

### **'When Everything Old Is New Again': Experiential Learning in the Classroom**

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#### **Abstract**

This session examined definitions of experiential learning and how the term has been recently used to focus on specific programmes and types of learning practices at the expense of other programmes, often based in the Humanities, as well as more routine pedagogical strategies. Further, the current use of the terminology creates a false and damaging dichotomy as it situates the classroom (and even the wider locale of the campus) away from the “real world” and encourages students to compartmentalize classroom learning as incidental to their lives and future careers. We encouraged participants to examine their current classroom practices to identify activities that may be considered experiential and asked them to identify obstacles they face both in their disciplines and generally that prevent them from incorporating more of these practices in their classrooms. We tried to model how small changes in teaching practices can encourage students to engage in their own learning. We contend that one does not have to reinvent the wheel—or rewrite the curriculum—to offer students experiential educational opportunities. Many of the activities instructors already use can be adapted to encourage students to participate more fully in their own learning and, with simple changes, these practices can be used in any classroom. Our hope was that participants would recognize how they might engage their students in experiential learning without leaving their classrooms.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning; Humanities classroom; student engagement in the classroom

#### **Introduction**

The goal of this practice-based workshop was to encourage participants to develop a more nuanced and complete understanding of experiential learning. We encouraged participants to examine their current teaching strategies to identify what they already do that could be considered experiential learning (Kolb, 2015). We also modelled our own approaches in the workshop and, through hands-on activities, discussion, and reflection, encouraged participants to identify interactive classroom practices they could adopt as a matter of course in their teaching. Rather than seeing experiential learning as something that exists primarily outside of the classroom, we argue that this kind of high-impact interactive learning is (or should be) routine in the classroom in any discipline, including those disciplines in the Humanities, which are often perceived as not involving much hands-on learning.

In order to facilitate our aims, we held a session of 50 minutes in which we engaged participants through brief presentations and activities, structuring our session in four parts:

- 1) a brief writing exercise asking participants how they understand the term “experiential learning”;
- 2) a brief presentation on how we understand experiential learning and a critique of the implied opposition between the classroom and the real world;
- 3) a brief presentation on the purpose of experiential learning and the practices we use in our own classrooms to engage students;
- 4) a discussion-based exercise in small groups to identify experiential practices that participants already use in their teaching and what obstacles—disciplinary or otherwise—that might prevent them from incorporating more, followed by a final debriefing with all participants to share some new ideas for experiential activities and offer suggestions for overcoming obstacles to employing such practices.

Throughout the session, our aim was to engage participants fully in a thought-provoking and productive discussion of experiential learning.

### **What Is Experiential Learning?**

As participants entered the room, we provided them with a handout that included seven questions and asked them to concentrate on the first two, one on defining experiential learning and the other on the purpose of this pedagogical practice. The session then began with an exploration of the etymology of the word *experiential*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, derives from the word *experience*—French *expérience* and Latin *experientia*—meaning “to try, put to the test” (“experience, n.”). The *OED* highlights the element of “experiment or observation” (“experience, v.”) and the activity of “being [...] consciously affected by an event” (“experience, n.”). These definitions link *experiential* to an activity or action, that of testing or attempting, and also to the idea of transformation.

We then posed the following questions: But what is going on in our institutions? How do administrators and students think of experiential learning? Using an example close to home, we assessed the “Experiential Learning” webpage of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), which, like those of many institutions, currently employs this term to present a much narrower definition than suggested by the *OED*. In our critical analysis of the MSVU webpage, we examined taglines, subheadings, and examples (as well as images) used to explain experiential learning to current and prospective students. Our analysis revealed a very particular idea of this pedagogical practice that ignores much of what happens in the everyday classroom and in the Humanities more broadly. For instance, experiential learning is defined on the webpage as a kind of “learn[ing] by doing” and as offering the “opportunity [for students] to pair what they learn in the classroom with hands-on experience.” Most of the examples provided relate to some kind of “real work environment” on and off campus (e.g., co-ops, internships, practicums). This language creates an opposition between the more traditional learning environment of the classroom—still the predominant locale of formal education—and opportunities that exist beyond the classroom and even off campus.

This opposition emerges from the view of experiential learning as involving action, activity, the body, employment or professional settings, and accomplishing some tangible task, all of which implies that the classroom involves the opposite. We argue that this opposition is not only false but also harmful in the way it suggests that the classroom environment is somehow not reality; is theoretical rather than practical; is where you learn but do not apply skills; is passive, where students conceive ideas rather than realize them; and is focused on thinking rather than doing. When we consider our own understanding of experiential learning, it is impossible to see the everyday classroom (in any discipline), the university campus in general, and the kind of education that happens there as somehow distinct from experiential learning; distinct from notions of experience and the real world; and distinct from

what is hands-on and active. The classroom is precisely where educators make attempts and put disciplinary knowledge, theories, and practices to the test on a regular basis.

### **What Is the Purpose of Experiential Learning?**

Following our examination of how experiential learning is so often presented in institutions of higher learning as referring mainly to activities that take place outside of the classroom, we asked participants to turn their attention to the purpose of experiential learning. Discussion focused on how it should prepare students for their future beyond the university, particularly in relation to careers associated with the discipline they were studying but also for the job market more generally.

In light of the idea that experiential learning prepares students for a future career, we examined the knowledge and skills gained by students in a Humanities classroom specifically because it tends to be omitted from discussions involving this kind of pedagogical practice and the practical concerns of the job market, making it an important case study. By examining our own teaching practices as English professors, we noted that students in our classes are taught to read deeply and carefully and to pay attention to details in a text, whether that text is the printed word, a visual image, or an object. They are also taught to think creatively and analytically about what they read and to recognize that there are multiple ways of interpreting a text. Moreover, students must share their ideas about a text and are thereby taught to communicate their ideas to others clearly, concisely, and persuasively, both orally and in writing. Often, they are also required to provide constructive feedback on the work of their peers. Students in upper-level courses are taught to identify a focus for independent research and to search beyond the obvious for authoritative resources that will aid them in developing an argument and defending their position. Thus the English classroom, and Humanities classrooms more generally, provide a fertile site for students to acquire important skills for their future careers.

While English studies might emphasize some of these abilities more or less than other disciplines in the Humanities, there are additional skills students hone in the classroom that are taught in many fields such as meeting deadlines, working collaboratively, and taking a leadership role. Importantly, students do not have to leave the classroom to learn any of these skills. Strong communication skills, teamwork, and leadership are among the most sought-after attributes in job candidates (NACE, 2018). All of these are connected to activities frequently undertaken in our English courses, activities that could be adapted for other disciplines. Well-planned group exercises teach leadership and teamwork as well as communication.

### **What Does Experiential Learning Look Like in Our Classrooms?**

In keeping with James Lang's (2016) emphasis on "small teaching" (p. 13), experiential learning in our classes can be as simple as having students brainstorm a short written response to a question that they share with a small group of students before collaborating on writing a more extensive response. It may be asking them to pose their own questions about a text and having other students fashion answers to them. It may be asking them not to do anything but think about—reflect on—what they have learned about a particular text and how that information impacts their view of the world in which we live. If the purpose of experiential learning is to prepare students for life beyond university, all these activities achieve this purpose.

## What Does Experiential Learning Look Like in Your Classrooms?

Having suggested some of the ways in which experiential learning could be identified in our classrooms at MSVU, we opened up the discussion to participants, asking them to identify practices they already undertake that could be considered experiential learning. Lively small-group discussions tackled two specific questions: 1) What are you doing now that could be considered experiential learning? 2) What else could you be doing that you don't already do? We hoped that these group discussions would provide participants with ideas for identifying experiential-learning practices that they already do and suggest specific new activities that they could implement in their courses. We then broadened the discussion by opening the floor to all participants and adding another question to the previous two: 3) What obstacles have you encountered or do you foresee encountering in trying to implement experiential-learning practices?

Responses varied, but what was clear to us from the discussion is that while there are obvious examples of experiential learning, there are also less obvious ones that tend not to be categorized as such and that this has the effect of marginalizing certain disciplines, especially those in the Humanities. Having students engage with case studies as if in a professional capacity or as if dealing with clients is a way in which students can experience specific career roles while still doing course work. This practice falls most easily under the rubric of learning by doing in that the activity is designed to introduce students to particular workplace situations. As we contend, many university definitions support this view of experiential learning; however, it is more difficult to define what happens in programs that are not geared towards specific jobs.

With further discussion, participants identified some important features of experiential learning in their classrooms and, in the process, shared ideas useful to others. Certain themes emerged from the various responses: the importance of active learning, context, reflection, and formative assessments.

It is not surprising that discussion emphasized the importance of encouraging students to be active learners, a goal which can be achieved, for instance, with the simple activity of asking students questions to which they have to find the answers themselves rather than giving them the answers in a lecture. Another way to encourage active learning is to ask students to engage in doing what they are studying; for example, if they are studying the sonnet, get them to write a quatrain in iambic pentameter, and if studying a play, to perform a scene. The problem of retaining material—a common pedagogical challenge—can also be addressed with small activities such as these that students are more likely to find memorable.

The discussion also dealt with the importance of attaching meaning to students' activities. An explicit explanation of the purpose of an activity and how it can develop important skills provides context for students' learning and encourages a fuller understanding of experiential learning. Self-reflection was also a significant element in many of the ideas for experiential-learning activities. An opportunity to reflect on an activity after it is done was seen as essential for both students and faculty, allowing them to recognize what and how they are learning or teaching. Finally, participants discussed the importance of developing assessment models that allowed for the development of learning while also leaving room for failure or highlighting the struggle that everyone goes through in achieving new knowledge and skills.

Experiential learning is increasingly occupying a more prominent role at our institutions, affecting the way our disciplines and programs are being viewed by administrators, staff, students, and the public, which in turn affects hires, funding, and enrolments. Our task as educators moving forward should be to

seriously question and critically analyze the definitions of experiential learning being constructed and the resulting implications for the everyday classroom.

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