

Position Paper

Experiential Learning

A number of years ago, the late Mel Silberman edited *The Handbook of Experiential Learning*. As the liner notes suggest, this includes topics like games and simulations, action learning, role play and improv, storytelling, adventure activity, reflective practice, and creative play. Increasingly, we are realizing that these elements are at the core of effective, *deeper*, learning. Yet, the term seems to have lost sway, and that's a shame.

Here, we explore the facets of experiential learning. We want to consider the definition, the rationale, and any problems. Ultimately, we want to end in a consolidated view.

What is it?

As suggested by the label, experiential learning is learning by experience. That means, specifically, *doing things*. It's not hearing lectures and answering knowledge questions, but instead acting on the world, making choices, and experiencing the consequences, with support for reflection.

As the list of topics suggests, this manifests in many ways. You could be talking about simulations, role-plays, improv, and more. It could be escape rooms, games, or virtual reality challenges. At the core, however, are activities designed specifically to require applying knowledge to situations, making decisions, and facing the outcomes. It requires as Michael Allen would have us know, challenge, in a context, as an activity, and feedback.

Why is it important?

When we look at what makes for effective learning, research converges on a picture demonstrating that we need to retrieve knowledge and apply it in the way we'll need it after the learning experience. In short, learners need to be put in contexts that are designed to require particular decisions, asked to make choices and discover the consequences. These decisions are matched to the ones that they'll have to make *after* learning. Then, learning is facilitated through guided reflection on the outcomes and how they relate to the underlying concepts.

This is exactly what experiential learning *is*! Experiential learning is an umbrella term that looks at how we can have learners perform the right task at the right time and level, apply knowledge, and get feedback to refine their understanding. We don't have to call it experiential learning, but we do need the elements that define it.

Why is it problematic?

There are two main problems with the current approach to experiential learning. First is the lack of awareness. We don't talk enough about it, and the term has languished. This helps turn attention away from the critical elements that underpin deeper learning. We need to keep or return a focus on meaningful action, not just knowledge and information.

The second problem is that to the extent it is used, it can be used to talk about trivial approximations of the important elements. When people think 'click to see more' is active learning, and that watching videos is a meaningful experience, we're undermining what makes learning work. Paying attention to the nuances comes from understanding the important elements.

Our approach

The nice thing about the term 'experiential learning' is that it focuses on an important aspect: actually *experiencing*. That is, being active. The term 'learning experience design' (which we favor) is about designing learning experiences, that is, making *experiential learning*! It's what we believe learning can, and should, be.

We recognize that not all learning outcomes require experiences, but we also fear that too often we're shooting for outcomes that are short of having an actual learning impact. To achieve that latter, that is, when it matters, it should be an experience. Which doesn't mean expensive technology! Learning experiences are about the design, not the implementation approach. You can make experiences experiential with your ordinary eLearning solutions. You just have to understand what makes learning that works and apply it.

We may not always use the term, but we're always pushing for those elements. We work in practical ways, typically using everyday tools. Yet we also believe in bringing to bear the important elements to achieve deeper learning outcomes, under pragmatic constraints. That's our goal, and we hope it's yours, too.

