

# Assessing Experiential Learning at HKU

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*‘There is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education.’ – Dewey, 1938, p. 20*

## Introduction

It has been recognised for long that learning cannot be separated from experience. Learning can only occur when the learner makes sense of new experiences and incorporates them into a broader conceptual framework<sup>1</sup>. Increasingly, educators in higher education regard experiential learning as an essential component in university curricula attuned to various challenges facing higher education today<sup>2</sup>.

In the University of Hong Kong (HKU), experiential learning is a distinctive feature of the new four-year curriculum. It has been conducted in a variety of forms, examples of which include internships, practicums, simulations, and service learning. Many of these initiatives are supported by the Gallant Ho Experiential Learning Centre, which was established in 2012 with the aim of supporting and promoting experiential learning across the University<sup>3</sup>.

With its increasing popularity, the assessment of experiential learning is also receiving more attention. Though experiential learning or learning by doing has become a well-established concept in recent years, assessing experiential learning is still a relatively new topic in the current higher education environment. This briefing aims to shed light on some emerging questions regarding assessing experiential learning, drawn from informal interviews with nine teachers and two students that have been involved in experiential learning in HKU. Perspectives and case examples from elsewhere are also referred in this briefing.

## What is experiential learning?

In 1938, John Dewey pointed out the close and essential relationship between the processes of actual experience and education in his book *Experience and Education*<sup>4</sup>. This has become a guiding principle for experiential education. Over decades, higher education institutions have incorporated different forms of real-life experiences into the curriculum, which include apprenticeships, internships, work or study programs, cooperative education, studio arts, laboratory studies, and field projects.

The scope of experiential learning defined in the HKU context is even wider. As defined in a 2012 HKU Senate paper, ‘Experiential learning refers to the kind of learning that requires students to tackle real-life issues and problems by drawing on theoretical knowledge that they



1 Beard, C. & Wilson, J.P. (2006). Exploring experiential learning. In C. Beard & J. P. Wilson (Eds.). *Experiential Learning: A Best Practice Handbook for Educators and Trainers* (pp. 15-44). London: Kogan Page Limited.

2 Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (2nd edition), New Jersey: Pearson Education.

3 Gallant Ho Experiential Learning Centre at HKU (<http://ghelc.hku.hk/>)

4 Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

have learnt in the formal curriculum ... (and) is relevant to all programmes.<sup>5</sup> In other words, experiential learning is not only appropriate for certain majors that may be perceived as closely connected to industry and the professions, but for all majors in the university.

Though experiential learning can take various forms in different disciplines, it is crucial to note that experiences alone do not constitute experiential learning. The role of thinking, reflecting and analysing is as important as the experience itself in the learning process<sup>2</sup>. Kolb's renowned 'experiential learning cycle' (Figure 1) neatly encapsulates the essence of how learning occurs through experiences.

Learning is defined as 'the process whereby

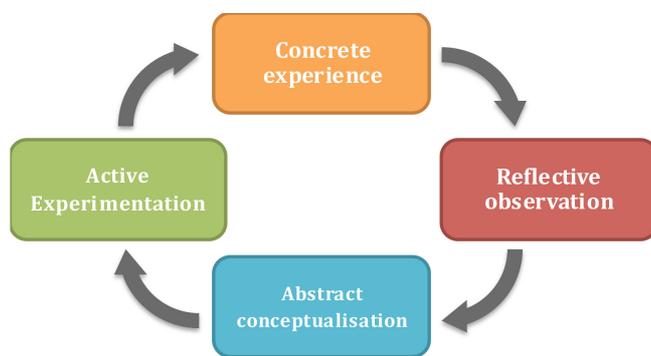


Figure 1 Kolb's experiential learning cycle<sup>6</sup>

knowledge is created through the transformation of experience<sup>2</sup>. Experiential learning therefore does not simply mean getting the learners to do something, but has to involve observing, reflecting, critically analysing, and synthesising the experiences. This practically implies that debriefing and reflection are essential stages for any experiential learning programmes<sup>7</sup>.

Interviews with the sample of HKU teachers have revealed various types of learning programmes that involve real-life or simulated professional experiences supported by carefully designed briefing, debriefing, and reflective activities. For example, one internship programme requires students to attend a number of workshops preparing them for entering the field. Along with the internship experiences, students need to write an essay demonstrating the ability to integrate their experience with academic knowledge to support an argument, as well as an individual

reflective journal, critically analysing and reflecting on the experience.

### What is assessed?

Two unique characteristics in the assessment of experiential learning have been found important to define what is assessed. First, the assessment of experiential learning should consider the context in which students' performance occurs, since there is a wide variety of possible learning experiences of students in different contexts<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, it has to involve the learning processes as well as the learning outcomes, because how and in what ways students apply the theoretical knowledge they learned from the classroom in practice and resolve real-world problems is as important as what students acquire from the experiences<sup>9</sup>.

The interviews with the sample of teachers in HKU show that students are commonly assessed through authentic tasks, which provide them with opportunities to demonstrate the integration of theory and practice; and more importantly students can learn from performing these tasks. The importance of authenticity to the assessment of experiential learning has been greatly emphasised in the literature. Authenticity in the assessment task design involves at least two dimensions. One is related to the degrees to which the professional context faithfully represents the everyday challenge a professional will face. Another dimension regards the extent to which the problems are properly situated within a specific disciplinary community<sup>10</sup>.

One example demonstrating these two dimensions of authenticity discussed during our interviews is a business practicum programme in which students are required to offer real solutions to companies as their client. They have to meet the client and critically analyse the needs in order to offer sensible consulting services. The assessment components include an initial proposal, a progress report, a presentation to clients, and a final consultancy report. These materials are the key documents that would be generated in a typical commercial case and the process to a certain extent mimics the real consulting services in the disciplinary community.

Another example is in a knowledge exchange programme in the engineering discipline: students are assessed by initiatives to learn and contribute to the community services, their engineering knowledge,

5 Senate Paper, HKU, January 2012, quoted in Tsui, A. (2013). In conversation with Amy Tsui – Challenges of experiential learning. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 3(2), 54-56.

6 The figure is adapted from Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; and Kolb (2015) – see first page

7 Andresen, L., Boud, D., & Cohen, R., (1999). Experience-based Learning. In Foley, G. (Ed.). *Understanding Adult Education and Training* (pp. 225-239). Second Edition. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

8 McGill University (Canada) (2014). *Guidelines for Assessment of Experiential Learning*. Montreal: Teaching and Learning Services.

9 Cooper, L., Orrell, J., & Bowden, M. (2010). Assessing work integrated learning. In L. Cooper, J. Orrell, & M. Bowden (Eds.), *Work Integrated Learning: A Guide to Effective Practice* (pp. 99-123). New York: Routledge.

10 Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from Award-Winning Practice* (pp. 63-64). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

and their management and cooperation during team building activities, along with some other components such as presentation and reflective writing. To summarise, the competencies that have been assessed include knowledge, actual practices, specific skills, and general social dispositions, which are appropriately situated in authentic tasks and relevant to real-world contexts as well as the engineering discipline.

## What are the methods for assessing experiential learning?

Qualters<sup>11</sup> states that good assessment for experiential learning should be student-centred, ongoing, aimed at improving and understanding learning. There are a range of methods recommended by scholars as desirable for assessing experiential learning<sup>12</sup>, some of which have already been adopted by teachers at HKU. Below shows some examples:

(1) *Reflective journals/ writings*. In one example, students are required to write several pieces of reflective writing along the three years of the experiential learning programme, which allows the teacher to observe changes in students' perceptions; in an internship programme, students are asked to focus on one or two critical incidents with reference to theories learned from the classroom.

(2) *Presentations*. Presentations in some courses are conducted in a group setting where students informally share their experiences; some presentations are conducted more formally through poster displays that will be assessed by both academic tutor and peers. An encouraging observation is that the students we interviewed gave high praise to presentations and regarded them as effective methods to assess and facilitate their learning.

(3) *Essays and reports*. Essays and reports can focus on what has been learnt or critical incidents and often need to show a linkage between the experience and the academic knowledge. In some cases, they can be the real reports prepared for clients in the industry or people in the community.

There are other methods discussed during the interviews, among which the most frequently mentioned ones are field supervisor's appraisals, self-evaluation forms, and project proposals. These three methods are also included in the list of recommended ones for assessing experiential learning in the literature<sup>12</sup>.

Interestingly, learning portfolios, regarded as the most comprehensive method by Qualters<sup>11</sup>, were not

mentioned during the interviews with the sample of interviews for this case. Learning portfolios are a well-designed collection of students' reflection that can be used to encourage development of professional competence and provide direct evidence of learning<sup>13</sup>.

## Who should assess?

A very important and distinctive feature in experiential learning is that assessment is not just conducted internally by academics. External assessors are significantly involved in nearly all of the courses and programmes that were discussed during interviews with the sample of HKU teachers. It is clear that stakeholders outside the university often play an important and active role in the assessment of experiential learning<sup>9</sup>.

In most of the courses and programmes that have been discussed during our interviews, external assessors contribute to a proportion of students' grade, often about fifty percent and the rest is based on the scores given by academics. In a few instances, field supervisors serving as the external assessors determine the final grades of students, except in extreme cases where scores are found to be unusually high or low. Only in these untypical cases would the instructor intervene by clarifying the issues with the external assessors.

Besides external assessors and academics (i.e., the instructor and tutors), students sometimes also act as assessors in a number of courses and programmes. In one internship programme, students are asked to complete self-assessment in order to review their responsibilities during the internship as well as evaluate the entire experience and the host organisation. In some other programmes, students need to assess one another's presentations. In a word, students are also assessors who assess themselves and their peers.

## How to ensure quality assessment?

One issue in having multiple assessors, especially external ones, is the concern over quality and consistency of the grades. From the interviews, it is revealed that all teachers are particularly aware of the issue of assessment quality. Two methods are emphasised during the interviews to ensure quality assessment: (1) the use of rubrics; and (2) training and guidance provided to external assessors.

Some teachers have put great effort into developing rubrics through literature search, adaptation, testing, validating, and continuously refining. In one particular

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11 Qualters, D.M. (2010). Bringing the outside in: Assessing experiential education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 124, 55-62.

12 For a list of the recommended methods, please refer to Schwartz, M. (2012). *Best Practices in Experiential Learning*. Ryerson University Teaching and Learning Office. [online resource] <http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/ExperientialLearningReport.pdf>

13 McNamara, J. (2013). The challenge of assessing professional competence in work integrated learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(2), 183-197.

case in legal education, the teacher has taken into consideration the local context and cultural issues during the refinement. It is generally recognised that rubrics help ensure consistency among different assessors and also provide students with information on expectations and requirements.

Even with the use of rubrics, extensive training for external assessors is still considered as essential by a number of teachers we interviewed. The training should focus on how to use the rubrics and provide guidelines for supervising students in the field. A relevant issue mentioned by one of the teachers is that it is often necessary for the teachers to discuss

with students about the assessment mechanisms upfront in order to address students' concerns about fairness in situations where they are assessed by non-academics.

### **Are there any other suggestions drawn from the interviews?**

A number of teachers we interviewed have offered some further suggestions for HKU colleagues who are thinking of adopting experiential learning. See the table below:

| <b>Useful suggestions</b>  |
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| 1. Build and maintain a network of organisations/ companies/ community partners                                      |
| 2. Select organisations/ companies/ community partners that can provide meaningful learning experiences for students |
| 3. Prepare students with necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes before entering the field                         |
| 4. Adopt mobile or online technologies to give timely feedback when appropriate                                      |
| 5. Plan for sufficient time and resources  |
| 6. Be flexible about the plan and ready for changes  |

### **Acknowledgements**

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