

Business Mentoring as Experiential Learning through the BRIDGE Model

Rahmat Ramli^{1*}, Sylvia Sari Rosalina²

¹⁻²Business Administration Study Program, Kwik Kian Gie Institute of Business and Informatics, Jakarta, Indonesia

E-mail: ^{1*}rahmat.ramli@kwikkiangie.ac.id, ²sylvia.rosalina@kwikkiangie.ac.id

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Abstract

The persistent gap between theoretical instruction and real-world practice remains a critical challenge in business education, particularly in contexts involving Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Experiential learning has been promoted as a pedagogical response to this challenge; however, many initiatives lack structured frameworks that integrate student learning with meaningful community engagement. This study examines the implementation of the BRIDGE model (Build, Reach, Discover, Grow, and Elevate) as a structured business mentoring approach grounded in experiential learning principles. Using a qualitative participatory action research design, the study involved 15 undergraduate business students and five MSMEs in Semarang City, Indonesia. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, reflective journals, and program documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the BRIDGE model facilitates deep experiential learning by enabling students to connect theoretical concepts with contextual business realities, while simultaneously generating instrumental and symbolic benefits for MSME partners. Despite limitations related to program duration, the model demonstrates strong potential as a feasible and transferable framework for experiential business education in emerging economy contexts.

Keywords: Business Mentoring; Experiential Learning; MSMEs; Participatory Action Research; Service-Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most persistent challenges in contemporary business education lie in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in classrooms and the complex realities encountered in actual business environments. While higher education institutions have traditionally emphasized analytical frameworks, models, and conceptual tools, graduates frequently report difficulties in applying such knowledge when confronted with uncertainty, resource constraints, and socio-cultural dynamics in real organizations. This disconnect is particularly evident when graduates engage with Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which often operate under informal structures and face multidimensional challenges that cannot be addressed through standardized solutions.

In developing economies such as Indonesia, this issue carries heightened significance. MSMEs constitute the backbone of the national economy, contributing substantially to employment creation, poverty reduction, and local economic resilience. Despite their strategic importance, many MSMEs struggle with limited managerial capacity, weak strategic planning, and insufficient access to professional business support. As a result, the interaction between higher education institutions and MSMEs represents a critical opportunity for mutual value creation: students gain authentic learning experiences, while MSMEs benefit from structured analytical perspectives and fresh insights.

Experiential learning has increasingly been promoted as a pedagogical response to the limitations of traditional lecture-based instruction. Rooted in Kolb's experiential learning theory, this approach conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Through direct engagement with real-world problems, learners are expected to move beyond passive knowledge reception toward deeper cognitive, behavioral, and affective development. In business education, experiential learning is often operationalized through internships, case competitions, simulations, service-learning, and community-based projects. However, despite its conceptual appeal, the implementation of experiential learning in business education frequently encounters practical limitations. Many experiential initiatives prioritize exposure over structure, emphasizing student involvement in real contexts without providing clear guidance on how experiences should be analyzed, reflected upon, and translated into actionable learning outcomes. As a result, learning processes may remain superficial, and the potential benefits for community partners may be fragmented or short-lived. This challenge is particularly pronounced in short-term programs, where time constraints limit the depth of engagement and reflection.

Within the Indonesian higher education system, experiential and community-based learning have been increasingly encouraged through national policy frameworks aimed at enhancing graduate employability and social relevance. Nevertheless, institutional implementation often remains procedural rather than pedagogically transformative. Programs may fulfill administrative requirements without fully integrating experiential activities into coherent learning designs that align academic objectives with community needs. Consequently, students may complete activities without achieving meaningful learning transformation, while MSMEs may perceive limited or unclear benefits from their participation. The literature on service-learning and business mentoring emphasizes the importance of reciprocity, reflection, and sustained engagement. Studies suggest that effective experiential learning requires structured frameworks that clearly define roles, expectations, and learning stages for all stakeholders involved. Without such frameworks, partnerships risk reproducing power asymmetries, where community partners are positioned merely as learning sites rather than as co-creators of knowledge. This concern highlights the need for models that balance educational rigor with ethical and contextual sensitivity.

Business mentoring has emerged as a promising mechanism for operationalizing experiential learning in MSME contexts. Through mentoring relationships, students are positioned not only as learners but also as facilitators of reflective dialogue, problem identification, and incremental change. When designed appropriately, mentoring-based experiential learning can foster deeper engagement, enhance student accountability, and generate tangible outcomes for MSMEs. Nevertheless, existing mentoring initiatives often lack clear pedagogical articulation, making it difficult to assess learning processes and outcomes systematically.

In response to these challenges, this study examines the BRIDGE model, Build, Reach, Discover, Grow, and Elevate, as a structured experiential learning framework for business mentoring. The model was designed to guide the mentoring process through sequential yet iterative stages that integrate experience, reflection, conceptual analysis, and action. By embedding experiential learning principles within a clearly articulated mentoring structure, the BRIDGE model seeks to address both pedagogical and practical limitations observed in prior initiatives. This study is situated within a university MSME collaboration in Semarang City, Indonesia, involving undergraduate business students and local MSME owners from diverse sectors. The central research question guiding the study is: How does the BRIDGE model facilitate experiential learning for business students while generating meaningful benefits for MSME partners? By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on experiential business education and provide practical insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions seeking to design structured, impactful community-based learning programs.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a participatory action research (PAR) approach. PAR was selected because it aligns closely with the dual objectives of this study: generating academically rigorous insights while simultaneously facilitating practical improvements within participating MSMEs. Unlike conventional qualitative approaches that position researchers as detached observers, PAR emphasizes collaboration, reflexivity, and iterative cycles of action and reflection involving all stakeholders.

In the context of this study, PAR enabled students, MSME owners, and researchers to engage as co-participants in the learning and mentoring process. This approach was particularly appropriate given the experiential learning orientation of the BRIDGE model, which requires active engagement, continuous reflection, and adaptive problem-solving. By embedding research activities within the mentoring process, the study was able to capture authentic learning experiences and business dynamics as they unfolded in real time.

2.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Semarang City, Central Java, Indonesia, an urban area characterized by a vibrant MSME ecosystem spanning food and beverage, fashion, retail, and service sectors. Five MSMEs were selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria: willingness to participate throughout the program duration, operational stability, and relevance to the learning objectives of the business mentoring initiative. The participating MSMEs varied in terms of business age, scale, and managerial sophistication, providing a diverse context for experiential learning.

Fifteen undergraduate students enrolled in a business-related study program participated in the study as mentors-in-training. Before field engagement, students received preparatory sessions covering basic mentoring principles, ethical considerations, and an overview of the BRIDGE model. This preparation aimed to ensure that students entered the field with a shared conceptual foundation while remaining open to contextual learning.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participating MSMEs

MSME Code	Business Sector	Years Operation	of Number Employees	of Monthly Revenue Range	Education Level of Owner
MSME-A	Food Beverage	& 3	2-3	IDR million	5-10 High School
MSME-B	Fashion/Apparel	5	4-5	IDR million	10-20 Diploma
MSME-C	Retail Trade	2	1-2	IDR million	3-7 High School
MSME-D	Food Processing	4	3-4	IDR million	8-15 Bachelor's Degree
MSME-E	Personal Services	6	2-3	IDR million	7-12 High School

Note: MSME codes are used to maintain confidentiality. Revenue ranges represent typical monthly turnover during the study period.

2.3 Implementation of the BRIDGE Model

The BRIDGE model was implemented over one academic semester, approximately three months in duration. The model consists of five interconnected stages: Build, Reach, Discover, Grow, and Elevate. Each stage corresponds to specific experiential learning objectives and mentoring activities.

The Build stage focused on relationship formation and trust-building between students and MSME owners. Students conducted initial visits to understand business histories, values, and daily operations. The Reach stage involved identifying key challenges faced by MSMEs

through observation, informal interviews, and collaborative dialogue. During the Discover stage, students identified challenges using relevant business concepts and theoretical frameworks introduced during coursework.

The Grow stage emphasized collaborative action, where students and MSME owners co-designed feasible improvement strategies aligned with available resources. Finally, the Elevate stage centered on reflection and evaluation, encouraging participants to assess learning outcomes, business changes, and future development opportunities. This structured yet flexible implementation allowed the mentoring process to remain responsive to contextual dynamics while maintaining pedagogical coherence. Figure 1 illustrates the BRIDGE model framework, which integrates five sequential yet iterative stages with Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Figure 1: The BRIDGE Model Framework Integrating Kolb's Experiential Learning



Note: The model integrates five sequential mentoring stages with Kolb's experiential learning cycle phases. Arrows indicate progression with iterative feedback loops. The timeline represents a 12-week implementation period.

2.3.1 Operational Structure and Timeline

Students were organized into five mentoring teams, with three students assigned to each MSME partner. Team composition was determined through a deliberative process considering complementary skill sets, student interests, and geographic proximity to MSME locations. This team-based approach was designed to foster peer learning, enable diverse perspectives in problem analysis, and provide continuity when individual students faced scheduling constraints.

Each mentoring team conducted weekly on-site visits to their assigned MSME, with each session averaging two to three hours in duration. These visits typically occurred during weekends or late afternoons to accommodate both student academic schedules and MSME operational hours. Over the three-month implementation period, each team completed approximately 10 to 12 direct engagement sessions with their MSME partners. Between formal mentoring sessions, students maintained regular communication with MSME owners through instant messaging platforms and brief follow-up calls to address emerging questions, provide updates, and ensure continuity of the mentoring relationship.

The duration allocated to each BRIDGE stage was structured yet adaptable based on contextual needs and the pace of relationship development. The Build stage typically required two to three weeks, during which students made multiple short visits focused primarily on listening, observing, and building rapport rather than immediate problem-solving. The Reach and Discover stages were conducted iteratively over three to four weeks, allowing students to cycle between field observation, data collection, and analytical reflection supported by classroom discussions and faculty guidance.

The Grow stage extended over four to five weeks, recognizing that collaborative action planning and initial implementation required sustained engagement and adaptive adjustments based on MSME feedback and operational realities. The final Elevate stage was conducted during the last two weeks of the semester, incorporating structured reflection sessions, peer-to-peer learning exchanges among student teams, and final presentations where students synthesized their experiences, and MSME owners shared their perspectives on the mentoring process.

Throughout implementation, weekly coordination meetings were held among all student teams and faculty supervisors to facilitate cross-team learning, address emerging challenges, and ensure alignment with the pedagogical objectives of the BRIDGE model. These coordination sessions also served as opportunities for students to practice reflective dialogue and receive formative feedback on their mentoring approaches. This multi-layered structure of mentoring visits, inter-visit communication, stage-based progression, and peer coordination meetings created a rich experiential learning environment that balanced structured guidance with contextual responsiveness.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Multiple data collection techniques were employed to enhance the richness and credibility of the findings. Participant observation was conducted throughout mentoring sessions, enabling researchers to capture interaction patterns, decision-making processes, and learning dynamics. In-depth interviews with MSME owners were conducted at mid-point and end stages to explore perceived benefits, challenges, and reflections on the mentoring experience.

Focus group discussions were held with students to facilitate collective reflection and peer learning. Additionally, students maintained reflective journals documenting their experiences, challenges, and insights at each stage of the BRIDGE model. Program documentation, including mentoring reports and presentation materials, was also collected as supplementary data.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure. Transcribed interviews, observation notes, and reflective journals were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes. Initial open coding was followed by axial coding to explore relationships between themes, particularly those related to experiential learning processes and mentoring outcomes. Analytical memos were used to support reflexive interpretation and theoretical integration.

2.6 Research Rigor, Ethics, and Trustworthiness

To ensure research rigor, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation across multiple sources and prolonged engagement with participants. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to validate accuracy and resonance. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of research procedures and analytical decisions.

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful engagement with MSME partners. Given the participatory nature of the study, particular attention was paid to researcher reflexivity. Researchers continuously reflected on their positionality as facilitators and academics, acknowledging potential influences on participant responses and interpretation. This reflexive stance strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings and aligned the research process with the ethical principles of participatory action research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Implementation of the BRIDGE Model in MSME Mentoring

The implementation of the BRIDGE model unfolded through a structured yet adaptive mentoring process that emphasized experiential learning at each stage. During the Build stage, students engaged in intensive interaction with MSME owners to establish trust and mutual understanding. This initial engagement was critical, as many MSME owners expressed skepticism toward academic programs based on prior experiences with short-term or non-continuous interventions. Through repeated visits and informal conversations, students gradually gained access to deeper narratives regarding business histories, values, and day-to-day operational challenges.

The Reach stage allowed students to move beyond surface-level observations toward a more systematic identification of business problems. Rather than relying solely on predefined analytical tools, students were encouraged to listen actively and observe contextual dynamics, such as customer behavior, supplier relationships, and internal workflows. This process revealed that many challenges faced by MSMEs were interconnected, encompassing not only technical issues such as marketing and financial recording but also psychological factors such as risk aversion and lack of confidence.

In the Discover stage, students translated contextual insights into analytical understanding by applying relevant business concepts. This stage represented a critical transition from concrete experience to abstract conceptualization, consistent with experiential learning theory. Students analyzed problems collaboratively, often revisiting theoretical frameworks introduced during coursework and adapting them to the specific conditions of each MSME. This process highlighted the importance of flexibility in applying theory, as standardized models frequently required modification to remain feasible within resource-constrained environments.

The Grow stage focused on collaborative action and incremental change. Rather than proposing comprehensive business overhauls, students and MSME owners co-developed small-scale, realistic interventions aligned with existing capacities. Examples included basic financial recording templates, simple customer segmentation strategies, and modest improvements in product presentation. The emphasis on feasibility helped sustain MSME engagement and reinforced students' understanding of practical constraints.

Finally, the Elevate stage emphasized reflection and evaluation. Students facilitated reflective discussions with MSME owners to assess perceived changes, learning outcomes, and future aspirations. Reflection was also conducted among students through guided discussions and written journals, enabling them to critically evaluate their roles, assumptions, and learning trajectories. This stage reinforced the cyclical nature of experiential learning and ensured that experiences were transformed into meaningful knowledge.

3.2 Student Learning Outcomes: From Theory to Contextual Understanding

The findings indicate that participation in the BRIDGE model significantly enhanced students' learning outcomes across cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains. At the cognitive level, students developed a more nuanced understanding of business concepts by applying them within real-world contexts. Many students reported that previously abstract concepts, such as value propositions and cost structures, became more comprehensible when confronted with actual business constraints.

Behaviorally, students demonstrated improved communication, problem-solving, and adaptive skills. Mentoring interactions required students to translate technical terminology into accessible language, negotiate differing perspectives, and respond

constructively to feedback from MSME owners. These interactions fostered practical competencies that are difficult to cultivate through classroom instruction alone.

At the affective level, students experienced shifts in attitudes toward entrepreneurship and professional responsibility. Reflective journals revealed that students developed greater empathy toward MSME owners and a deeper appreciation of the socio-economic realities shaping business decisions. This emotional engagement contributed to increased motivation and a stronger sense of accountability for their mentoring roles.

These outcomes align with experiential learning literature emphasizing the transformative potential of authentic engagement and structured reflection. Table 2 summarizes the key themes emerging from the thematic analysis of student learning outcomes across cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Results: Student Learning Outcomes

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Findings	Data Sources
Cognitive Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextual understanding of "Previously abstract concepts like value propositions became theory clear when applied." Enhanced problem analysis "Learned to adapt theoretical critical thinking frameworks to real constraints." skills 	<p>of "Previously abstract concepts like value propositions became theory clear when applied."</p> <p>"Learned to adapt theoretical critical thinking frameworks to real constraints."</p>	<p>Reflective journals</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p>
Behavioral Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication skills "Had to translate technical terms into language MSME owners" Adaptive problem-solving "Understand." "Learned to adjust approach" Negotiation abilities based on owner feedback." 	<p>"Had to translate technical terms into language MSME owners"</p> <p>"Understand." "Learned to adjust approach"</p> <p>based on owner feedback."</p>	<p>Participant observation</p> <p>Student interviews</p>
Affective Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empathy development "Developed a deeper appreciation for MSME struggles." Professional identity "Felt accountable for mentoring role." Social responsibility "Understood, business has social dimensions." 	<p>"Developed a deeper appreciation for MSME struggles."</p> <p>"Felt accountable for mentoring role."</p> <p>"Understood, business has social dimensions."</p>	<p>Reflective journals</p> <p>Focus group discussions</p>

The BRIDGE model facilitated not only skill acquisition but also identity formation, enabling students to perceive themselves as emerging professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

3.3 MSME Perceptions and Business Impact

From the perspective of MSME owners, the mentoring process generated both instrumental and symbolic impacts. Instrumentally, MSMEs reported tangible improvements in several operational areas. For instance, simple financial recording practices enabled owners to gain clearer insights into cash flow and cost structures. Marketing-related interventions, such as improved product displays and basic social media strategies, contributed to increased customer engagement in some cases.

Symbolically, the mentoring process enhanced MSME owners' confidence and sense of validation. Many owners expressed appreciation for being listened to and respected as partners rather than treated merely as objects of intervention. This recognition fostered openness to reflection and experimentation, which are critical for learning and adaptation.

The reciprocal nature of learning observed in this study underscores the value of structured university-MSME partnerships. While students gained experiential insights, MSME owners benefited from reflective dialogue and renewed perspectives on their businesses. Table 3 presents the thematic analysis of MSME-perceived benefits, categorized into instrumental, symbolic, and relational dimensions.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis Results: MSME-Perceived Benefits

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Findings	Data Sources
Instrumental Benefits	• Financial management improvement	"Now I track daily expenses and income systematically."	
	• Marketing enhancement	"Social media posting MSME interviews increased customer inquiries." Observation notes	
	• Operational efficiency	"Better product display attracted more buyers."	
Symbolic Benefits	• Increased confidence business decisions.	"Feel more confident making decisions."	MSME interviews
	• Validation and recognition	"Appreciated being listened to and respected."	Program documentation
	• Openness to change	"More willing to try new approaches."	
Relational Impact	• Enhanced self-think differently.	"Students' questions made me think differently."	MSME interviews
	reflection	"Feel motivated to continue improving."	Final reflection sessions
	• Renewed motivation	"Started planning for business expansion."	
	• Future orientation		

This reciprocity differentiates the BRIDGE model from one-directional assistance programs and strengthens its contribution to sustainable community engagement.

3.4 Experiential Learning, Professional Identity, and Social Responsibility

Beyond immediate learning outcomes and business improvements, the findings highlight the role of the BRIDGE model in shaping students' professional identities. Exposure to real business challenges prompted students to confront ethical considerations, power dynamics, and social responsibilities inherent in business practice. These experiences encouraged students to reflect on the broader implications of managerial decisions and the social embeddedness of economic activities.

The structured reflective components embedded in the BRIDGE model were instrumental in facilitating this identity formation process. Through guided reflection, students critically examined their assumptions about success, profitability, and entrepreneurship. Many students reported a shift from profit-centric perspectives toward a more balanced understanding that incorporates social and relational dimensions.

Theoretically, these findings extend experiential learning scholarship by demonstrating how structured mentoring frameworks can integrate cognitive, affective, and ethical dimensions of learning. The BRIDGE model operationalizes experiential learning in a manner that addresses critiques regarding the lack of conceptual depth in practice-based education. By explicitly linking experience, reflection, theory, and action, the model supports holistic learning and socially responsible professional development.

3.5 Challenges and Lessons Learned

Despite its positive outcomes, the implementation of the BRIDGE model was not without challenges. Time constraints emerged as a significant limitation, as the semester-based structure restricted the depth and continuity of mentoring interventions. Variations in MSME readiness and commitment also influenced the pace and scope of change.

These challenges highlight the importance of aligning program design with contextual realities and managing stakeholder expectations. Future implementations may benefit from longer engagement periods and clearer articulation of roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, the lessons learned from this study provide valuable insights for refining experiential learning models and strengthening university-community partnerships.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of the BRIDGE model as a structured experiential learning framework for business mentoring in MSME contexts. The findings demonstrate that the model effectively integrates experiential learning principles with mentoring practices through sequential stages that emphasize relationship building, contextual problem identification, reflective analysis, collaborative action, and evaluative learning. By guiding students systematically through these stages, the BRIDGE model addresses common shortcomings of experiential learning initiatives that rely on unstructured exposure to real-world settings.

From an educational perspective, the study provides evidence that structured, mentoring-based experiential learning can significantly enhance student learning outcomes beyond the acquisition of technical knowledge. Students developed contextual understanding, adaptive problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and ethical awareness through sustained engagement with MSMEs. Importantly, the reflective components embedded within the BRIDGE model enabled students to transform experience into meaningful learning, supporting professional identity formation and social responsibility. These findings reinforce the argument that experiential learning in business education must be intentionally designed to balance experience with reflection and theory.

From the perspective of MSME partners, the mentoring process generated both instrumental and symbolic benefits. Instrumentally, MSMEs experienced improvements in basic managerial practices, including financial recording, marketing strategies, and customer engagement. Symbolically, MSME owners reported increased confidence, motivation, and openness to reflection as a result of being engaged as collaborative partners rather than passive recipients of assistance. This reciprocal learning dynamic underscores the potential of structured university–MSME partnerships to foster mutual value creation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to experiential learning and business education literature by offering an operationalized mentoring model that bridges pedagogical theory and practice. While existing studies often emphasize the importance of experiential learning, fewer provide concrete frameworks that articulate how learning stages should be structured and enacted in community-based contexts. The BRIDGE model addresses this gap by demonstrating how experiential learning cycles can be embedded within mentoring processes that are sensitive to contextual constraints in emerging economies.

Several implications emerge from this study. For business education practitioners, the findings suggest that mentoring-based experiential learning should be integrated into formal curricula using structured, theory-informed models rather than ad hoc activities. For higher education institutions and policymakers, the results highlight the importance of supporting sustained university MSME collaborations through institutional incentives and longer-term program designs to maximize both learning depth and community impact.

This study is not without limitations. The relatively short duration of the mentoring program and the limited number of participating MSMEs constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research may build on this work by employing longitudinal designs or mixed-method approaches to examine the long-term effects of structured experiential learning on graduate competencies and MSME performance. Despite these limitations, the study provides robust evidence that the BRIDGE model represents a viable and transferable framework for experiential business education in emerging economy contexts.

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