

# Potential for Experiential Education in Distance Learning Contexts

Demian Hommel  
Oregon State University

## Introduction

The literal distance inherent in online education can be an important difference between it and traditional classroom settings, such that proximate, on-site learning is thought to be where experiential, transformative education happens (Cohen, 2013). Yet it is possible that some of the most compelling, effective aspects of traditional, proximate education are transferable, and are actively being tested in distance learning environments. While these efforts are generally short-term, and are often conducted in isolation, there is potential to study these attempts, and to build on them. After establishing some common vocabulary regarding distance and experiential education, this paper shares responses from practitioners who have used experiential activities in distance contexts to both highlight potential areas for growth, and to suggest a framework for future experiential-distance integration.

## Distance education

One of the most traditional and effective ways of educating multiple people is to bring them together to one place, at one time. This structure still remains the dominant system of institutionalized learning in the world. However, distance education is fast becoming a sought-after, alternative mode of instruction. Online education is growing in many different formal and informal educational settings for several reasons including improvements in and increasing access to communication technologies; employers wanting more adaptive skill-sets; the increasing cost of traditional higher education; the ability for individualized pacing; and the potential for information use within expanding digital formats and interfaces (Anderson & Raine, 2012).

There are perhaps thousands of different research articles that highlight best practices in online or distance education. These best practices may originate from different challenges, or can focus on a range of different issues: teaching strategies, retention, curriculum development, departmental policies, and more. Unsurprisingly, a survey of the best practices for online learning environments

reveals many similarities with proximate, face-to-face (F2F) environments (Magna Publication, 2017). In fact, the recommended strategies, tools and techniques apply to most educational enterprises: clear instructions and expectations, a range of different approaches and mechanisms, activities, formative assessments, among many other examples.

At the same time, the differences between online learning and F2F environments are evident. Many of the specific challenges of online learning involve, or result from, what could be called *the distance problem*—the reality that students, instructors, and TAs must communicate through a digital interface, and that the class functions at a literal distance, often asynchronously (not at the same time). And although synchronous interaction is possible in online learning, in some cases there is rarely, if ever, any analogue (or non-electronic) communication between educators and students. Further, technology is both the facilitator and arbiter of distance courses, and challenges in the efficient, effective and seamless use of technology are apparent (Magna Publication, 2017). I think we can safely assume that there is not a human on the planet who both uses cellular, computer, network or any digital technology that has experienced complete 100% ease of use, understanding, lack of errors, bugs, glitches, erroneous downloads, viruses, unwanted advertising, etc.

Despite these problems, distance learning has been a tremendous success in some specific spheres of application. Exponential growth of online delivery, expansion of all-online majors and degree programs, and the growing offering and acceptance of credentials from online courses is evidence that some of the shortcomings of online learning have been rectified. However, success in this sphere has been highly dependent upon the content, subject, and context.

A review of the top ranked online programs by Paine (2014) revealed that at the time almost all related to highly digital/technological specializations, programs and careers, including

business and marketing – and often with a focus on using technology. Coding, for example, makes sense in an online environment. Students are assumed to have the ability to interface with digital environments already. It is perhaps understandable that most of the successes in online program development have been due to a steady focus on technology—both as content and as the medium (Paine, 2014).

At the same time, there are core ideas about how education works that may transcend the technologies that facilitate it. Effective learning strategies and techniques in F2F settings can potentially be applied to distance learning beyond content that is technologically centered and driven. As an example, the progression through the experiential learning cycle is a process that can likely be implemented in online environments in many different subjects and fields. What follows is a brief summary of what is meant by “experiential education.” This summary provides context for the interviews with practitioners who have tried experiential activities in distance learning environments.

### **Experiential approaches in distance learning contexts**

Experiences are likely the most ancient form of education: a history of experiential education would have to begin before recorded history, and therefore would be difficult to compile. But the more recent institutionalization of experiential education in modern education systems is much more easily constructed. As a formal field of study, experiential education is grounded in the work of four major theorists: Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, and Kolb. Generally regarded as the figurehead of the progressive education movement, John Dewey rejected rote learning as formal education’s primary objective. Instead, he argued that educators need to engage students in meaningful and relevant activities that allow them to actively apply concepts. In *Democracy and Education*, he writes, “Education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process” (Dewey, 1916, p. 22). In this paper, “experiential learning” refers to the experience of the

participant. “Experiential education” refers to intentional activities, processes and structures put in place to promote experiential learning. A participant of an activity denoted as experiential education may or may not be engaged in experiential learning. For Dewey, education must be grounded in experience and active inquiry. He believed that the interaction of past and current experience was the basis for new knowledge, and he proposed that experiential learning requires structure to help students make meaning from experience. Accordingly, he encouraged educators to implement real-world, practical workshops and to provide students with opportunities to reflect upon their experiences in these non-traditional activities.

Lewin was another major contributor to the experiential learning movement, emphasizing two key aspects: (1) attention to present, concrete experience to test abstract concepts, and (2) using feedback processes to assess deviations from desired goals (Dewey, 1916). For Piaget, human development from infancy to adulthood progresses from a concrete to an abstract view of the world. In these terms, *accommodation* of concepts and the process of *assimilation* of experiences provide the foundation for deep learning (Dewey, 1916). Drawing from the efforts of these traditions, Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) is perhaps most prominently cited and used by practitioners. Experiential strategies and techniques have been shown in studies to be effective for gaining academic achievement and scientific process skills (Alkan, 2016); improving academic performance (Leal-Rodriguez & Albort-Morant, 2017); and facilitating the long-term production of socially responsible behavior (Caulfield & Woods, 2013), as examples. Kolb defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (see Fig. 1) identifies four stages of “adaptive learning modes” which lie on two dialectically opposed orientations (Kolb, 1984).

## Kolb's experiential learning cycle

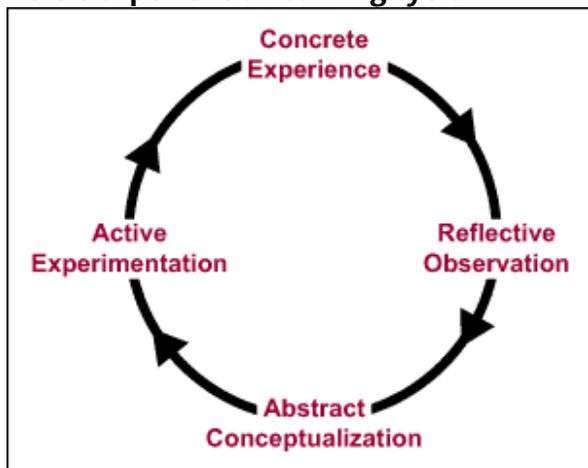


Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle

In this diagram, Concrete Experience/Abstract Conceptualization represent opportunities for interpreting experience. Reflective Observation/Active Experimentation represent two different and opposed ways of transforming the grasping of experience into new knowledge. In practice, the model is nonlinear and recursive—participants enter the cycle at different points, and the results of each stage inform the learning in the subsequent stages. Kolb described the implications of this model as follows:

The central idea here is that learning, and therefore knowing, requires *both* a grasp or figurative representation of experience and some transformation of that representation. Either the figurative grasp or operative transformation alone is not sufficient. The simple perception of experience is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it. Similarly, transformation alone cannot represent learning, for there must be something to be transformed, some state or experience that is being acted upon (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Regardless of tradition, all experiential education theory emphasizes the dynamic, interactive, and ongoing process of learning, which is usually grounded in experience. The cognitive acquisition of information—the basic memorization and recall of facts—is only part of the process, suggesting that the static activity of acquiring and

transmitting information is insufficient to be called “learning.” A notable exception is Budhai & Skipwith (2016). Yet the understanding of experiential learning can be interpreted and facilitated in a variety of different ways.

While major traditions of experiential learning have some differences, they are generally variations on the same themes: action/reflection/thought/application. Kolb (1984) identified the following characteristics of experiential learning common to the three traditions of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget:

- Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes
- Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience
- The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world
- Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world
- Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment
- Learning is the process of creating knowledge

Unfortunately, many overly simplistic definitions of experiential learning lead to approaches that focus too heavily on *experience*. The working assumption is that if experiences are available, students will be doing experiential learning. One important implication of Kolb's model is the potential for inefficiency and ineffectiveness in devoting resources to providing experiential learning opportunities if this cycle (or any mode of reflection and experimentation) is not used in the facilitation of the experience. Experiences must be integrated with *facilitated reflection* that helps learners explore what happened during the experience, analyze patterns, draw conclusions, strategize and transfer learning to future experiences (Budhai & Skipwith, 2016).

Yet, to what extent is this happening in early attempts to incorporate experiential learning in online environments? At the time of this research project, very little had been published on the integration of experiential learning in distance environments (also noted by Budhai & Skipwith in 2016). Following a qualitative research methodology, where research questions emerge and transform as one gains new information, this project set out to first establish a foundation of what is known about distance and experiential education. Gradually, it became apparent that there were likely attempts to integrate these disparate interests, but these have yet to be studied. As a result, what started as a few brief conversations turned into the opportunity to interview and reflect on some initial efforts to incorporate experiential activities and strategies in online classes. The following focuses on responses to a series of interview questions about reasoning, design, and an assessment of the utility of the projects, administered via email, asking distance educators about their experiences. Respondents were chosen through professional networks of faculty who are known for attempting this experiential-distance integration. For the purpose of this paper, distance education is isolated as traditional higher education courses offered through an online Learning Management System (LMS).

The following educators responded to the interview questions and provided permission to have their answers published in this paper:

### **Respondents**

Eric Boggs (**EB**) is Director, Lundquist College Honors Program at the University of Oregon. Shireen Hyrapiet (**SH**) is a Senior Instructor at Houston Community College. Yvette Gibson (**YG**) is a Rangeland Sciences Instructor, Online Rangeland Science Program Coordinator, and Academic Advisor at Oregon State University. Deb Arthur (**DA**) is an Assistant Professor in University Studies at Portland State University. Judit Torok (**JT**) is the Director of the Teaching and Learning Commons in the Berkeley College at the New School University. And, Zapoura Newton-Calvert

(**ZNC**) is the Digital Coordinator and Capstone faculty at Portland State University and an Instructor at Portland Community College.

The following are excerpts of the respondents answers to each question, followed by a short analysis by the author.

### **Question #1: What were some of your motivations for constructing and facilitating these online-experiential activities?**

**EB** “Three things: Access (experiential learning doesn’t have to be expensive, but often is exclusionary in its cost and I believe the pedagogy should be accessible regardless of the students socioeconomic status), Engagement, and Preparation for immersive experiential learning.”

**SH** “One of my primary motivations was alignment between the on-campus and online sections of the same class. Sustainability for the Common Good, taught on-campus by different instructors, requires a 3 hour volunteer activity. I wanted to incorporate this into the Ecampus course as well so that students taking the class are getting the same experience. Second, I wanted students online to get out into the real-world, away from their computers and do some hands-on activity that requires interacting with people. This networking and social relationship building can be difficult via the online learning environment. Experiential activities are the means to overcome them.”

**YG** “First, can we clearly define experiential learning? I recently sat in on a College of Agriculture workshop on experiential learning and I’m not quite sure what I do in a course is experiential learning vs. hands-on field-based learning. I feel it is my job to prepare students to be able to hit the ground running when they start an internship while in school or first job post-graduation. Students should know the basic terms, concepts, methods and tools of the Rangeland Science Discipline.” Since I can’t be in person with online students I needed to design experiential learning field activities so they could be completed solo, yet have my feedback on the students

technique, perception, interpretations, etc. In other words, I needed to figure out a method which would approximate my being present with the student at a project site to help guide their actions and interpretations. I also wanted students to have an outlet to express their experiences and share ideas and approaches to the field assignments.

We are revising the Rangeland Science program and carving out 3-4 credits specifically for experiential learning. Our expectation is that students will select an experiential learning opportunity that aligns with their specialization to bring to life and expand upon what they learn in courses. Also to help students validate that their chosen specialization is what they truly want to pursue as a career focus. Further in a field-based science such as Rangeland Science hands-on learning is vital, not only in terms of techniques and methods, but understanding temporal and spatial scales and complexity of systems.”

**DA** “I teach Capstone courses at PSU [Portland State University], which are small community based learning courses. I was asked to put together a fully online Capstone. So it forced me to get creative with constructing/facilitating online experiential activities.”

**JT** “The key motivations for incorporating online experiential activities in my classes stem from my belief that learning takes place when students are actively engaged in authentic projects, collaborating with each other or with external constituents, and building relationships. This process is punctuated by recurring reflections on their own learning process throughout, and culminates in one or more artifacts that learners are ready to share with others, beyond the classroom.”

**ZNC** “I have taught experiential/community-based learning courses for the past 10 years. When I taught solely face-to-face, I used community-based learning as the core of my work. When I was asked to teach online, I quickly realized that (a) I didn't want to lose the framing for my class that

has been so powerful for me and my students AND (b) my online students needed community-based learning experiences just as much as my face-to-face students. Because Community-Based Learning (CBL) is a high-impact practice, I did some research on CBL online and realized that there was little research into CBL online. I decided to dive in and figure out how to do CBL online and have been teaching this way ever since. To me, it's a social justice issue — all of our students deserve high impact practices and learning that connects to the community.”

Although there were times where these overlapped, each respondent was motivated by different priorities and reasons: access; engagement; alignment; preparation and training; focusing a capstone; and the attempt to inspire students in authentic projects that use a specific approach (e.g., Community-Based Learning). Much of the deeper pedagogical philosophy is rooted in the same basic idea, however, that experiential activities have the potential to accomplish these tasks better than traditional or static approaches and methods. Ultimately, the driving forces in these different projects are *challenges* to access and engagement, the need to better (and more efficiently/effectively) align and train students, and the need for authenticity and even inspiration. Combine this reality with the rapid expansion of online programs and digital technologies, and the subsequent changes in the habits and patterns of student use of computers, smartphones and the internet, and it is understandable why these practitioners are motivated to try experiential activities. The next question addresses what design principles would they draw from, including an analysis of some of the results.

**Question #2: What considerations did you put into the design of experiential learning? What were the outcomes?**

**JT** “Online course design considerations for different experiential activities that I have done included timing, technology, relevance and clarity. Timing is important because most experiential projects span several week or even months, so

aligning the project with course objectives within the allotted time for the semester has been a challenge. Technology in online courses is always both a blessing and a curse. Negotiating not only the limitations imposed by various technologies, but the institutional policies and student readiness, has been a serious consideration. The relevance of the experiential learning activity to course outcomes as well as students' own career paths and personal interests is another design challenge. And finally, I put an emphasis on communicating the expectations and instructions for the experiential learning assignment in a clear and concise way - which is not always easy.

So far, the outcomes are promising. High engagement and thoughtful responses are good indicators of success. I also collect student feedback surveys on their experiences, the project itself, ask for their feedback on how to improve it in the future. And the assignments do get better with every iteration, semester after semester.”

**SH** “I went headlong into it. I modified the syllabus and included a three-hour volunteer activity requirement. Students on campus are typically given a list of volunteer activities and then sign up for whatever works with their schedule. [Online courses are] different because students can be anywhere in the US or the world for that matter, so the student is required to locate the volunteer activity and get the three hour work completed. I offered to provide any corresponding letter that might be required for students to complete their activity.

I am very pleased with the experience. Students have conveyed that they too have enjoyed the activity. I have had students with families who have taken their kids on the volunteer activity and have enjoyed it. I have had others who have lived close to volunteer centers and have newly discovered the joy of volunteering because they were required to do so because of the course requirement. Students have taken photographs of themselves at work and then shared them with one another on online discussion boards.”

**YG** “As stated above, I needed to figure out methods that would approximate my being present at the student project site. In one course I had students video themselves executing field labs at their project site. In another course I had students craft a site brief that included pictures of a number of site characteristics as well as the broader landscape. Both approaches are a bit clunky, but suffice for student success in learning outcomes achievement. I would very much like to develop a summer hybrid course for campus-based and online students that would take them out to meet ranchers, federal agency and NGO personnel working on rangeland issues and participate in activities related to ranching, restoration, invasive abatement, land management planning, etc. I feel strongly that a student experience such as this and interacting with faculty and professionals would deepen student understanding of coursework, and again, help them find their niche within the discipline. Students, heck people in general, are inspired and motivated by their experiences.

Again, this is in the design phase... But we will allow any of the following to meet experiential learning credits: internship, hybrid course, volunteering, special project, student research, possibly job shadowing. Not only would students have to engage in one the listed activities, but write a report or give a presentation on their experience. Again, the aim of experiential learning would be hands-on experience, apply course learnings, get inspired and motivated, and validate or determine career focus.”

**DA** “I explored a variety of online platforms that would allow for a fuller online experience - Flipgrid, VoiceThread, PebblePad... I wanted to be sure there were multiple options for student input and response, and I wanted the technology to be accessible for students...This is a larger question but overall I feel like the depth of student interaction was quite deep, and student end of term evals would support that.”

**ZNC** “I would need to provide a different way to convey the complex logistics and pedagogical reasoning behind my CBL choices when I taught

online. I started to learn how to use video, used Universal Design Principles for my documents, and also began to create spaces for asynchronous and synchronous discussion that would be lively and important to the CBL experience. I realized that there would need to be some flexibility in the options and framing of the actual community-based work since students were coming from different locations and with often very full schedules. I ended up creating a variety of volunteer pathways that students could choose from...these included 'local to students' options as well as virtual options.

I would need to create safe spaces to encourage dynamic online discussions. So far, using FlipGrid and Google Hangouts has produced the best outcome. Video responses in D2L are also adequate. There were also issues about confirming the community work, communicating with the community partner, evaluating the depth of the learning in ethics/social responsibility, etc.”

**EB** “The design aspect is much more involved when compared to in-person facilitation. Typically, when I facilitate experiential learning modules I come over-prepared and augment my lesson plans based on an ‘on the spot’ analysis of the group. This allows me some customization and flexibility. With online experiential learning, I endeavor to plan ahead and prepare for maximum engagement and personal customization. The instructions must be much more specific, FAQs have to be developed prior and I build some room for personalization of the lessons. For instance, in the online class I am teaching for UO Graduate students in Place-based Education (an inherently experiential pedagogy) they have bi-weekly ‘place-making activities’ and I essentially create three separate activities that allow them to choose based on their location, interests and preferences. This also makes assessment a challenge. Students are operating off of an activity-specific rubric.”

These responses begin to show some of the true divergence in form and function for those that have attempted these types of experiential-distance integrations. The practitioners

approached their project from different places and in different ways, and while a few are still (at the time of writing) in the planning and design phase, others were able to assess the results. In these cases, the combination of experiential approaches and digital tools had a positive outcome, although for perhaps disparate reasons. An obvious future direction for this research would be to approach these attempts as a means of providing data (quantitative, qualitative, or both) about the effectiveness of learning outcomes, engagement, skill-development, etc. And while the next question will show how a fair bit of revision and adjustment is still necessary, the practitioners are finding utility in attempts to bridge the experiential-distance divide.

### **Question #3: Based on your experience, what would you keep, change, do differently, etc.?**

**ZNC** “There are a lot of things that I have kept over the last few years after revising and experimenting. I have strong community partnerships, good communication with students and the class community, and a lot of connectivity between course content and the community work. I would like to continue to work on having even more dynamic challenging conversations about race and social justice - we have these conversations, but I find that they are slightly different to facilitate than their face-to-face counterparts. I would also like the course to be longer than one quarter as best practices recommend at least a six month placement if not a year long placement for greatest impact on the community and the student.”

**YG** “Students need to transcend conceptual/theoretical thinking and see how things work in real life and apply their learning to real life... to enhance their understanding of courses work and practice applying skills and methods [...] I would encourage you to really focus your research on how to make experiential learning work for the non-traditional student [...] We need alternatives to the standard internship that work for the working parent with multiple obligations!”

**SH** “The few things I had to tweak. When I left the assignment open to ‘volunteering’ I had some students volunteer with friends or a family member and there was no way for me to verify that this was indeed a legitimate volunteer experience or whether the student in fact did the activity. I have since tweaked the assignment to note that students must complete the activity with a registered organization and must submit to me, a note from a supervisor confirming that they did indeed complete three hours of volunteer work - the note must be accompanied with a business card or an online link through which I can verify the organization and supervisor.

Since beginning this experiential activity, I have also been maintaining a Google Map of the locations where my students have volunteered across the US. I request students who find opportunities at locations across the United States, to add information to the map, so that it can be made available to students who register for the class in future terms. I intend to keep this activity. I have, thus far, only had positive responses from students.”

**EB** “Assessment of experiential learning can be challenging in general. The field of student affairs is doing a lot of foundational work in assessing development in very nuanced subjects such as intercultural competence, leadership and community engagement. Often these experiences are being ‘assessed’ rather subjectively - instructor observations are relayed through in-person discussion and guiding feedback. Using a digital format from a distance makes that challenging to replicate discussions that are often the highlight of an immersive experience. As we know the debrief is often where meaning is made during the abstract conceptualization process. Online discussions can be dry and not feel authentic. I am exploring the possibility of video uploads to bring the human element into the discussion groups.

The advantage exists within more academic coursework to have much more solid learning outcomes and therefore assessment. Online portfolios or journals can serve to replicate the

narrative development of students learning. There is a growing body of research on digital storytelling and how that can be used as an assessment tool for experiential learning. For my final exam this term, students will submit a presentation with voiceover that summarize their learning in the form of a pitch to their counterparts - I am excited to see how it works.”

**DA** “I like Flipgrid, it allows for face to face interaction and is VERY simple for students. I will be re-designing the course for this summer term and I plan to also incorporate smaller group discussions (so far it has been full class discussions)...”

**JT** “I make adjustments to the assignments in every semester. Some adjustments are minor, others are broader or more radical revisions. It's hard to answer this question in the abstract.”

This is perhaps the most interesting part of the discussion—attempts to adapt to the challenging circumstances of the experiential-distance integration were the norm. While traditional field trips are not easy to facilitate by any means, the digital asynchronous interface creates its own special and significant challenges.

Each of these practitioners employed different methods, and the methods utilized were within a narrow spectrum of possibilities to merge experiential and distance education in complementary ways. While the majority of practitioners required adjustments to their approaches, what they found was that it is indeed possible to apply effective experiential strategies to the online learning environment. And although their experiences and results varied, they have all expanded the boundaries of what is possible through employing transformative pedagogy in distance education.

### **A framework for future integration**

One common theme of the interview responses was each respondent’s eagerness to put continued effort into these types of activities as they (and their students) have benefitted from the process,

despite substantial difference in motivation and design. Yet, when experiential education activities and perspectives are defined and described, they are usually split into specific categories, often featuring some combination of service learning, community-based learning, learning communities, internships, project-based learning, and field experiences. And, despite the various formats and characterizations of experiential activities or approaches, and the pedagogies that inform them, there still appears to be shared, integral aspects within the types of experiential-distance learning opportunities. Budhai and Skipwith (2016) identify these aspects as the potential to provide real world connections, hands-on experience, practice in professionalism, and a civic contribution. These are lofty goals, but all entirely possible given the opportunities of an experientially informed, distance-based curriculum.

At the same time, distance education is often technology centered, or, at least, technologically-mediated. It is important to explore opportunities that enrich experiential education by application of innovative technologies (Budhai & Skipwith, 2016). When considering integration of experiential education in distance settings, results from a review of the research literature and interviews suggests practitioners should consider the following topics:

**Motivation and justification:** Why would an instructor include an experiential activity in an online course? Is the motivation to simply vary the activities, or is there a compelling reason to have students observe and reflect on something accessible in their local context? How might the course be improved, particularly given that it already has some substantial barriers as a distance course?

**Goals and alignment:** What are the actual goals of the activity and the course? More broadly, are there department/program goals, college and/or university objectives? Desired goals and outcomes can provide their own form of framework for all

phases of an experiential activity, from initial conception, design, delivery, assessment and revision. Furthermore, aligning these goals and outcomes with the experiences students have in the course is critical.

**Design:** Activity design is perhaps one of the most important components of the framework, particularly as it involves all of the other pieces. In fact, failures of design tend to dominate the examples or case studies provided in field study design manuals (Speights-Binet & Gamble, 2008). First, does the activity consider the objectives that are the foundation of best practices in distance learning: presence, clear expectations, feedback, leveraging tools, etc.? Moreover, is the experiential part just an experience? Or is it a necessary step in Kolb's trajectory? Are students reflecting, conceptualizing, and actively experimenting? And are the best practices in distance education being used to facilitate this process? Good design, based on the right motivation and justification, combined with aligned goals and outcomes are essential. Yet, ideally, the facilitation of an experiential activity is an experience as well, and will likely be more successful if approached in a way similar to the assignment or activity itself.

**Assessment, reflection, and recursivity:** How will you know if your experiential activity is successful? Is it providing access to education for those who would not otherwise be able to have the experience? Does it allow for variability in temporal and geographical realities of distance students? Are they achieving the outcomes? Is there unnecessary confusion, or were there unforeseen problems? Did students progress through the experiential model? Was the experience transformative? Did they enjoy themselves? Did they feel safe? Especially because these experiences or activities are novel, it is perhaps even more

important to assess their effectiveness, and to reflect on the results. Ultimately, the possibility for these attempts to be recursive, iterative and allowed to evolve is where the potential for growth may reside.

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of the meta-level considerations in building, facilitating, and assessing the use of experiential strategies in a distance context, these might be effective starting points for considering new applications. It may also be valuable to incorporate some of the deeper, more philosophical outcomes, such as specific knowledge gained, connections to other topics, fields or disciplines, or simply a higher level of student engagement and inspiration (Lang, 2016).

### **Potential challenges and unknown-unknowns**

Balancing the potential for experiential-distance integration requires acknowledging some of the possible drawbacks. After all, coming to terms with some of the limitations of distance education may ultimately advance its evolution. Of course, the practitioners' perspectives detailed here confirm there is still room for growth and development of experiential strategies in distance education. Obviously, building an educational approach that is dynamic requires a significant investment of time and resources in order to experiment with and formulate and construct new knowledge about the approach.

Naturally, the technological infrastructure involved for distance education can be a major limitation, creating difficulty for students to access, understand, and interact with content. While advancement of the technology over the past decade has been impressive—leading to enormous strides in efficiency and effectiveness—there are still populations of students who are left out. A distance-based experiential activity may be simply incomprehensible or impossible for a variety of reasons. For example, access, linguistic or cultural barriers, or variable capabilities to understand, interpret, or even move through different environments, are some of the reasons why these activities may be out of reach for

students in either an online or F2F scenarios. In some cases, adding a virtual component may be possible, and could provide opportunities for people who might otherwise not be able to go outdoors, for example, to participate. However, at what point does the technology become so controlling that students miss the possible sensory experiences of being in the real world?

An additional and serious limitation can be variability in local context and experience. For example, the local physical or cultural landscapes may be so dramatically different that it may be a stretch to have students interact with the same variables. Further, when an actual teacher is moderating a field experience, there is some control over what is seen and/or described, explained or interpreted. A disparate field experience may be a challenge to assimilate without significant effort to design the activity with flexibility and coherence. This also links to the previous limitation—people are already differently abled in their potential to venture into their local environments. Add tremendous variability and the diverse interactions and unforeseen consequences magnify, especially due to the lack of shared experiences common in F2F settings.

Regardless of the above limitations, integrating experiential principles and strategies into distance education programs can yield mutually beneficial results. In fact, many—though not all—of the challenges associated with distance learning may be mitigated by employing time-tested, effective approaches in experiential education, particularly the practice of moving through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. And while these experiences might not be exact replicas of more traditional experiential opportunities, they may actually be better in many ways. It is possible that some of the major barriers to certain experiential activities might be overcome through the use of distance technologies. The lack of geographical and temporal constraints may improve some aspects of student participation and instructional flexibility. For example, it already is possible to conduct online internships. To what degree these are

formally experiential depends on context and interpretation. Additionally, experiential pedagogies have the potential to revolutionize some aspects of distance learning, allowing for more participation and inclusion for example, particularly when projects are focused within a student's local context (Budhai & Skipwith, 2016; Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012). Still, these attempts should consider the core components of experiential education theory, most specifically the need to include meaningful opportunities for reflection and experimentation.

Finally, it may not be a question of can we do experiential education online, but should we? This conjecture was perhaps the most reflexive aspect of this research project. Notwithstanding the growth in online education, and the absolute necessity to take advantage of this growth for a sustainable future, should we try and make experiential activities an accessible component of online university courses? This is a great question, and after conducting this research it appears worthwhile, despite the significant challenges. The practitioners already enthusiastically incorporating these strategies provide anecdotal evidence that such integration can produce beneficial results. This project was an attempt to focus attention on this important opportunity to cultivate a community of scholars and teachers working on experiential-distance research and practice, and to begin to build a collective understanding of how to better approach these projects in the future.

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*This entire project was dreamed up after conversations with many thinkers and scholars, teachers, designers and skeptics. Mostly, this would not have been possible without the support of OSU Ecampus and specifically Katie Linder and Mary Ellen Dello Stritto. My experience as an Ecampus Research Fellow and evaluation of the entire program is that it is well constructed, organized and facilitated. My participation as a Fellow was a distinct pleasure, and I hope that many others are able to receive funding to pursue projects that add value to OSU's already considerable, high quality distance education*

*offerings. I would also like to thank the entire community of folks working on these issues, including my respondents, particularly Eric Boggs and Shireen Hyrapiet. Your attempts to push the boundaries of education in this direction are as valuable as they are impressive.*

### **Please join our group**

If anything, this project has revealed a surprising number of passionate, dedicated academics attempting to make the most of the integration of experiential and distance learning environments. Email me directly: [hommeld@geo.oregonstate.edu](mailto:hommeld@geo.oregonstate.edu) or comment on this draft if you are interested in seeing what comes of this effort.

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## About The Research Unit At Oregon State Ecampus

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### Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit supports Oregon State University's mission and vision by conducting world-class research on online education that develops knowledge, serves our students and contributes to the economic, social, cultural and environmental progress of Oregonians, as well as national and international communities of teachers and learners.

### Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit (ECRU) makes research actionable through the creation of evidence-based resources related to effective online teaching, learning and program administration toward the fulfillment of the goals of Oregon State's mission. Specifically, the research unit conducts original research, creates and validates instruments, supports full-cycle assessment loops for internal programs, and provides resources to encourage faculty research and external grant applications related to online teaching and learning.

### Contact

Katie Linder, Ph.D.  
Director of Research  
Oregon State Ecampus  
541-737-4629  
[kathryn.linder@oregonstate.edu](mailto:kathryn.linder@oregonstate.edu)

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