

SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis Grant: New Ways of Learning

Final Report

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Bridging the Theory/Practice Divide:

Experiential Learning for a Critical, People-Centred Economy

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Key Messages

1. There is an uneven disciplinary engagement with experiential learning in the scholarship. In keeping with our original proposal, our synthesis focused on the nine professional fields associated with the Faculty of Community Services, Ryerson University: Child and Youth Care, Disability Studies, Early Childhood Studies, Midwifery, Nursing, Nutrition, Public and Occupational Health, Regional and Urban Planning, and Social Work. Of the fields listed here, only three (Nursing, Social Work and Midwifery) had engaged in systematic scholarship reviews of experiential learning.
2. There appears to be no widely accepted operational definition of experiential learning. As part of our synthesis, we searched the scholarship for the following types of teaching and learning experiences as well as associated terms: lab, field placement, practicum, internship, studio, co-op, and service learning.
3. There is an overemphasis in research on a few methods of experiential learning (e.g. simulations, problem-based learning, practice/field placements) despite the fact that there is a broader range of methods being discussed in the scholarship.

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview and analysis of the current understanding of how “experiential learning” is conceptualized, implemented and evaluated in professional service fields of study. Better understanding of this educational approach will benefit educators as well as students. Experiential learning is an integral part of the authors’ institutional culture: 90% of all undergraduate programs include an experiential learning component (Learning and Teaching Office, Ryerson University, 2015). Experiential learning is also rapidly expanding in other Ontario universities (Council of Ontario Universities, 2014). Despite its prevalent use, the field of experiential learning remains under-researched and the research that has been done is fragmented. There is a lack of evidence to support the extent to which this type of learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, broadens career prospects, and contributes to the development of students’ critical thinking skills. This report focuses on the nine professional fields associated with the Faculty of Community Services, Ryerson University: Child and Youth Care, Disability Studies, Early Childhood Studies, Midwifery, Nursing, Nutrition, Public and Occupational Health, Regional and Urban Planning and Social work.

The methodological framework developed by Arskey and O’Malley (2005), was used to conduct a scoping review focused on experiential learning. This framework includes; 1) developing the research question, 2) searching for relevant studies, 3) selecting the relevant studies, 4) charting the data, 5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results, and finally 6) consulting with stakeholders to better understand the findings (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). This report includes a detailed description of the process and outcomes of research studies and grey documents that were uncovered and analyzed in the scoping review, followed by a discussion of the findings, areas for further research, and knowledge mobilization strategies and activities.

The results of the review include four key findings, 1) ‘experiential learning’ is a frequently used term used in undergraduate education; however, it is one that is often used without a definition. Or when a definition is used, there is not a common point of reference, 2) a number of methods identified as experiential learning opportunities were discussed in the articles analyzed in the departmental systematic reviews, 3) this knowledge synthesis focused on bridging the theory-practice gap because this gap is often tied to the use of experiential learning methods, and finally 4) amongst the ‘community services’ disciplines, there is an uneven disciplinary engagement in scholarly research about experiential learning.

Key messages from the review clearly illustrate an uneven disciplinary engagement with experiential learning in the scholarship, with only three of the above-mentioned schools, Nursing Social work and Midwifery, having engaged in systematic reviews of experiential learning. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of a commonly-accepted operational definition of experiential learning. The review also highlights the disproportionate amount of research that focuses on a small number of types of experiential learning methods, including simulations, problem-based learning and practice/field placements, in spite of the fact that a broader range of methods are discussed in the scholarship.

The report concludes with the recommendation that further research be done with an emphasis on engaging relevant and interested stakeholders. It explicates the need for future research to enhance our knowledge of the impacts of “experiential learning” in general, as well as the need to bridge the theory-practice gap. Specifically, it is noted that further research needs to begin with the development of a consistent definition of ‘experiential learning’, as this will facilitate the comparison of various studies in order to inform the body of scholarship that explores this educational approach. It is also recommended that future research in the area of experiential learning shift attention from how we teach to focus on how students learn. It is proposed that this paradigm shift can be achieved through the engagement of key stakeholders, faculty development, analysis of student success, curriculum development and future research by professional practice disciplines.