

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with the **Future Skills Centre**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Skills and Work in the Digital Economy**

Reimagining experiential learning in online courses for the digital economy

About the project

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting physical/social distancing regulations required postsecondary institutions to transition courses online, including those with experiential learning components. Experiential learning occurs when students apply course theory and concepts in real-world situations (e.g., eService-learning, co-op, remote co-op, practicums, service-learning and community-based projects). It allows students to acquire in-demand skills, gain competencies to transition into the workforce, obtain new skills to re-enter the workforce or prepare for future employment in the digital economy. However, educational stakeholders like academics, students, employers and policy-makers report that they do not know how to effectively incorporate

experiential learning in online courses. Experiential learning has established benefits and research foundations, and thus, these educational stakeholders must reimagine quality experiential learning in online courses to ensure that it prepares students for evolving labour market demands. In this knowledge synthesis project, we conducted a scoping review to (a) identify the types of available evidence on online experiential learning; (b) identify promising strategies for integrating experiential learning in online courses; (c) identify outcomes of incorporating experiential learning in online courses; and (d) identify and analyze gaps in the current evidence on online experiential learning to direct future research on the topic.

Key findings

Our search resulted in 18,530 studies, of which 5,528 were duplicates. Thus, we screened 13,002 studies and included 110 for analysis. The included articles largely represented literature from North America (n=81; 74%) and most were published within the last five years (n=70; 64%). They mainly consisted of empirical studies (n=64; 58%) and theoretical articles (n=26; 24%). They spanned across disciplines, notably general higher education (n=36; 33%), education (n=19; 17%), health sciences (n=15; 14%) and business (n=12; 11%), among others. They employed diverse study designs, including, for example, text and opinion (n=37; 34%), case reports (n=23; 21%), qualitative research (n=15; 14%) and mixed methods (n=9; 8%).

We identified that experiential learning is integrated in online courses using the following strategies: (a) videos or online modules, (b) social media and cloud-based communication systems, (c) online internships, (d) online simulation and gamification, (e) student-led labs, (f) reflective practices and (g) small group discussions / peer feedback.

We identified the following outcomes of incorporating experiential learning in online formats: (a) increased work to integrate experiential learning online, (b) increased time for planning and implementing online experiential learning, (c) increased supervision of students in online experiential learning, (d) improved student accessibility to online experiential learning opportunities and (e) improved student employability skills in a technological age through online experiential learning.

We identified three methodological gaps and four content-related gaps worthy of further exploration. Methodological areas for future research include: (a) replicating the included studies with a larger sample size, (b) revising the study design to be more rigorous and (c) applying or testing a theoretical model. Content-related areas for future research include: (a) assessing learning outcomes, (b) aligning online experiential learning with teaching content, (c) accessibility of online experiential learning and (d) the overall education experience.

Policy implications

- Implement training programs for faculty who wish to incorporate online experiential learning in their courses.
- Assess how online experiential learning aligns with postsecondary internationalization goals; consider how international exchanges and learning opportunities can be done online to promote accessibility for students who would otherwise be unable to access international experiences.
- Assess how online experiential learning conforms to accessibility standards and criteria as well as linguistic and cultural responsiveness.
- Include clear guidance on how to incorporate online experiential learning in institutional continuity of learning plans to help with educational transitions during periods of disruption.
- Develop a repository of institutional community partners for students and faculty members to engage with during online experiential learning.
- Invest in interactive communication technologies that allow students, faculty and community partners to communicate and collaborate in online experiential learning experiences.
- Consider accrediting or incentivizing online experiential learning opportunities (e.g., with certificates) to recognize the time commitment and the concrete skills gained to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration, dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.
