

What is Experiential Learning?

The basic definition of Experiential learning is learning and knowing through doing. Though somewhat more complex in nature, learning through trial and error is the oldest form of education.

Learning that is considered “experiential” contains all of the following elements:

1. A designed learning experience that includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.
2. Opportunities for students to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.
3. Opportunities for students to engage intellectually, creatively, emotionally, socially, or physically.
4. Reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.

How does Experiential Learning work?

The experiential learning process has been described (Indiana University, 2006) as the integration of:

- **Knowledge** — the concepts, facts, and information acquired through formal learning and past experience;
- **Activity** — the application of knowledge to a “real world” setting; and
- **Reflection** — the analysis and synthesis of knowledge and activity to create new knowledge”

The ultimate goal of experiential learning is to foster genuine understanding of key concepts through the purposeful application of knowledge and skills obtained in a variety of settings.

Examples of experiential learning include (Indiana University, 2006; Moore, 2010):

- **Internships** – Often a credit-bearing, free-standing activity in a student’s field of interest that is assessed by a faculty member and supervised by an employer or mentor who is not a faculty member. The mission of this experience may be to support the integration of theory and practice, to explore career options, or to foster personal and professional development.
- **Service learning** – Optional or required out-of-classroom community service experiences/projects attached to courses or a separate credit-bearing experience designed to meet identified community needs and reflect on the service activity to better understand course content and gain a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.
- **Cooperative education** – Mostly a part of professional programs, students gain practical relevant work experience over a period of multiple terms that intersperse their coursework either by alternating work and study time over separate semesters or dedicating specific time to each during a semester.
- **Clinical education** – This is a more specifically defined internship experience in which students practice learned didactic and experiential skills, most frequently in health care and legal settings, under the supervision of a credentialed practitioner. It is often a separate credit-bearing course tied to a related theoretical course or a culminating experience after a sequence of theoretical courses.
- **Student teaching** – This experience is specific to students in pre-professional and pre-service teacher education who are gaining required and evaluated experience in supervised teaching.
- **Practicum** – A relative of the internship, this form of experiential learning usually is a course or student exercise involving practical experience in a work setting (whether paid or unpaid) as well as theoretical study, including supervised experience as part of professional pre-service education.
- **Undergraduate research experience** – Students function as research assistants and collaborators on faculty projects.

- **Community-based research** – Faculty and students cooperate with local organizations to conduct studies to meet the needs of a particular community. Students gain direct experience in the research process.
- **Field work** – Supervised student research or practice carried out away from the institution and in direct contact with the people, natural phenomena, or other entities being studied. Field work is especially frequent in fields including anthropology, archaeology, sociology, social work, earth sciences, and environmental studies.
- **Study abroad** – Students usually engage in courses at higher education institutions in another country. The experiential learning component is the cultural immersion which provides novel challenges for navigating living in a new place. The coursework connected to a study abroad can also include internships and service-learning experiences.