CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Experiential Learning

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

-Benjamin Franklin

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is self-explanatory: it's learning that occurs when students are directly involved in a learning experience rather than being recipients of ready-made content through teaching methods such as lectures.

David Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience"

-David Kolb
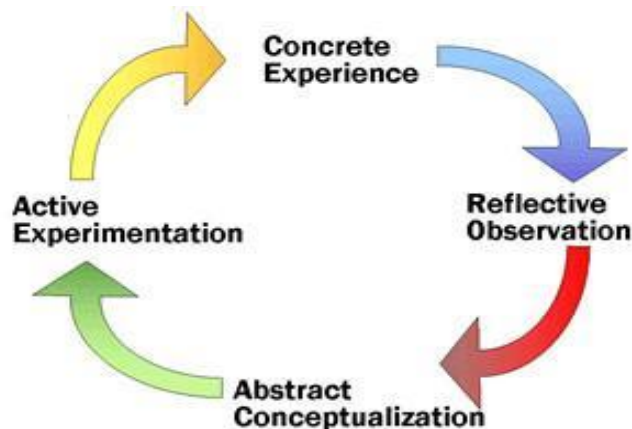
The following chart demonstrates the application of Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning to a specific example of experiential learning:

	Stage	Example
Concrete Experience	The learner has a "concrete experience."	In a mechanical engineering course, students are asked to use 20 popsicle sticks to build a small bridge that will support 500 grams.
Reflective Observation	The learner makes observations and reflections based upon that experience.	Students note which popsicle sticks failed first, whether the sticks supported more when they were laid flat versus on their edges, and so on.
Abstract Conceptualization	The observations and reflections are synthesized into a new conceptual understanding and interpretation of the experience.	Students develop a list of construction "principles" or best practices.
Active Experimentation	This conceptual understanding is applied and is used to guide new and purposeful experiences.	Students build another iteration of the bridge with the list of construction principles in mind.

Examples of Experiential Learning

Through experiential learning, students are able to integrate abstract knowledge into concrete applications which results in more enduring and meaningful learning outcomes.

Examples of experiential learning may include, but are not limited to:

- **Case Studies**: Students are involved in problem-solving processes especially when cases are based on real experiences
- **Client-based projects**: Students work with a business client to provide them with a service (i.e. design a communication product, conduct a research project, plan an event, etc.)
- **College Service**: A class project that may involve students participating in college committees, students' union activities, student club activities, course redesign, curriculum review, etc.
- **Community Service Learning (CSL)**: Course projects that involve students working to assist a nonprofit community organization as they build subject-area knowledge and skills
- **Educational Travel or Field trips**: Students are involved in structured observation, participation, discussion, and reflection
- **Events co-organized by students**: Students present their knowledge to the community through an event of their choice
- **International Exchange programs**: Student participates in studies at another institution and brings information back to original school to share, discuss, and reflect upon
- **Lab activities**: Students do exercises, create documents, conduct experiments, or do other hands-on activities under the guidance of instructors (i.e. in a computer lab)
- **Peer Mentoring**: As part of an official mentoring course or honours project, a student works with an instructor to enhance the learning experience of their peers by leading study groups, organizing essay workshops, facilitating online discussion, etc.
- **Workplace learning**: i.e. co-op, internships

Educator's Role

Overall, the educator's role is to provide students with opportunities for experiential learning.

He or she will:

- Explain how the experience relates to specific learning outcomes from the course
- Allow students to gain the experience through exploration
- Permit sufficient time or methods through which students can reflect upon their experience
- Have students refine the experience so that they understand how it fits into currently held views. In other words, how does theory relate to experience?
- Provide methods to follow up the experience so that students can apply the insights they gained

Caution

Not every course can and/or should have an experiential learning component due to limitations such as variety in student learning styles and different cultural experiences and conditions.

That being said, if students would benefit from experiential learning activities, be sure to look at the sequencing of a course curriculum and outline. More specifically, look at how the learning outcomes tie with learning activities and evaluations.

An example that would raise a red flag:
- The learning outcome states that students 'analyze' the material
- The learning activities include case studies but evaluations are a midterm and final with only multiple choice questions.

As one can see, this learning outcome requires the case study material to be analyzed in which multiple choice question based tests are not a suitable form of assessment for this outcome.

Reflection Tool

The following tool aligns with David Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning and may be used to reflect upon the inclusion of experiential learning activities.

Experiential Learning Reflection Tool

Check the appropriate - Yes, No, or Uncertain - as it applies to experiential learning. Comment on the reasons or provide examples for your selections.

Concrete Experiences	Yes	Unsure	No	Comments
• The audience was experiencing the activity through direct, hands-on participation (i.e., learning by doing)	◯	◯	◯	
• Carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis	◯	◯	◯	
• Student takes initiative, makes decisions, and is accountable for the results	◯	◯	◯	
• Student is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning	◯	◯	◯	

Reflective Observation	Yes	Unsure	No	Comments
• Involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic	◯	◯	◯	
• The basis for future experience and learning is formed	◯	◯	◯	
• End results of the experience cannot be totally predicted	◯	◯	◯	
• The learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes	◯	◯	◯	
• Students discuss the experience(s) they had completing the activity	◯	◯	◯	
• "Direct experiences" have been designed that include preparatory and reflective exercises	◯	◯	◯	

Abstract Conceptualization	Yes	Unsure	No	Comments
• Participants discussed the experience(s) they had completing the activity	◯	◯	◯	
• There was evidence of active reflection in small or large groups	◯	◯	◯	

Active Experimentation	Yes	Unsure	No	Comments
• Connections between the activity and real-world examples were made by the participants and/or the facilitator	◯	◯	◯	
• The outcomes of the activity were applied to one or more independent situations	◯	◯	◯	

Additional Comments:

Resources

University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence. (n.d.) *Experiential Learning.* Retrieved October 21, 2014 from https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/resources/integrative-learning/experiential-learning

University of Calgary Department of Communication, Media and Film. (n.d.) *Experiential Learning.* Retrieved October 22, 2014 from http://commfilm.ucalgary.ca/experientiallearning