Overview

Welcome to experiential learning at McMaster University! This reference guide is meant to be an introduction to key aspects of experiential learning as currently defined by the Ontario’s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD). This guide may be helpful as you begin to incorporate or enhance existing experiential learning into your course or program. Context is provided through Ontario’s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), and McMaster University’s Office of Community Engagement which developed a Community-Engaged Education Toolkit in 2018.

This guide is parsed into five main sections as follows:

1) What is the current definition of experiential learning in Ontario?
2) How to include experiential learning in the classroom
3) Experiential learning as community-engaged education
4) Assessment of experiential learning
5) Resources and references

Please note this guide is not intended to be exhaustive in nature but can be used as a starting point to help you throughout your process.
What is Experiential Learning in Ontario?

At its core, experiential learning takes a learning-by-doing approach. Ontario’s Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) outlined their guiding principles for experiential learning in 2017 which were designed to help instructors consider how to most effectively implement experiential learning into their programs/courses\(^1\). As of May 2018, McMaster University is also working on a set of experiential learning definitions that will be reflected in future iterations of this document.

These principles reflect the MAESD’s goal for students to “have greater access to high-quality, educational work-related experience before they graduate” (MAESD’s Guiding Principles for Experiential Learning, p. 2-3\(^1\)) and are outlined as follows:

1) Postsecondary supported, workplace linked
2) Meaningful, structured, and verified
3) Compliant with employment laws
4) Formally recognized by the post-secondary institution
In the context of “work-related experience”, it is important to note that this also includes real and simulated workplaces, and not solely focused on community-based activities.

In order to adhere to these principles, the MAESD has created the following checklist to help identify what constitutes experiential learning.

According to the MAESD learning activity is considered experiential learning if it meets all of the following six components:

- The student is in a workplace or simulated workplace
- The student is exposed to authentic demands that improve their employability, interpersonal skills, and transition to the workforce
- The experience is structured with purposeful and meaningful activities
- The student applies university or college program knowledge and/or essential employability skills
- The experience itself includes student self-assessment and evaluation of the student's performance and learning outcomes by the employer and/or university/college
- The experience counts towards course credit or credential completion OR is formally recognized by the college or university as meeting the five criteria above

As you embark on your own experiential learning design and implementation, consider how these components fit within your course design.
Experiential learning provides students an opportunity to build on knowledge acquired during their studies and to acquire and/or hone a variety of different skills, such as:

- Applications of theoretical content,
- Work and workplace practices,
- How organizations operate,
- Communication and collaboration skills,
- Planning and completing projects,
- Self-management,
- Reflective practice

Reflection is a major component across all types of experiential learning and is covered in more detail in the Assessment of Experiential Learning portion of this guide.
How to Include Experiential Learning in the Classroom

As noted in the first section of this guide, experiential learning is a fairly broad term. In terms of what constitutes experiential learning in a classroom setting, there are currently ongoing discussions between a number of Universities (McMaster being one of them) and the Ministry to establish common understanding.

In general, there are some guidelines to help you when you are designing experiential learning activities for use in your classroom. For example:

- Think of problems to be solved or experiences that allow for the integration and/or application of course material rather than information to be remembered.
- Maintain structure.
  - E.g. group working agreements, activity learning goals, big-picture design, etc.
- Taking a student-centred approach, including:
  - Creating hands-on activities relevant to their studies,
  - Allowing some aspect of self-design where possible – do not want the students to feel the project has been assigned to them,
  - Encouraging students to make mistakes – use them as opportunities for learning, not for penalizing,
  - Incorporating reflection as a key component.
Some examples of experiential learning activities for the classroom include:

- Performance and artistic productions,
- Role playing,
- Case-study analysis,
- Laboratories / work simulation,
- Various types of group work / presentations, and
- One-off activities of: field visits; an interview with a professional in the field; participation of a community event.
Experiential Learning as Community-Engaged Education at McMaster†

According to McMaster’s Community Engagement Task Force (2013), community engagement at McMaster University is broadly defined as valuing the expert knowledge that community members have and fostering ongoing collaboration between university and community partners. The vision for McMaster’s community engagement initiative is “working together for an inclusive, sustainable greater Hamilton” (Community-Engaged Education Toolkit, p. 7), and is guided by the principles of relationship-building, reciprocity, equity, continuity, openness to learning, and commitment to action.

Community-engaged education is one form of experiential education and is meant to be a purposeful effort to connect real-world experiences to the content and theory being learned in the specific course. It can take many forms and varies in size and required effort for planning/implementation.

†The information in this section comes from a toolkit recently developed by the Office of Community Engagement at McMaster University [http://community.mcmaster.ca] with a focus on community-engaged education (also referred to as: academic-service learning, community service learning, and/or community-based learning). The full toolkit will be broadly shared in September 2018, where more detailed information can be found. If you would like to a copy of the toolkit in its current form, please click here, or email the Office of Community Engagement for more information (community@mcmaster.ca).
The following list provides some examples of community-engaged experiential learning activities, and are subject to change as current language is updated²:

- **Community Exposure** – observing or participating in community events
  - E.g. walking through a neighbourhood; participating in public event

- **Course-based Projects** – informed by what community partners need
  - E.g. creating a tool or resource for the partner that can support their work; working with the partner to plan/implement/evaluate an event

- **Capstone, Major Projects or Thesis Projects** – credit used to integrate and apply previously gained knowledge working with or for a community partner

- **Placements & Practicums** – students are placed within a community partner’s organization for a specific amount of time
  - E.g. clinical placements

- **Credit-based co-ops and internships** – can be paid (co-ops must be paid) or unpaid positions in a workplace environment; often coordinated through a co-op or internship program on campus

For further details, please see Section 2 of the [Community-Engaged Education Toolkit²](#).

For more information regarding McMaster’s principles of community-campus partnerships and additional considerations for curriculum design, please see Sections 3 and 4 of the [Community-Engaged Toolkit²](#), respectively.
Assessment of Experiential Learning

A fundamental component of assessing the learning that occurred during an experiential learning activity is some form of critical reflection. Reflection allows students to investigate and evaluate their own experiences, connect this learning to their course theory, and build on this learning to expand their understanding of course material and broader world around them.

Experiential learning is an additional way to learn and apply course material. When assessing experiential learning activities/performance it is important to use assessment techniques that measure the student’s ability to meet anticipated learning outcomes. Related skills and knowledge can also be developed through experiences such as team work, organizational analysis, and interpersonal skills. As such, assessment of experiential learning is more than outcome measurement. Instead, assessment of experiential learning is best when it focuses on both the process and the product of the activities. This allows both the student and the instructor to confirm and reflect on the learning and growth that occurred and ensure continued growth after completion of experience.

Another important consideration when developing assessment for experiential learning is to keep it student-centred, which gives the students a sense of control over their own learning. Suggestions for student-centred assessment include:

- Encouraging the students to develop their own learning outcomes and help create a rubric for assessment,
- Having students keep track of their work, and
- Communicating results by having students present their learning to an audience.
The following is a list of possible assessment ideas. This list is not exhaustive, and you are invited to view the resources provided for more details/examples:

- Maintaining a learning journal or portfolio
- Presentation of what was learned
- Analysis of strengths and weaknesses and related action planning
- Essay/report of what was learned (ideally, with references to reflective writings)
- Self-evaluation and/or group evaluation of a task performed
- Observations in the workplace of how the course theory is applied
- Oral exam
- Identify and rationalize projects that could be done moving forward

When preparing a reflection activity related to experiential education, there are four components to aim for:

- Reflection should be continuous – taking place throughout the course
- Reflection should be connected – relating the process back to the course content or other experiences
- Reflection should be challenging – setting high expectations and communicating that reflection requires the same academic rigor as any other assignment
- Reflection should be contextualized – appropriate to the level and type of course

Remember, the type of reflection you choose to incorporate will depend on your course and the specific type of experiential learning activity in which your students are engaged.
Summary

- Experiential learning can take many forms; both inside the classroom and out in the community/workplace
- Refer to the MAESD guidelines on experiential learning until further details are made available through the Province or University
- Student-reflection is a key aspect of assessing experiential learning
  - Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences occur alongside critical reflection exercises
- A number of internal and external resources are available for you to help you along the way, including the MacPherson Institute and the Office of Community Engagement

List of References


Additional Resources

For additional resources both internal and external to McMaster University, please click here.