Mapping the Landscape of Experiential Education

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MINDSET

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Abstract

This concept paper proposes a way of mapping educational landscapes to clarify the practice of experiential programming. It initially reviews how experiential education has been defined and suggestions for better definitional clarity. It then examines a recent initiative commissioned by the Society for Experiential Education to update its institutional definition. Heinrich and Green's (2025) prototypes, which are the products of that process, are presented and discussed. This article then examines a recently published definitional model (Meyer, 2024), compares that model to Heinrich and Green's (2025) prototypes, and applies Meyer's model to analyze two hypothetical, high-impact teaching practice scenarios with the goal of mapping the experiential features of each scenario. This approach provides direction for validating a framework of definitional features that can be used to map experiential practices. Thus, this paper addresses Heinrich and Green's (2025) call to action as it offers a conceptual and pedagogical entry point into experiential education (Prototype 1) that also provides useful insight for institutional stakeholders (Prototype 2).

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what actually occurs in educational settings that promise to offer "real-world experiences?" If you are a student, have you found yourself deflated because the learning experience you signed up for did not play out as you had hoped? If you oversee an internship, have you ever grappled with what to emphasize to give a student an optimal experience? If you are an administrator, have you ever struggled to translate key learnings from eager faculty into outcomes relevant to your institution's strategic plan? Have you ever felt bad for uninitiated learners because the context of experiential education is so foreign to them? It is easy to relate to these challenges because it is difficult to assess and compare experience-based learning and high-impact teaching practices.



Caleb Jackson presents at National Conference for Undergraduate Research

Purpose

The purpose of this concept paper is to propose a way of mapping instructional landscapes to improve the practice of experiential programming. Despite its long history, the features of experiential education[1] tend to be loosely defined and subject to the interests of the educator (Meyer, 2024). While this can offer useful flexibility, it also leads to problems with implementation and inconsistent programming. Moreover, the lack of definitional clarity can also recapitulate problems with access because key information is unclear and/or difficult to locate (Heinrich et al., 2024). Mapping the landscape of experiential instruction can help learners gain a clearer understanding of the pedagogical activities they will encounter, it can aid educators with direction for organizing their instructional practice, and it can benefit administrators by providing clarification of the ways experience-based features are emphasized.

Key Propositions

After reviewing literature related to defining experiential education and experiential learning (EE/EL), this paper first offers suggestions for building on that ongoing work by basing a new definition in historic ideas and perspectives from current members of the EE/EL community. Once defining features are understood and agreed upon, the next step includes developing validated and standardized scales to assess each defining feature. Scores from that process can then be combined and plotted on a radar chart to "map" the footprint of each unique experiential context. This map will then allow stakeholders to conceptualize the ways EE/EL occurs in various contexts. Learners will acquire a better understanding about what they will encounter, educators will gain pedagogical clarity, and administrators will acquire a clearer holistic understanding of instructional practices. This format offers a flexible design that accommodates unique ways EE/EL can be offered in different contexts while simultaneously capturing the nuances of this instructional approach. It also provides a tool for improving equity and access by making the practice easier to decipher and understand.

Literature Review

In a study exploring the defining features of experiential education, Meyer (2024) conducted a critical review of historical literature around expe-

[1] Note: for the purpose of this article experiential education (EE) refers to an instructional process, led by an educator, that prioritizes experiential learning as an instructional method. Experiential learning (EL) refers to the epistemological process of acquiring knowledge through direct means. EE/EL is used to refer to the general construct whereas specific terms are used in reference to their specific meaning or how they were originally published.

riential education and found it to be broad, eclectic, and not well-agreed upon. To explore this further, he employed a mixed-method approach targeting individuals with expertise in experiential education for interviews and surveying members of various professional groups to clarify the defining features, canonical works, and theoretical foundations of experiential education. Meyer found there to be numerous, evolving definitions of experiential education, a tendency for the field to pass knowledge from experts to novices directly through word of mouth, and a strong affinity to learn through personal experience over a well-agreed upon literary canon. While these elements align with the gestalt of experiential education, Meyer argues they do not lend themselves well for the field to grow with purpose because overarching professionalization is missing. Furthermore, he asserts that lack of clarity may make it harder for novice educators to understand and access opportunities to practice experiential education, which may negatively impact populations that have not historically had access to experiential programming. In short, preferencing hands-on, experience-based, word-of-mouth knowledge transmission limits access to those in that knowledge chain and makes it harder for those outside that chain to access crucial information. Meyer concludes his investigation by identifying eight defining features (see Table 1).

He offers these features as a starting point for further clarifying how experiential learning is defined, which provides a template for future investigation.

Meyer's (2024) work complements the Eight principles of good practice for all experiential learning activities established by the National Society for Experiential Education (SEE) at the 1998 Annual Meeting. These include: 1) Intention, 2) Preparedness and planning, 3) Authenticity, 4) Reflection, 5) Orientation and training, 6) Monitoring and continu-

Table 1: Synopsis of Meyer's (2024) Defining Features of Experiential Education

Experential Feature	Description
Direct Contact	Direct, personal connection to what is being learned
Existential engagement	Learning in the moment through one's senses
Learner agency	Opportunities for learners to make decisions for themselves
Fluid affordances	Functional activities offered by the environment that can be used for achieving a certain task
Flexible pedagogy	The application of fluid affordances to the instructional process
Ways of knowing	The integrated epistemological process of learning through one's senses interwoven with learning through one's (internal) thoughts
Freedom	Opportunities to explore ideas and gain enrichment for oneself
Precision	Corollary to freedom; development of self-discipline

ous improvement, 7) Assessment and evaluation, and 8) Acknowledgement. SEE's guiding principles have changed little since their initial development. Beyond being established at the 1998 Annual Meeting, it is not clear how these guiding principles were decided upon. These principles primarily differ from Meyer's (2024) defining features in that they address "how" experiential learning occurs rather than the "what" it encompasses (addressed by Meyer's model).

The Association for Experiential Education (AEE, 2025) regularly updates an overarching definition of experiential education, which currently reads, "Challenge and experience followed by reflection, leading to learning and growth." AEE also provides 12 principles of practice adopted from Gass et al. (2012), which empirically substantiate theory and practices of adventure therapy. Although SEE's and AEE's guiding principles share overlapping features, the societies differ in organizational focus. SEE tends to emphasize experiential learning practices occurring within higher education settings, whereas AEE tends to emphasize experiential education in adventure-based contexts. Societal focus becomes important when one grapples with definition. Adventure involves risk, and an important aspect of definition around risk involves addressing safety. Higher education, on the other hand, prioritizes measurable outcomes (typically in the form of grades), transparent structure (via syllabi), and a broader pedagogical focus (such as aligning with a course of study). Both societies offer useful information for definition, albeit for different purposes. Maintaining a clear understanding of those differences is an important part of the process of establishing an organizational definition.

In a more recent attempt to modernize its definition, SEE has commissioned its Research and Scholarship Committee to engage with interested stakeholders to explore and update the definition of experiential education. Employing a human-centered design process, occurring over 20 months, this Committee has engaged with its members to elucidate a definition. Heinrich and Green's (2025) publication shares those findings with the broader EE/EL audience. The work of SEE's Research and Scholarship Committee overlaps with a similar goal established by this journal (Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education [ELTHE]) to explore the definition of experiential learning.

A variety of authors have offered valuable contributions to this journal's call for articles pertaining to defining and understanding experiential learning. O'Donnell's (2024) summary of Issue 7.1 suggests students, families, and employers are seeking more opportunities for hands-on experience, yet conventional metrics, such as college transcripts and course catalogs fail to make it clear when students engage in the practice. In a different article in that issue, Green et al. (2024) found that students experience a "bump" in performance when they participate in experiential learning and high-impact practices (HIPs) contexts, yet SEE's and ELTHE's initiatives to clarify defining features speak to a need for a better, common understanding. In a more focused review, Odio and McLeod (2022) describe the challenge of understanding what occurs in an internship and how an internship experience impacts learners (a concept Odio refers to as "internship's black box" due to its unclear nature [personal communication]). Thus, there is an important need for a clear understanding about what is encompassed by EE/EL



[2] The Society for Experiential Education (SEE) was formerly called the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)

practices, coupled with a practical means for assessment. Heinrich (2024) offers a useful summary:

> We understand how evidence from the NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement] contributes to HIPs use and proliferation, but we continue to seek clarity about the underlying experiential learning (EL) processes that make such experiences powerful. ... Identifying the power of EL along with the unique program characteristics can help make a case for sustainability. (p. 22)

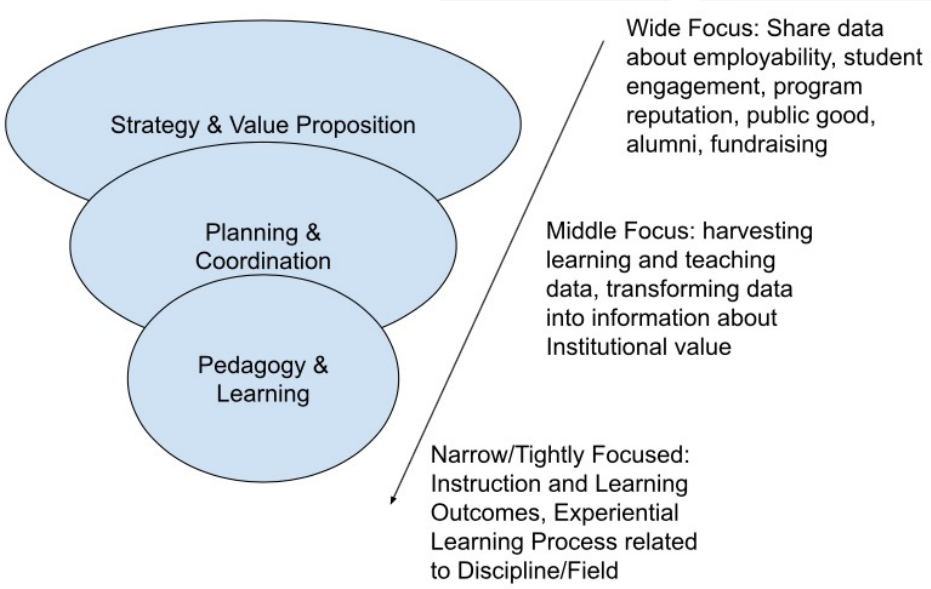
Moreover, he challenges scholars and practitioners to explore questions along the following lines: value, access, purpose, definitions, positioning, stakeholders, sustainability, critical approaches, and exploring what is missing to fill in those gaps.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that not only is EE/EL not well-agreed upon, but a lack of agreement may impact access. Heinrich et al. (2024) explored a question about the relationship between definitional clarity and access, pondering if a lack of clarity around the defining features limited access for individuals who have had little previous exposure to the practice of experiential learning. Employing a scholar-practitioner research methodology, they identified differences in perspective (e.g., learner, educator, and administrator) and differences in need (e.g., funding, demonstrating 'what works,' etc.). These findings suggest that an overarching, singular definition of experiential learning may be inadequate. Instead, a more dynamic definition may be more beneficial for addressing differences in perspective and need.

Lastly, lack of agreement amongst key stakeholders impacts its sustainability, which is especially crucial in today's data-driven landscape. Although less overt, O'Donnell (2024), Heinrich (2024), and Heinrich et al. (2024) all suggest that administrators are key stakeholders who need a clearer, measurable understanding about what encompasses experiential learning to continue justifying it as an important pedagogical approach. Heinrich et al. (2024) suggest it is important to adopt a systems orientation for experiential learning to understand the relationship between focus and practice (see Figure 1). Pedagogy and learning, which occurs at the pedagogical implementation level, are tightly focused, whereas strategy and value proposition have a wider focus and are concerned with outcomes such as employability and career readiness skills. Each perspective is important, though how experiential learning looks and is assessed differs at each level.

To summarize, despite having a long history, the defining features of EE/EL are neither clearly understood nor well-agreed upon. Current work to redefine EE/EL speaks to foundational questions behind the practice. SEE and ELTHE have exemplified courage, humility, and leadership as they have engaged in this process,

Figure 1: Systems Orientation to Experiential Learning (Heinrich et al. 2024)



recognizing that definitional clarification will improve, substantiate, and increase access to EE/EL across higher education. Acknowledging this problem, this paper now considers Heinrich and Green's (2025) findings before offering theoretical propositions about how to address and ameliorate these challenges.

Research and Scholarship Findings

The SEE Research and Scholarship Committee employed a human-centered design process to explicate a definition rooted in the knowledge and insight of its members (Heinrich & Green, 2025). This process has followed five stages (Table 2).

In ELTHE issue 8.1, Heinrich and Green (2025) share three prototypes as a way of testing the Committee's learnings (engaging in Stage 5) with the EE/EL community. Prototype 1 considers the ecosystem of experiential education through the interrelationship of pedagogy, philosophy, and institutional strategy. Prototype 2 provides an institutional perspective by considering the activity, purpose, and approach of experiential education from the perspective of the following stakeholders: experiential educators and learners; deans, directors, and chairs; vice presidents and associate/assistant provosts; and executive/provost. Prototype 3 considers the action of experiential education through a workflow/logic model that acknowledges the processes and outcomes for experiential learners. These prototypes provide different ways EE/EL is regarded and practiced, and they are not intended to provide nuanced pedagogical definition. Heinrich and Green (2025) conclude their article with a call to action for connecting practices and theories in an experiential learning ecosystem and requesting feedback from the EE/EL community about their prototypes. This charge will now be addressed by considering pedagogical defining features.

Clarifying a Definition

Heinrich et al. (2024) suggested it is unlikely a singular, overarching definition will be able to adequately address the multiple foci and differing perspectives of EE/EL. Although a single, overarching definition provides a clean way of capturing the essence of experiential instruction, it does so at the cost of being so broad that it fails to provide practical usefulness. For example, the long-held notion that experiential education involves "learning by doing" can encompass everything from learning mathematics by doing math homework to understanding the myriad nuances of nursing by completing clinical rotations. Although catchy, "Learning by doing" does not provide clarification about what is

Table 2: SEE Research and Scholarship Committee Design Process

Stage	Process Goal	Key Questions
1	Empathize	Who are SEE's stakeholders? What are the EE pinch points?
2	Define	How do we collectively understand the shape of the challenges/problems?
3	Ideate	What are possible solutions to the problem?
4	Prototype	From the solutions offered, can we create a few working prototypes?
5	Test	What does the world think? What do they do with this information?

encompassed by an instructional practice because that definition is so broad that virtually everything is captured by it. Consequently, disentangling the definition of EE/EL requires a dynamic model that handles multiple viewpoints and offers flexibility for nuanced approaches.

The strategy of adopting defining features handles variability much better, which is crucial for capturing the specific ways EE/EL is offered. Offering multiple features also increases the affordances of a definition, meaning rather than delimit the practice, clarifying the defining features can sharpen it. But without internal structure, defining features also run the risk of becoming so all-encompassing that, depending on how they are interpreted, any instructional practice can be considered "experiential" (see Seaman, 2019). So, identifying defining features is an important place to start, but more work needs to be done – importantly, establishing a way to usefully make sense (i.e., assessment) of those defining features as they apply to instructional contexts.

Once the defining features of EE/EL are established and agreed upon, it becomes possible to validate each one to quantify how much it is promoted in any given context. Some contexts may promote a high connection to what is being learned while others may not. A validated scale for assessing each feature would be invaluable. For example, 0 would signify that no parts of that feature are present and 10 would signify maximum/full exposure. If each feature is standardized according to this scale, it becomes possible to portray an experiential learning context using radar charts (i.e., spider graphs) as an experiential map. Although this concept originated independently under a different focus, elements resemble the degree profile spiderweb offered by the Lumina Foundation (2014).

As a way of demonstrating what this could look like, Meyer's (2024) defining features are used to examine two hypothetical experiential contexts. Each scenario is described, then it is (hypothetically) assessed according to each feature (assessment scores are listed in parentheses), and, lastly, scores from those defining features are then presented in tables and mapped as radar charts. This exercise provides a way of considering the usefulness of this (mapping) approach, and directions for future research.

High-Impact Teaching Practice Examples

Community-Based Learning Scenario

A requirement of EMEC 350: Manufacturing Processes requires students to complete 10 hours of community-based learning (HIP) to acquire "real world" knowledge about how manufacturing occurs so they can gain a better understanding about the manufacturing process. A third-year mechanical engineering student chooses to complete her requirements at a nonprofit organization that constructs wheelchairs. The student's main job is to assemble wheels, which involves lacing, tensioning, and truing each wheel, fitting the wheels with bearings, and installing the wheels on the wheelchair. The steps must be followed in order and executed precisely. Once a wheel is trued, it must be inspected by the shop manager before the student can proceed to the next step. The manager provides a comprehensive, live demonstration of the assembly, leaves the student with partially assembled wheels as models, and offers their assistance when needed. The student is on her own to build and install the wheels as soon as she feels comfortable with the process. The student returns once a week for five weeks to complete her hours and satisfy this course requirement.

Scenario Assessment[3]. In this situation, the student is studying manufacturing, and the community-based learning project involves manually assembling wheels. The shop manager shows the student how to do each step in the process and they provide models, but there is no textbook or manual. Most of the student's time is spent assembling wheelchair wheels, which provides ample direct contact with the manufacturing process (9). Because the student is completing hands-on work related to her major, her existential engagement is relatively high (7). The student had agency to choose the site (6), which also complements the moderately strong fluid affordances for learning (7) built into this community-based learning HIP. The underlying pedagogical process of allowing students to choose their site for the course requirement was flexible (8). Although the experience emphasized direct ways of knowing, it did not offer supplemental (e.g., literature-based) means (5). The rigid manufacturing process did not afford the student with much freedom (1) to innovate, although it did require the student to exercise a high degree of precision (9).

[3] This section applies Meyer's (2024) EE/EL features to each scenario, summarizes how the feature is associated with the scenario, and provides a (hypothetical) assessment score (listed in parentheses) for each feature.

These scores were recorded in Table 2 and represented visually with a radar chart (Figure 3).

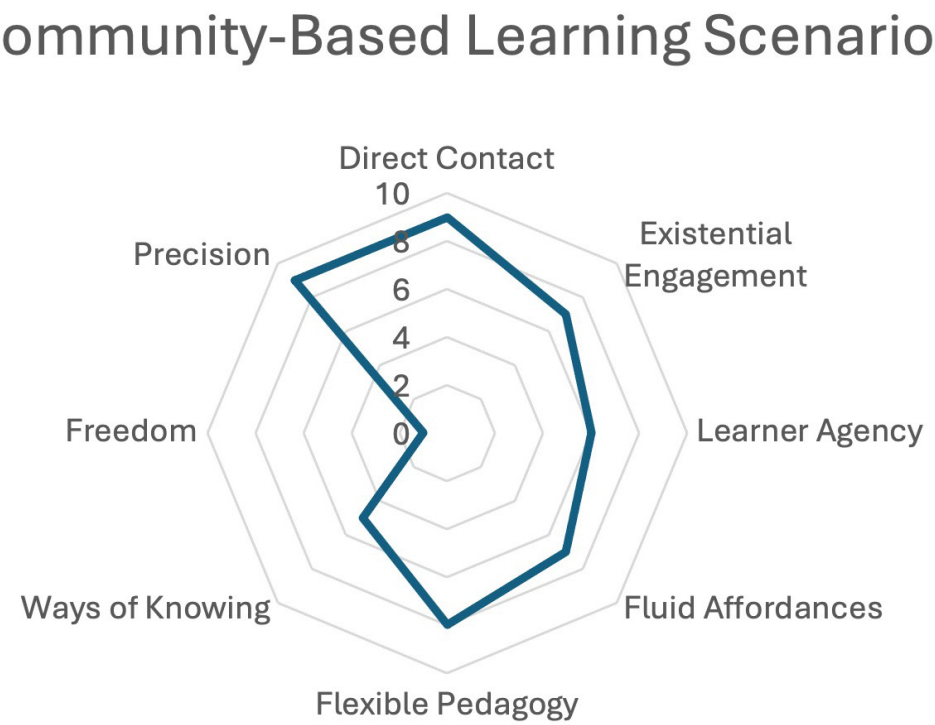
Table 3: Community Based Learning Scenario

Experiential Feature	Score
Direct contact	9
Existential engagement	7
Learner agency	6
Fluid affordances	7
Flexible pedagogy	8
Ways of knowing	5
Freedom	1
Precision	9

Internship Scenario

A third-year environmental science major has secured a summer internship sponsored by a nonprofit foundation to "clear" trails of downfallen trees and hazards in a 1.5-million-acre wilderness complex. This internship partners with a long-serving U.S. Forest Service (USFS) trail boss, and the pair travels by foot to clear the ~3000 miles of trails. They typically work 10-hour days and camp at remote sites when not working. The pair is accompanied by a livestock pack train to carry equipment and supplies. Once they enter the backcountry, they have minimal contact with the outside world until they return 4-8 days later. The student uses hand tools (e.g., cross-cut saw, axe, Pulaski) to remove trees and maintain the trails. The student completes USFS trainings to become certified to use those tools, and he also operates as an apprentice to his veteran USFS trail boss supervisor. The student is thrilled about this opportunity, as it fulfills one of his life goals of living close to the land and doing "an honest day's work." He acknowledges that he is unsure exactly how this internship relates to his academic studies, but the supporting foundation has assured him that it will provide him with "invaluable real-world experience" relevant to his major.

Figure 2: Experiential Map of Community-Based Learning Scenario

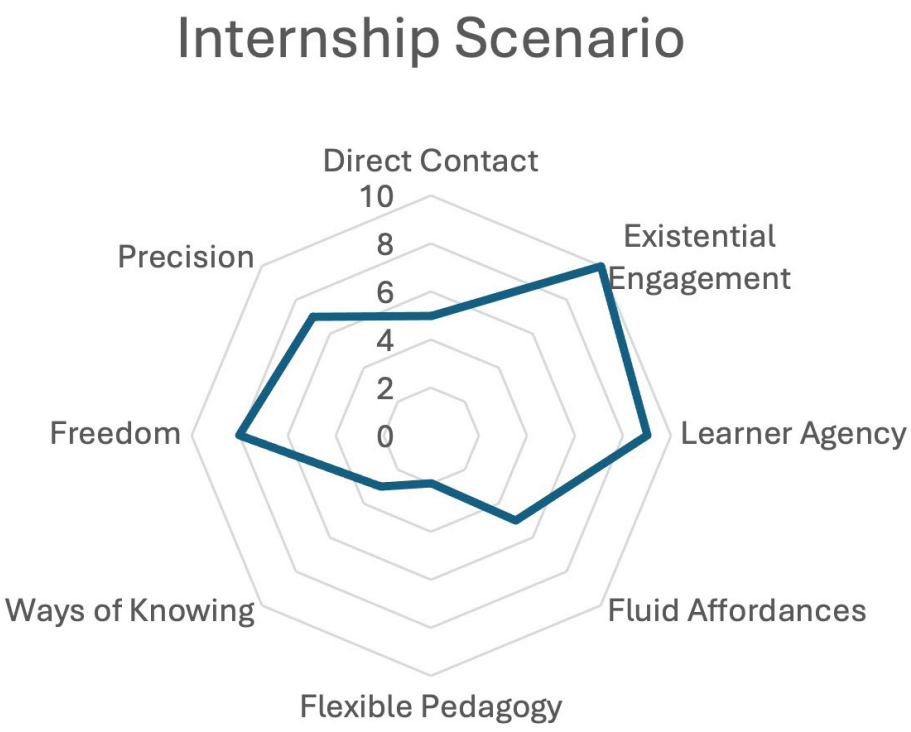


Scenario Assessment. Although this student is an environmental science major, and he is completing an active, hands-on internship, it is unclear how this internship relates to his academic studies. The student completed certification trainings to satisfy USFS tool usage requirements, but none of those were associated with his coursework. As an apprentice to a seasoned professional, he has ample opportunity to learn the ins and outs of a trail crew work, although trail crew work does not require formal schooling. Thus, it is unclear what is being learned, despite the student having ample direct contact with his job duties (5). The student's existential engagement is high because this opportunity is fulfilling a life goal (10). The circumstances around this internship support high student agency (9). Although there is considerable flexibility around the work, there is also a considerable lack focus about what is being learned (5). Even though the student's internship context is ever-changing, because the pedagogy is ill-defined, the score is low (2). The student has ample opportunities to learn directly through his work, but there is no textbook, durable medium for him to record his thoughts, or models to study, limiting his ways of knowing to one modality (3). The student has ample freedom to engage his work (8), and he quickly learns how to be precise in his duties (7).

Table 4: Internship Scenario

Experiential Feature	Score
Direct contact	9
Existential engagement	7
Learner agency	6
Fluid affordances	7
Flexible pedagogy	8
Ways of knowing	5
Freedom	1
Precision	9

Figure 3: Experiential Map of Internship Scenario



Discussion/Implications

Although hypothetical, this thought experiment generates some useful information. First, using a standardized scale to assess each defining feature provides greater understanding about the nuances of the experiential learning context. Second, these experiential maps convey important information for key stakeholders to conceptualize the learning experience. Lastly, this exercise provides useful information about directions for future research.

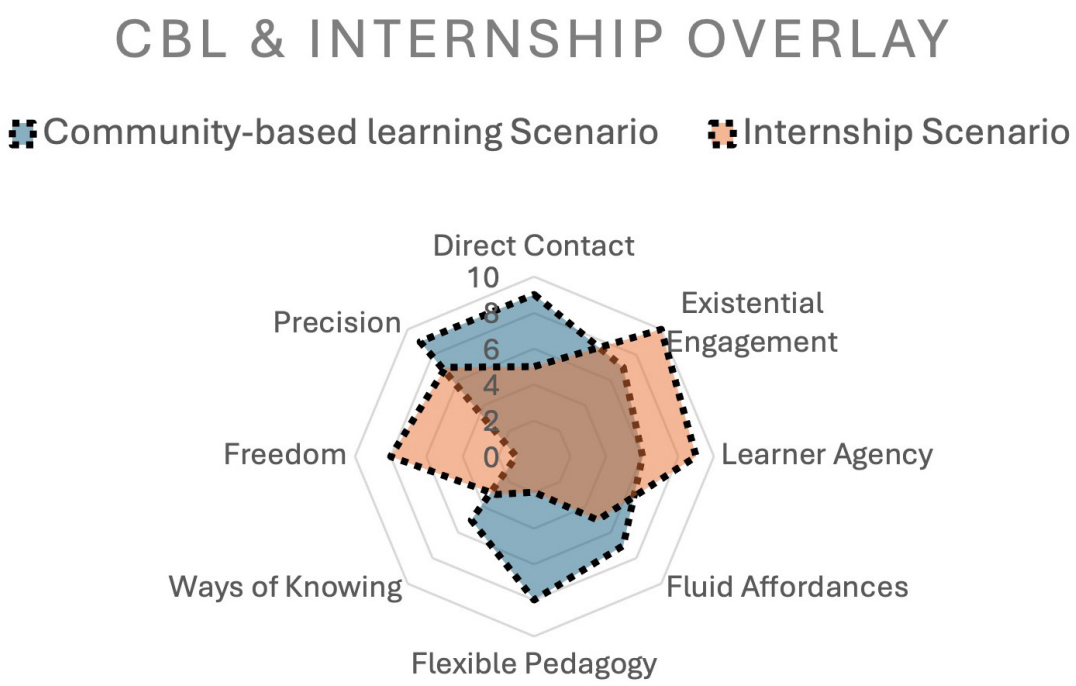
Experiential maps provide visual ways of conceptualizing the experiential features and make it easy to see which features are supported and which are not. Contexts can be examined individually (e.g., Figure 2 and 3) or overlayed for comparison (Figure 4). Note: the goal should not be to strive for the highest marks in each category, but to capture the holistic essence of an experiential learning context to design activities that meet the underlying pedagogical goals. These maps support Heinrich and Green's (2025) Prototype 2 by capturing the activity, purpose, and approach of these scenarios for the learner. These maps also provide a pedagogical entry point (via Prototype 1) that creates a space to consider the relationship between pedagogy, philosophy, and institutional strategy for these scenarios. Because experiential programming often calls for different areas to be emphasized or downplayed, it is easy for an instructional practice to occur without knowing what is pedagogically involved. This mapping framework provides a way for practitioners, learners, and administrators to visualize those details more clearly.

If this information were presented to a student prior to participating in either project, they would have a better idea about what to expect from the experience. This information would benefit faculty and HIP site managers by helping them to pedagogically create an experience that simultaneously fits with their offerings while also meeting the course objectives (this could resemble a form of backwards design). Lastly, this information provides administrators with another perspective to understand the pedagogical "big picture," which can inform broader programmatic and strategic decisions.

Direction for Future Research

Future research could replicate elements of Meyer's (2024) study applied to higher education (Meyer's original study examined experiential education occurring in nature-based settings). Once substantiated and/or refined, those features could be validated and set to a standardized scale with clearly defined metrics so they can be used for assessment.

Figure 4: Community-based learning and internship overlay



Future investigations could also apply Heinrich and Green's (2025) prototypes to Meyer's (2024) model. When Meyer's model is applied to these different scenarios, it also becomes apparent that his features do not adequately address the overlap between the experiential context and the pedagogical goals. This finding relates to an issue elucidated by Heinrich and Green (2025) related to how EE/EL is understood. Meyer's model provides pedagogical clarity about what occurs in an EE/EL context, but it does not address the learning workflow (Prototype 3). Applying Heinrich & Green's (2025) prototypes to other definitional models would be useful.

Finally, considering SEE's and ELTHE's longstanding goals to increase equity and reduce barriers to access, exploring how this mapping framework impacts access would provide a valuable direction for future research.

Conclusion

As SEE's Research and Scholarship Committee continues to promote definitional clarity, this paper offers a strategy to support that work. Experiential programming can be better understood by using radar charts to map its central features. Establishing comprehensible ways to make sense of and assess experiential instruction provides an invaluable resource for stakeholders by promoting a common way to understand, measure, and talk about experiences. Students gain important information to understand and prepare for their experiences. EE/EL mapping provides a visualization tool educators can use to improve their pedagogical design. And radar charts provide administrators with resources to holistically conceptualize EE/EL contexts and compare them to one another. Ultimately, this strategy reduces barriers to access by making the practice of experiential programming more transparent for everyone.



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