

## Experiential Education at MHC: To Lead in Learning Excellence

### Abstract

The most current draft of MHC's academic plan includes: "define and inventory current experiential learning opportunities that exist within the College." This brief provides definitions of experiential learning, a review of theory, practice, and an institutional case study in order to inform MHC's approach to this pedagogical practice and considerations for how to formalize experiential learning as part of a potential college marketing strategy. MHC is already an unrecognized leader in experiential education; almost all MHC programs include experiential learning activities such as labs, creative exhibits, clinical practice, practicums, field experience, simulations, internships, and international experiences. Formalizing a strategic focus on experiential learning provides an opportunity to deepen theoretical understanding of experiential learning, aid faculty in improving existing experiential learning opportunities, and marketing MHC as a leader in learning excellence through its focus experiential learning.

### History & Theory of Experiential Education

Dewey (1938) first called for a theory of experiential education in *Experience & Education*, arguing that the essence of progressive education was the "active participation by pupils in the development of what is taught" (p. 19). The "fundamental unity" of the different philosophies of progressive education "is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relationship between the processes of actual experience and education" (p.20). Dewey's work has been massively influential, and since his writing experiential education has blossomed into a core learning paradigm in postsecondary education, best represented by David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Figure 2). Some (Miettinen, 2000) consider Kolb's cycle a "dumbing down" of Dewey's conception of educative experience (Figure 1), but the essence of experiential education, as defined by Kolb (1984) is that:

- Learning is a process not an outcome
- Learning is driven by experience(s)
- Learning requires the learning to resolve conflicts through dialect (reflexivity)
- Learning carries a more holistic and integrative view
- Learning requires the individual to interact with their environment, and
- Learning creates knowledge

Kolb's model of experiential learning appears in *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2014). Kolb was influenced by Lewin, Piaget, and Dewey, and "the heart of Kolb's experiential learning model is a cycle of learning that proposes four learning modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation." Kolb describes each of these as learning modes that do not necessarily need to be completed in this sequence. Laurillard (2012, p. 168), for example, suggests that one "may begin or end at any point," though a key idea in Kolb's model is that

experiential learning works most effectively when all four modes in this cycle are completed (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999, p.9). Kolb's model has become the basic instructional design architecture for experiential education. First, students do something and feel something, and then reflectively think about what one did and felt in the course of the experience in order to modify habitual ways of relating to the world or solidify new skills, abilities, and thoughts.

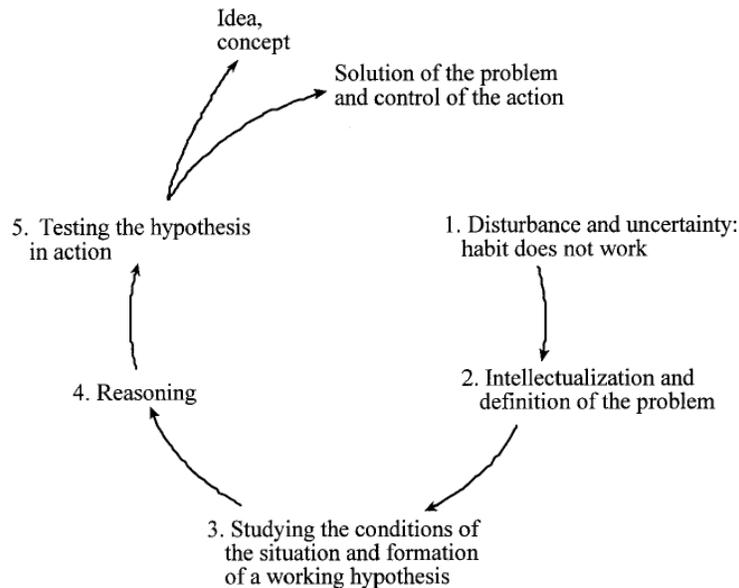
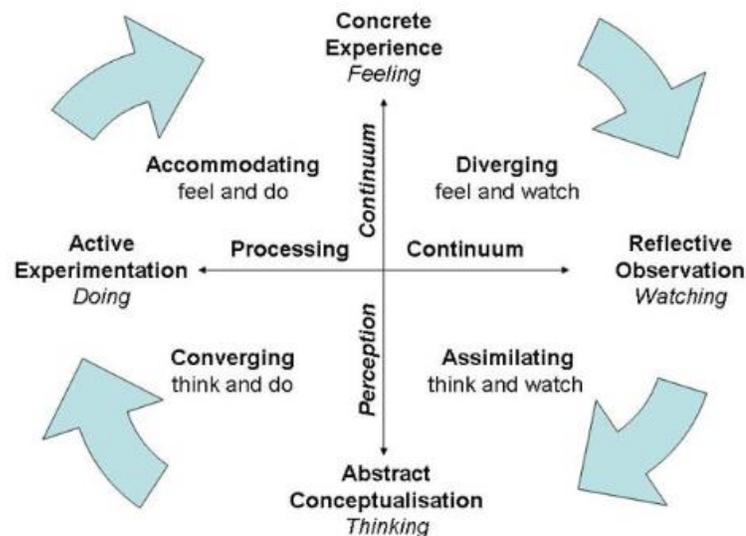


Figure 3. Dewey's model of reflective thought and action.

Figure 1. Miettinen, 2000, p. 65



*Figure 2. Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward's expansion to Kolb's basic experiential educational cycle.*

These four modes suggest "two primary dimensions to the learning process. The first dimension represents the concrete experiencing of events at the one end and abstract conceptualization at the other. The other dimension has active experimentation at one extreme and reflective observation at the other" (Kolb, 1984, pp. 30-31). McCarthy (1980, 1990 as cited in Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999) labeled these continua as perception (anchored by concrete experience and abstract conceptualization) and processing (anchored by active experimentation and reflective observation). In the perception continuum, thinking and feeling are connected as part of a single process – one pays attention to how one is thinking, feeling, and thinking about feeling. In the processing continuum, watching and doing are connected – one watches themselves actively experiment with a new action or approach to see what happens.

Criticisms exist that this is a too simplistic way to view the complexities of learning and what is not represented is problematical. Consequently, there have been adjustments, revisions, and expansions to Kolb's basic cycle. The major criticism is that Kolb's model does not recognize Dewey's assertion that experience is filtered through the "cultural mediatedness of observation." There is a cultural dimension to concrete experience. As Dewey points out

Experience is already overlaid and saturated with the products of the reflection of past generations and by-gone ages. It is filled with interpretations, classifications, due to sophisticated thought, which have become incorporated into what seems to be fresh naive empirical material. It would take more wisdom than is possessed by the wisest historical scholar to track all of these absorbed borrowings to their original sources" (as cited in Miettinen, 2000, p. 63).

By recognizing that experience is culturally mediated, Dewey is also accepting that prejudice may exist and be an obstacle in any experiential learning experience. The experiential learning experience may not account for the affective experience of the learner (the inner environment), the biases that may be involved in the exercise of student judgment, and how experience reflects one's social position in the outer environment or how the outer environment recognizes the social position of the student. All of this is important to keep in mind, especially when considering the learning experiences of marginalized students.

To account for this omission, Mughal and Zafar (2011) have reconceptualized Kolb's experiential learning cycle in the following way:

The critical analysis of Kolb's learning cycle reveals that the constructivist view of learning which indicated creation of knowledge through experience is not only based on the learner but several other perspectives which act as forces exerting pressure on the learner . . . A re-conceptualization of the model shows that these forces act upon the cycle and the individual igniting the process of learning. Thus, creating more opportunity

for the learning cycle to anticipate and mimic reality through experience *rather than used as a cliché for learning through experience [emphasis added]*" (p. 35).

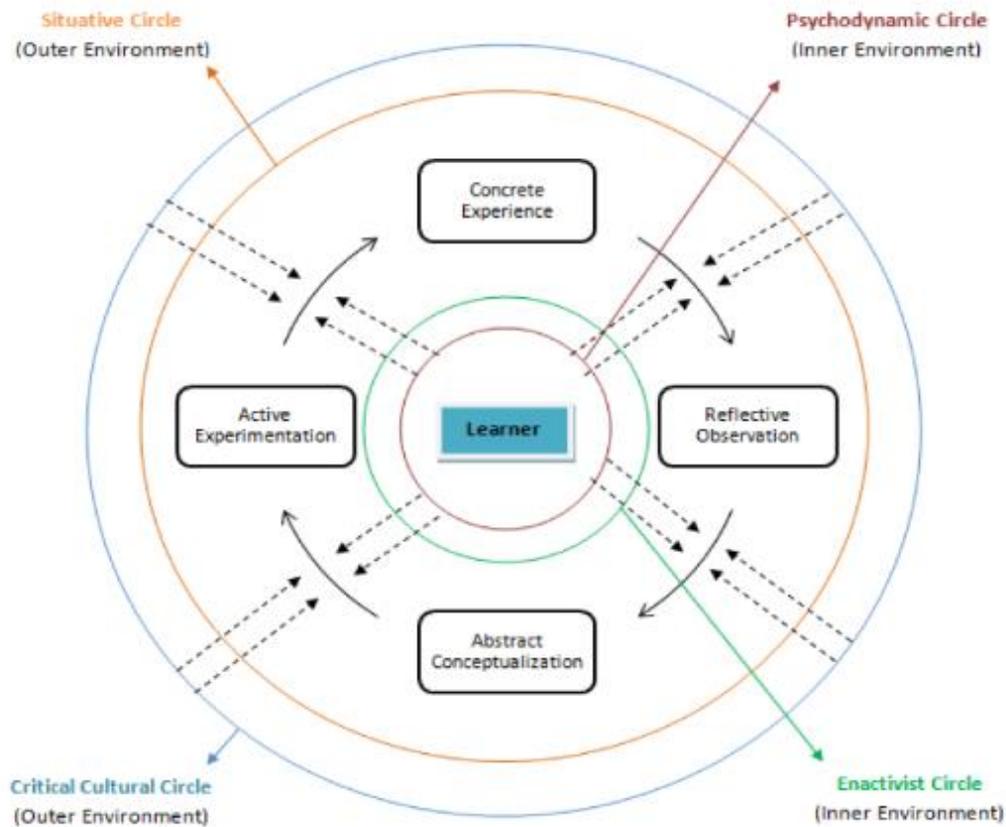


Figure 3. Mughal & Zafar's (2011) reconceptualization of Kolb's experiential learning cycle accounts for the sociopolitical forces working on the cycle and the learner.

Mughal and Zafar's inclusion of critical cultural and external situative forces also enables one to see why experiential learning has become such a commonplace and preferred pedagogical approach. Experiential learning theory's popularity is due, in part, to its intricate connection to the conception that learning is for employability and that it is best done in the "real world" in order to obtain practical skills.

In addition to the economic arguments for experiential education, pedagogically-based reasons for experiential education "are rooted in a concern for the total development of young people - social, psychological, and intellectual (Conrad & Hedin, 1995, p. 382). Conrad and Hedin (1995) provide an enduring definition of experiential learning; "educational programs offered as an integral part of the general school curriculum, but taking place outside of the conventional classroom, where students are in new roles featuring significant tasks with real consequences, and where the emphasis is on learning by doing with associated reflection." (p. 382).

As noted in Brock University's report to the Senate, experiential learning does not need to take place outside the conventional classroom, but it is related to the incorporation of innovative pedagogical approaches and active learning strategies.

Experiential learning is rooted in the learning mode of *reflection*. For learning to be educational, rather than *miseducational*, the learning must make connections between knowledge and experience. The student must seek meaning from the experience through reflection. This connection between knowledge and experience is derived from an Aristotelian view of the world that using the language of knowledge is no proof students actually possess that knowledge. "Thus, during the course of two millennia, we find an awareness that there are two elements to the state of being educated: the possession of skills and knowledge, and the expression of those abilities in intercourse with the world." (Jernstedt, 1995, p.357).

This is the essence of Qualters' (2010) observation:

Unless experiences outside the classroom are brought into the classroom and integrated with the goals and objectives of the discipline theory, students will continue to have amazing outside experiences but will not readily connect them to their in-class learning . . . Without a careful curriculum involving structured, reflective skill building, students may never learn what we hope they will outside the four walls of the classroom.

The evidence of the energy and focus on effective integration of experiential education highlights that the practice of experiential education continues to present challenges and opportunities.

### The Effective Practice of Experiential Education:

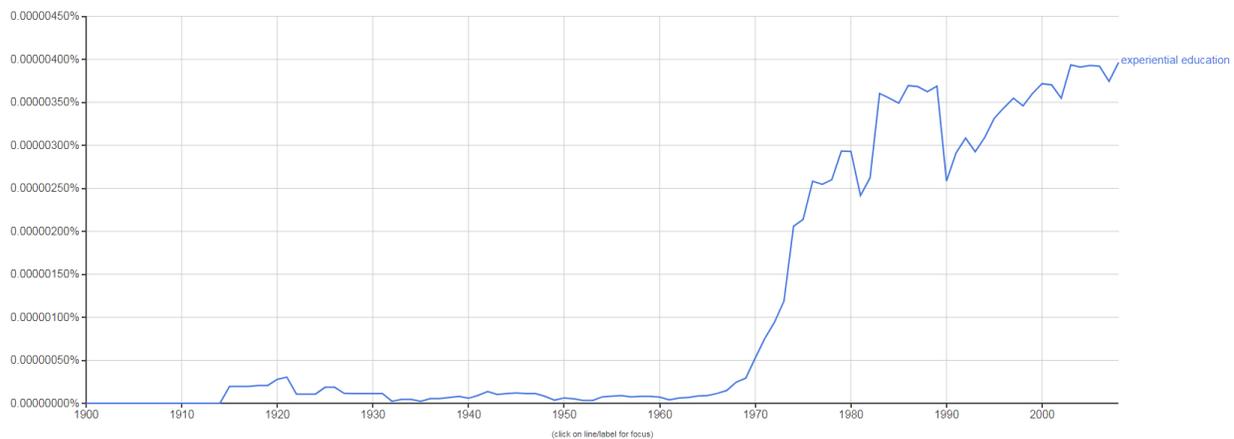


Figure 4. Google NGram Reader of Experiential Education

As observable in the Google NGram above, the amount of attention on experiential education has grown exponentially since the 1980s. While it must be recognized that "not all

experiences offer good learning opportunities" (Lindsey & Berger, 2009, p. 123), many do, and experiential learning activities can have profoundly positive impacts on student learning. Lindsey and Berger recommend three principles:

**1. Framing the experience** - Communicating the instructional objectives, assessment criteria, and expected behaviours.

**2. Activating experience** - Activation may include laboratory work or simulations to ignite prior experience and provide the student a safe microworld where the learning outcomes can be practiced and demonstrated. The reflective component of experiential learning activities may include class discussion, reflective journals, and critical incident narratives (Lindsey & Berger, 2009, p. 133).

**3. Reflecting on experience** - This is the crucial component. "Experience must be analyzed in order to learn from it," and this principle causes the learner to ask and answer "What happened?" "Why did it happen?, What did I learn?", and "How would I apply this knowledge to the future?" (Lindsey & Berger, 2009, p. 123).

Lindsey and Berger (2009) suggest there is a "paucity of empirical support for what works when using experience as the basis for instruction" (p. 124), but Roberts' (2016) *Experiential Education in the College Context: What it is, How it Works, and Why it Matters* helps resolve this research gap with many different discipline-based suggestions for integrating experiential education. Conrad and Hedin (1995) also discovered early on that experiential programs had "a positive impact on the psychological, social and intellectual development of the student participants" (p. 386). They also found that "both experimental groups attained significant gains in their moral reasoning scores." Students in experimental experiential programs showed increases in self-esteem, and students in experiential programs entered into collegial relationship with adults that are atypical of most school and work settings. "These students tended to show large, consistent changes on the semantic differential scale toward more positive attitudes toward adults," towards others, and increased their likelihood to see themselves accepting community responsibility in the future (pp. 386-390).

If there remains a paucity of research on experiential education, it is in terms of student assessment. Regarding assessment, "it is not easy to assess substantive knowledge, communication skills such as persuasive writing and speaking, or aspects of analytical or critical thinking such as the capacity to formulate and defend positions on difficult issues or the ability to take multiple perspectives into account." Some even argue that experiential learning may be, or *should* be beyond assessment: "Many dimensions of moral and civic development should not contribute to a student's grade, even if they are goals of the course" (Colby, et al, 2003, p. 260). In the end, the challenges in assessing experiential learning is connected to the larger trend of assessing student learning outcomes more broadly.

## The Recent Resurgence of Experiential Education

It would be wrong to say that experiential education ever “lost its lustre,” but it has gained considerable attention in recent events and publications concerning higher education. In 2016, [Brock University adopted an institutional definition of experiential education](#). Brock draws a distinction between experiential education and experiential learning.

Experiential education is defined as the philosophical process that guides the development of structural and functional learning experiences. Experiential learning is defined as the specific techniques or mechanisms that an individual can implement to acquire or meet learning goals (Roberts, 2012).

This definition is inclusive, expansive, and flexible. To paraphrase, experiential education is the philosophical belief in and commitment to this form of pedagogy that informs the design of the learning experience. Experiential learning happens during a specific teaching and learning activity, such as administering morphine in simulation, participating in a lab, pouring a suspended concrete slab, or visiting a sweat lodge. Experiential learning can take the form of competency-based education or in more abstracted disciplines such as “experiential liberal arts” (Aoun, 2017).

Brock University notes that “experiential learning has gained renewed attention in the public discourse in Canada” because of economic globalization, demographic change, the evolving nature of work, and “government attention with regard to the quality of the undergraduate learning experience, learning outcomes, and work preparation” (Lathrop, Boese, Grose, Law & How, 2016, p. 2). Beyond adopting the institutional definition, Brock outlines plans to collect data on experiential education, track experiential education, and include experiential education in their course descriptions so students can make informed decisions when selecting courses. Experiential learning is also a core component of Brock’s marketing and communications strategy and their Strategic Mandate Agreement (Lathrop, et al., 2016). Brock’s list of experiential learning activities concludes this document.

In *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (2017), Joseph Aoun argues for “the experiential difference,” where “there must be a two-way street between the application of classroom learning in the context of life and the application of real-world knowledge in the context of the classroom” (p. 81). For Aoun, experiential education, especially experiential liberal arts, is the key for institutions of higher education and their students to remain robot-proof because it is the best way to promote *far transfer*, where students use creativity and mental flexibility to solve problems in novel and unfamiliar situations. The use of experiential learning to support far transfer is similar to an observation made in *Educating Citizens*:

Recognizing how difficult it is to transfer skills learned in a classroom setting to the more complicated and emotionally charged contexts of life, many faculty incorporate

experiential approaches into the teaching of ethics. When students face difficult moral issues in personal or public life, it will be important for them to consider multiple points of view and alternative courses of action and to appreciate the moral complexity of the issues. Moreover, sometimes difficult moral dilemmas require an urgency when there is no clear consensus of how they ought to be resolved. Simulations can help students learn to make judgments in the face of uncertainty as they will need to do many times in the future. . . they might sit on the board of a fictitious insurance company, making decisions about whether to cover certain kinds of experimental medical treatment" (Colby, et al., 2003, p. 147).

In short, the opportunities to integrate experiential learning opportunities exist in every discipline. Building meaningful experiential learning opportunities is not easy and requires careful construction, and assessing student learning outcomes is extremely difficult.

## **Conclusion**

Experiential education is nothing new or novel, but it is also not “the flavor of the month.” It continues to receive attention because of its positive impact on learning and its ability to provide practical skills and social value. Medicine Hat College is already a leader in the volume and quality of its experiential learning activities, and institutional discussions about experiential education may focus attention to how experiential education supports MHC’s vision to lead in learning excellence. The process of defining experiential education and taking stock of experiential learning opportunities provides an opportunity to engage faculty in meaningful discussions about pedagogy, continuous improvement of current experiential learning offerings and perhaps provides part of an institutional marketing and recruitment strategy.

## **References**

- Aoun, J. (2017). *Robot-proof: Higher education in the age of artificial intelligence*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Barnett, R., & Coate, K. (2005). *Engaging the curriculum in higher education*. [electronic resource]. Maidenhead, England: Society for Research into Higher Education: Open University Press.
- Brooks-Harris, J. E., & Stock-Ward, S. R. (1999). *Workshops: Designing and facilitating experiential learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T. Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Conrad, D. & Hedin, D. (1995). National assessment of experiential education: Summary and implications. In Kraft, R. J. & Kielsmeier, J. C. (Eds.), *Experiential learning in schools and higher education* (pp. 382-403). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.
- Jernstedt, G. C. Experiential components in academic courses. In Kraft, R. J. & Kielsmeier, J. C. (Eds.), *Experiential learning in schools and higher education* (pp. 357-371). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education LTD.
- Lathrop, A., Boese, C., Grose, J., Law, M., & Howe, S. (2016, December 7). Report to Senate: Experiential Education.
- Laurillard, D. (2012). *Teaching as a design science: building pedagogical patterns for learning and technology*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lindsey, L. & Berger, N. (2009). Experiential approach to instruction. In Reigeluth, C. M., & Carr-Chellman, A. A. *Instructional-design theories and models: Vol. 3*. (pp. 117-142). New York: Routledge.
- McLeod, S. A. (2013). Kolb - Learning Styles. Retrieved from [www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html)
- Miettinen, R. (2000). The concept of experiential learning and John Dewey's theory of reflective thought and action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, (19)1, 54-72. doi: 10.1080/026013700293458
- Mughal, F., & Zafar, A. (2011). Experiential learning from a constructivist perspective: Reconceptualizing the Kolbian cycle. *International Journal of Learning and Development*, 1(2).
- Qualters, D. M. (2010). Making the most of learning outside the classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, n124, pp. 95-99.
- Roberts, J. M. (2016). *Experiential education in the college context: What it is, how it works, and why it matters*. New York, NY: Routledge.