

Adapting Experiential Learning in Times of Uncertainty: Challenges, Strategies, and Recommendations Moving Forward

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Article abstract

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Adapting Experiential Learning in Times of Uncertainty: Challenges, Strategies, and Recommendations Moving Forward

Eileen O'Connor, Emily Marcogliese, Hanan Anis, Gaëlle Faye, Alison Flynn, Ellis Hayman, Jamel Stambouli

ABSTRACT Experiential learning offers students the opportunity to gain practical experience with a community or industry partner in their field of study. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many workplaces transitioned from in-person to at-home work environments, and those that did not, often reduced or removed access for non-essential personnel. In this report from the field, multiple viewpoints are shared that emerged from an interdisciplinary panel on experiential learning in the June 2022 Spotlight Series hosted by Teaching and Learning Support Services at the University of Ottawa. These voices “from the field” shed light on the impact of uncertain times on experiential learning and, collectively, focus on identifying challenges, implementing strategies and good practices, and sharing recommendations moving forward.

KEYWORDS experiential learning, higher education, Covid-19, community engagement

A defining feature of post-secondary institutions' approach to student learning is the commitment to building strong community–campus partnerships that enhance and expand students' learning opportunities. These partnerships support students' experiential learning placements within the community, government, and private sectors. The resources and relationships invested in university–community collaborations are extensive, as evidenced by well-established co-op and practicum placements, as well as smaller community service-learning placements. Experiential learning is recognized not only as direct, hands-on learning acquired through doing, but also for its role in building participants' confidence to learn in different settings, make critical connections to their curricula learning, learn from local communities, and build greater self-efficacy and self-awareness through critical thinking and reflection (Kolb, 1984). Building on Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, students are increasingly encouraged to renew their focus and efforts on the reflective aspect of their experiential learning and to assume a greater role in learner responsibility (Morris, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2021).

Given this commitment, we turn our attention to the current context of practicing experiential learning during a worldwide pandemic and to questions that arise from challenges

to that practice: How do students, community partners, administrators, and faculty respond and adapt their experiential learning during times of uncertainty such as a global pandemic, war and displacement, or significant weather events that disrupt in-person learning on campuses? Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, what were the main challenges in navigating experiential learning? What experiences and strategies could be shared to inform the creation of safe practices during times of uncertainty? While many researchers are publishing on adaptations to experiential learning in universities in other countries, particularly in medicine and pharmacy (see Butler, 2022; Castro et al., 2021; Leite et al., 2020), evidence from Canada (and from community partners) is only now emerging. To that end, we share this note to move the conversation forward.

This Report from the Field focuses on our involvement with experiential learning in partnership with community organizations in the Ottawa–Gatineau region of Canada as we take stock of our collective experiences and share recommendations moving forward by summarizing emergent ideas from a panel discussion. The panel on experiential learning during Covid-19 included six panelists and a moderator and was featured in the Spotlight Series at uOttawa in June 2022. The series grew from the work of the Strategic Committee for Teaching and Learning Supports, which has representatives from across the institution, including Teaching and Learning Support Services, students, and faculty. In this piece, we share multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder viewpoints on experiential learning at the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) and Saint Paul University. These viewpoints reflect the context of working in a large, comprehensive, bilingual university offering a range of undergraduate and professional graduate programs, including Medicine, Nursing, Law, Engineering, and Education, in the capital city of Canada. Our goal is to actively contribute to the ongoing reflection on the operations of higher education institutes for experiential learning in Canada during Covid-19. In doing so, we strive to contribute to the necessary broader reflection on the challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for experiential learning during times of uncertainty.

Listening to Multiple Perspectives from the Field

Panelists affirmed that the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted in-person learning and education around the world. They said that as disruptions increased, it was uOttawa's leaders in pedagogy and teaching who assumed crucial leadership roles on campus during a period of critical discussion and decision-making. Shared best practices and guidelines were developed and disseminated to assist faculty and students in the temporary and/or ongoing pivot to online classes. Panelists stated that it became apparent that intersecting issues of students' isolation and mental and physical health would need to be addressed in new learning practices, as was reported at other institutes (Hager et al., 2020; Krendl, 2021). Challenges abounded, as did the necessity of finding solutions while being receptive, flexible, and adaptable to emergent and ongoing pandemic-related issues. The scope of experiential learning at uOttawa is wide ranging and encompasses structured co-op placements, program internships, community-based research, and entrepreneurial or service-learning placements, as well as professional program practicum placements in Nursing, Medicine, and Education. While some reflections

in this field report focus on specificities within our respective programs, several key themes emerged from our discussion, summarized below.

Challenges of Doing Experiential Learning During Times of Uncertainty

Many of the challenges discussed by panelists centered on the difficulties of working during times of uncertainty. With this uncertainty, they noticed higher levels of stress and anxiety related to increased work demands, difficulties around planning ahead, transitioning to online workspaces, and adapting to changing public health requirements. Not only did work become more challenging, so too did managing home life, family health, and children's schooling. Panelists revealed that they heard about struggles to balance work, home life, and assuming greater caregiving roles. They said the struggles were particularly challenging as social, learning, and work "spaces" blurred quickly together, and one's laptop and living space became the new focal point of learning.

Panelists noted that students involved in experiential learning felt that their program requirements, deadlines, and expectations remained relatively unchanged while the needs and capacities of community, government, and industry partners were going through enormous upheaval. Managing these gaps proved to be a challenge experienced by many of the panelists. Voices from the field in accredited programs such as Education and Nursing reiterated that experiential learning is a compulsory and valued aspect of their programs, but they grappled with a sharp decrease in available placements and an increase in host burnout, particularly for partners in long term care homes, hospitals, and schools. Conversely, other programs such as Business witnessed an increased demand for experiential learning placements and were challenged with recruiting enough students to fill the growing needs of their local, national, and international industry partners.

Finally, there was consensus among the panelists that during the pandemic, students and faculty missed the humanistic approach to engagement and learning. They noted that they had become more reflective on the privilege and benefits of in-person engagement with students, colleagues, and partners as they adapted from what was first anticipated to be a temporary transition to an evolving situation for the last two and a half years. Yet, experiences revealed this was not the case for all students nor all colleagues. For example, one panelist shared that many third- and fourth-year students who experienced on-campus learning prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic saw the benefits of returning to classes on campus and placements within community settings, while in-person classes and experiential learning did not hold as much value for many of the second-year students. A new challenge was identified as an ongoing need for partners, administrators, and faculty to develop ways to rekindle interest in the human, in-person aspects of experiential learning.

Strategies, Solutions, and New Opportunities for Experiential Learning During Times of Uncertainty

Panelists stated that stakeholders used various strategies to adapt experiential learning for students, whether in the classroom, in their placements, or in research laboratories. While

the transition and uncertainty were challenging to manage, they also created an opportunity for innovation and creativity. The Faculty of Engineering, for example, created and mailed laboratory kits to students across the globe. While this solution proved expensive and they eventually transitioned to a virtual simulation model, this demonstrates how the Engineering instructors developed creative solutions to meet the hands-on learning needs of their students. Similarly, other panelists described how they adapted experiential learning opportunities by working more closely with students to develop projects that could be done virtually. Panelists reiterated that they wanted to ensure that students felt they were receiving high-quality experiential learning opportunities despite the uncertain times.

It was also noted that some students did not move to their university city during the academic year as was previously the case with on-campus learning. This represented a significant opportunity for students for whom the cost of living away from home is a significant financial obstacle. Panelists continued that the shift in learning expanded the opportunity for international students to enrol in graduate level programs while living all over the globe. It also offered opportunities for students to feel empowered to take greater ownership of their own experiential learning and generate project ideas to create with local partners. Given the nature of Covid-19 lockdowns, students reached out to create new partnerships in communities in Ontario, Canada, and internationally. Panelists strove to maintain these new partnerships beyond initial projects.

While developing new partnerships was important, one strategy that panelists said consistently proved effective was to rely on community partners with whom they had created strong relationships and partners who were able to demonstrate flexibility and compassion. Panelists felt that maintaining open and frequent communication with these trusted community partners over the years allowed critical relationships to pivot closer together in uncertain times. Panelists shared common goals of providing mutually beneficial outcomes for students and partners. In professional programs like Education and Nursing that have compulsory practicums, efforts were focused on reinforcing existing relationships through recognition and retention. The adapted strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic reflected an ongoing commitment to experiential learning from all parties, including administrators, students, faculty, and community partners.

Discussion

While it appears the height of the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us, academics and community partners remain attentive to ongoing uncertainties such as new variants that could cause changes to university–community long-term planning. Hence, we wish to contribute here to a broader reflection and discussion by sharing experiences that provide valuable knowledge of how others adapt experiential learning in times of uncertainty—knowledge that transcends the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, being prepared for unexpected disruptions may help ease the transition during times of uncertainty for all involved including community partners, students, administrators, and faculty.

During this uncertain time, needing to adapt quickly in so many areas of our lives required considerable time and effort. Within current workloads, trying to continue integrating experiential learning required additional effort and time that was largely unrecognized and unappreciated by administrators and students. Several strategies proposed by panelists to address these challenges emerged. The first was to simplify tasks and turn to those with whom one is closest for assistance. Panelists shared that, in their experience, university administrators and professors turned to their community partners with whom they had the strongest relationships. They negotiated mutually beneficial experiential learning opportunities that allowed them to pivot quickly and ensure students could continue to learn with and from these partners. In the ongoing discussion, the panelists said that challenges and lessons learned highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining strong university–community collaborations.

As previously noted by panelists, the humanistic approach to engagement and learning was difficult to create in a virtual setting. Developing human connection in virtual learning spaces, including experiential learning, requires additional effort and preparation by educators and administrators. Human connection was perceived to be an important element of developing a sense of community within the university where people helped and supported one another. One panelist facilitated more effective ways for students to express specific challenges they experienced during the pandemic and share how it impacted their studying, learning, and engagement in the community and/or business sector. Through reflective activities, students revised learning goals and identified supports needed to address challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Moving forward, schools can look at what industry partners are doing to cultivate effective human connection in virtual workspaces. Blended learning may represent an innovative way for experiential learning to respond to the challenge of fostering human connection. Yet, while blended learning may provide some in-person human contact, it may not be sufficient in professional practice programs such as Education and Nursing. The value of hands-on learning in these programs is significant because graduates are expected to work competently and safely in practical settings like schools and hospitals. Although students may learn specific tasks or competencies, virtual and in-person environments are different. Online experiential learning made it difficult to develop the relational skills and confidence needed for students to navigate new environments in preparation for graduation. For nursing students, lives are at stake. Performing in a virtual environment does not mirror the pressures and relational aspects of in-person practice. Learning and mastering in-person communication provides tremendous value to students and can be one of the most enriching aspects of experiential learning. Learning to navigate relationships and the physical spaces of in-person experiential learning is part of the learning process for students. Moving forward, it will be important to recognize and valorize the relational learning that takes place during in-person experiential learning. This learning that happens as students navigate and adapt to new roles and relationships is a part of the learning process that is less amenable to being evaluated on a checklist. Seeing the value in this type of learning behooves educators to continue investing in in-person learning, particularly for professional practice programs. To our knowledge, pandemic effects on relational learning among post-secondary students has not yet been explored in the literature.

Although virtual experiential learning presents some accessibility challenges, such as the requirement for reliable internet access and computer devices, it also removes barriers and allows some students to participate in experiential learning for the first time due to increased flexibility in their schedules, with asynchronous classes and less structured commitments to sport or employment responsibilities. Another way that virtual experiential learning reduces barriers and offers more equitable access is found in international partnerships for experiential learning. Previously, students would have to pay for their travel and living expenses for an experiential learning placement with an international partner. The pandemic helped make international partnerships more accessible for students as many workplaces transitioned to online spaces. Students could then work with international partners without the burdens of travel and the additional associated costs (financial, personal). It is important, however, to acknowledge and account for the increased demand on time that is required by administrators, faculty, and partners in creating virtual and blended learning spaces with new partners.

Conclusion

Moving forward, it will be important to invest resources into the recruitment, recognition, and retention of community and industry partners. Investing in these partnerships and creating strong relationships that are mutually beneficial can ease the burden of trying to develop new partnerships in times of uncertainty when rapid change and trust are needed. This includes learning to better understand and adapt to the changing needs of community partners and the students who learn in those spaces. We need to actively listen to student voices and pilot their ideas to create healthy, open channels of communication among all stakeholders during times of uncertainty, in ways free from repercussions for students given the existing power relations. Students bring innovation and insights that can help shape our discussions on learning in the evolving landscape of higher education.

Sustaining strong partnerships necessitates sufficient human and financial resources to adequately recognize the tremendous work that community partners provide to support students, particularly those partners who stepped up for us in times of uncertainty. Another salient recommendation from our discussion is to continue to explore alternative experiential learning modalities that are less impacted by uncertainty, such as virtual and blended learning. Given the pivot to online spaces more broadly, it seems likely that virtual spaces will continue to be a cornerstone of our social, work, and learning spaces moving forward. Now is the time for renewed reflection and praxis among all stakeholders in experiential learning. Lessons learned during the Covid-19 pivot could shape the processes we need to put in place to ensure sufficient flexibility to better adapt in times of uncertainty and to ensure that relational learning occurs for the students we mentor.

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