



# Experiential Learning

“Experiential [learning] is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education, para. 2).

Experiential learning is also referred to as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration, all which are clearly defined by these well-known maxims:

*I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.*  
~ Confucius, 450 BC

*Tell me and I forget, Teach me and I remember, Involve me and I will learn.*  
~ Benjamin Franklin, 1750

*There is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education.*  
~ John Dewey, 1938

*A key element of experiential learning...is the student, and that learning takes place...*

In their book, *Teaching for Experiential Learning*, Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) found that most college faculty teach by lecturing because few of them learned how to teach otherwise. Although good lecturing should be part of an educator’s teaching repertoire, faculty should also actively involve their students “in the learning process through discussion, group work, hands-on participation, and applying information outside the classroom” (p. 2). This process defines experiential learning where students are involved in learning content in which they have a personal interest, need, or want.

Learning through experience is not a new concept for the college classroom. Notable educational psychologists such as John Dewey (1859-1952), Carl Rogers (1902-1987), and David Kolb (b. 1939) have provided the groundwork of learning theories that focus on “learning through experience or “learning by doing.” Dewey popularized the concept of Experiential Education which focuses on problem solving and critical thinking rather than memorization and rote learning. Rogers considered experiential learning “significant” as compared to what he called “meaningless” cognitive learning. Kolb also noted that concrete learning experiences are critical to meaningful learning and is well known for his Learning Style Inventory (LSI) which is widely used in many disciplines today to help identify preferred ways of learning. A key element of experiential learning, therefore, is the student, and that learning takes place (the knowledge gained) as a result of being personally involved in this pedagogical approach.

## **Principles of Experiential Learning (EL)**

Unlike traditional classroom situations where students may compete with one

another or remain uninvolved or unmotivated and where the instruction is highly structured, students in experiential learning situations cooperate and learn from one another in a more semi-structured approach. Instruction is designed to engage students in direct experiences which are tied to real world problems and situations in which the instructor facilitates rather than directs student progress. “The focus of EL is placed on the process of learning and not the product of learning” (UC Davis, 2011, para 6). Proponents of experiential learning assert that students will be more motivated to learn when they have a personal stake in the subject rather than being assigned to review a topic or read a textbook chapter. What is essential in EL, however, “that the phases of experiencing (doing), reflection and applying are present. In addition, “the stages of reflection and application are what make experiential learning different and more powerful than the models commonly referred to as ‘learn-by-doing’ or ‘hands-on-learning’” (UC Davis, 2011, para 12 citing Proudman).

The following is a list of experiential learning principles as noted from the (Association for Experiential Education, 2011, para 4):

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the student to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the student is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning.
- Students are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: student to self, student to others and student to the world at large.
- The instructor and student may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of the experience cannot totally be predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for students and instructors to explore and examine their own values.
- The instructor’s primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting students, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The instructor recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Instructors strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the student.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

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### **The Experiential Learning Process**

Experiential learning involves a number of steps that offer student a hands-on, collaborative and reflective learning experience which helps them to “fully learn new skills and knowledge” (Haynes, 2007). Although learning content is important, learning from the *process* is at the heart of experiential learning. During each step of the experience, students will engage with the content, the instructor, each other as well as self-reflect and apply what they have learned in another situation.

The following describes the steps that comprise experiential learning as noted by (Haynes, 2007, para. 6 and UC Davis, 2011)

#### **Experiencing/Exploring “Doing”**

Students will perform or do a hands-on minds-on experience with little or no help from the instructor. Examples might include: Making products or models, role-playing, giving a presentation, problem-solving, playing a game. A key facet of experiential learning is what the student learns from the experience rather than the quantity or quality of the experience.

#### **Sharing/Reflecting “What Happened?”**

Students will share the results, reactions and observations with their peers. Students will also get other peers to talk about their own experience, share their reactions and observations and discuss feelings generated by the experience. The sharing equates to reflecting on what they discovered and relating it to past experiences which can be used for future use.

#### **Processing/Analyzing “What’s Important?”**

Students will discuss, analyze and reflect upon the experience. Describing and analyzing their experiences allow students to relate them to future learning experiences. Students will also discuss how the experience was carried out, how themes, problems and issues emerged as a result of the experience. Students will discuss how specific problems or issues were addressed and to identify recurring themes.

#### **Generalizing “So What?”**

Students will connect the experience with real world examples, find trends or common truths in the experience, and identify “real life” principles that emerged.

#### **Application “Now What?”**

Students will apply what they learned in the experience (and what they learned from past experiences and practice) to a similar or different situation. Also, students will discuss how the newly learned process can be applied to other situations. Students will discuss how issues raised can be useful in future situations and how more effective behaviors can develop from what they learned. The instructor should help each student feel a sense of ownership for what was learned.

**Instructor Roles in Experiential Learning**

In experiential learning, the instructor guides rather than directs the learning process where students are naturally interested in learning. The instructor assumes the role of facilitator and is guided by a number of steps crucial to experiential learning as noted by (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010, p. 13).

1. Be willing to accept a less teacher-centric role in the classroom.
2. Approach the learning experience in a positive, non-dominating way.
3. Identify an experience in which students will find interest and be personally committed.
4. Explain the purpose of the experiential learning situation to the students.
5. Share your feelings and thoughts with your students and let them know that you are learning from the experience too.
6. Tie the course learning objectives to course activities and direct experiences so students know what they are supposed to do.
7. Provide relevant and meaningful resources to help students succeed.
8. Allow students to experiment and discover solutions on their own.
9. Find a sense of balance between the academic and nurturing aspects of teaching.
10. Clarify students' and instructor roles.

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**Student Roles in Experiential Learning**

Qualities of experiential learning are those in which students decide themselves to be personally involved in the learning experience (students are actively participating in their own learning and have a personal role in the direction of learning). Students are not completely left to teach themselves; however, the instructor assumes the role of guide and facilitates the learning process. The following list of student roles has been adapted from (UC-Davis, 2011 and Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

1. Students will be involved in problems which are practical, social and personal.
2. Students will be allowed freedom in the classroom as long as they make headway in the learning process.
3. Students often will need to be involved with difficult and challenging situations while discovering.
4. Students will self-evaluate their own progression or success in the learning process which becomes the primary means of assessment.
5. Students will learn from the learning process and become open to change. This change includes less reliance on the instructor and more on fellow peers, the development of skills to investigate (research) and learn from an authentic experience, and the ability to objectively self-evaluate one's performance.

*Once the EL experience has been decided upon, plan the experience by tying it to the course learning objectives and determine what students will need to successfully complete the exercise...*

**Integrating Experiential Learning (EL) in Teaching**

As previously noted, a primary role for instructors is to identify a situation which challenges students through problem-solving, cooperation, collaboration, self-discovery and self-reflection. At the same time, decide what the students should learn or gain from the learning experience. Below are some primary points to consider when integrating experiential learning in your own teaching.

*Once begun, you should refrain from providing students with all of the content and information and complete answers to their questions...*

**Plan.** Once the EL experience has been decided upon, plan the experience by tying it to the course learning objectives and determine what students will need to successfully complete the exercise (resources such as readings and worksheets, research, rubrics, supplies and directions to off-campus locations, etc.). Also, determine the logistics: how much time will be allotted for the students to complete the experience (a complete class session, one week or more)? Will students need to work outside of class? How will the experience end? What forms of assessment will you employ? Will you use ongoing assessments such as observations and journals (called formative assessment), end of experience assessments such as written reports and projects, self and/or peer assessments, or a combination of all three?

**Prepare.** After the planning has been completed, prepare materials, rubrics, and assessment tools and ensure that everything is ready before the experience begins.

**Facilitate.** As with most instructional strategies, the instructor should commence the experience. Once begun, you should refrain from providing students with all of the content and information and complete answers to their questions. Instead, guide students through the process of finding and determining solutions for themselves.

**Evaluate.** Success of an experiential learning activity can be determined during discussions, reflections and a debriefing session. Debriefing, as a culminating experience, can help to reinforce and extend the learning process. In addition, make use of the assessment strategies previously planned.

### **Experiential Learning Opportunities in Higher Education**

There are numerous experiential learning opportunities in higher education that can be found in most disciplines. The following is a list of these experiences as noted by (George Mason University, 2011; Loretto, 2011; Northern Illinois University OTC, 2011).

**Apprenticeship Experiences** provide students an opportunity to try out a job usually with an experienced professional in the field to act as a mentor. Apprenticeships are a type of on the job training which may lead to certification. Many skilled laborers learn their trade by doing an apprenticeship.

**Clinical Experiences** are hands-on experiences of a pre-determined duration directly tied to an area of study such as nursing students participating in a hospital-based experience or child development and teacher education students participating in day care and classroom settings.

**Cooperative Education Experiences** are more extensive than internships and will usually span two or more semesters of work. Co-ops are paid professional work experiences and are tied very closely to the student's academic work. During the co-op experience students will

receive ongoing advising and the co-op will be structured to meet the student's academic and/or career goals. Co-op experience usually is included on a student's transcript in addition to being awarded designated credit hours for its completion.

**Fellowship Experiences** provide tuition or aid to support the training of students for a period of time, usually between 6 months to one year. They are usually made by educational institutions, corporations, or foundations to assist individuals pursuing a course of study or research. Post-graduate fellowships assist students at the graduate level while post-doctorate fellowships provide monies for those who have already achieved their doctorate degree.

**Field Work Experiences** allow students to explore and apply content learned in the classroom in a specified field experience away from the classroom. Field work experiences bridge educational experiences with an outside community which can range from neighborhoods and schools to anthropological dig sites and laboratory settings.

**Internship Experiences** are job-related and provide students and job changers with an opportunity to test the waters in a career field and also gain some valuable work experience. Internships can be for credit, not for credit, paid or unpaid.

**Practicum Experiences** are often a required component of a course of study and place students in a supervised and often paid situation. Students develop competencies and apply previously studied theory and content such as school library media students working in a high school library or marketing majors working in a marketing research firm. Practicum experiences also allow students to design and develop a project in which they apply knowledge and develop skills such as a doctoral student preparing the components of an online course.

*Service Learning Experiences are distinguished by being mutually beneficial for both student and community.*

**Service Learning Experiences** are distinguished by being mutually beneficial for both student and community. Service learning is growing rapidly and is considered a part of experiential education by its very nature of learning, performing a job within the community, and serious reflection by the student. Service learning involves solving some of society's issues; such as, homelessness, poverty, lack of quality education, pollution, etc. One of the goals of service learning is to help students become aware of these issues and develop good citizenship in learning how to help solve some of these problems.

**Student Teaching Experiences** provides student candidates with an opportunity to put into practice the knowledge and skills he or she has been developing in the preparation program. Student teaching typically involves an on-site experience in a partner school and opportunities for formal and informal candidate reflection on their teaching experience.

The on-site teaching portion of this experience can range from ten to sixteen weeks, depending on the program.

*Study Abroad Experiences offer students a unique opportunity to learn in another culture, within the security of a host family and a host institution carefully chosen to allow the transfer of credit to a student's degree program.*

**Study Abroad Experiences** offer students a unique opportunity to learn in another culture, within the security of a host family and a host institution carefully chosen to allow the transfer of credit to a student's degree program. Students studying a foreign language will perfect the accent and greatly expand their vocabulary--a skill retained for life. Making new friends, and travel and decision making, are also key parts of the study abroad experience.

**Volunteer Experiences** allow students to serve in a community primarily because they choose to do so. Many serve through a non-profit organization – sometimes referred to as formal volunteering, but a significant number also serve less formally, either individually or as part of a group. Because these informal volunteers are much harder to identify, they may not be included in research and statistics on volunteering.

### **Experiential Learning Opportunities at Northern Illinois University**

The Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning (OSEEL) provides “opportunities for undergraduates to engage in hands-on learning. Through OSEEL's undergraduate research, service learning, themed learning communities, and other high impact practices, NIU students will develop critical thinking, use creativity, and employ multiple communication strategies while applying their skills to real-world problems. As an outgrowth of the Curricular Innovations strategic plan, OSEEL works collaboratively across university divisions and colleges to create sustainable, relevant, student-centered, research-based programming which utilizes experiential learning, both in and out of the classroom to promote and sustain student academic success. Each of OSEEL's programs align directly with the eight student learning outcomes of the Baccalaureate Review as NIU seeks to enhance the cognitive, social, and academic skills of its students to prepare them to be life-long students and responsible citizens in our ever-changing, global society”(OSEEL, 2011, para. 1). For more information on the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning, call 815.753.8154 or at <http://www.niu.edu/engagedlearning/>.

Since 2000, The Experiential Learning Center (ELC) in the College of Business has been connecting “teams of NIU students with organizations to tackle real-world business issues. From software evaluation to emerging market analysis projects, students serve as consultants addressing non-mission critical, cross functional business issues. Throughout the 16-week semester, Business ELC teams are guided by a faculty coach and assisted by an organizational sponsor. To each unique project, teams apply the Business ELC project methodology, as well as the knowledge, skills and theories learned in the classroom” (ELC 2001). For more information about the College of Business Experiential Learning Center, call 815.753.5445 or at <http://www.cob.niu.edu/elc/>.

**Summary**

Experiential learning experiences help to complete students' preparation for their chosen careers which reinforce course content and theory. Students learn through student- rather than instructor-centered experiences by doing, discovering, reflecting and applying. Through these experiences students develop communication skills and self-confidence and gain and strengthen decision-making skills by responding to and solving real world problems and processes.

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**Experiential Learning Resources**

Association for Experiential Education

<http://www.aee.org/>

International Consortium for Experiential Learning

<http://www.icel.org.uk/>

*Journal of Experiential Education*

<http://www.aee.org/publications/jee>

National Society for Experiential Education

<http://www.nsee.org/>

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<http://www.wilderdom.com/experiential/>

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

<http://www.cael.org/>