



Experiential Education

Experiential Education in BC Post-Secondary Institutions: Challenges and Opportunities

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Summary

This report provides a snapshot of the state of experiential education (EE) in BC higher education and identifies examples of practice as well as challenges. Twelve BC Transfer System member institutions and over 70 educators and administrators provided their insights on EE through a series of institutional conversations. Three main areas of potential directions for the continued growth as well as transfer and articulation of EE in BC emerged from this exploratory study: 1) efforts required for developing shared definitions of EE, 2) educating post-secondary stakeholders on EE differences from purely classroom-based teaching, and 3) awareness of EE value and support for EE offerings at the institutional and provincial levels.

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Background

A significant and useful body of knowledge attempts to describe how people learn experientially, from which attributes and constructs of high impact practice may be derived. Theorists such as Dewey (1916, 1938), Kolb (1984), Schön (1983, 1987), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Mezirow (1991) are often cited for their contributions to the understanding of experiential learning and resultant good practice in experiential education. Excellent overviews of these and other theoretical contributions to the field of experiential education, experiential learning, and work-integrated learning (WIL) may be found in Coll & Zegwaard (2011), HEQCO (2016), and Moon (2004).

Operational Definitions

Moon (2004) suggested that there was no single unifying definition of experiential learning or experiential education that was agreed upon in the literature. Discussions about shared meaning of EE at the provincial level pointed to similar levels of conflation and confusion. Due to this limitation in the scholarship, it was necessary to propose an operational definition of the term as a launching point for this research dialogue. The goal of providing the definition was not to achieve agreement, but rather to function as a common starting point.

Experiential Education (EE) Programs, have experience at their core, and are intentionally linked to the learner's academic and professional goals, and are directed and monitored by the institutions so as to develop the learner's knowledge, skills, and values.

This study reports on programs that have experience as the central means of learning, and which are intentionally designed to result in specified learning outcomes mediated and assessed by the institution.

EE programs in BC are curricular in nature but may be credit bearing with some credits integral and contributing to the student's credentials and others additive credit, above and beyond credential requirements. Other programs may be non-credit bearing, and some types bear credit at some institutions while not at others. Dominant types of EE offerings in BC include:

- Co-operative education and internship;
- Community service learning;
- Consulting project;
- Clinic;
- Creative or physical practice, performance, exhibit, or project;
- Field experience, field placement, field school;
- Laboratory;
- Practicum, internship
- Publication or conference presentation;
- Research project;
- Study abroad or exchange; and
- Apprenticeship.

There was a sense among participants that some shared understanding of the attributes of experiential education existed but it became clear that in many instances, diverse forms of EE were not designed, delivered, assessed, or accredited within any commonly accepted framework. Some of the credit-bearing courses such as laboratories did share more attributes of EE and others such as accredited co-op programs also followed specified design and

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operational criteria, but for the most part the nature of the credit-bearing EE offerings was very specific to the instructor or professor delivering them. This, along with the general lack of shared definitions, highlighted early on the challenge that results in issues of articulation and transfer.

The BC Comparative Matrix for Work-Integrated Learning

The majority of types of EE identified in BC are included in the BC Comparative Matrix for Work Integrated Learning (ACCE, 2015). The Matrix was developed by a working group of the Accountability Council for Co-operative Education of BC. It proposes operational definitions for a majority of work integrated types found currently in BC PSE and provides a series of program/course attributes, which may be used to compare and contrast the various types.

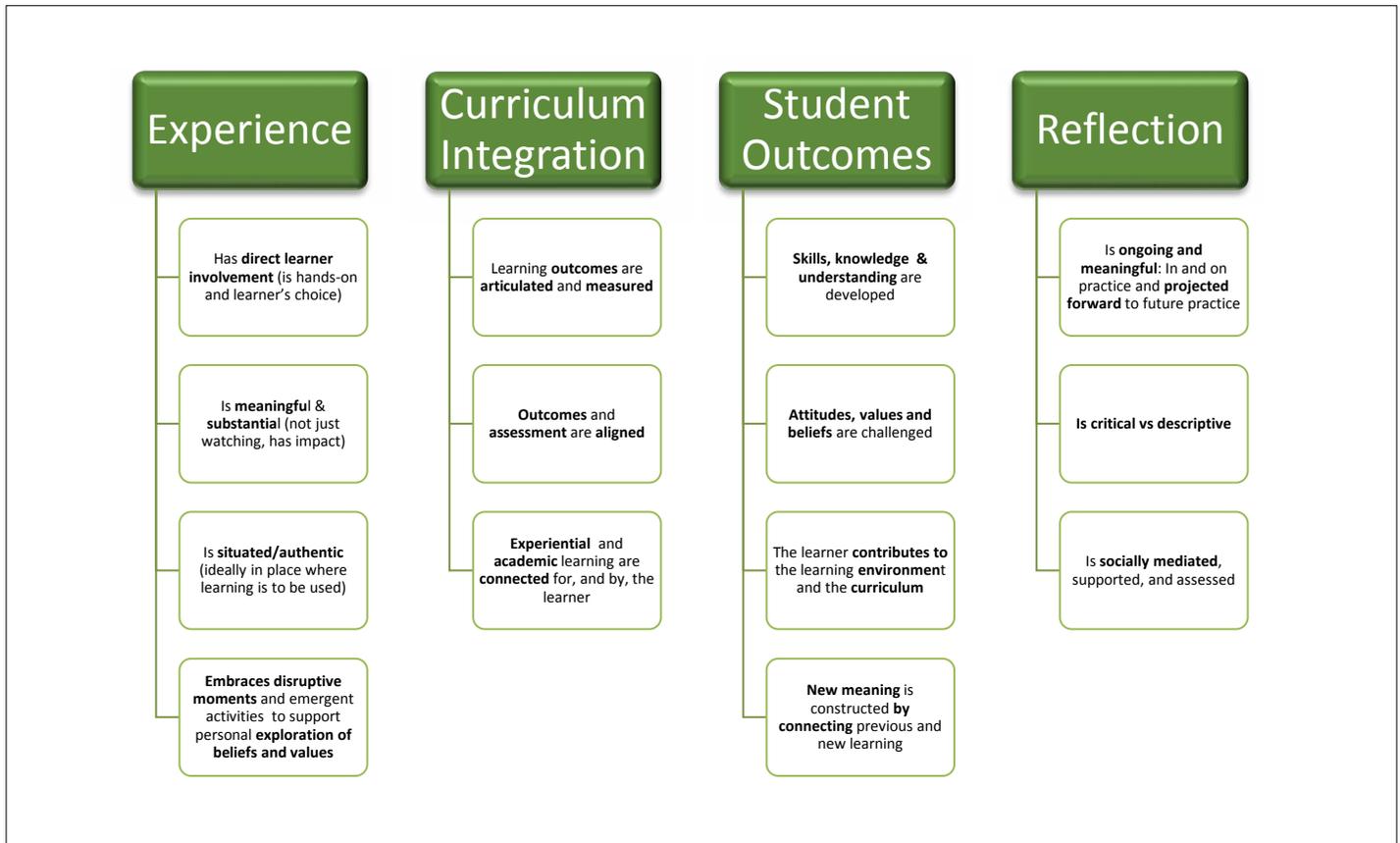
The Matrix distinguishes between Work-Integrated Education, which is curriculum-based and expressed in learning outcomes and assessed, and Work-Integrated Learning, which is co-curricular in nature and not linked to specific courses and not necessarily expressed as or measured through learning outcomes. For the purposes of this study, Work-Integrated Education is considered a subset of EE. This subset focuses on experiences that can be attributed to participating in the work environment, while post-secondary institutions tend to define EE more broadly and include other non-workplace based forms of EE, such as field schools or international exchanges. This difference in the approaches adds to the multiplicity of EE definitions.

High Impact Practices

The term 'high impact' is used in the EE scholarship to describe practices that are attributed to successful student learning outcomes through experiential learning design (Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000; Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000; Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004; Schön, 1983). These practices are summarized in Figure 1 and include the following:

- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged and helps develop the curriculum;
- The learner is engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, and/or physically;
- The results of the learning are very personal and form the basis for future learning;
- The learner is prompted to reflect in and on their experience, before, during, and after the learning event;
- Relationships and connections are developed and nurtured between learner and self, learner and others, and learner and the world at large;

FIGURE 1: High Impact Practices in Experiential Education



Adapted from McRae (2015).

- There is acknowledgement that the experiences and learning cannot totally be predicted;
- Disruptive opportunities during and after the experience are nurtured and learners (and educators) are supported to explore and examine their own values and beliefs; and
- The design must incorporate educator recognition of learner input, multiple possible outcomes, and the need for customizable teaching and assessment, tools, and techniques.

Methodology

Besides summarizing literature on EE, the study also employed a series of institutional conversations with over 70 administrators and educators from BC PSE institutions (Table 1) that provide a broad array of EE offerings. The landscape of experiential learning within BC PSE is complex, and there was no single area, department, or program that could serve as a point of contact to answer questions about EE on behalf of the institutions interviewed. A scan of institutional websites affirmed this observation. In many cases the EE stakeholders gathered at the meetings for this research were being acquainted with each other for the first time. The data collection method involved open-ended interviews conducted in face-to-face or Skype (an online collaboration tool) meetings over a 1.5 – 2 hour duration.

TABLE 1: Participating Institutions

BC Institute of Technology	Simon Fraser University
Douglas College	University of British Columbia- Vancouver
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	University of British Columbia- Okanagan
Okanagan College	University of the Fraser Valley
Quest University	University of Victoria
Selkirk College	Vancouver Island University

Examples of Successful EE Practices

Institutions reported the following EE models and programs as high impact:

- Co-operative education;
- Practicum;
- Apprenticeship;
- Community Service Learning program;
- Employability programs that teach soft skills;
- Capstone programs (i.e., they incorporate full research projects working with an industry partner);
- Passport to leadership training (i.e., integrate apprenticeship and practicum models); and
- Research opportunities between students and researcher.

High impact models and programs were reported to have the following outcomes:

- Strong relationships and partnerships that provide access to current knowledge, skills, and equipment in the field;
- A formalized educational program that integrates community partners;
- Opportunities for transformative learning; the higher the degree of experientiality the more opportunity for transformation;
- The intentional embedding, recognizing, mediating, and supporting of transformative learning, reflection, and experiential learning in emergent contexts;
- Opportunities for students to take the experience where it needs to go and lead their experience/ project/ inquiry;
- Curriculum that facilitates (e.g., coaches and guides) iterative opportunities for learning and supports learning pre, during, and post experience;
- The inclusion of multiple partners in the design (e.g., students) and assessment of experiential learning; and
- Strong alignment of learning outcomes with planned activities and assessment.

Many respondents referenced the ease and confidence with which some EE programs could be reported on. For example, co-operative education placements are reported provincially and recorded on transcripts, and are available through reports generated by institutional research and planning units and/or co-op units. Similarly, apprenticeship programs have oversight by the Industry Training Authority, which tracks and reports participation numbers.

Participants reported that study and learning abroad program participation information (e.g., field schools, exchanges, dual degrees, etc.) is also readily available through international offices, safety and risk management offices, or institutional research and planning offices. Similarly one college reported submitting numbers annually to the BC Applied Research Network regarding student participation in applied research-based experiential learning.

A number of institutions (e.g., Kwantlen Polytechnic University, University of Victoria) created websites so that students can better see what is delivered in an experiential way and make their choices accordingly. Communities for experiential learning exist at, for example, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, and Vancouver Island University. Other institutions (e.g., Langara College) have developed a suite of experiential courses. In most institutions, however, EE continues to be developed and delivered in those places where it has champions, not necessarily in a coordinated or intentional manner.

Challenges of Implementing EE

Reports of what participants considered to be good experiential practice and transformative outcomes were often intertwined with messages about the challenges and barriers to doing more, and better, experiential programs, course development, and delivery (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Types and Examples of Institutional Challenges to Implementing EE

Type of Challenge	Examples
Articulation	The lack of strategic co-ordination of EE and the concomitant lack of system-wide support has left EE to develop as a result of individual proponents versus institutional or programmatic strategy.
Articulation	The focus on the meaning or value of the ‘academic credit’ extends beyond the program, departmental, and institutional level to the question of articulation of EE courses and programs between and amongst institutions.
Articulation	There is concern about what it means for one institution, or the system, to scale up EE given the pre-requisite system already in place and a lack of clarity regarding how EE-centric courses would/could articulate.
Coordination and Tracking	There is no reliable way of reporting valid and complete data with respect to both numbers of students participating in EE and numbers and types of EE offerings, institutionally or system-wide.
Coordination and Tracking	If the EE model is not accredited or credit bearing, it is much more difficult for the institution to identify it.
Definitional	Some models are more clearly defined such as co-operative education programs that are accredited by the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE) and those that have oversight from professional bodies and boards (trades, apprenticeships, etc.), while others are not.
Definitional/Stakeholder	There is a need to be clearer about the various models of EE and their value propositions so that students can more intentionally select models that best meet their needs and goals.
Financial/Stakeholder	There is significant concern regarding unpaid internships and a risk that students could be exploited for free or cheap labour.
Financial/Stakeholder	Extra time is needed to develop and deliver this kind of education and there needs to be recognition of that by the institution.
Pedagogical	Attention needs to be paid to students’ safety and risk management during the EE activities.
Quality	EE placements were sometimes reported as being difficult to obtain (especially in particular sectors, and when the students needed to be paid), challenging to monitor, and as a result could offer quite variable experiences.
Quality/Articulation	Measuring course quality is challenging and classroom-based tools are limited in their use in the field, where curriculum can be emergent and unpredictable
Quality/Articulation	Accreditation and oversight systems that are in place for some models (e.g., co-op education, apprenticeship, trades, professional practice, etc.) make the quality assessment for these types of EE much easier than for the others.
Quality/Pedagogical	While a course may have been designed to be taught with an experiential core, the way it is delivered often depends upon who is teaching it.
Quality/Pedagogical	There is a general lack of readily available expertise and resources specific for designing and developing high impact EE.
Stakeholder	Different EE types reward students differently and confusion may arise when students are placed at the same organization, doing the same work and one is getting paid, another receiving academic credit, and a third receiving a combination of both.
Stakeholder	There is potential for strain on the receiving communities including concerns over the training of community partners, their acceptance as educational partners, and the potential for exhausting their goodwill as receivers of PSE students.

Potential Directions

Three main thematic areas emerged from the conversations that might help advance EE programs and offerings and their transfer and articulation within the BC PSE system.

Towards Shared Definitions and Coordination

Perhaps the most pervasive challenge in the EE field is the lack of shared language amongst practitioners and researchers. The term EE is commonly used and has been variously appropriated, constructed, and re-constructed (Usher & Edwards, 1994) around the world. Furthermore, the various EE approaches, models, programs, and courses that have ‘experience’ at their pedagogical core create a multiplicity of terms. For example, the term ‘capstone’ was used in many different ways by participants to signify many different things: the end of a project; the summative curation of work at the end of a program; or the formative capitulation of student learning in a course. Exceptions to this were programs such as co-operative education, accredited by CAFCE and other professional practica under the auspices of the professional body or association (e.g., Industry Training Authority).

Developing operational definitions at the provincial level would greatly assist in understanding what, and how much, is being delivered at the institutional and system levels, and tracking, monitoring, assessing, articulating, and reporting on experiential education. This would also facilitate research on the impact of various EE models and interventions as they relate to other outcomes such as advancing the workforce, community development, global engagement as well as sets of program/learner outcomes (employability skills, intercultural fluency, community development skills, citizenry, etc.). Institutions may also benefit by developing mechanisms for reporting their EE work that are consistent with each other so that system-wide data can be reasonably collected and reported upon.

There are several pockets of good work emerging in this area, some from within BC. Specifically in work integrated education, the BC Comparative Matrix presents a good starting point to regularize some operating definitions for commonly offered WIL-EE programs in BC.

The areas of apprenticeship and trades are also well defined and regulated, with best practices for their delivery outlined by various bodies. Most professional programs with EE components are specifically designed to meet their professional association’s requirements (e.g., engineering, medicine, nursing, etc.). These programs often have longer histories within PSE and participate in accreditation processes that ensure program quality and effectiveness.

A major conclusion drawn from the data is the need for EE professional development for EE educators, mentors, preceptors, employers, community co-educators, administrators, policy makers, and even the learners themselves.

Other less formalized models of EE, such as service learning, study abroad, practica affiliated with a credit course, research assistantships, etc., have much greater variability in their definitions, design and delivery. Many attempts have been made to operationalize definitions and develop good practice guides for particular audiences and purposes (e.g., Academica Group, 2016; EAB, 2014; Higher Education Council, 2011; HEQCO, 2016; Kramer & Usher, 2011). Perhaps these can be built upon.

Educating the Field

A major conclusion drawn from the data is the need for EE professional development for EE educators, mentors, preceptors, employers, community co-educators, administrators, policy makers, and even the learners themselves. All of these key stakeholders need to better understand how EE differs from classroom-based teaching and learning, and how those differences impact teacher and learner roles and how that affects the design, delivery, and assessment of EE. Many participants supported initiatives that would bring together the complete EE community (e.g., administrators, faculty, staff, and community partners) to learn more about the underlying teaching and learning theories that inform EE practice, to share resources and tools, and to engage in dialogue regarding advancing this work institutionally and across the system. These opportunities could take the form of a think tank, a forum, conference, or new teacher training programs. Many respondents suggested a wider scale conference that brings together stakeholders from many of the related sectors (e.g., education, business and industry, governments, professional associations, and regulatory bodies, etc.) to discuss EE as it relates to their goals. Current activities in this area include the development of a course in learning, teaching and knowing experientially by Simon Fraser University’s Faculty of Education.

There is a need for more peer-reviewed and published scholarship that better integrates the theory and practice of EE. In addition, there needs to be exploration of the value of experience as the basis for student learning in relation to traditional academic education. Experience in the lens of the academy is not often thought of as a source of knowledge itself and there is an authority of experience (Munby & Russell, 1994) that has to be drawn upon and made public.

Awareness and Support

Participants recommended that information be posted on ministry and related websites about the value of EE, and especially WIL, with a listing of all post-secondary institutions with recognized programs in this area. Another recommendation includes better educating parents about the various types of EE and their value with respect to particular outcomes. As well, the needs of professional associations, regulatory bodies, and business and industry associations should be considered.

Participants identified a need for a systematic approach to tracking both the students engaged in experiential learning at a given institution and the offerings themselves. In this way institutions can more confidently state how many students are learning through this model of education, where they are learning, and what they are learning. This enhances accountability and comprehension of the size and scope of EE offerings as well as ensuring that students participating in all EE programs under the auspices of an institution do so safely having undertaken appropriate risk management measures. Another recommendation was for coordinated partnership management so that not all institutions, or all programs at any given

institution, interact with the same businesses, not for profits, or community groups when requesting student placements, jobs, or service learning opportunities, etc.

Almost every institution indicated that developing strong experiential practice would require further resources. Some of these might be directed at educational partners in the form of financial incentives to employers or host communities, or for the development of EE resources that would be relevant to the majority of BC PSE models and available to all practitioners. Some identified small business as needing particular assistance in order to make WIL hiring possible, while others did not believe that providing financial incentives to business was a sustainable strategy and encouraged focusing on the intrinsic value proposition inherent in providing work experiences for students. Participants suggested project-based funding and applied research grants to better track and assess EE. Some reported that links to government initiatives such as the BC Jobs Plan is an asset while others felt that ties to such government initiatives create inherent tensions and can leave programs vulnerable when political initiatives and directions change.

EE is at an exciting juncture provincially and globally. There is significant activity and evidence of excellent practice, great interest by learners for more opportunities, and many calls by stakeholders for increased offerings and engagement. While this study outlined some specific challenges regarding the growth and development of EE, it also revealed significant interest, enthusiasm, and progress being made towards meeting those challenges so as to ensure the delivery of high quality experiential education in BC.

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