Integrating Experiential Learning into a Course

Integrating experiential learning (EL) in your course is perhaps one of the most rewarding ways of engaging students in educationally purposeful learning activities. Use this guide to design an EL activity and to assess your students’ work.

**Why integrate EL into your course?**

**Increased student engagement**

Experiential learning activities increase students' motivation to learn, boost their self-esteem, strengthen their leadership capacity & heighten their engagement in school and at work. Incorporating [reflection exercises](#_Step_2:_Planning) into your teaching strategy encourages students to engage with the course content on a deeper level.

**Benefits for students**

* Active participation and increased engagement
* Development of transferable EL skills
* Experimenting in a safe space with new projects they will see in real situations
* Application of learned skills and knowledge
* Reflection on learning to assess strengths and weaknesses

**What is experiential learning?**

Experiential learning is learning by doing. Through a concrete experience, students apply learned skills and knowledge and then reflect on the process. Reflection before, during and after the experience is crucial as it engages learners more deeply with what they learned. This brings them closer to mastery of the subject.

Kolb (1984) developed a cyclical learning model for EL through which students do the following:

1. Start the **experience**, where they apply knowledge and skills from readings and lectures,
2. **Reflect** on what they have done,
3. **Abstract** what they have learned by synthesizing their reflections and articulating their learning,
4. Apply and test their learning through **experimentation**, and then,
5. Engage in the next cycle of their **experience**.

Experiential learning checklist

The best EL activities include many of the best practices below.

* **The active application of theory**

Students apply what they know to carry out an action or sequence (i.e. doing): sketch, analyze, model, discover, examine, illustrate, investigate, modify, predict, project, perform, use, solve, respond, practice, construct, role-play, simulate, test, demonstrate, conduct, execute, implement, complete, dramatize, integrate, see more actions.

“...the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.”

Source: Association for Experiential Education. (n.d.). *What is experiential education?* <https://www.aee.org/what-is-experiential-education>.

* **A high degree of realism**

The activity is rooted in an authentic, real-world context.

“Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.”

Source: Association for Experiential Education. (n.d.). *What is experiential education?* <https://www.aee.org/what-is-experiential-education>.

* **Facilitated reflection**

Students reflect on the experience to engage with what they have learned (see [reflection template and guidelines](#_Step_2:_Planning)). The student tests their assumptions and incorporates the outcomes into their future actions. Through this process, the experience (doing) becomes new knowledge (knowing).

* **The identification of skills**

Students will develop specific technical or soft skills through the activity: time management, communication, active listening, coordination, self-awareness, initiative, teamwork, empathy, global and cultural awareness, judgment and decision-making, job search and interview skills, active listening, conflict resolution, etc. For more skills see our [EL Skill Sets webpage](https://www.concordia.ca/academics/experiential-learning/students/skill-sets.html).

* **Connection to life after graduation**

Students engage in self-discovery, career exploration, career validation, professional development, and networking activities.

**Step 0: Getting Oriented**

Here are some key questions to help you develop an experiential learning teaching strategy.

Learning Outcomes

Does my course have learning outcomes that can be supported by doing EL activities inside or outside of class?

Ex. the objective “students will identify best practices for data collection methods” could lead to a project in survey development for a community organization that needs to better understand how they engage their network or clientele.

EL Experiences/Activities

What types of experiences can I use to support the acquisition, practice, application or demonstration of these learning outcomes and skills?

**Examples:**

**Capstone Project**

Culminating project where students apply and synthesize cumulative skills & knowledge through a demonstration.

**Simulation**

Students interact with computer-based or other simulations where they actively experiment to solve realistic problems.

**Case Study**

Students analyze real data to make decisions that will impact the stakeholders involved and actively create a new series of events.

You can find more examples of course-integrated experiential learning activities in our [Course-Integrated EL Guide](https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/academics/experiential-learning/docs/Course-Integrated-EL-Definitions-and-Guide.pdf).

**External Partners**

If I wish to have students working in settings outside the university (or with external partners) do I have a working knowledge of the places and people with whom they would interact?

For example, external partners can provide survey data for students to analyze, serve as a resource for data collection, or provide a case example for a simulation exercise.

Read through our [Working with Industry Partners in the Classroom](https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/academics/experiential-learning/docs/Working-with-industry-partners-in-the-Classroom.docx) guide for more information.

**Need help finding a partner?**

[Riipen](https://www.concordia.ca/academics/experiential-learning/faculty-staff/resources.html) is an online platform where faculty can connect to industry partners in a variety of fields. [Join Concordia’s portal as an educator](https://www.concordia.ca/academics/experiential-learning/students/skill-sets.html). [Contact the experiential learning office](mailto:experiential.learning@concordia.ca?subject=Help,%20I%20need%20a%20partner%20for%20my%20course) for more support in finding a partner.

**Step 1: Designing Your Activity**

Helping students apply their knowledge

Now that you’ve decided to use EL in your teaching, consider the following when designing your course.

Identify your learners’ needs

Consider your students’ skill level (ex: year of study) and what they already know about the content. Keep in mind that students at lower levels need more guidance, coaching and feedback. International students may also need more support.

Define the activity’s objectives

Objectives should clearly communicate the expectations for assessment to your students. A good learning objective has three parts. For example:

*Students will* ***identify*** *the steps to designing a survey* ***using a list*** *with* ***100% accuracy****.*

**1. An action word 2. A condition (optional)** **3. A measure**

What do you want students to be able to do?

Once you’ve identified what students **need to know**, translate that into what they **need to do**. Your course objectives should reflect the action that students will be “doing” in the learning activity (e.g. if the activity is to design a survey, the “design” action should be mirrored in your course objective). However, if your course objectives are more generalized, you can still design experiential learning activities that support the acquisition, practice, application or demonstration skills and knowledge if the expectations and outcomes for the activity are clearly explained.

For example:

Course objective (Knowing)

Students will identify the steps to designing a survey for a research project.

Project objective (Doing)

Students will use the following steps to design and administer their own survey:

* Design
* Collect data
* Analyse data
* Report results

Identify skills

Next, identify what transferable [EL skills](https://www.concordia.ca/academics/experiential-learning/students/skill-sets.html) will students acquire through the activity. You can add these skills to the course outcomes to ensure students are aware of the skills they will be developing through your course.

**Examples:**

Critical thinking

Problem-solving

Communication

Leadership

Collaboration

Creativity

Active listening

Project management

Presentation

Set Expectations

Describe the expectations of the EL activity, including how the activity will be supervised. Include information on:

* Expected time commitment
* Available resources
* Ideal performance
* Consequences for failing to meet expectations

For example, schedule brief check-in meetings periodically, provide constructive feedback and suggestions for improvement throughout the experience, ensure students know how and when their performance will be evaluated, and define expectations and the consequences for failing to meet expectations. (See the [assessment guide](#_Step_3:_Assessment) for more information on evaluating EL).

Feedback

Build a feedback loop into your activity to keep them on track and to provide support. Consider the following:

* **Type of feedback:** written, verbal
* **Frequency:** weekly check-ins, pre-activity, during activity, post-activity
* **Direction:** teacher to student, peer-to-peer (student to student)
* **Setting:** group feedback, one-on-one

Giving quality feedback

Students want to do better so that they can learn and grow. Consider the following best practices when you give them feedback:

* **Be positive:** tell them what they did well and what they can do better.
* **Focus on behaviour**: discuss what they did, not their personal attributes.
* **Be specific:** present examples of what they did.
* **Be timely:** while there may be scheduled intervals for feedback, don’t wait too long especially if there is an improvement to be made.
* **Make it a partnership:** ask students how they like to receive feedback (see *setting* and *type* above) and make it a conversation.

# **Step 2: Planning for Reflection**

Creating meaningful learning

Reflection is an integral component of experiential learning – it links the concrete experience to the learning in Kolb’s cycle. Reflection should encourage students to question, challenge and interpret what they are learning. Consider the following:

Frequency

Reflection should take place more than once. Before, during and after the experience are recommended intervals.

Course connection

Objectives, readings, lectures, assignments, etc.

Structure

To ensure the quality of student reflections, it’s important to structure reflection activities by providing prompts and questions aligned with course learning outcomes. Prompts should encourage students to develop their self-awareness as learners and as members of the broader community. Additionally, students can be encouraged to consider how the knowledge and skills they acquire can contribute to their vision for life after graduation.

Consider this suggested structure for a student reflection:

**What?**

Report what happened.

* Environment
* Stakeholders
* Issues
* Learning outcomes

**So what?**

Analyze the experience.

* New skills/knowledge
* Expectations/surprises
* Challenges
* Likes/dislikes
* Personal needs
* Community needs

**Now what?**

Consider the impact.

* Personal
* Community
* International
* Application of learning
* Next steps

See our [Reflection Guidelines](https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/academics/experiential-learning/docs/Reflections-guidelines.docx) for more information.

# **Step 3: Assessment and Evaluation of Experiential Learning**

Measuring the impact

It is important to assess the impact of EL. Students should be asked to provide work that allows them to distinguish whether and to what extent the course learning outcomes have been met. It is also important to only assess the knowledge, skills, and behaviours you have supported students in acquiring. Below is a template you can use to get started.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Evaluation Criteria** | **Expectations** | **Assessment Method\*** | **Desired Performance Criteria** |
| Connecting concrete experience with academic concepts | Students can meaningfully synthesize connections between concepts and applications, which allows for a deeper understanding of the area of study and for developing a broader perspective. |  |  |
| Application | Students can properly apply academic concepts to the concrete experience and develop solutions to a problem effectively, with the ability to aptly describe specific methods used from their field of study that are required to complete the activity. |  |  |
| Communication skills | Students can effectively communicate knowledge, skills, and results, demonstrating an understanding of how concrete experience links to academic concepts. |  |  |
| Reflection and self-evaluation | Students can meaningfully reflect on the experience by thinking critically about the activity that was undertaken, how the experience evoked an emotional response, and how the learning was achieved through the process itself. |  |  |

See [Learning Outcomes and Assessment Guidelines](https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/concordia/academics/experiential-learning/docs/Learning-Outcomes-and-Assessment-Guidelines-Aug2022update.docx) for more information.

There are different ways to assess EL. Below are some options on how you can assess your EL activity, along with space for you to take notes:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **\*Assessment method** | **Comments** |
| Maintenance of a learning journal or a portfolio |  |
| Reflection on critical incidents |  |
| Presentation on what has been learned |  |
| Analysis of strengths/weaknesses and related action planning |  |
| Essay or report on what has been learnt (preferably with references to excerpts from reflective writing) |  |
| Short answer questions of a ‘why’ or ‘explain’ nature |  |
| A project that develops ideas further (group or individual) |  |
| Self-evaluation of a task performed |  |
| An article (e.g., for a newspaper) explaining something in the workplace |  |
| Recommendation for improvement of some practice |  |
| An interview of the learner as a potential worker in the workplace |  |
| A story that involves thinking about learning in the placement |  |
| An oral exam |  |
| An identification of and rationale for projects that could be done in the workplace. |  |
| Other |  |

Source: Moon, J.A. (2004). A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice. New York: Routledge Falmer.

We are happy to assist you with developing or refining your own EL approach for your course (course development, setting intentional EL learning goals, assignment design, reflection activity ideas and tools and more). Please contact the [Experiential Learning Office by email](mailto:experiential.learning@concordia.ca?subject=Request%20for%20Support:%20Course-Integrated%20EL) for more information.