

Guidelines for assessment of experiential learning

This guide provides an introduction to experiential learning, summarizes several strategies for assessing experiential learning, and offers case studies with potential in-class applications.

What is Experiential Learning?

In its simplest form, experiential learning means learning from experience or learning by doing.

Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking.¹

Experiential learning can take many forms, including field trips, laboratory experiments, role playing, and work placements. All share common characteristics, including:²

- **Mixture of content and process:** there should be a balance between the activities and the underlying content/theory.
- **Engagement in purposeful, meaningful endeavors that encourage a “big picture” perspective:** the activities must be personally and emotionally relevant to the student, and allow them to make connections between the learning they are doing and the real world.
- **Opportunities for reflection:** students should critically reflect on their own learning, connecting their experience to theory and gaining insight into themselves and their interactions with the world. Students can also consider how their new skills, knowledge and experiences are transferrable to other situations or environments, including those outside of academia.

The Challenge of Assessment

The outcomes of experiential learning can be varied and unpredictable. How one student chooses to solve a problem will be different from another student, and what one student takes away from an experience may differ for his or her peers. Also, in experiential learning, the process is as important as the final product. Therefore, we need to develop assessments that measure success in both the process and the product—each area may require separate learning outcomes and criteria.³

Assessment Strategies

Some of the following strategies can be used to assess experiential learning:^{4,5}

- Allowing students to define how their work will be judged: They choose what criteria will be used to assess their work, or help create a grading rubric.
- Creating a reflective journal or a portfolio
- Reflection on critical events that took place during the experience
- Essay, report, or presentation (could be arts-based, multimedia or oral) on what has been learnt (preferably with references to excerpts from reflective writing)
- Self-awareness tools and exercises (e.g., questionnaires about learning patterns)
- Short answers to questions of a ‘why’ or ‘explain’ nature (e.g., “What did you learn during this assignment? What did you not learn that you would like to?”)
- One-on-one oral assessments with the instructor
- A project that develops ideas further (individually or in small groups)
- Self-evaluation and/or group evaluation of a task performed

Note that these methods incorporate elements of **reflection** or **self-assessment**.

In experiential learning, the student manages their own learning, rather than being told what to do and when to do it. The relationship between student and instructor is different, with the instructor passing much of the responsibility on to the student.³

Putting it into Practice

Here are some real-life examples of different experiential learning assessment tools put into practice, as described in the literature. One thing to note is that, while experiential learning opportunities may often occur in the field (work placements, community projects, field excursions, etc.), many of the assessment tools also translate well to in-class applications.

1. Science students participate in a field trip to Costa Rica to study biodiversity

Learning outcome: Demonstrate an ability to apply scientific theory to describe an environment.

Assessment tool: Reflective Journals

Why and how it works: “Students were asked to journal their experience daily. These journal activities are similar to field journals used by scientists to organize and document field observations. The process meets criteria for authentic assessment as it replicates an activity in which scientists engage [and] the journal activity gave students the opportunity to construct knowledge in a way that both encouraged and provided evidence of higher-order thinking. Student journal entries were analyzed using a rubric designed to evaluate the cognitive level of their entries based on Bloom’s Taxonomy.”⁶

In-class applications: Journals can be used when students participate in an activity over a period of time (group or solo projects, weekly tutorials/readings, or even regular lectures). Journal entries can include summaries of new information/things learned (learning “products”), but more importantly, they should focus on the *processes* (e.g. self-reflection, learning strategies, successes, failures, lessons learned, new approaches tried, observations, making connections, asking questions, etc.).⁷ Journal entries can be free-form, but may be more effective if they follow some framework. For example:

- Critical reflections can be based on questions provided by the instructor (e.g., ‘What insights did I gain today?’, ‘In what way does today’s reading/activity tie in to the theory discussed in class?’ ‘What strategies have I used to help me in my learning?’, ‘What prior knowledge did I apply to help me understand the problem better?’).
- Students may also reflect directly on their learning by developing a journal response to the DEAL (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning)-Based Reflection Session Framework. This Framework for critical thinking may include the prompts “I have learned that... I learned this when... This learning matters because... In light of this learning I will...”⁸

2. Engineering students participate in a Sichuan Reconstruction Community Service Project

Learning outcome: Demonstrate an ability to summarize and present information via an oral presentation that meets professional standards, in a professional setting.

Assessment tool: Presentation at an academic conference

Why and how it works: “If students are required to work outside the university, or to be supervised by their peers, professionals, or community members, then there must be measures in place to ensure that work is assessed in the same standard as required by the university. The benefit of using presentations is that they can be done as part of either individual or group work, and can utilize peer and self-assessment.... To make presentations effective, there needs to be explicit assessment criteria and a well-structured marking scheme.”^{9,10}

In-class applications: You can “up the ante” for oral presentations by holding a “conference day”, either by designating one or more lecture periods for the “event” or by creating a more formal event outside of regular class time, perhaps at the end of the term. Members of the community at large, the professional community, or the academic community (e.g. other members of the apartment, students

from other classes) can be invited to observe the presentations and/or to participate by delivering their own. In addition to instructors' assessments, students can perform self-assessments of their work and assess their peers' performances.

3. Law students participate in a full clinical model, offering legal advice to members of the public

Learning outcome: Improve drafting/writing skills while developing self-awareness of own approach to learning.

Assessment tool: Portfolio of practical work and reflections

Why and how it works: "Students must include copies of all substantive written communications they have produced, and a reflective commentary which refers to three specific items (such as a letter of advice, a witness statement and a letter to an opposing party setting out a case) and which: (1) compares the different approaches the student took when preparing each of the three items, and (2) discusses the development of the student's drafting and writing skills throughout the year and his or her strengths and weaknesses in this area Not only will they perform better in their clinical course but reflection will make them more aware of how they learn. There is evidence that increased self-awareness of learning is correlated with better learning, so by engaging in reflection students are teaching themselves how to learn better in the future."¹¹

In-class applications: Like reflective journals, reflective portfolios of work accomplished throughout the term or during a single project can be used effectively in a classroom setting. Portfolios can be used to track the progression of different types of written work (e.g., letters, lab reports, essays: outlines, drafts, commentary from peers, final products, self-assessments) and can even be used to create products for hypothetical scenarios (e.g., business plans, not-for-profit funding proposal, intake assessments and client records for social workers/counsellors, etc.)

Checklists and rubrics

To provide feedback on journals and other methods of assessing students' experiential learning, instructors can develop a checklist or rubric. These tools have several benefits:

- Articulate clear, specific criteria on which students' work will be evaluated, so that students and instructors have a common understanding of expectations for the assignment. Criteria should be related to the desired learning outcomes – what you want students to be able to know, do, or value as a result of the experience/assignment.
- Permit students to self- or peer-assess their work prior to submitting it, potentially resulting in higher quality submissions.
- Offer a systematic approach to providing feedback
- Students can see their strengths and possible areas for improvement

A checklist is a straightforward and accessible way to communicate assignment expectations. It should list the criteria that would define an excellent assignment. These criteria should be described such that each can be answered with a "yes" or "no", enabling students to self- or peer-assess prior to handing in their work. An example checklist for a short written assignment, an op-ed, is below. [The checklist and rubric examples here are elaborated from Professor Rosalie Jukier's "op-ed" assignment in the Faculty of Law. For the complete assignment description, consult the online [Writing Toolkit](#).]

<p>Topic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Current, newsworthy <input type="checkbox"/> Related to the course <p>Organization, Writing, & Mechanics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The op-ed presents a clear, focused and original point of view <input type="checkbox"/> Information is organized in a meaningful way (i.e. ideas follow a logical sequence) <input type="checkbox"/> The language is appropriate for the purpose and the audience <input type="checkbox"/> The length is appropriate
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In its simplest form, a rubric is a list of assignment components with space for instructor comments:

	Comments	Grade: <input type="checkbox"/>
Topic chosen		
Content of assignment		
Structure		
Manner in which assignment is written		
Response to another student's assignment		

To provide students with more detailed expectations, the instructor can define criteria:

	Criteria	Comments	Grade: <input type="checkbox"/>
Topic chosen	Topic is current, related to the course, of interest to a national lay audience, newsworthy		
Content of assignment	The op-ed presents a clear, focused and original point of view		
Structure	Information is organized in a meaningful way (i.e., ideas follow a logical sequence)		
Manner in which assignment is written	The language is appropriate for the readership and the purpose. The length is appropriate		
Response to another student's assignment	The response is interesting, takes a critical stance and involves analytical reasoning		

To provide students with even more detailed expectations, the instructor can add a grading scale (e.g. 1-4; poor/fair/good/excellent; v-/v/v+):

	Criteria	Score on scale of 1-4 (inadequate to excellent)	Comments
Topic chosen	Topic is current, related to the course, of interest to a national lay audience, newsworthy		
Content of assignment	The op-ed presents a clear, focused and original point of view		
Structure	Information is organized in a meaningful way (i.e., ideas follow a logical sequence)		
Manner in which assignment is written	The language is appropriate for the readership and the purpose. The length is appropriate		
Response to another student's Op Ed	The response is interesting, takes a critical stance and involves analytical reasoning		

For a wealth of information and examples of checklists and rubrics, please consult suggested readings¹²,¹³ available through the McGill University Library.

Detailed sample rubrics for specific types of assessments similar to the case studies shared above:

- Reflective journals: http://ar.cetl.hku.hk/am_rj.htm#6 (field biology); <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=LXW8B79&sp=yes> (clinical medicine);
- Presentations: <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=S8377C&sp=yes> (Engineering)
- Portfolios: <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=QXW8B74&sp=yes> (legal externship); <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshowc.cfm?code=M5A7B6&sp=yes> (English/writing)

References and Suggested Readings

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