HOW DO YOU PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH ROBUST LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT?

TEL Education piloted three courses focused on experiential learning to find out. Here is what we learned.
Experiential learning has long been the primary form of knowledge acquisition and retention. Going by different names, such as authentic learning, anchored instruction, “learning through doing,” or cognitive apprenticeship, experiential learning focuses on the premise of learning through hands-on experiences and collaboration.

It has been the primary pedagogical approach for trade skills in career and technical education. However, experiential learning approaches are less common in online education, particularly in the post-secondary space. This can often be due to the vast foundational knowledge students must acquire prior to application in many academic fields, as well as the struggle to provide genuine experiences to students in survey-focused courses.

With a focus on lifelong learning and transforming students’ lives through education, TEL Education was looking to integrate this educational approach into its online, asynchronous courses. Three courses were used in the pilot experiential learning program: Introduction to Communication, American Government, and Introduction to Information Technology.
DESIGN CHALLENGES

A primary challenge in designing experiential learning courses for this project centered around the ability to create an agile curriculum for a multitude of learning environments and to combine a typically non-linear learning approach with a structured, linear-course format. TEL designers identified a number of challenges to address when tackling the unique needs of online learners.

Asynchronous Learning
In typical experiential learning environments, “in-the-moment” teaching often happens when students receive hands-on experience under the guidance of an expert. This is difficult to replicate in an online environment.

Self-Paced Learning
TEL Education’s model centers around the flexibility of a self-paced learning, which makes collaborative and reflective elements challenging when learners are on different learning levels at different points in the course.

Independent Work
In the self-paced model, the typical TEL student completes their work independently from their peers. Adapting experiential learning to this particular learning environment was difficult because students needed opportunities to work with others, including peer experts.

Variety of Resources and Environments
Another challenge of experiential learning is the variety of resources available to the students. Setting up apprenticeships, internships, hands-on experiences with experts, or pointing students to the same organizations was not possible with students living all over the country. Creating agile solutions to this problem with centralized instructions and assignments was by far the most challenging aspect of this design.
DESIGN SOLUTIONS

Through the use of virtual meet-ups, portfolio and badging tools, and carefully scaffolded project-based assignments, these three courses were redesigned to provide students with richer learning experiences.

Community-Focused Assignments
In each course, students identified a community problem related to the specific course they were taking (communication, government, or information technology). Working with local governments, organizations, and community experts, students created a proposal or solution to this problem through a series of scaffolded assignments that built into a final presentation of the project. For example, in American Government, students were asked to develop a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) that sought to assess structural weaknesses in their local and state governments and develop a series of corresponding policy solutions. Students used a third-party peer review system to upload their work and evaluate others at each stage of the project creation process.

Badging Assignments
Students earned badges by completing small participation assignments throughout the course. These assignments helped students iterate on their projects and ideas while also creating a portfolio of what they’d learned. The badging assignments were designed to scaffold the student projects into manageable pieces. For example, students could earn the Writing Badge by creating a professionally composed email that they could send to an organization or expert to request help with their project.

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Resource Library
Because a new online experience like this can be complex to navigate, we also created a resource library for students to use throughout the course. The library included tutorials and web pages that students could use to navigate the course.

Virtual Meet-ups
Students were required to attend virtual meet-ups with their instructors and other students enrolled in the experiential learning courses. Students were able to discuss projects with each other all across the nation and provide suggestions and solutions to project problems as well as receive guidance from the instructors.

To learn more about the feedback we received from the students in the course and which solutions we are incorporating into our wider course catalog, check out our full research report.