

BOOK REVIEW

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY: EXAMINING THE UNIVERSITY'S TEACHING MISSION

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Buzzelli, Michael (Ed.) (2025). *Experiential Learning and Community: Examining the University's Teaching Mission*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 235. Price: 75 CAD (hardcover).

Experiential learning (EL) has expanded rapidly across higher education, yet its definition and implementation remain fluid. In this context, Michael Buzzelli brings together twelve chapters that examine the role of EL in shaping the university's teaching mission and its relationship with local and global communities. Rather than giving a fixed definition, the book adopts an "inclusive" definition of EL to reflect the rapid expansion and conceptual diversity of the field. In this volume, EL is presented not only as a pedagogical approach but also as a force that reshapes institutional priorities, community relationships, and the broader social role of higher education.

The book is organized into three sections: learners and intra-institutional dynamics, partnerships and community networks, and EL in relation to local governance and sustainability. These sections address key questions about how universities organize around EL, how they engage with community partners, and how EL contributes to broader societal challenges. A key strength of the book is its consistent emphasis on the close connection between experiential learning and community engagement.

The first section examines how EL is understood and implemented within universities. In Chapter 2, the author challenges simplified understandings of graduate employability, arguing that EL should not only produce "work-ready" graduates but also "work-changing" individuals who can question and transform professional practices. This perspective expands the purpose of higher education beyond labour market preparation to include democratic citizenship and social responsibility. Chapter 3 further explores institutional challenges by highlighting tensions between managerial and academic priorities. While universities increasingly promote EL as a strategic priority, its implementation requires significant "logic work" to align institutional goals with academic values and reward systems. Without such alignment, EL risks becoming a short-term initiative rather than a sustained part of the university's teaching mission.

The second section shifts focus to relationships between universities and communities. Several chapters underscore the importance of involving stakeholders, especially those directly affected by EL, in the

design, delivery, and evaluation of learning experiences. This “participatory” approach challenges traditional hierarchies and calls for collaboration, shared responsibility, and ongoing communication among stakeholders. Additionally, Chapter 5 examines social innovation (SI) and social enterprise and entrepreneurship (SEE), showing how different institutional priorities, such as market, state, and community interests, shape community-engaged EL initiatives. While community goals often guide these efforts, market and state pressures can create tensions that influence institutional priorities and practices.

Notably, issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) are also central throughout this section. Chapter 7, which examines Indigenous storytelling and community-engaged learning, addresses the potential of EL to challenge colonial structures and foster reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities. Similarly, in Chapter 8, when discussing community-engaged experiential learning (CEEL), the authors note the importance of addressing power imbalances and engaging historically excluded populations through practices such as listening, reflection, and early intervention. These chapters suggest that without careful attention to ethics and equity, EL risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to address.

The final section broadens the scope to consider EL within global, environmental, and governance contexts. Through international case studies, including examples from Italy and the Netherlands, this section illustrates how EL is shaped by diverse policy frameworks, institutional structures, and socio-economic conditions. These chapters introduce both the opportunities and challenges of integrating EL into formal educational systems, particularly in relation to evaluation, stakeholder coordination, and long-term sustainability. The emphasis on sustainability and “grand societal challenges” also positions EL as a key mechanism for preparing students to address complex global issues through interdisciplinary and community-engaged approaches.

Across the volume, a recurring theme is the tension between the expansion of EL and the capacity of universities to support it effectively. While EL is often promoted as a high-impact practice, its implementation raises critical questions about resources, governance, assessment, and institutional priorities. The Afterword section synthesizes these concerns by asking why universities are investing in EL and how different institutional logics shape its development. It suggests that the future of EL will depend on how well institutions align their goals, resources, and expectations, particularly regarding the production of both “work-ready” and “work-changing” graduates.

One of the main strengths of this book is its ability to move beyond overly positive narratives of EL to offer a balanced and critical examination. By integrating conceptual, empirical, and comparative perspectives, it presents EL as a complex and evolving area of practice that operates across pedagogical, organizational, and societal levels. Its focus on Canadian contexts and international examples makes it particularly relevant for scholars and practitioners interested in higher education in North America and European countries.

However, the diverse range of topics also presents some challenges. While the inclusive definition of EL reflects the current state of the field, it could lead to conceptual ambiguity, making it difficult to draw clear boundaries or develop a consistent framework across chapters. Additionally, the chapters also differ in focuses and approaches, which can make the book feel somewhat uneven, with some chapters more closely connected to the university's teaching mission than others.

Despite these challenges, *Experiential Learning and Community* offers valuable insights for a wide range of audiences. By critically examining the intersections of pedagogy, institutional dynamics, and community engagement, it challenges readers to reconsider the purposes and practices of EL within universities. For faculty and administrators, the book provides critical reflections on the design, implementation, and evaluation of EL initiatives, as well as practical considerations for

building meaningful community partnerships. For researchers, it presents a rich foundation of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that can inform future studies on EL and higher education. More broadly, the book contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of universities in society, particularly in relation to community engagement, social responsibility, and student learning.