

What is Experiential Learning and Why Does it Matter?

Experiential learning theory builds on the work of scholars such as John Dewey (1938),¹ David Kolb (1984),² and Carl Rogers (1969, 1994).³ It differs from cognitive learning, such as rote memorization of vocabulary words or multiplication tables, by addressing the needs and wants of the learner, resting on the central tenet that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from a combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb). According to Kolb, experiential learning is a cyclical process in which learners:

- (1) **Act:** participate in an experience
- (2) **Reflect:** think about that experience
- (3) **Learn:** form new ideas based on these reflections
- (4) **Apply:** test their new ideas in a different situation, beginning the cycle once more.

Internships, study abroad, undergraduate research, and service learning are forms of experiential learning, among many others. These place learners in situations outside of traditional academic environments in which students must take initiative, make decisions, learn from natural consequences, and be accountable for the results of their choices. A well-designed experiential learning program embeds frequent opportunities for reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis to facilitate the cycle of learning by experience, placing students in situations where they encounter genuine social, practical, personal, or research problems.

Unlike the typical passivity of a classroom, experiential learning allows students to participate completely in the learning process and exercise control over its nature and direction. Students are the primary evaluators of their own learning, as well as assessing their own progress and success. The instructor acts as a facilitator who establishes a positive climate for learning, clarifies the purpose for the learner, organizes learning resources and makes them available to students, balances the emotional and intellectual aspects of the learning experience, and shares thoughts and feelings with students without dominating their learning experience.

Experiential learning differs from instructional strategies for active learning within a classroom or studio setting. Even where students engage in problem-based, project-based, or other pedagogies for active learning, classroom learning cannot substitute for the types of experience acquired in a real-world environment. For example, student nurses might practice patient care skills in a learning lab on campus, but true experiential learning occurs when they are able to deliver supervised hands-on patient care in a hospital. It’s one thing to read about the theory of starting an IV and another to practice starting an IV on a lifelike mannequin in the college’s lab, but neither compares to the experience of starting an IV on a living breathing patient in a genuine clinical practice setting. Likewise, some academic fields such as graphic design are inherently experiential because most learning occurs through doing rather than passive listening. Nevertheless, the experience of designing something in response to a class assignment is fundamentally different from working at a graphic design firm, completing a project for a

client while under pressure to meet the client's expectations while delivering the project on time and within the agreed-upon budget.

Although professions requiring licensure such as healthcare or Pre-K-12 education maintain practicum requirements, many academic fields maintain their historical emphasis on students' acquisition of knowledge in the classroom. We hold a tacit belief that the responsibility to apply knowledge in practical settings rests with our graduates, not with us. Despite this longstanding tradition, confining learning to the classroom is a far less effective pedagogical method than we've believed. Educational psychologists such as Jean Piaget (1936)⁴ and Jerome Bruner (1957)⁵ and cognitive neuroscientists (Kandel, 2012⁶; Eagleman, 2015⁷) explain that the human brain learns by making connections between new knowledge and prior learning. The more we can strengthen those connections, the deeper our learning. Practice and repetition are a key to learning, but the more we conduct this practice within authentic settings, the more effective and satisfying our learning will be. The human brain not only connects new learning to prior factual knowledge but to emotions, experiences, sensory input, and actions. Conversely, it's far less effective to learn by rote (simple memorization) or in the isolation of a classroom because the new knowledge lacks connection to anything other than itself.

Experiential education provides invaluable opportunities for students to develop, reflect upon, apply, and transfer knowledge in real-world settings while remaining under the instructor's guidance, embedding learning in real-world contexts, and increasing student engagement with the topics they're studying. It allows us to deliver an educational experience that empowers students' academic achievement while also strengthening their ability to form their own connections between their education and their lives after graduation.

¹ Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. Kappa Delta Pi.

² Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall

³ Rogers, C.R. (1969). *Freedom to Learn*. Columbus, OH: Merrill; Rogers, C.R. & Freiberg, H.J. (1994). *Freedom to Learn* (3rd Ed). Columbus, OH: Merrill/Macmillan.

⁴ Piaget, J. (1936). *Origins of intelligence in the child*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Piaget, J. (1957); *Construction of reality in the child*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Piaget, J. (1958). The growth of logical thinking from childhood to adolescence. *AMC*, 10, 12.

⁵ Bruner, J. (1957). "On Perceptual Readiness." *Psychological Review*, Vol 64(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0043805>

⁶ Kandel, et. al. (2012). *Principles of Neural Science*. McGraw-Hill Education.

⁷ <https://www.eagleman.com/thebrain>