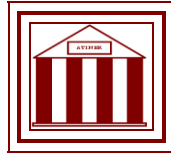


**Athens Institute for Education and Research  
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ARC2016-2102**

**Experiential Learning in Interior Architectural  
Education: Experiences and Case Studies in  
Environmental Psychology Course**

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## **Experiential Learning in Interior Architectural Education: Experiences and Case Studies in Environmental Psychology Course**

**Banu Garip**

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the significance of experiential learning strategies and interdisciplinary collaborative work in Interior Architectural Education, specifically within the field of Environmental Psychology. In this context, experiences of a semester in 2016 at Istanbul Technical University, in scope of the Environmental Psychology Course and the case studies which were done in Istanbul by the students are presented and discussed within the paper. The structure of the course was constituted on the idea that the learner makes direct contact with the cases by means of working both inside and outside the school. Therefore, the students were encouraged to go out of the school and work within the selected sites in every stage of the program. The students worked as interdisciplinary groups, selected problematic sites to work on, tried to understand the current state, analyze the study area and determine the problem by searching, discussing and brainstorming. 4 Case studies were conducted and the students designed the research by using the selected research methods, and collected information related with the determined problems. The students applied questionnaires, made face to face interviews and systematic observations within the sites. The titles were defined as “Istanbul Istiklal Street and Its Transformation within a Five Years Period”, “Mecidiyekoy Station of the Bus Rapid Transit System and Spatial Problems”, “Living in High-Rise in Istanbul”, “How Should Istanbul Haydarpasa Train Station Be Re-used?: Urban Memory, Attachment and New Interventions”. Each group designed a research strategy and conducted field studies. At the end of the course, a questionnaire was given to the students in order to understand their evaluations about the process and to test the changes in their understanding of what a research is. As a result, the students experienced a simulation of a research and systematically made an investigation on a problem within the urban space.

**Keywords:** Environmental Psychology, Experiential Learning, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Interior Architecture Education.

## **Introduction**

The study presents a reading through the experiences in the Environmental Psychology course, which was held in the 2016 Spring Semester at Istanbul Technical University and in this sense evaluates the studies within the educational process. The aim is to discuss the role of experiential learning strategies in interior architectural education, specifically in the field of Environmental Psychology through the process and case studies done in scope of the Environmental Psychology Course. The key points are elucidated through examples of case studies which were conducted by the students. The reflections upon developing the knowledge of “what a research is” and establishing the awareness of person-environment relations in Environmental Design are examined and discussed within this paper.

## **Role of Experiential Learning in Interior Architecture Education**

Experience is a crucial component in interior architecture education from many points of view, as well as other design disciplines. Theory and practice have a strong relationship and the processing of the mechanism that is composed of both is essential for the design process. The significance of the Environmental Psychology Field in interior design education depends on its potential on making the connection between theory and practice, and on gathering data that can be used as inputs of the spatial design process.

Founded on the theories of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin, many studies have been done on experiential learning in many fields, especially within the education literature. It can be observed that a few studies have been done focusing on experiential learning strategies in Interior Architectural Education. However, it is crucial for specifically the courses which are related with the application process such as “Furniture Design”, the “Project Studios”, “Building Element Design”, etc. “Rural Studio” is a good example in this sense, which is an undergraduate program within School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture at Auburn University, America. Established in 1993 by D.K. Ruth and Samuel Mockbee, gives students a more hands-on educational experience whilst assisting an underserved population in the West Alabama's Black Belt region ([ruralstudio.org](http://ruralstudio.org), 2016). Presently, the program has expanded the scope and complexity of its projects, focusing largely on community-oriented work and application of recycling, reusing and remaking.

Kolb (2015) defines experiential learning as a fundamentally different view of the learning process from that of the behavioral theories of learning based on an empirical epistemology or the more implicit theories of learning that underlie traditional educational methods, methods that for the most part are based on a rational, idealist epistemology. According to Beard and Wilson (2006), the great strength of experiential learning can be explained as experiencing something is a linking process between action and thought. Educational psychologists define learning as a change in the individual caused by experience. However, how people create and manage their

“experience” is crucial to the process of learning (Dewey, 1938). The experiential learning theory proceeds from a different set of assumptions; ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience (Kolb, 2015).

### **Environmental Psychology Course and an Experience of “Learning by Doing”**

Interior design is a complex process that requires the unification of users’ needs and the qualities of a given or certain place, and the generation of a good design (Brooker and Stone, 2011). The designer is required to have a good command of the basic topics such as building codes and regulations, materials and fixture, construction techniques and costs. And before all these topics, the relations, connections and dialogues the design establishes with its social and physical environment have to be considered. Wahl and Lang (2003) state that the concept of “context” covers both the “social environment” and the “physical environment”; the social environment and physical environment constitute the whole of the various phenomena, events and forces occurring around the individual. The field of Environmental Psychology provides a ground for studying the relations between social and physical environment. According to Moore (2006), the field of Environmental Psychology emerged from two sets of complementary concerns, one in the professional disciplines of Environmental Design and the Built Environment, and the other in the Socio-Cultural and Behavioural Sciences. The Environmental Psychologist suggest that man and environment interrelationship is a dynamic feature. Man acts upon his environment and is in turn influenced by it (Yadav, 1987). Stokols (1987) notes that the substantive concerns of Environmental Psychology are distinguishable from those of other areas of psychological research in some important respects, and can be framed within a broad interdisciplinary context.

Within this paper, experiences of the spring semester in 2016 at the Istanbul Technical University, in scope of the Environmental Psychology Course and the case studies which were done in Istanbul by the students are presented and discussed.

#### *Method and Program*

The study presents a reading through the experiences in the Environmental Psychology Course, and in this sense, evaluates the case studies which were done in scope of the course and the educational process. The aim is to discuss the role of experiential learning in Interior Architecture Education. The key points are elucidated through examples of the case studies which were conducted by the students.

During the initial phase of the course, seminars focusing on general definitions, studies, different approaches, notions of Environmental Psychology, methods that are used within studies were given in order to establish a general understanding of the field. Short exercises were done

related with the research process to give students efficiency for applying the methods and understanding the notions.

The concept of experiential learning is considerably broader than that commonly associated with the school classroom; it occurs in all human settings, from schools to the workplace, from the research laboratory to the management board room, in personal relationships and the aisles of the local grocery (Kolb, 2015). In this sense, the structure of the course was constituted on the idea that the learner makes the direct contact with the cases by means of working both inside and outside the school.

Works on the case studies started simultaneously with the seminars and discussions explaining the research methods. Four case studies were conducted by the students and the titles were defined as:

- “Istanbul Istiklal Street and Its Transformation within Five Years Period”,
- “Mecidiyekoy Station of the Bus Rapid Transit System and Spatial Problems”,
- “Living in High-Rise in Istanbul”,
- “How Should Istanbul Haydarpaşa Train Station Be Re-used?: Urban Memory, Attachment and New Interventions”.

The City of Istanbul is a metropolis which has a population more than fifteen million and has various problems within its structure in different scales. Due to the complexity of the urban problems, the need for interdisciplinary work and questioning person-environment relations in different scales (interior architecture-architecture-urban design) was essential. The determined problems and topics were focusing on the urban interior space and its contextual conjuncture. For example, the “living in high-rise” topic discussed both the inside and the outside living within a gated housing settlement in the city of Istanbul.

In scope of the experiential learning process, the students designed a research and conducted a study which was carried out both in the classroom and within the field (Figure 1). Within the process, the students;

- Worked as interdisciplinary groups,
- Selected problematic sites to work on,
- Tried to understand the current state,
- Analyzed the study area (applied questionnaires, made face to face interviews and systematic observations within the sites),
- Determined the problem by searching, discussing and brainstorming, and
- Evaluated the data they gathered.

**Figure 1.** *Students Making Interviews on the Site (by D.Aydın,H.Işın, 2016)*

At the end of the course, a questionnaire was given to the students in order to understand their evaluations about the process and to test the changes in their understanding of what a research is. In the field of Interior Architecture Education, it is crucial to use experiential learning as a strategy especially for hands on experience. Within the Environmental Psychology Field, the learning-by-doing process can be operated by giving the complete responsibility for doing a research to the students by themselves. It is crucial to carry out the whole research process as an experience; designing and doing the field study inside and outside the school, interviewing with users, observing, collecting data and to read and evaluate the results. As a result of the environmental psychology course, students experienced a simulation of a research and systematically made an investigation on a problem within the urban space.

#### *Research Design and Case Studies*

Case studies were conducted and the students designed research by using the selected research methods, and collected information related to the determined problems. The students applied questionnaires, made face to face interviews and systematic observations within the sites.

The study which was titled as “Istanbul Istiklal Street and Its Transformation within Five Years Period” analyzed the dramatic transformation of Istiklal Street and tried to investigate the reasons of the transformation. Istiklal Street has been a major public open space for the city of Istanbul for many centuries, not only for today, but also from the early times that the district has been founded. It represents the spatial characteristics of a cosmopolitan structure of different ethnic groups and many social spaces (Figure 2). Besides, the district has a very important place at the urban memory; many social resistances take place here against societal predicaments of the country.

**Figure 2.** Views from Istiklal Street in Istanbul (by A.G. Hüner, M.G.Topraktepe, B.Akol, 2016)

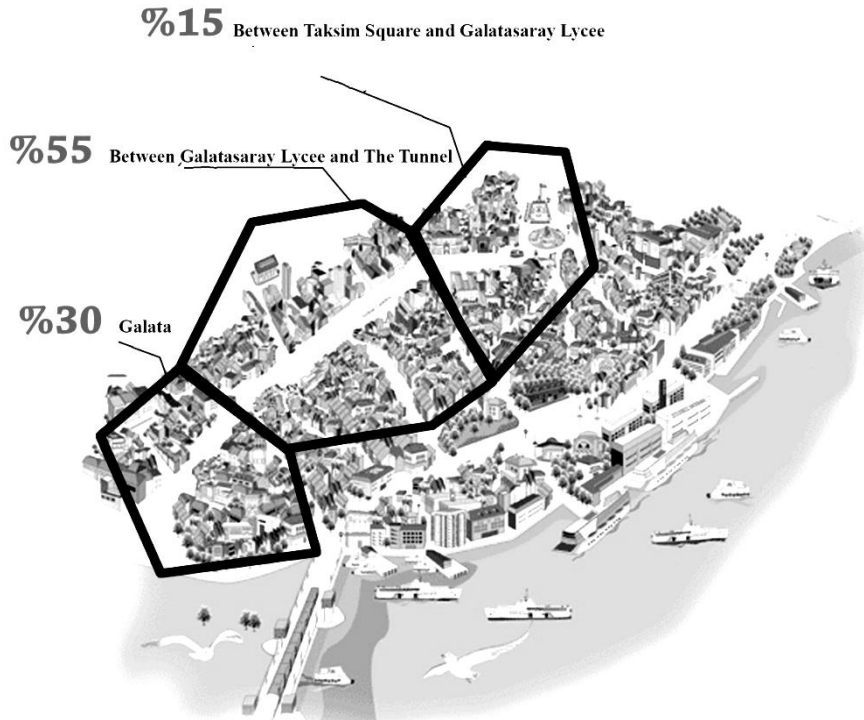


Students prepared questionnaires including open ended and multiple-choice questions which were applied to the users of Istiklal Street. In addition, they made interviews with the local trades people within the district. And before all else, the students themselves as the users of the street as well -the School Of Architecture at ITU is located very near to the Istiklal Street in Taksim- made evaluations as they were the witnesses of the transformation process.

From the interviews with the tradesmen, it was understood that many different factors affected the transformation of the street; the main reasons were due to buying and selling of real estate, customization, and change of investors in the district regarding the policy of the current municipality and the governmental decisions. The functions of the buildings have been changed and larger shopping centers instead of local shops are set within the street. Consequently, user profiles have changed, and it is understood from the questionnaires and personal observations that the former user profile has been moved to the part of the street which was defined as the district “between Galatasaray Lycee and The Tunnel” from “Taksim Square and Galatasaray Lycee” (Figure 3) and the first part is left to the tourists in great majority. There are sensitive reactions of civil and social constitutions; however, the process is still continuing and expanding to the near districts, such as Tarlabaşı.



**Figure 3.** Reflection of the Transformation of Istiklal Street on Spatial Use According to the Survey Results (by A.G.Hüner, M.G.Topraktepe, B.Akol, 2016)



Another study which was titled “Mecidiyekoy Station of the Bus Rapid Transit System and Spatial Problems” took attention to one of the planning problems of Istanbul, the Bus Rapid System and its stations that are located next to the rapid highways causing environmental stress on thousands of people every day. The location of the stations and the crowdedness due to the high population that want use the system causes many problems (Figure 4). Daily approximately eight hundred thousand people uses the Bus Rapid System.

**Figure 4.** Mecidiyekoy Station of the Bus Rapid Transit System (by C.Yücel, M.Y.Şafak, 2016)



Students applied a questionnaire to the passengers that use the selected station (Figure 5). It was understood that despite the bad conditions of the stations due to their locations and the crowd, people evaluated the station as “good” in a moderate level. They were satisfied with significantly the speed of the transportation system, and in majority, they were complaining about the insufficient capacity.

**Figure 5.** *Students Working on the Site (by C.Yücel,M.Y.Şafak, 2016)*



A study which was titled as “Living in High-Rise in Istanbul”, was conducted in a gated housing settlement that is consist of high apartment blocks in Istanbul, My World Housing Settlement (Figure 6). The selected site is a large-scale housing settlement which has one million square meters of living space, and more than three thousand apartment units.

**Figure 6.** *My World Housing Settlement and its Near Environment (by D.Aydın,H.Işın, 2016)*



Students made a detailed analysis of literature about the high rise buildings and their effects on users. They tested the assumption “living in the high rise apartment blocks may affect the social interaction and life quality of the families with children negatively”. Within the case study, they made interviews with the residents who have children in the selected settlement (Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** *Students Working on the Site (by D.Aydın,H.Işın, 2016)*

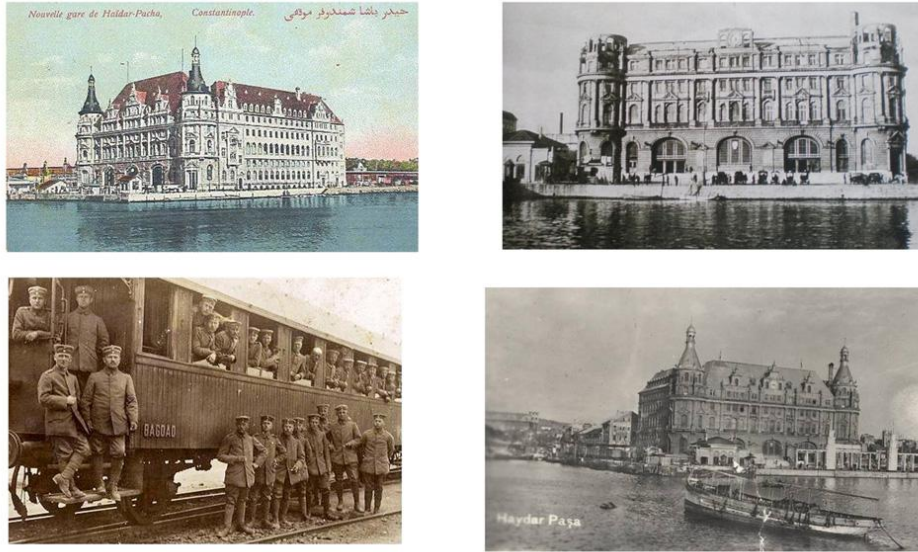


According to the results, there was a difference between the uses of open social spaces of the families with children due to the location of their apartment units' level within the apartment blocks. The families which were living on the higher levels allowed their children to play within the social spaces alone less than the families which were living on the lower floors. Especially families with babies were complaining about living and feeling closed with walls in a high rise building.

The final group's study was titled as “How Should Istanbul Haydarpaşa Train Station Be Re-used?: Urban Memory, Attachment and New Interventions”. Haydarpaşa Train Station is a significant building and a landmark for Kadıköy, Istanbul and has an important place in the urban memory, memories of the people that came to Istanbul from Anatolia as well as the local people which are living in Kadıköy (Figure 8). It was accepted as the entrance door to Istanbul for many years; people came from Anatolia first met Istanbul and the Bosphorus within the Haydarpaşa Station.

It was built in the beginning of 1900s, and today, it is not functioning as a station anymore due to the metropolitan planning strategies in the larger scale. There are many controversies about the re-use of the building; the municipality and the government intends to start a privatization process, for all that, local citizens and the social constitutions defend to save the building as a public space that is open to everyone.

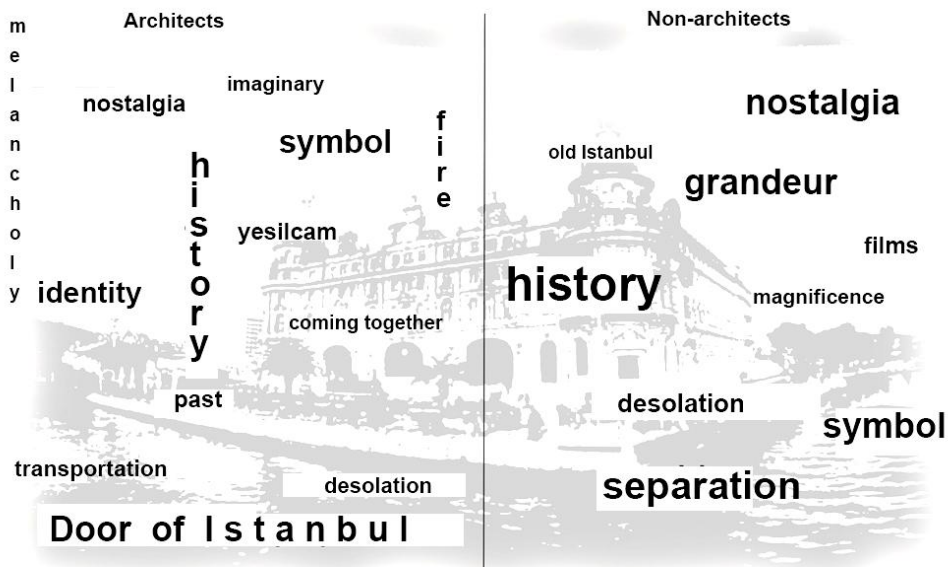
**Figure 8.** Memories about Haydarpasa Station (by B.Ergin,T.Çoruh, 2016)



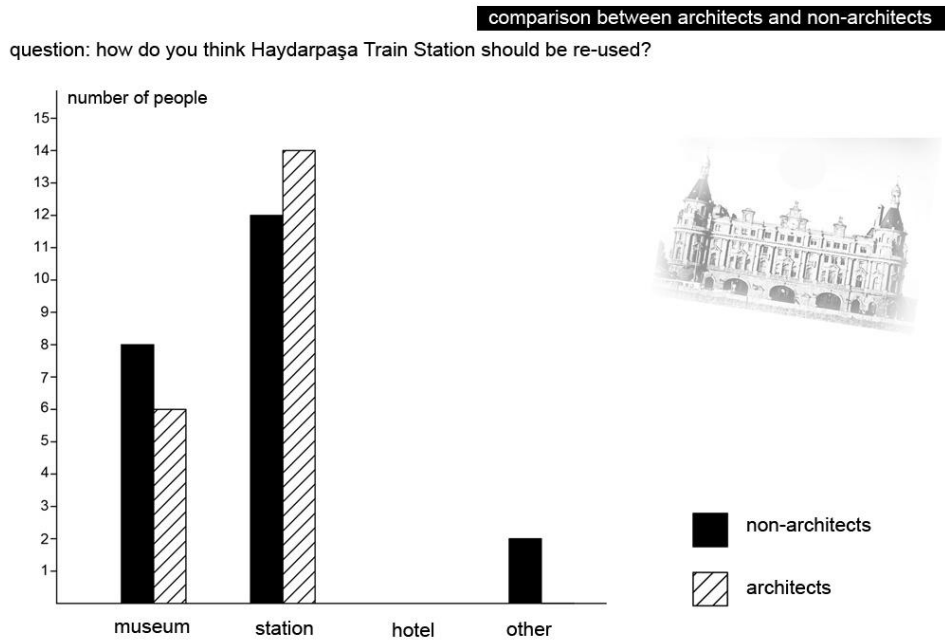
Students were curious about the current circumstances and the people’s thoughts which have different backgrounds. They designed a questionnaire which included multi-choice questions and open-ended questions. As a result, they made a comparison between the architects and non-architects; and between the local people and the other people that were living in the other districts of Istanbul (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

**Figure 9.** Examples from their Analyses: Meaning of Haydarpasa (by B.Ergin,T.Çoruh, 2016)

question: what does Haydarpasa Train Station mean to you?



**Figure 10.** *Examples from their Analyses: Re-use of Haydarpaşa (by B.Ergin,T.Çoruh, 2016)*



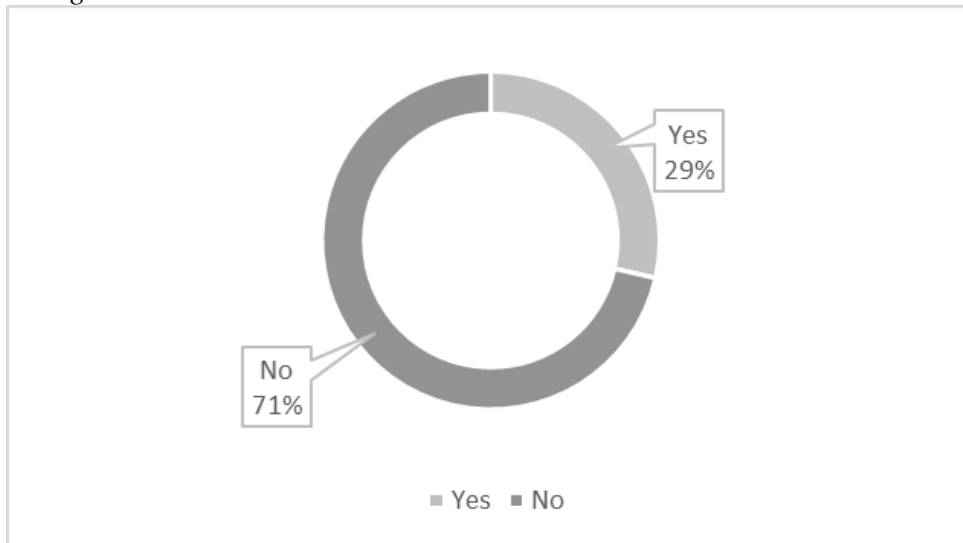
The results showed that neither the architects nor the non-architects had certain information about the current situation. And the great majority of the participants agreed on using the building as a station as it was in the history.

### Conclusions

As a result of the course, the groups were successful on conducting the case studies and concluding the process. They were able to make interpretations about the results related with the examined problems. It was quite impressive to see the students' anxiety and constancy on the work both within the classroom and at the selected sites. The students were encouraged to deal with the real problems within the real context.

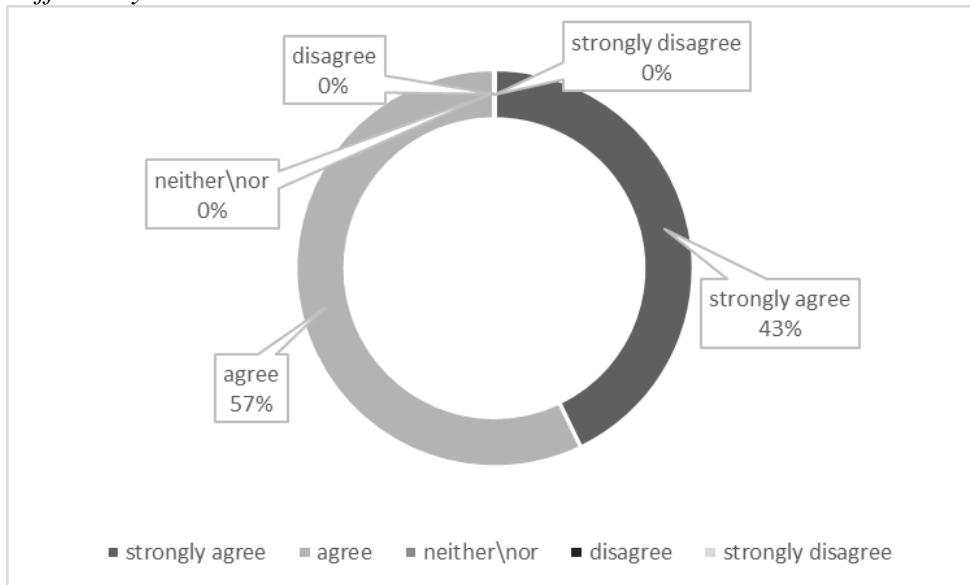
At the end of the course, a questionnaire was applied to the students in order to understand their evaluations about the process and to test the changes in their understanding of "what a research is". It is understood from the analyses that most of the students have not experienced a similar research study before they took the Environmental Psychology Course (Figure 11).

**Figure 11.** Analysis which Shows the Students' Former Experiences on Doing a Research



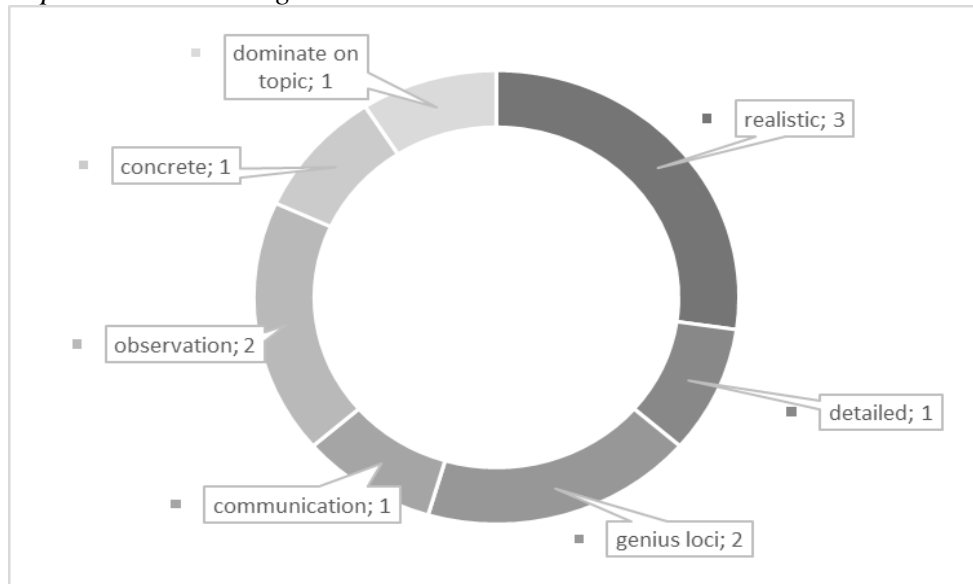
The greatest majority of the students agreed on the statement that they were feeling themselves sufficient to conduct a research on design after they took the Environmental Psychology Course (Figure 12).

**Figure 12.** Analysis which Shows the Evaluations of the Students on their Sufficiency



They mostly used the words “topic”, “method” and “curiosity” while they were defining the meaning of a research. And they defined the positive contributions of working on the real site with real problems by using the words that are shown in Figure 13. As a result, the students experienced a simulation of a research and systematically made an investigation on a problem within the urban space.

**Figure 13.** *Used Words to Define the Positive Contributions of the Experiential Learning*



Within the scope of this article, it was emphasized that “experiential learning” and “interdisciplinary group studies” gain importance in design education specifically within the Environmental Psychology Field. A discussion that questions the “role of experiential learning” within the context of the ideas and studies of students attending to “Environmental Psychology Course” is presented. As it is seen from the process and the individual evaluations of the students, the learning strategy enables students to design and conduct a research study by using the research methods and activates them within the classroom as well as the study sites.

After the experiences of a semester, for specifically the Environmental Psychology Field, it can be inferred that determination of the problem by the students themselves and applying the case studies within the field were the most important parts of the research process. Discussing and determining problems related with interior space and its urban context in different scales provided valuable data and a deep understanding of user-environment relations, and additionally for the further stages, inputs for the design process.

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