

Experiential Learning/Education

What is it?

Experiential learning and experiential education are two sides of the concept of acquiring knowledge through direct experience. Experiential learning occurs naturally; we observe or experience something and learn from it, although we might come to false conclusions. Experiential education expects learners to have the ability to analyze and reflect on experience and apply the learned knowledge to new situations.

What does it look like in practice?

Think the classic field trip where students are taken to a museum to observe a local art exhibit on working-class art to supplement a sociological discussion of class. In a subject that requires field research, such as the natural and social sciences, students might be sent out of the classroom environment to collect data through interviews, observation, or collection of objects in nature. So, cultural anthropology students might go into a local ethnic community to observe and record musical traditions or transcribe oral histories or learn about cultural foods.

In today's technological landscape, immersive observational research can occur on the Web or in virtual worlds. Language students might visit a Spanish-speaking region in Second Life, interact with native speakers and return to reflect on the experience. Business students might create a virtual product, market, and sell it in a virtual store that they build. History students might visit the virtual King Tut's Tomb exhibit in Heritage Key to experience the discovery and interpretation of ancient artifacts.

How does such a method fit into my course?

- Experiential learning might take the form of one component of a larger research project, or it might be the primary form of learning in a course from which students will soon graduate into their field.
- Writing assignments might take the form of analysis of data or essays.
- Reflective writing and class discussions support the development of analytical procedures.
- Post-experience problem solving assignments support the application of learned knowledge in new situations.

Further Reading:

The Experiential Learning Cycle: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/experience.htm>

PDF: "Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community." ERIC Digest. Download PDF here: <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED404948>

PDF: " Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education." <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.127.6489&rep=rep1&type=pdf>