

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is learning by doing. This is an active, hands-on process where learners apply their knowledge and practice their skills, while also engaging in reflection. Reflecting before, during and after the experience is crucial to the learning process, as it engages learners more deeply with what was learned, thus getting them closer to mastery of the subject.

Through an EL activity, students:

- Apply knowledge, skills and values from readings, lectures, etc. to an analysis of the real-world context in which they are working.
- Use the experiences to describe the impact on their understanding of the course material.
- Synthesize and articulate how the ideas and experiences provided might inform their personal, academic, and/or professional pursuits.

A Learning Model

Kolb (1984)¹ developed a cyclical learning model for EL, where learners start the experience, reflect on what they have done, abstract what they have learned, apply and test their learning through experimentation, and then engage in the next phases of their experience or in a new experience (Figure 1). The key to mastery is to integrate new knowledge and skills into what is already known, and to applying them to what will be done in the future.

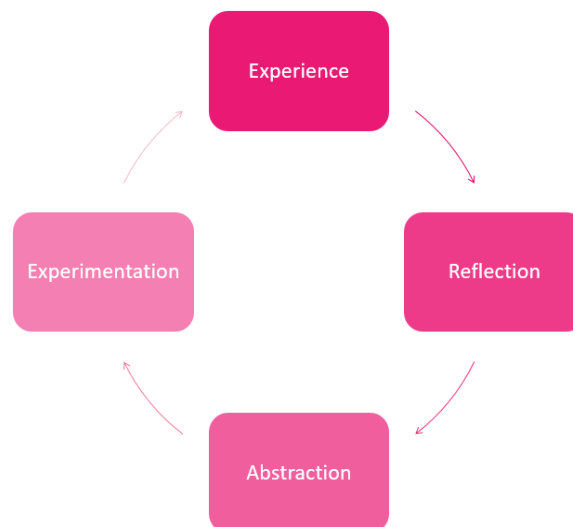


Figure 1 Kolb's (1984) EL Model

¹ Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience As the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Benefits

Experiential learning is a high-impact practice in higher education that benefits all stakeholders.

For students, EL allows them to contextualize what they learn in class, and help them to absorb, retain and apply knowledge in a way that is more profound than a traditional lecture-based course. The active engagement of the student in the learning experience enhances knowledge, professional and transferrable skills (such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, etc.), and attitudes (increased self-esteem, leadership, motivation, engagement in school and at work). These, in turn, help students build their resumes, their networks, and allow them to better realize their career aspirations. Overall, students develop an increased sense of preparedness for life and work.

For faculty and staff, positive student feedback and engagement lead to increased teaching and work satisfaction, an enhanced classroom environment, and potentially more research opportunities.

Industry, community, and other partners benefit from better-prepared graduates that enter the workforce and the world, and benefit from increased access to talent, resources, and state-of-the-art knowledge that students apply to help solve their problems.

The university benefits from enhanced reputation, increased enrolment, and retention of students, as well as increased civic engagement.

Categories of EL

There is a wide range of models that incorporates EL within real-world contexts. Concordia offers a broad array of EL opportunities to students, which are categorized as follows: in-class learning, work-integrated learning (WIL), research-integrated learning, community-based learning, international learning, and co-/extra-curricular learning. Each category and types of activities within each category are provided in Figure 2. [See detailed definitions for each EL category.](#)

COURSE-INTEGRATED LEARNING	WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING	RESEARCH-INTEGRATED LEARNING	COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING	INTERNATIONAL LEARNING	STUDENT LIFE LEARNING
Artistic performances/exhibits	Apprenticeships	Internships	Competitions	Field schools	Concordia camp counseling
Capstone projects	Clinical placements	Major research projects	Internships	International internships	Design challenges
Case studies	Co-op placements	Participatory action research	Service learning	Study abroad	Entrepreneurship
Course-integrated projects	Community-based internships	Research assistantships	Social action research		Event organization
Games/Role playing	Concordia camp counseling	Undergraduate research projects	Volunteer positions		Mentorships
Hands-on workshops	Internships				Student associations/clubs/competitions
Laboratory/Clinics	Student teaching				Volunteer positions
Practica	Teaching assistantships				Workshops

Figure 2 Types of activities offered in each EL category

Best Practices for Implementing EL

The National Society for Experiential Education ([NSEE, 2011](#)) identifies eight principles of good practice:

1. Intention: Why this experience? What knowledge will be gained?
2. Preparedness and planning: What foundation does the learner need?
3. Authenticity: How is this useful or meaningful in the real world?
4. Reflection: What ideas were tested, and what can be applied in the future?
5. Orientation and training: What background information or preparation is needed for the learner, facilitator and partners?
6. Monitoring and continuous improvement: What formative evaluation tools and feedback loops can be used?
7. Assessment and evaluation: How will processes and outcomes be documented?
8. Acknowledgement: How will learning be recognized and reported?

These principles emphasize the importance of each stage in the EL cycle. The practices of planning, training, monitoring and assessment directly address the challenges of integration, feasibility and sustainability, and impact, giving learners the best opportunity to succeed. You will find resources throughout the EL website to help you succeed in implementing your experiential learning activity. See the sections for [students](#), [faculty and staff](#), and [partners](#).

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are key in an EL experience - they describe the knowledge, skills and values that students are expected to have acquired at the end of the EL activity, with a clear notion of why they are important and useful. Learning outcomes focus on the potential applications of the knowledge and skills, help students connect learning in various contexts (within and outside of the context of the academic program), and help guide assessment and evaluation. Outcomes can be stated in terms of core knowledge and skills, but can also include transferable knowledge and skills, such as communication, self-awareness, social responsibility etc.

Assessment

It is important to assess the impact of EL. Once learning outcomes are articulated, a critical step is to assess them. Assessment describes how well a student is achieving an outcome, and how to improve. Various assessment tools can be used to measure these outcomes. Students should be asked to provide work that evaluates whether and to what extent the learning objectives have been met.

Reflection

Reflection is an integral component of EL - it links the 'concrete experience' to the 'learning', facilitating the connection between the theory learned in class and the practical experience gained. Different types of reflection can take place:

- Cognitive – looks at new knowledge and skills you have learned
- Affective – looks at how you feel from the experience
- Process – reflects on the steps taken in the process

Reflection is ongoing. It should take place before, during and after the EL experience. Depending on the nature of the activity, the reflective exercises may look different.

21st Century skills

The RBC Future Skills Report states that “An assessment of 20,000 skills rankings across 300 occupations and 2.4 million expected job openings shows an increasing demand for foundational skills such as critical thinking, coordination, social perceptiveness, active listening and complex problem solving.”² These are also called transferable skills because they allow students to transfer them to a variety of different contexts and future opportunities, whether they are academic, vocational or charitable. Figure 3 below shows these skills in order of descending importance.

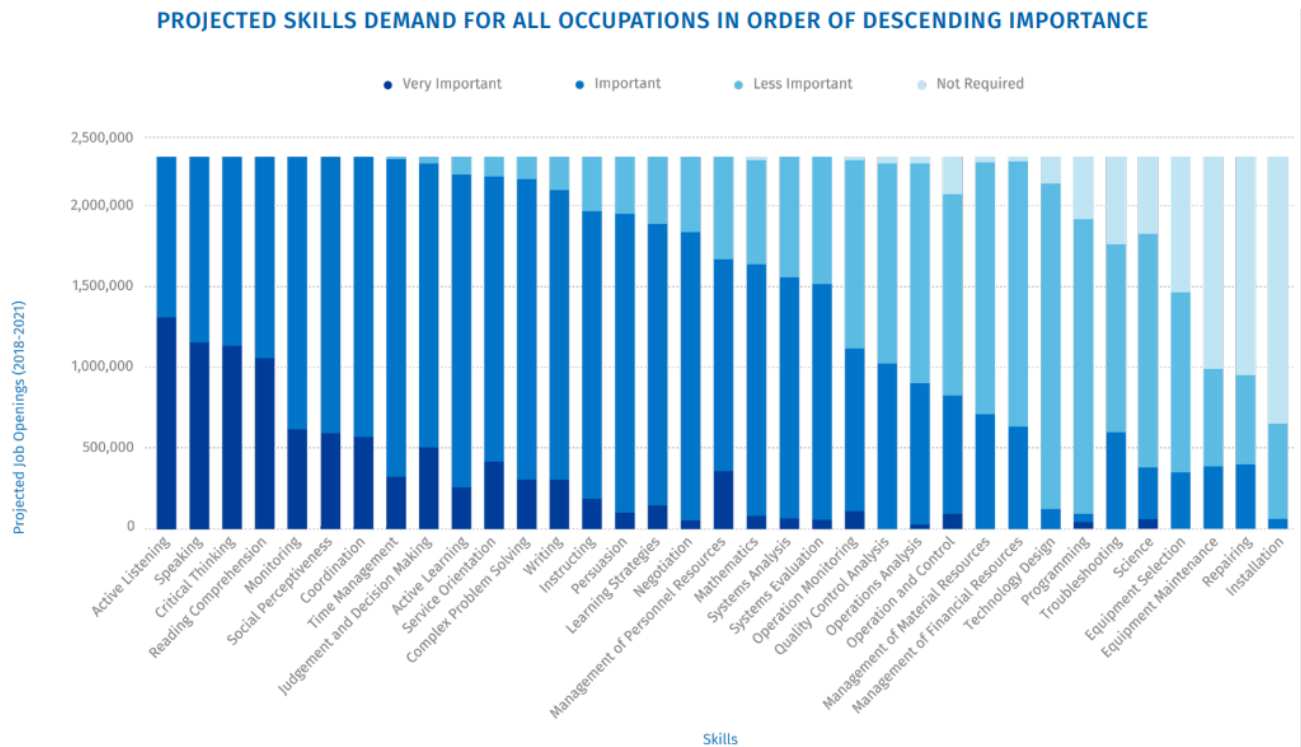


Figure 3 Demand for skills.

² <https://www.rbc.com/dms/enterprise/futurelaunch/assets-custom/pdf/RBC-Future-Skills-Report-FINAL-Singles.pdf>

A survey was conducted at Concordia University in 2017-2018 and faculty and staff were asked to indicate the most relevant skills needed to prepare students before and EL, support students during and after EL. Table 1 tabulates the findings. [FutureBound](#) works in conjunction with the EL Office to offer skills development opportunities related to EL to all students. For more information on how your students can gain access to these opportunities, [please contact the EL Office](#).

Table 1 Relevant skills before, during and after an EL experience.

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Pre-EL experience skills help students prepare for the journey.	In-process EL skills help students assess learning and reflect on the process and outcomes.	Post-EL Experience skills allow students to process, understand and articulate the learning experience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Communication • Active listening • Coordination • Self-awareness, initiative and self-direction • Teamwork • Empathy • Global and cultural awareness • Judgment and decision-making • Job search, résumé, cover letter, and interview skills • Active listening, recognition of marginalization groups, self-awareness • Conflict style, preliminary understanding of charity versus justice approaches to community development, conflict resolution • Reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Leadership and collaboration • Social perceptiveness • Judgment and decision-making, negotiation • Coordination • Persuasion • Creativity • Public speaking • Active listening • Self-awareness • Reflection • Preparation, time, resources and financial management • Global and cultural awareness • Initiative and self-direction • Personal reflection, journaling, group reflection, critical discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judgment and decision-making • Self-Awareness • Reflection: articulation of skill and knowledge gained, integration with program/degree objectives

An ideal EL experience follows Kolb's cycle presented above. A well-rounded EL experience includes supports for students in the form of well-defined learning objectives, assessment of these objectives, relevant reflective exercises, and access to key skills development opportunities, and a means to articulate what a student has learned.