

Reimagining Experiential Learning in Online Learning for the Digital Economy



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☰ Executive Summary

Prior to 2020, online course registrations in postsecondary institutions increased by 10% each year. Online program delivery expands access to postsecondary education to those who would otherwise be unable to attend due to personal or social circumstances. It also serves to prepare students for the digital economy.

Now, the majority of postsecondary programming has an experiential learning component. Experiential learning is a process in which learners apply course theory and concepts in real-world situations. Types of experiential learning include, for example, eService-learning, co-ops, remote co-ops, practicums, service-learning, and community-based projects. As a result of the pandemic, even experiential learning components of courses had to be delivered online.

Experiential learning is a core component of students' education and growth, as students acquire in-demand skills, gain competencies to transition into the workforce, acquire new skills to re-enter the workforce, or prepare for future employment in the digital economy. Therefore, all partners involved in designing and delivering online experiential education need to reimagine how they can integrate quality experiential learning into online courses to ensure that students are prepared for evolving labour market demands and that students gain the appropriate skills to succeed.

The findings of this review will increase academics', students', employers' and policy-makers' understanding of the available evidence on experiential learning in online courses, as well as their capacity to use evidence-informed strategies when reimaging the online experiential learning experience.

KEY INSIGHTS

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Current practices in online delivery of experiential education include a number of emerging technologies, including virtual reality and gaming.

- 2 Experiential learning helps equity-deserving groups gain valuable experience in the workforce, which they may not otherwise have access to.
- 3 Future research needs to be done to better understand the learning outcomes associated with experiential education when delivered online.

▶ The Issue

Experiential education is now an important part of postsecondary curricula. During COVID-19, institutions transitioned courses online, including the experiential learning components of those courses.

Academics, students, employers and policy-makers report that they do not know how to effectively incorporate experiential learning in online format. Given the importance of experiential learning, however, it is critical to reimagine how quality experiential learning can be integrated into online courses.

This paper synthesizes and identifies the gaps in the research on online experiential education so that learners may continue to gain the appropriate skills to succeed in a changing labour market.



🔧 What We Investigated

The objectives of this research were to:

- identify the types of available evidence on experiential learning in online courses;
- identify promising strategies for integrating experiential learning in online courses;
- identify outcomes of incorporating experiential learning in online courses;
- identify and analyze gaps in the current evidence on online experiential learning to direct future research on the topic.

The following research questions guided the review:

1. What types of evidence are available on experiential learning in online courses?
2. How is experiential learning integrated or done in online courses?
3. What are the reported outcomes of integrating or doing experiential learning in online courses?
4. Based on the identified gaps in the current evidence, what areas are important to consider for future research on experiential learning in online courses?

✔ What We're Learning

Experiential education can be delivered online in a variety of ways

The research has identified that experiential learning is normally integrated in online courses using the following strategies:

- videos or online modules
- social media and cloud-based communication systems
- online internships
- online simulation and gamification
- student-led labs
- reflective practices
- small-group discussions and peer feedback

Outcomes of online experiential education

The paper identifies the following outcomes of incorporating experiential learning in online formats:

- increased work to integrate experiential learning online;
- increased time for planning and implementing online experiential learning;
- increased supervision of students in online experiential learning;
- improved student accessibility to online experiential learning opportunities;
- improved student employability skills in a technological age through online experiential learning.

Gaps and future directions

The research identified three methodological gaps and four content-related gaps worthy of further exploration.

Methodological areas for future research include:

- replicating the included studies with a larger sample size;
- revising the study design to be more rigorous;
- applying or testing a theoretical model.

Content-related areas for future research include:

- assessing learning outcomes;
- aligning online experiential learning with teaching content;
- improving accessibility of online experiential learning;
- assessing the overall education experience.

★ Why It Matters

Experiential education is now an important mode of teaching and learning in all levels and systems of education, from K–12 to postsecondary education. It is a way of providing learners with direct experience that allows them to test the theories and concepts learned in traditional classroom learning. It is also called “learning by doing,” or “learning through exploration.” Other names include “project-based learning,” “inquiry-based learning” and “problem-based learning.”

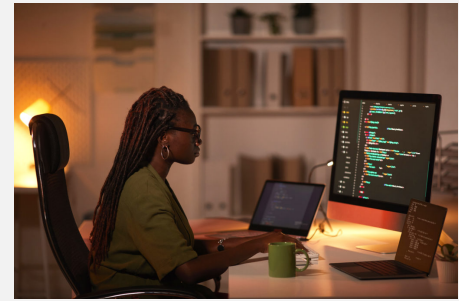
When postsecondary institutions transitioned courses to online delivery during COVID-19, they also had to transition the experiential components of coursework, components that would have usually otherwise taken place outside the classroom. Types of experiential learning include, for example, eService learning, co-ops, remote co-ops, practicums, service-learning, and community-based projects. Experiential learning is a core component of students’ education and growth, as students acquire in-demand skills, gain competencies to transition into the workforce, acquire new skills to re-enter the workforce, or prepare for future employment in the digital economy. It can also provide students who experience disadvantages or discrimination with labour market opportunities that they may otherwise be unable to access. Thus, experiential learning is important to retain in online courses and as work environments change post-COVID-19.

Effectively incorporating experiential learning in online courses remains a challenge, however. This challenge is important to tackle so that students will be prepared for evolving labour market demands.

► What’s Next

Proposed next steps following from this research are as follows:

- Consider accrediting or incentivizing online experiential learning opportunities (e.g., with certificates) to recognize the time commitment and the concrete skills gained to bridge the gap between theory and practice.



State of Skills: Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

- Implement training programs for faculty members who wish to incorporate online experiential learning in their courses.
- Assess how online experiential learning aligns with postsecondary internationalization goals; consider how international exchanges and learning opportunities can be done online to promote accessibility for students who would otherwise be unable to access international experiences.
- Assess how online experiential learning conforms to accessibility standards and criteria as well as linguistic and cultural responsiveness standards.
- Include clear guidance on how to incorporate online experiential learning in institutional continuity-of-learning plans to help with educational transitions during periods of disruption.
- Develop a repository of institutional community partners for students and faculty members to engage with during online experiential learning.
- Invest in interactive communication technologies that allow students, faculty members and community partners to communicate and collaborate in online experiential learning experiences.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

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