

Experiential learning is a process in which students acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and values in a relevant setting. The process involves linking theory to practice through student engagement and critical reflection.<sup>1</sup>

Experiential learning is student-centered; it requires the student's active, direct involvement. Furthermore, the experience itself must be personally significant or meaningful to the student.

### Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb (1984) outlined the experiential learning process as a four-stage cycle.<sup>2</sup>



"[W]hen students start with concrete experience and then have the opportunity to step back and reflect upon the experience, to form generalizations and conceptual models in relation to prior learning, and to test the implications of this conceptualization through new experiences, they can achieve the mastery of both theory and practice."<sup>3</sup>

*I hear and I forget, I see and I remember,  
I do and I understand.<sup>4</sup>*

### Principles of Good Practice<sup>5</sup>

1. **Intention:** It is important to clarify why experience is the chosen approach to the learning that is to take place and to the knowledge that will be demonstrated, applied, or will result from it.
2. **Preparedness and Planning:** Participants should have sufficient foundation to support a successful experience. Also, they should focus from the earliest stages of the experience/program on the identified intentions, adhering to them as goals, objectives, and activities are defined.
3. **Authenticity:** The experience must have a real-world context and be meaningful in reference to an applied setting or situation. This means the experience should be designed in concert with those who will be affected by it, or in response to a real situation.
4. **Reflection:** Reflection is the element that transforms simple experience to a learning experience. For knowledge to be discovered and internalized, the student must test assumptions and hypotheses about the outcomes of decisions and actions taken, then weigh the outcomes against past learning and future implications. This reflective process is integral to all phases of experiential learning, from identifying intention and choosing the experience to considering preconceptions and observing how they change as the experience unfolds. Reflection is also an essential tool for adjusting the experience and measuring outcomes.

### Benefits to Students

- Active (vs. passive) participation
- Increased enthusiasm about learning
- Deeper understanding of course content/subject matter
- Holistic (whole-person) involvement
- Higher-order cognitive or intellectual skills (i.e., analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing/creating)
- Increased relevance of learning
- Competitive edge for initial post-college employment
- Interest in lifelong learning

### Forms of Experiential Learning

- Adventure-based activity (Ropes course, rock climbing, etc.)
- Capstone
- Community-based research
- Cooperative education
- Fieldwork
- Internship
- Practicum (Student teaching, clinical placement)
- Service-learning
- Study abroad

5. **Orientation and Training:** For the full value of the experience to be accessible to students, it is essential that they be prepared with important background information about others who will be involved and about the context and environment in which the experience will be situated.
6. **Monitoring and Continual Improvement:** Any learning activity will be dynamic and changing, and the parties involved all bear responsibility for ensuring that the experience, as it is in process, continues to provide the richest learning possible, while affirming the student. It is important that there be a feedback loop related to learning goals and objectives and that the structure of the experience be sufficiently flexible to permit change in response to what that feedback suggests.
7. **Assessment and Evaluation:** Outcomes and processes should be systematically documented with regard to initial intentions and quality outcomes. Assessment is a means to develop and refine the specific learning goals and quality objectives identified during the planning stages of the experience, while evaluation provides comprehensive data about the experiential process as a whole and whether it has met the specified objectives.
8. **Acknowledgment:** Recognition of learning and impact occur throughout the experience by way of the reflective and monitoring processes and through reporting, documentation, and sharing of accomplishments. Everyone involved in the experience should be included in the recognition of progress and accomplishment.

<sup>1</sup> Definition by the Center for Community Service Initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)

<sup>3</sup> Jane C. Kendall, John S. Duley, Thomas C. Little, Jane S. Permaul, & Sharon Rubin, *Strengthening Experiential Education Within Your Institution*. (Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1986, p. 9.)

<sup>4</sup> Attributed to Confucius (circa 450 BC).

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the National Society for Experiential Education, Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities, <http://www.nsee.org/8-principles>.