

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FAQ

WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning often takes a hands-on approach to key questions, texts, and research of a course and discipline. While experiential learning can take many forms, pedagogical theorists agree that this form of learning is best understood through Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning (1984). In this cycle, learners integrate knowledge, activity, and reflection.

Experiential learning requires framing, planned activities that align with course goals, and reflection upon the experience that aims toward synthesis and new knowledge production.

There are many resources online that provide definitions, pedagogical theory and frameworks, and practical examples. Here are a few resources that have a dynamic range of uses.

[The University of Texas at Austin Center for Teaching and Learning Experiential Learning Page](#)

[Boston University Center for Teaching and Learning Experiential Learning Page](#)
["The 10 Commandments of Experiential Learning" *Inside Higher Ed*](#)

WHAT ARE SOME TYPES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

- Internships (Pitt English's Internship Webpage)
- Co-ops
- Independent research with faculty advisor
- Archival methods
- Studio and workshop practices
- Maker space projects and activities
- Community engagement
- Study Abroad
- Service Learning
- Lab Work
- Clinical Work

WON'T THIS MODE OF PEDAGOGY INCREASE THE ALREADY CONSIDERABLE LABOR DEMANDS THAT TEACHING MAKES?

Initially, yes. Developing experiential learning pedagogical practices does take time in research, course design, assignment scaffolding, and scheduling and sequencing the experiences. However, the initial outlay in time yields exponentially higher levels of student engagement, learning outcomes, and independent student work.

There are some standard pedagogical approaches that still apply with experiential learning, though. For example, if you want to integrate an experiential learning opportunity into a class that you've taught before, start with one small, highly focused, and well-planned activity, rather than attempting an entire unit or course structure built around an experience. Just as with any course, text, or unit you teach for the first time, going through the teaching process is a learning experience. Iteration and revision strengthen the activity design, show ways of integrating additional activities, and, ultimately, lessen the preparation load.

Finally, part of the experiential learning process often involves the instructor learning, making, and doing with the students. This can be difficult, as it may expose vulnerabilities. Or, on-the-spot situations may arise for which the only solution is a change of plans. This can feel like making a mistake or showing the students a lack of preparedness or expertise. None of this is true. Almost always, students recognize the unpredictability of the new classroom experience you are creating with and for them. They see our willingness to pivot and to work through our own gaps in knowledge as empowering and the experience usually increases student respect and willingness to contribute to the positive atmosphere of the class.

HOW DO STUDENTS GAIN KNOWLEDGE FROM EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Reflection is key to experiential learning. Journal entries, freewriting, small group activities that involve reflection and sharing, and small, low stakes assignments all give students the opportunity to integrate the experience with key texts, terms, and concepts from your course. This follows the Kolb Cycle of Learning mentioned above. The combination of engaged, embodied experience with reflection deepens student motivation and requires more independent thinking, research, and work. Experiential learning helps students to synthesize material and develop independent thought and to pursue critical inquiry in a more active way.

The National Survey of Student Engagement has tracked these outcomes through what they term "High-Impact Practices," which [you can read more about here](#).

HOW DO I ASSESS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MY CLASSROOMS, ESPECIALLY IF I AM NOT QUALIFIED TO EVALUATE PROJECT WORK SOME STUDENTS MAY SUBMIT (E.G. STUDENT ART)?

Assessing experiential learning is challenging because the emphasis is on the process and the experience itself. What makes experiential learning so effective—its high level of variability and adaptability to individual learners—also makes it difficult to assign standard evaluation criteria to the engaged learning process. Here are a few assessment methods that take seriously the process of experiential learning while also offering clarity to students and teachers concerning evaluation:

- Reflection Journals or a Portfolio Project
 - Both can help instructors require particular elements (e.g. use of key terms from the course, citation of evidence, etc.) while also giving students the chance to use their own experience to make meaning based on their process
- Rubrics
 - Though this one may seem obvious, rubrics are another flexible model of assessment capable of providing clarity for students and instructors. Rubrics are especially useful with project-based, material-making assignments that involve skills—such as design, building, and visual experiments—that neither the students nor the instructor have in full. Rubrics can delineate the skills for which students can be responsible—those introduced and discussed through class experiences, readings, class discussion, and other assignments—while leaving other factors out of consideration.
 - Rubrics can be co-developed by instructors and students after an assignment/experience has been introduced and explained. This grants students' agency while also holding everyone accountable for working toward shared goals and outcomes.
- Individual Student Conferences
 - Prior to the meeting, the student completes a self-evaluation and reflection and then you discuss together how the student's engagement did or did not meet particular criteria for the experience. Students tend to grade themselves down, so the conversation typically opens space for the student to realize how much more they learned and developed from an experience.
- Labor-Based Assessment Methods such as Specifications Grading and Contract Grading
 - Doing some research on these methods and the various ways they can be implemented is important here, but allowing students to earn completion or work toward the goals they set for a particular grade can increase student engagement and relieve the instructor from the pressure to assess every particular of an experiential process. This method is particularly helpful with

semester-long projects and/or courses involving multiple experiential activities.

Initially, developing new assessment methods does take time. However, in the long run, both the experiential learning process and the new methods of assessment develop new modes of student-teacher interaction and can lower the time investment as compared to traditional grading methods.

WHAT KIND OF RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR PLANNING AND FOR EXECUTING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PEDAGOGY?

We are building a shared Experiential Learning Resource folder that includes syllabi, experiential learning activities and assignments, and assessment examples.

HOW CAN I STAY IN TOUCH WITH MY COLLEAGUES ABOUT COURSES, ASSIGNMENTS, FUNDING AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES?

[Join the Experiential Learning Newsletter's email list.](#) Visit Elise Ryan, Experiential Learning Coordinator for the English Department, during her [faculty office hours](#).

I'M WELL VERSED IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING. HOW CAN I BRING MY MESSAGE AND MY EXPERIENCES TO A WIDER AUDIENCE?

Have you considered working with Pitt's teaching and Learning Center? Every March the University hosts the Community Engaged Scholarship Conference. Do you have material that you could present at this conference? Are you interested in running a workshop for faculty in the English department? Contact Elise Ryan (elr97@pitt.edu) if you'd like to share your expertise with the department!

I'VE PRACTICED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN MY CLASSROOMS AND IN SPACES THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSITY. HOW DO I MAKE THE MOVE TO COMMUNITY-ENGAGED COURSES AND SCHOLARSHIP?

Community-engaged experiential learning requires a significant outlay of time and energy in building and maintaining relationships with community members that are mutually beneficial. The [University's Community Engagement Centers](#) have programming, resources, and administration able to help move your ideas into spaces and communities that are interested in working with Pitt students and faculty. The University of Pittsburgh runs two

professional development series to help faculty develop equitable, engaged, and bias-aware community engaged projects. Through the office of Human Resources, the [Community Engaged Professional Foundations Certificate Program](#) runs during the fall semester and involves participation in a sequence of courses. The [Community Engaged Scholarship Project Development Cohort](#) is an award granted to winning proposals. Over the course of an academic year, awardees co-develop a course and/or community engaged project with their community partner (who is also supported with a stipend to participate in the Cohort).