishing the work, the students were able to connect the robot and control it using a digital controller, create a simple sequence of commands in the iconographic language and to properly use the data coming from the sensors. The direct interaction with the robot is the biggest advantage of robotics with a mobile device. Robotics with tablets is much better than the combination of robots and computer. The lesson is much more dynamic, and students like it. Touching the screen means much more direct interaction with a device than using a traditional input device like a keyboard and a mouse.



Figure 3: Programming of EV3 robot connected to the tablet via Bluetooth.

In comparison with the desktop version, the mobile development environment has only a subset of commands. The more complex problem should be probably complicated to solve via the mobile environment. However, a tablet is better for the first introductory classes. It is easier for students to understand the concepts.

This activity was realised several times at university (20-22-year-olds: 30 participants), at computer science summer school (11-14-year-olds: 80 participants) and finally, we prepared the workshop for the in-service teachers (10 participants). Based on our experience we can conclude the university students were less flexible as students from the primary school. Primary school students were more engaged and motivated; they even try to formulate new tasks.

3.3 Robotics on Mobile Devices

Ozobot is the miniature programmable robot with the own intelligence based on randomly generated decisions. Ozobot will follow Black, Blue, Red and Green colours. It is able to recognize the colouring commands by using sensors. At the lowest level of programming, we can draw a path along which

Ozobot passes. *Question:* “Based on which principle is the Ozobot moving?” The students have to find out, the robot randomly decides where it wants to go. The official application OzoPath and OzoLuck are interactive games to present a random behaviour. *Question:* “How the commands influence the robot moving?” The game OzoDraw allows us drawing a path with a finger directly on the tablet screen. The robot recognizes specific combinations of coloured commands (ozocodes) on the basis of which we can control the direction, speed, timing and special moves. Students can add flashing codes to the path (e.g. Fast, Turn Left, Tornado, UTurn etc.). Ozobot performs prescribed operations immediately after the reading the code, and so the activity is dynamic and interactive. *Question:* „Are you able to navigate the robot to the final destination in the labyrinth using all of the limited set of commands?” Students use the proposed labyrinths and a predefined set of available ozocodes. The aim is to construct a deterministic algorithm of moving by placing the ozocodes before the crossroads (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Programming Ozobot using the tablet.

After the experiencing students should prepare their own paper labyrinths with the extra story behind (Figure 5.).

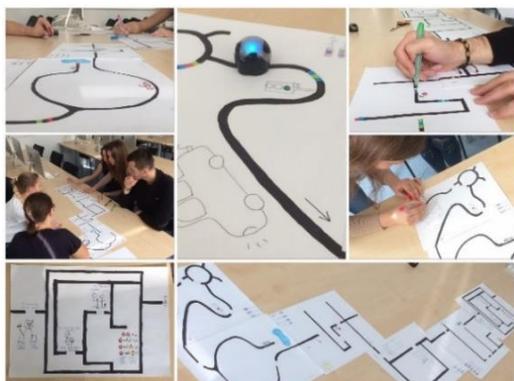


Figure 5: Labyrinth with story and sub-tasks.

The math, logic or even a joke could be included. Students solve the other labyrinth, using coloured markers by adding the ozocodes. They need to decide where to increase a speed level, to decrease a speed, where to turn or where to make a

winner dance. We can achieve the highest level of programming through an online visual programming environment OzoBlockly. From the teacher’s perspective, the Ozobot is an excellent tool for introductory lessons of robotics.

This activity was realised several times at primary school (11-year-olds: 30 participants), at computer science summer school (11-14-year-olds: 40 participants) and finally, we prepared the workshop for in-service teachers (20 participants).

We can deduce certain experiential activities conclusions. Ozobot is a simple robot without the need to design a model, offering a wide range of programming options. It has a miniature size and a real resistance to falls. The robot is suitable for the second grade at the elementary school, but it can also cover the needs of the secondary school curriculum in an appropriate range and form. It supports a wide range of activities.

3.4 Physical Computing with BBC Micro:bit

BBC Micro:bit (Fig. 6) is a tiny, pocket-sized code able physical computing device, programmable computer, a small battery powered circuit board, designed to make learning and teaching a younger audience (Cápay and Klimová, 2019). It can be programmed via a desktop PC, laptop or tablet through block-based language, MicroPython or JavaScript. In comparison with most sophisticated hardware (such as Arduino and Raspberry), micro:bit is powerful even without any extensions. It consists of the ARM chip, memory, buttons, accelerometer, magnetometer, light sensor, Bluetooth and pins. Using the crocodile clips, we can extend the possibilities of this device (Hodges et al., 2013).

The most interesting micro:bit aids we have experienced was the Adafruit NeoPixel Digital RGBW LED Strip. Each LED is colored and programmable, where every color is made as a mix of red, green and blue color. We use this strip to teach python lists by creating the Christmas lights. *Question:* “How to colour the strip using the RGB color model?” According to the pre-prepared code, where the first LED is already switched on, students need set to all unlighted LED colour firstly. They can experience a wide color spectrum. *Question:* “How to make a falling snow effect?” They need to use a loop concept and found out how to switch off the LEDs. If we want to switch off LEDs we need to set the black colour and switch on the LEDs. *Question:* “How to make a rainbow that is rotated in

the loop?" The list must be shifted to the right or to the left. *Question:* "How to make a sparkling effect?" The concept of a randomly chosen colour for each LED in the infinity loop must be discovered.

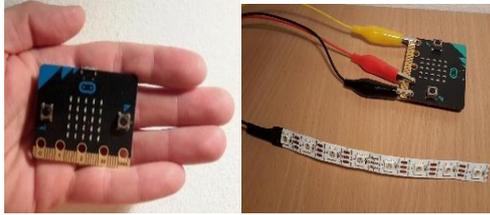


Figure 6: The microcontroller micro:bit with clips and LED strip.

We can upgrade the project by creating the remote control micro:bit, that can be used also like the effect chooser.

We asked 53 high school students (16-19-year-olds) several questions in the questionnaire (Cápay and Klimová, 2019). It was found that the micro:bit encourages students to work creatively; it is a great motivator in the classroom. After the first use of the programming with hardware concept, we noticed the rise of the motivation to learn programming even among the 'non-informatics' pupils, among the girls and the in-service teacher. We conclude that using BBC micro:bit is the right decision for those who want the powerful device to learn programming and to understand the principles of how the hardware works at the same time. Programming of micro:bit microcontroller makes computer science fun and tangible. Students are engaged because the program interacts with the outside world through shaking, tilting, and plotting the LEDs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Experience-based learning is usually connected with the natural sciences such as physics, biology or chemistry. We described several examples, how to introduce the concepts via experience in computer science teaching.

Visualization of abstract concepts through computer science unplugged, as non-formal education, is an issue that could change the view of computational thinking. Also, the card tricks should explain the standard programming concepts such as shifting, searching and sorting or controlling checksum. It has been shown that these activities are helpful. The positive influence of a teacher is a positive outcome.

Portability, touchscreen interfaces and various sensors of the tablets provide a big opportunity for collaborative learning out of the classroom environment. There are a lot of mobile applications in stores designed for developing algorithmic thinking and even programming thinking from early childhood. The tablets within the computer science curriculum contribute to the intrinsic motivation of students. The tablets should be used not only as a learning tool but also in location-based games, real-time questioning, and programming.

Evaluation of physical computing concept in formal education was experienced. We observed that supporting the programming lesson by using a tiny programmable computer with a set of sensors and LEDs is the right way to engage students. We can prepare a set of tasks presenting the programming concept using physical computing in such a way that pupils need to change the sitting activity by playing activity or hands-on activity realized besides. Tangible projects are not only engaging and enjoyable to work on, but also effective in demonstrating abstract programming concepts for the beginners.

Programming of micro:bit microcontroller makes computer science fun and tangible. Students are engaged because the program interacts with the outside world through shaking, tilting, and plotting the LEDs.

According to our experience, we should conclude that children really learn from their attempts and errors even in computer science classes. Generalization should be made after the experience based on learning tasks. Students used many tools intuitively. They provide a big opportunity to discuss openly. It is also important to choose the topic correctly; not all computer science content is possible to present only by experience. On the other hand, teachers should ensure that activities are designed and carried out in such ways that offer each learner the chance to engage in the manner that suits her to the best.

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