Revisioning the UCalgary Experiential Learning Framework

Introduction

In 2020, UCalgary launched the Experiential Learning Plan with bold targets for all students to participate in experiential learning (EL). The priorities for achieving these targets are to expand capacity and reduce barriers, increase student opportunities, and track and ensure high-quality experiential learning. Since the plan launched, we've taken great steps toward the goals and priorities and gained new insights and reflections on experiential learning at UCalgary:

Accomplishments

- Celebrated the widespread and diverse nature of experiential learning, expanding institutional understanding of the variety of experiential learning activities across disciplines and campus.

- Studied equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility of experiential learning on campus and deepened understanding of the opportunities and barriers students experience in accessing experiential learning.

- Identified the varied ways in which faculty, staff, and students find meaning in the work of experiential learning.

- Ensured experiential learning is discussed as part of curriculum reviews across campus and incorporated into new academic programs.

- Enhanced pedagogical support for experiential learning educators through workshops, online resources, guides, one-on-one consultations, microcredentials, and communities of practice.

- Focused on expanding and enhancing two "signature forms" of experiential learning for UCalgary: work-integrated learning (WIL) and undergraduate research.

- Developed a process to track work-integrated learning courses and student participation in work-integrated learning across campus.

- Launched an institutional platform for managing experiential and work-integrated learning activities, including an Experience Catalogue to help students identify opportunities.

Reflections & Insights Learned

- Recognized that categorizing experiential learning can be challenging because it is so multifaceted and contextualized.

- Built an appreciation for the differences in experiential learning intensity, from highly immersive experiences to small experiential learning activities, while also recognizing that all experiential learning, regardless of scale or type, is meaningful and valuable to student learning.

- Matured in our understanding of experiential learning and work-integrated learning.

- Identified the need to reduce the Western bias in our understanding of experiential learning and to align with the UCalgary ii 'taa'poh'to'p Indigenous Strategy and decolonize experiential learning.

With the progress, insights, and reflections, we recognize a need to update the experiential learning definition and framework to capture experiential learning at UCalgary more completely. The 2020 experiential learning framework helped kick-start conversations about experiential learning across campus, and the five categories for experiential learning at UCalgary (Co-Curricular, Community-Engaged, Curriculum-Integrated, Research-based, and Work-Integrated Learning) begin to capture the diversity of experiential learning types (Appendix A). After four years of conversations with the campus community, the original framework needs expansion and contextualization, especially around the many spaces and places where experiential learning happens.

Here, we provide an updated framework that integrates extensive feedback and conversations with the campus community. Furthermore, as part of the UCalgary *ii 'taa'poh'to'p* Indigenous Strategy the University of Calgary has committed to "establishing a welcoming, inclusive, and culturally competent campus community that respects, includes, and promotes Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, learning, and research."

Teaching and learning, including experiential learning, have an essential role in the **transformation and renewal** of campus and as a path toward reconciliation. As part of this commitment, the updated definition and framework draw from and align with *ii 'taa'poh'to'p*, providing a new appreciation for experiential learning as more than "learning by doing." This newly revised framework is intended to guide and support all **UCalgary practitioners** implementing experiential learning. Additionally, this framework can be used to develop a common understanding of experiential learning when we **work with partners and communities**.

2024 Experiential Learning Framework

Defining Experiential Learning at UCalgary

Experiential learning is learning by doing, being, connecting, and reflecting.

Learning by doing provides students with the opportunity to put their knowledge into practice in a meaningful, relevant, and authentic context – to grapple with messy problems, sort through different perspectives, and develop new ways of thinking. Students find these types of hands-on learning experiences to be deeply engaging and relevant to their future and interests. They actively engage in tasks to solve problems and work on projects that resonate with them, and subsequently, they carry their learning forward and reapply it in different settings.

Learning by being is learning that happens because an individual is immersed in the context of the experience. This aspect of experiential learning recognizes individuals as whole beings with intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Experiential learning seeks to address and integrate these aspects in the learning process. With this learning, shifts in student identity can arise from *being* a professional in a work environment, *being* a researcher, *being* in the field, *being* yourself, or *being* a community member, for example. Learning by being prioritizes the richness of the experience and direct immersion in the context rather than emphasizing the tasks students are doing.

Learning by connecting involves the learning that takes place when students connect with self, others (human and more-than-human), physical and spiritual spheres and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom, community, or workplace. Often, experiential learning is highlighted as helping students see the connections between their learning and the "real world." Students learn from peers, collaborate, expand their networks, practice reciprocity, and develop interpersonal and communication skills. Learning by connecting also involves making meaningful connections between different ideas, concepts, experiences, and contexts – and integrating theory and practice.

Learning by reflecting is a meaning-making process that helps us use what we've learned from an experience to inform future action, set goals, and consider the real-life implications of our thinking. It is a process of identifying, questioning, and assessing our deeply held assumptions about our knowledge, the way we perceive events and issues, and our beliefs, feelings, and actions.

Experiential learning happens when knowledge and experience are bridged through critical reflection.

Critical Reflection is essential to experiential learning because it develops students' abilities to use metacognitive thinking to question, analyze and challenge assumptions and biases about an experience and articulate their learning. By critically reflecting on our experiences, we can set goals, explore emotions and feelings, and consider the real-life implications of our thinking, which helps us to grow and improve as learners.

Experience + Critical Reflection = Experiential Learning

As an essential aspect of experiential learning, critical reflection can be formally or informally incorporated into experiences. It *may* be formally assessed through reflective essays, videos, error analyses, podcasts, and other creative assignments. It can be informally incorporated into an experience through discussion prompts, conversations, self-reflective writing activities, sharing circles, debrief sessions, and many different approaches where students are guided to reflect on their experiences. Critical reflection may also be encouraged through internal processing, such as meditation or ceremony.

Experiential Learning Pedagogy: Ensuring High-Quality Learning

While experiential learning activities are diverse and varied, there are common pedagogical and design elements typically associated with meaningful, high-quality experiential learning. These elements are considered before, during, and after any experiential learning activity and are sometimes explored simultaneously. Identifying criteria for high-quality experiential learning opportunities will enable UCalgary to define, measure, and evaluate work in experiential learning across campus.

In our updated framework, activities become high-quality and meaningful experiential learning when they include A.I.R.: 1) Authentic Experience, 2) Intentional Design, and 3) Reflection. A.I.R is an adaptation of the PEAR framework (McRae, 2018) with a de-emphasis on assessment and enhanced focus on reflection and feedback. This framework is more inclusive of experiential learning occurring in non-credit and co-curricular spaces where assessment is often not a part of the experience.

Anticipate the unpredictable

Given that experiential learning takes place in real-time, it can be unpredictable, and things may not go as planned. For facilitators and students, this might be an unpredictable endeavour, but *letting go* of some control, allowing experiences to unfold, leaning into the discomfort and unpredictability, and processing the experience meaningfully is where deep learning happens.

A.I.R. Framework for high-quality experiential learning

Authentic Experience

✓ It's a meaningful, relevant, embodied experience.

✓ It's complex, uncertain, and often unpredictable.

These are in-situ hands-on experiences that center the student in the learning and directly support the learning outcomes. Students actively engage in relevant and purposeful challenges or problems, often (but not always) in connection with a community or organization. The authenticity of the experience makes the learning relevant and applicable.

Intentional Design

✓ It's intentionally designed.

✓ It's ongoing and iterative.

Experiential learning activities are intentionally designed and integrated into a program or course curriculum. Clear learning outcomes support students in connecting their learning to the experience. The facilitator examines, reflects on, and iterates on the design.

Reflection

✓ It's ongoing and continuous.

✓ It's designed to challenge students to unpack assumptions, biases, and perspectives.

Students are guided through meaningful and ongoing reflection, helping them make connections between their knowledge and practice. Feedback is regularly provided to support learners' growth. Learners are encouraged to seek feedback from many sources, ask questions, take initiative, and make choices about their learning. They also consider the ethical implications of their actions, demonstrate integrity, and develop responsible practices.

The Continuum of Experiential Learning at UCalgary

2024 UCalgary Framework for Experiential Learning

The inclusion of a broad range of activities in the experiential learning framework will help ensure that all students can access meaningful, high-impact learning opportunities. The 2020 UCalgary framework identified five categories of experiential learning. While these categories worked for many, for some, it wasn't easy to fit an experiential learning activity into just one category.

In the 2024 Framework, we move to thinking about experiential learning as a continuum that can be **described**, *rather than categorized*, based on the context in which the experience occurs and the focus or purpose of the experiential learning activity in terms of student learning. While no framework will perfectly capture the richness of experiential learning, we hope this new framework provides an additional way to locate and explain experiential learning at UCalgary.

Environment: Spaces and Places for Experiential Learning

Recognizing that experiential learning occurs in many contexts can add to our understanding of the diversity of student experiences. Here, we provide four common places or environments where students engage in experiential learning, including:

- Classrooms: the physical classroom and broadly within the context of a course.

- Studio, Lab or Field: opportunities that are part of a course, co-curricular, or volunteer opportunities.

- The Land and Society: on the land, place-based, and cultural learning.

- Campus Community: co-curricular and curricular opportunities where students work with the campus community and beyond.

- Workplaces: industry, practice or professional setting, and may be paid or unpaid.

Focus: Aims and Purpose for Student Learning

Intentionally designed experiential learning opportunities have a primary purpose, focus, or aim for engaging students in the experience. Do you want students to learn how to conduct research? Gain work or professional career experience? Creatively solve a problem? The focus of experiential learning can span various aims; however, we have identified four common areas of focus at UCalgary:

- Innovation: students tackle a problem and create innovative solutions.

- Research: students develop research skills by leading or contributing to a research project.

- Knowledge, Skills & Attributes: students develop particular knowledge and skills, including field and lab techniques, research methodologies, and concepts and theories.

- Career and Life: students build life, work, or professional career experience.

- Creative: students engage authentically in creative projects, performances, or design projects.

Of course, these are not exhaustive lists, and students may move between different environments in a single experience, and there may be multiple aims for student learning. However, locating the *primary* environment and focus of experiential learning can help ensure high-quality learning when considering good design, authentic experience, and critical reflection. Recognizing and naming multiple foci, if they exist in the design, is also essential for students and facilitators.

Using the visual (*Fig.1*), experiential learning opportunities can be described and positioned at the intersection of the place, space, or environment and the primary focus of the experience. Examples of UCalgary experiential learning opportunities are shown in the first image. Use the second (*Fig. 2*) to map your own experiential learning.

With this new framework, you can construct a name for each unique experiential learning activity. For example, Research-focused Classroom EL, Creative-focused Community EL, Field Research-focused EL or any combination of these. Maybe it's Career and Innovation focused Workplace EL — it's up to you to decide how to best name and describe the experiential learning you facilitate.
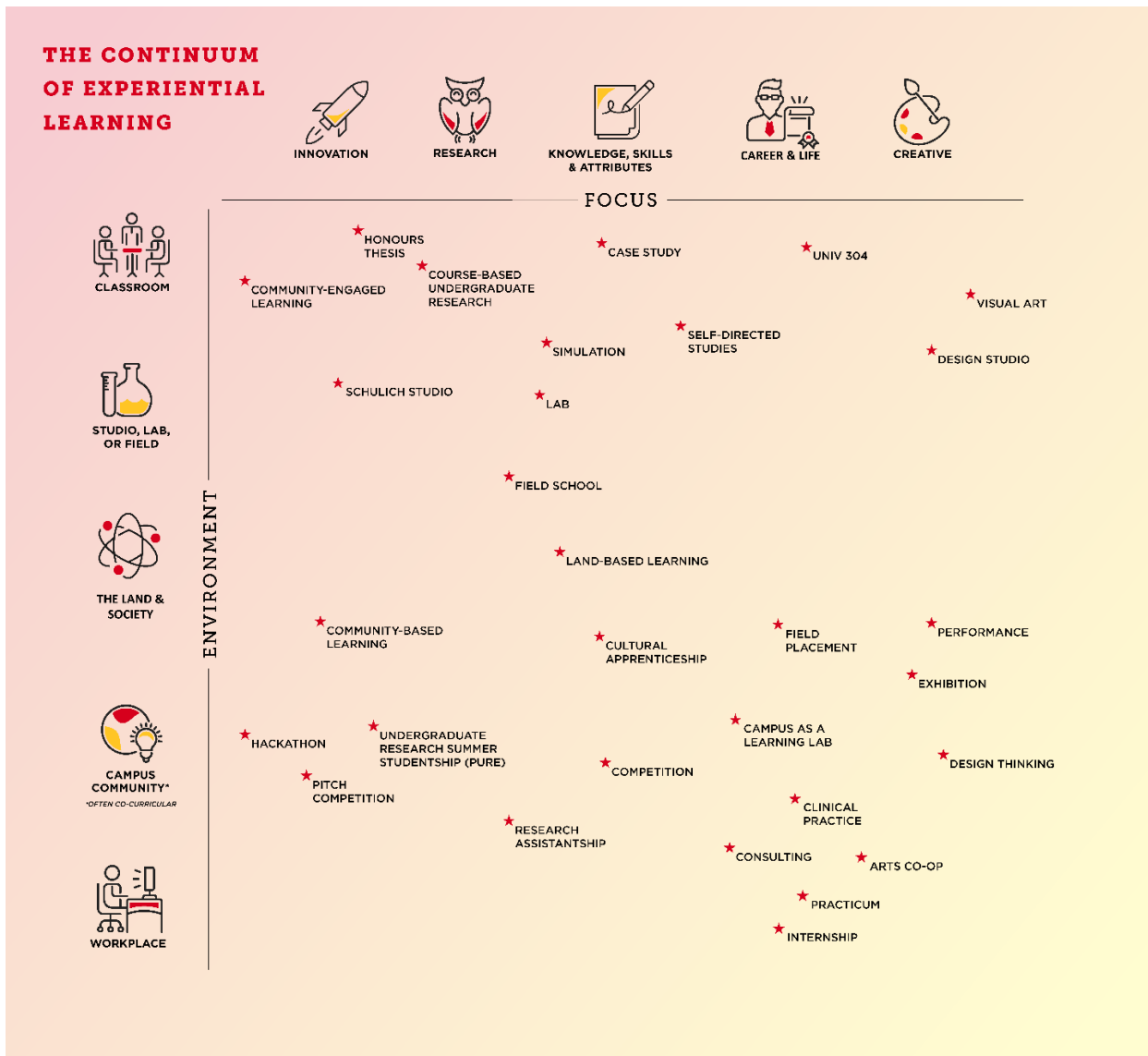
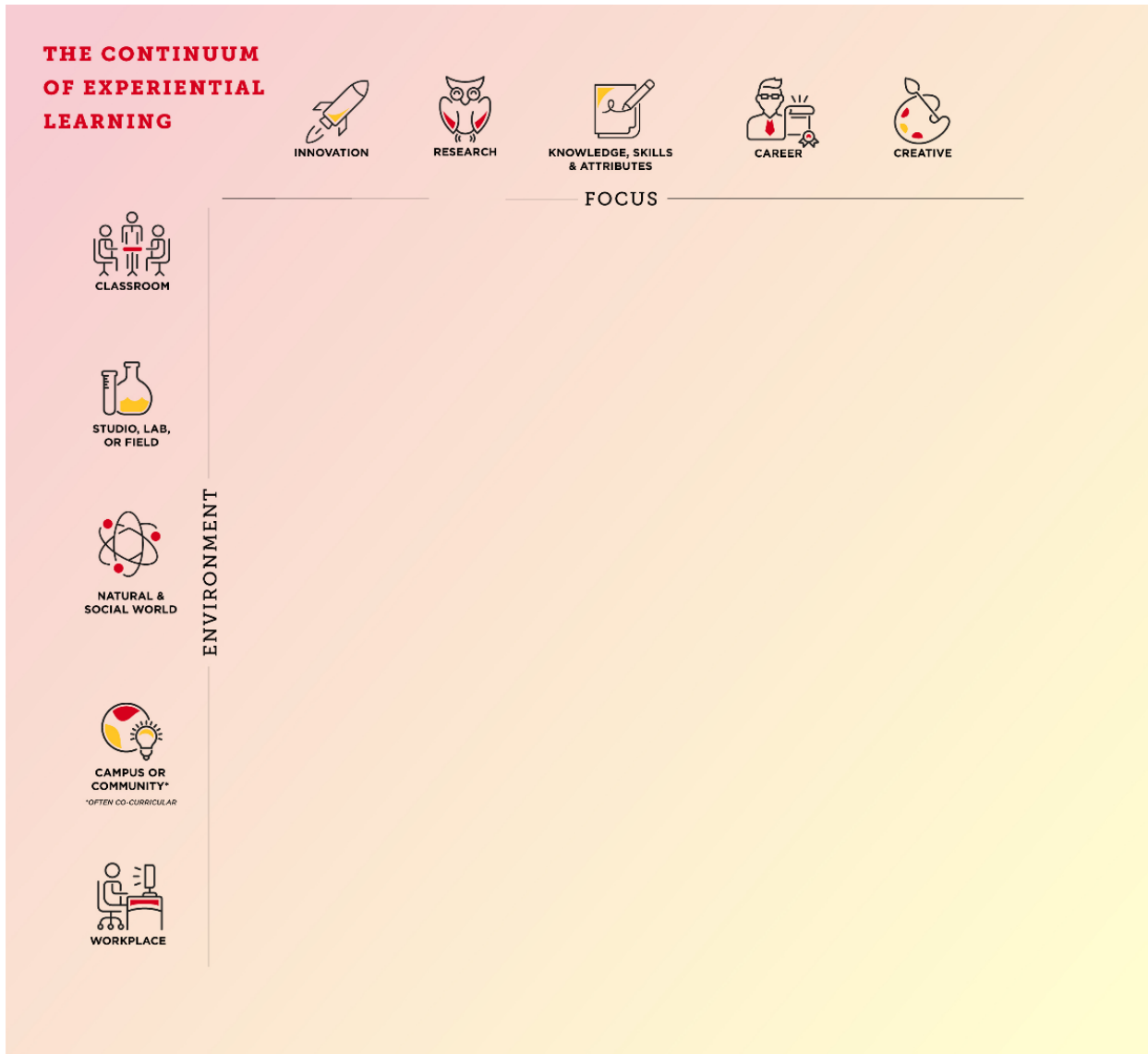*Fig. 1 Graphic design credit: Elyse Bouvier*

Fig. 2 Graphic design credit: Elyse Bouvier

Conclusion

UCalgary's Experiential Learning Framework is a living document that will continue to evolve based on our campus community's input. This framework emphasizes the importance of meaningful hands-on learning through a combination of good design, authentic experiences, and critical reflection. Though the five categories of EL in the original framework are not lost, the continuum of EL highlights intersections between spaces/places and focus and expands what EL looks like at UCalgary.

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