FYEE Project: "Formulating evidence-based supports to minimize faculty barriers to experiential education in large first-year Arts courses"

Part 1: Literature Review

As part of the approved and funded "Advancing Education Renewal" (AER) project to identify, analyze and address key facilitators and barriers to engagement and teaching effectiveness of experiential education (EE) pedagogies for faculty members in UBC, research assistants, Assem Zhakysbay (she/her) and Valeria Pérez (she/they), have created this literature review with the purpose of collecting the most salient themes in EE literature and answering starting questions to set up the ground before talking to UBC faculty, staff, and students.

The work to create this literature review started in late May 2022 and finished by the end of August 2022.

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Content:

1. Introduction

As universities increasingly try to implement effective learning strategies to improve the education experience, the role and usefulness of experiential education in large first-year courses comes into light. This paper intends to establish the connection between experiential education and its potential uses in large first-year courses by discussing the foundational theory behind experiential education, its outcomes for students and instructors, the benefits and drawbacks of implementing it in large classes and in first-year courses, and the proposed areas of further investigation. By better understanding the facilitators, the challenges, the benefits, and outcomes of using experiential education in large first-year courses, the research team are able to translate findings into the development of Instructor, TA and student-facing resources. The resources will be designed to support and facilitate the growth of experiential education in the Faculty of Arts at the University of British Columbia and to allow instructors to make informed choices on whether the implementation of experiential education would improve their own courses. As such, the main goal of the literature review is to attempt to answer the following research questions: (1) What does/can experiential education (EE) look like in large first-year (FY) classes? (2) What is possible to achieve and experience through EE that is not possible with other pedagogical approaches? (3) How can first-year better prepare and scaffold students for 2-4th-year EE courses? (4) What prevents instructors from implementing EE in large FY classes?

1.1 Foundational Theory: What is Experiential Education?

Experiential Education (EE), also referred to as experiential learning, is a learning philosophy based on the premise that certain knowledge can be acquired more effectively through experience rather than didactic classroom content (Weaver, 1998). As Kuh (2008) asserts, the high-impact activities embedded in experiential education are highly effective due

to (1) their demand to devote a considerable amount of time to a purposeful task, (2) the facilitated interactions amongst faculty and students, (3) the likelihood of experiencing diversity, (4) the frequent feedback provided, and (5) the opportunity to learn in different social settings. As such, students are able to significantly benefit from experiential learning in their curriculums. The theoretical framework of EE can be traced back to Dewey's (1938) ideas that experience and practice, from which students actively learn, should not be separated from the subject matter. He argues that it is the instructor's responsibility to engage students in enjoyable experiences that promote students' shift from passive to active participants in their education (Dewey, 1938). Similarly, according to Kolb (1984) the experiential learning cycle can be defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.38). As such, it involves both interrelated dimensions of knowledge, namely knowledge acquisition and knowledge transformation, through which the learner engages in concrete experience, abstract conceptualisation, reflective observation, and active experimentation (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021). According to Millham (2012), whose view of experiential learning falls within the realm of critical pedagogy, such an atmosphere of transformative education is essential in promoting equity across both teaching and learning practices. Within this framework, students are assigned greater autonomy and control over their learning, with the instructor assuming a less directive role (Mantai & Huber, 2021). For instance, a common approach in experiential education is when the instructor intentionally designs a learning activity that allows for authentic experiences, educator-engaged feedback, and student reflection (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021; Mantai & Huber, 2021).

Nevertheless, experiential education as a concept still proves hard to define as it includes a wide array of learning techniques and pedagogies, ranging from outdoor education (Wolfe & Kay, 2011) to community-based learning initiatives (Mooney & Edwards, 2001),

with varying lengths of time required for completion (e.g. short-term to long-term) (Wright, 2000). More recently, the introduction of web-based learning has also expanded the variety of experiential learning activities available for instructors to design and use (O'Connor et al., 2021). Fenwick (2000) notes that "the notion of experiential learning has been appropriated to designate everything from kinesthetic-directed instructional activities in the classroom to special workplace projects intersected with critical dialogue led by a facilitator, to learning generated through social action movements, and even team-building adventures in the wilderness" (p.243). While the ambiguity of the term can seem challenging to navigate at first, it also provides a variety of opportunities to develop highly-effective learning strategies that encompass a multitude of learning styles. This is particularly important in terms of raising students' awareness of alternative learning approaches, conducted both in-person and virtually, since individuals vary in their preferred learning styles (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). At the University of British Columbia (UBC), the participation in experiential education is actively growing with the Faculty of Arts encompassing a variety of experiential education practices (Grain & Gerhard, 2020). Namely, the categories of experiential education at UBC include work integrated, community engaged, research based, immersion based, land-and-place based, activity based, and student led activities/practices (Grain & Gerhard, 2020). While keeping in mind the myriad of learning styles that experiential education offers, it is important to understand how different disciplines and instructors themselves define and use experiential education in their practices. This raises the questions of how can experiential education be used by instructors (in terms of pedagogies/styles/activities), why has it been implemented, and how successful has it been in engaging students in deep participation and active learning? More importantly, how can experiential education lead to the transformation of the self, to the engagement with others, and to societal change, in ways that other pedagogies are unable to do?

1.2 Benefits and Equity Concerns of Experiential Education

While instructors' motivation for implementing experiential education may differ case by case, the general benefits of experiential education for students cannot be ignored. A number of studies have shown the association between experiential learning and positive outcomes for students (Trolian and Jach, 2020). For instance, a study on applied learning and student motivation found that activities, which involve the application of theories/concepts to practical problems, and other out-of-class experiences that transmit knowledge into action, increase student motivation, student academic engagement, and their perceived self-efficacy (Trolian and Jach, 2020). This is further supported by Forestal and Finch (2021), who argue that in their town hall project, political science students "understood themselves to be impacting the community (*community awareness*) and felt that their peers were valuable resources for completing the project (*self-understanding*)" (p.125). Students who have completed experiential learning activities that included reflection and service-learning have also reported significantly higher pedagogical effectiveness, civic engagement, and professional development scores than those who have not had experiential education practices in their liberal arts programs (Painter and Howell, 2020). Furthermore, students have frequently reported enjoyment of such an approach to learning, and that the skills and knowledge gained were generalisable to other aspects of their education (Blunsdon et al., 2003). For example, Donovan and Hood (2021) have found that performative pedagogy, which is a form of EE that uses performative arts, "is an effective way to engage the interest, participation, and commitment" (p. 353) of the students. For McPhee and Przedpelska (2018), while undergraduate students do not lack transferable skills, they are not confident enough in their application to a real-world context. As such, experiential education, in this case in the form of a community-based field course, provides a unique opportunity for instructors to facilitate the integration of knowledge and its applications to the wider world, and for

students to gain useful skills and actively engage with course content (McPhee and Przedpelska, 2018). It is clear, therefore, that the effectiveness of experiential learning strategies in higher education has been documented and highlighted by both students and instructors alike in their evaluations.

It is worth mentioning, however, that not all students benefit from experiential education practices equally. Kuh (2008) notes that "historically underserved students tend to benefit *more* from engaging in educational purposeful activities than majority students" (p. 17). Yet, due to a number of systemic issues, underserved students, such as racial minorities and students whose parents have not attended university, or first-generation students, are less likely to participate in high-impact activities in the first place (Kuh, 2008). Certain forms of experiential education tend to exclude students "based on their socioeconomic status, nationality, visa status, race, religion, physical ability, or other identity markers" (Grain & Gerhard, 2020, p. 9). For example, in Hawtrey's (2007) study, there exists differences among day and evening students in terms of preferences for the use of experiential learning activities, whereby students taking evening classes were more likely to be of a lower socioeconomic background and had to work during the day. Taylor et al. (2019) further argue that while experiential education, such as service-learning, has significant potential to engage first-generation students in ways that other pedagogies are unable to do, it is unlikely that service-learning "help[s] first-gen students fit better into universities" (p.352), as some other researchers have argued. Rather than questioning how underserved students benefit from service-learning, Taylor et al. (2019) propose shifting the research agenda to "How to promote an asset-based approach to underserved students with sensitivity to structural inequalities?" and "How to develop culturally responsive service-learning/pedagogy?" (p.358). In their view, understanding the structural inequalities faced by underserved students

in regard to experiential education becomes increasingly more important for equity in learning and a successful outcome.

1.3 Focus on Small Upper Year Courses

Interestingly, the representation of experiential education as a successful learning strategy in literature is generally one-sided toward small upper-year level university classes. In general, scholars highlight that the incorporation of large courses into the detailed and extensive discussion of experiential education continues to be scarce and limited (Mantai & Huber, 2021; Kofinas & Tsay, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021; Trinh et al., 2021). Upper-year courses (3rd to 4th year) seem to overwhelmingly dominate in their use of experiential education, despite the well-documented importance of experiential education as an effective learning strategy on all educational levels. While instructors recognise that experiential education is a means of learning that, ideally, should be taught "across all stages of a student's college experience, even before they declare their major" (Weller & Saam, 2019, p.92), not many first-year courses use the opportunity to include it. According to Kofinas and Tsay (2021), "there are good reasons for" (p. 761) the preference toward small classes to predominate in EE scholarship. Some of these reasons include the greater possibility to develop stronger connections, increasing the willingness to share and participate more, and enhancing trust and significant relationships for a better EE experience (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021). Additionally, because of this preference toward small classes, most EE activities are designed for smaller groups, which may require extra coordination and planning when adapting to larger classes, consequently, creating a new set of challenges (Agogué & Robinson, 2020). In this view, it becomes ever more important to understand the facilitators and challenges for conducting experiential education in large first-year courses, to be able to expose students to experiential education earlier on in their educational development and be

able to provide the first building blocks that are required in upper-year EE courses. What prevents instructors from including EE in large first-year courses, and how the conditions of first-year large classes can be used as an advantage, will be explored in the next few sections.

1.4 What is a Large Class?

In order to understand the barriers pertaining to 'large' classes, it is important to first define what a large class consists of. Even though there is no agreement between the many definitions of large classes, which also differ across different academic disciplines, scholars usually define them with negative connotations. Literature often presents the idea of a large course as a class (both in the physical and virtual delivery model) in which the number of enrolled students makes the quality, delivery, and equality of both teaching and learning challenging (Mantai & Huber, 2021). Trinh et al. (2021), however, would argue that the negative connotations associated with 'large' classes mostly stem from "the lens of the traditional, information-transfer educational model of instructor-led, lecture-based classrooms as opposed to a bottom-up, participative, and experiential model of teaching and learning" (p. 788). Though not all scholars agree, this means that it is not the characteristics of large classes per se but rather the scepticism about them that generates a negative impact on student education (Trinh et al., 2021). In terms of the number of students per class, the range of a 'large' course can go from 30 to 50, or even greater than 100 students, most common in research universities (Mantai & Huber, 2021; Trinh et al., 2021). For Lund Dean and Wright (2017), a 'large' course constitutes a course in which "the number of students in the class limits the extent to which students can be physically or vocally active" (p. 653). Nevertheless, for Mantai and Huber, in the case of EE, specifically, "a class with over 50 students would be difficult for only one teacher to provide… [the needed] immersive and interactive experience" (p.722). To define large classes in the case of UBC Vancouver, since all Arts

departments differ in size, a range of 50 students or higher, relative to the department size, was selected. For example, in a large department, such as Geography, where first-year courses range from 200 to 250 students, the courses defined as 'large' had a significantly higher student population in comparison to a 'large' course in a smaller department, such as the department of Central, Eastern, and Northern European studies, where the highest number of students in a first-year course was 50. In that sense, the definition for 'large' classes used at UBC Vancouver varied by department size and took into consideration the extent of student participation in a course, the resources available for each department, and the number of TA's assigned for each course by the departments, rather than focusing on a specific numerical value to draw the boundary.

1.5 Challenges of Experiential Education in Large First-Year Classes

In connection to experiential education, existing research tends to emphasise the challenges that large classes bring to both students and faculty when implementing experiential education (Agogué & Robinson, 2020; Kofinas & Tsay, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021). For students, the difficulty to create relationships with faculty hinders their active engagement in the class, or being "physically or vocally active" (Mantai & Huber, 2021, p.791), which also affects their need to prepare for specific activities, and impacts their educational fulfilment by the end of the course (Mantai & Huber, 2021; Trinh et al., 2021). Experiential education itself has also been linked to increased student anxiety, also referred to as the shadow side of experiential learning, as a result of being pushed outside of one's comfort zone (Elmes, 2019). The high levels of student anxiety can result in defensive and withdrawal behaviours, which decrease the likelihood of the student seeking meaningful feedback and engaging in reflection (Black et al., 2021). Since students often lack the emotional, social, and cognitive competence to reflect on their own development, experiential

education offers little value to those who are not fully engaged (Black et al., 2021). This becomes even more prevalent in a large class where the meaningful coaching from the instructor is reduced and students are able to easily disengage from the group activity (Black et al., 2021; Mantai & Huber, 2021). Elmes (2019) further argues that "relational challenges might arise around issues related to, for example, authority, inclusion, exclusion, influence, control, and affection" (p. 101). This is due to the fact that authority dynamics are more ambiguous in experiential education than in traditional lecture-based models, whereby the control over learning constantly shifts between faculty and students and causes certain participants to feel anxious, confused, and out of control (Elmes, 2019).

In the case of faculty, the lack of opportunities to give individual attention or substantial formative assessment to students and the shortage of time to cover all course curriculum and objectives are some of the constant factors in literature that explain the resistance of faculty to develop EE in large classes (Mantai & Huber, 2021; Trinh et al., 2021; Agogué & Robinson, 2020). The planning and designing of an EE activity can also increase work strain and burnout in faculty who have to balance their responsibilities between being an educator, conducting research, and service (Black et al., 2021). Mantai and Huber (2021) note that in their study, instructors listed time, workload, and resourcing pressures as the main barriers to developing and delivering experiential learning activities in large classes. According to Grain and Gerhard (2020), the labour of experiential education is also often gendered and racialized, with women and Indigenous scholars taking on more workload than their counterparts. Experiential education activities often cover less content than lecture-based approaches, which means that there is a constant trade between breadth or depth of the subject and oftentimes there is not enough time to plan, design experiential learning, and organise the rest of the teaching team e.g. TA's (Mantai & Huber, 2021). Furthermore, Lund Dean and Wright (2017) demonstrate that there are a myriad of other

considerations that should be taken into account when deciding whether or not to implement experiential learning in one's large course. Such considerations range from student well-being (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017), to ethical considerations and principles when dealing with community partners (Gadhoke et al., 2019), to the creation of a hospitable learning space, both physical and psychological, required for successful experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2017 ; Trinh et al,. 2021), to logistical issues and institutional context (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017 ; Grain & Gerhard, 2020), and even the instructor's ability to create and/or adapt an existing experiential learning activity, as well as the instructor's perception of their own capabilities to organise and execute an experiential learning course (Agogué & Robinson, 2021).

The decision to implement experiential learning is made even more complex for instructors when viewed in the context of large first-year courses, most of which continue to grow in size as universities enrol more and more students each year (O'Connor et al., 2021). The nature of the first-year itself, in which first-year courses act as introductory gateways to each discipline with no prerequisites, as well as other factors such as higher dropout rates in upper levels, teaching preference of professors, and the requirements of taking first-year courses in order to progress in one's degree, further contribute to the typical 'large' class size of a first-year course. As such, encountering the complexities of teaching a 'large' course is much more prevalent in the context of existing first-year courses. Lund Dean and Wright (2017) argue that "doubling or tripling the number of students in a class section is not merely additive - more of the same - but multiplicative in terms of complexity" (p.654). For this reason, for example in the case of UBC Vancouver, there is a lack of information on **large first year university classes** incorporating experiential learning pedagogies in their syllabi. Agogué and Robinson (2021) argue that perspectives regarding the value of experiential education exercises in large courses differ among instructors from enthusiasm to scepticism,

in particular when preparing to use experiential education for the first time. This is due to the fact that "to unseat the lecture mode and suggest non-lecture alternatives [one] often challenges long standing preferences for and norms about teaching in a mass education system" (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017, p. 653). Advocacy for engaged, or experiential, learning is often juxtaposed against the realities of course design in large higher education institutions where the infrastructure supports passive modes of teaching and learning, and where there's a lack of training, or even exposure, for academics to use non-lecture pedagogies (Lund Dean & Wright, 2017; Brownwell & Tanner, 2012). As such, the questions of (a) what motivates the instructors to pursue experiential education in a lecture-dominated educational environment, (b) how can the instructors be best supported, and (c) what adjustments need to be made to overcome the major barriers and to better navigate experiential learning in a large course, are actively raised.

1.6 Experiential Education: From Self Transformation to Social Change

To answer these questions it is important to mention that some large-classes advocates like Kofinas and Tsay (2021) explain that large classes are not the problem, but instead they are a way to overcome the "individualistic psychology-based model" (p.761) of EE as presented in Kolb's framework which tends to favorise EE in small classes. When EE is too focused on individual experiences it tends to corner the 'experience' part to only a design, delivery or technical issue, failing "to tackle some of the social and political issues intrinsic to all educational experiences" (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021, p.764-766). Moreover, in relation to first-year classes, scholars also explain how Kolb's individualistic learning cycle disregards the fact that confronting new experiences (such as EE, first-year courses, or both) might create feelings of fear, specifically, when encountering "the 'other' student" (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021, p. 773-774). In response to this problem, large classes are then presented as a "social

micro-cosmos" or social ecology of "a multitude of interconnected student communities" where they can learn from different social groups and where knowledge and "meaningful experiences of learning" can be absorbed by students' own conditions and needs (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021, p.761, 765). These social groups encompass both other students and faculty as Mantai and Huber (2021) note that "the teacher is not the only person students rely on for learning and for an engaging learning experience" (p.729). Educational designers, learning technologists, administrators, tutors, teaching assistants, and technologies all form part of the 'village' needed to facilitate experiential education (Mantai & Huber, 2021). In this way, large classes extend beyond the common psychological focus of experiential education by incorporating the sociological and ecological aspects of learning, as Quay (2003) proposed. It is the educator's role, therefore, to yield their 'invisible hand' intently to manage the social dynamics of the class and shift away from a focus on individuals to the learning of the class as a whole in order to develop a socially aware and reflective cohort (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021). Furthermore, as Forestal and Finch (2021) note, "successful experiential learning, even in a large lecture course, is an iterative process; as instructors run projects more and more often, and figure out what to expect they will be better able to convey important information and draw out connections between students' experiences both in- and outside of the classroom" (p.125). This means that as challenging as it may seem, instructors should not shy away from introducing experiential education in their large courses. By doing so, instructors make space for students to leverage their strengths and resources (Trinh et al., 2021), and to benefit from the pedagogic advantages of large classes such as enhancing students' freedom to learn, allowing for diversity in interactions, and facilitating insightful and meaningful group work (Kofinas & Tsay, 2021).

Alongside networked teaching, several other scholars have contributed potential solutions to the challenges of using experiential education in both first-year and large classes.

As Wright (2000) argues, it may prove to be beneficial to include short-term experiential education practices in Sociology courses, which do not take up vast amounts of time to complete but still retain the benefits of using experiential education. O'Connor et al. (2021) further suggest using virtual teams when trying to engage students in a virtual large class, through which students are able to engage both synchronously and asynchronously, while Donovan and Hood (2021) argue for the use of performative pedagogy in large classes. The shift in perception of 'large' courses from being challenging to beneficial may reduce the anxieties around implementing first-year experiential education, and can be used as a successful learning strategy. For example, Weller and Saam (2019) note that the Indiana University Kokomo have managed to successfully implement an experiential education program for first-years, recognising that "experiential learning needs to occur across all stages of a student's college experience, even before they declare their major" (p.92), in order to contribute both to student general learning and student retention.

1.7 Summary

This literature review intended to start setting the grounds to further answer our research questions. First, Experiential Education was scholarly defined along its different categories identified at UBC. This was followed by mentioning the general benefits and positive outcomes found in literature while also highlighting that these benefits might not be distributed equally among students (e.g., first-generation and underserved students). Nevertheless, instead of rejecting EE, as Taylor et.al (2019) suggest, introducing EE needs to be done by taking into consideration structural inequalities within an asset-based methodology. Moreover, the idea that EE is presented as a successful learning strategy by scholars within the margins of small upper year level-classes was discussed in connection to how usually large classes are viewed as challenging and unsuccessful. Some of the challenges

or the reasons why there could be resistance when combining large classes with EE were enlisted such as the concerns regarding student engagement, student anxiety, the ambiguity of authority dynamics between instructors and students, and lack of time to plan and cover class content. To make things more complex, when first-year courses are added to the equation of large experiential education classes, the idea of non-lecture alternatives in a mass education system, where the opposite is the norm, makes the introduction of experiential education in first-year courses ever so difficult. Finally, the paper noted key ideas surrounding the shift from psychological to sociological aspects of learning, whereby large classes should not be seen as an issue, as they actively form the 'village' needed for a successful experiential learning experience. The solutions proposed by various authors offer a new perspective on how experiential education can be conducted in large first-year courses, tackling some of the previously mentioned challenges.

1.8 Implications & Gap in Knowledge

The implications of the key factors discussed are that instructors are able to make informed decisions on the implementation of experiential education in large first-year courses based on the different types of EE, its benefits, its challenges, and some of the possible solutions. The factors also inform the resources and toolkits needed to support both instructors and students to overcome systemic issues related to EE and its challenges in large first-year courses. It allows for the development of better support systems for faculty and students, and encourages the use of experiential education as an effective learning strategy, as well as providing a clearer understanding of what experiential education is and what it can look like in first-year courses. As such, the toolkits are able to overcome the challenges of a lack of a shared understanding of EE at UBC Vancouver, struggles with communication and connection, inequity and exclusion, and teaching and learning difficulties, all of which have

been reported by Grain and Gerhard (2020) to be the main challenges and support needs for experiential education at UBC. Nevertheless, more research needs to be conducted on the ways in which first-year courses can better prepare and scaffold students for upper year experiential education practices, as well as on the inherent differences in the purpose of experiential education in first-year and upper years. There seems to be no distinctions between first-year and upper year experiential education in the literature which makes the planning of experiential activities difficult for those implementing EE specifically in first-year. Many of the case studies and exercises described seem to be more catered towards smaller upper year courses which may not be suitable for introductory first-year courses. As such, more focus on the foundations built in first-year through the use of experiential education and on the reasons for including EE in first-year is required for a more in-depth and nuanced review. The project needs to inquire further into why EE is important in first-year and how it can better prepare students for EE in upper years.

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