

TRANSFORMING A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM INTO A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

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Through a previous review of high impact practices at our institution, we identified that health science students have very few opportunities to engage in experiential learning (EL) in the current curriculum. This paper describes our work to transform an existing volunteer opportunity at an allied health clinic, into a meaningful, student-driven, co-curricular EL opportunity. Specifically, we incorporated critical EL elements (i.e. reflection, feedback) into the existing volunteer program and developed five program specific learning outcomes (LO). We then tracked volunteers' self-selected participation in a variety of activities and collected volunteers' and practitioners' assessment of LO achievement. This paper presents LO data from the first offering of this EL opportunity and discusses the challenges we faced and lessons learned through this process so that it may inform other institutions considering implementing co-curricular EL opportunities.

High impact educational practices, (HIP), refer to well-recognized pedagogical approaches, such as first year seminars, internships and community/service learning, that have been shown to improve student engagement and enhance student learning across a variety of settings (Kuh, 2008). We recently conducted an institution-wide scan to better understand student participation in Kuh's ten commonly accepted HIPs. From this exercise, it was identified that many students in health science majors were not having the opportunity to engage in Experiential Learning (EL) prior to graduation (Cook & Ritchie, 2017). In fact, less than 10% of health science students report having participated in EL as part of their curriculum. This finding, coupled with provincial government initiatives to increase EL opportunities in order to improve university graduates' readiness to join the work force (MAESD, 2017b), prompted us to explore creative strategies to expose more students to the educational and professional benefits of EL.

Our institution has defined EL as “a pedagogical practice whereby students gain new knowledge, skills and abilities due to the intentional application of classroom learning in a workplace setting, ... which must be grounded in an intentional learning cycle and have clearly defined learning outcomes (LO)” (Lachapelle and Whiteside, 2017). Kolb's experiential learning cycle is most commonly cited when describing EL, where learning is presented as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984). In Kolb's framework, a learner must progress through 4 stages: 1) concrete experience 2) reflective observation 3) abstract conceptualization and 4) active experimentation, to fully engage with the learning process. Our working definition of EL was also informed by the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), which has identified six criteria that an experience must satisfy in order to 'count' as EL (eg: take place in a workplace or simulated workplace, expose students to authentic tasks etc.) (MAESD, 2017a).

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While several well-known EL structures fit within Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle and satisfy the MAESD criteria, (eg: Co-ops, internships, field placements etc.), these programs typically require significant resources (time, financial and personnel) to set up and maintain. We were motivated to explore alternative EL structures that could satisfy these criteria and deliver demonstrable student learning, but in a less resource intensive way. Our solution was to explore student-led, co-curricular experiences (CCE) as untapped sources of EL.

Co-curricular experiences (CCE) are out of classroom activities that extend students' learning and provide additional opportunities for individuals to engage in learning or personal development while meeting program and/or institutional level learning outcomes (Suskie, 2015). Kuh has estimated that up to 50% of student learning at University takes place through engagement with CCE (Kuh, 1993). Many Canadian institutions, including the University of Calgary, the University of Guelph and McGill University, recognize this important contribution by documenting selected activities (eg: varsity athletics, student governments etc.) on some form of official co-curricular record. To be considered co-curricular, (as opposed to extra-curricular) an experience should be intentionally linked to the curriculum, although how this link occurs is not always clear. That is, while learning is known to happen outside of the classroom, students still need to be directed through clear Learning Outcomes (LO) and intentionally developed activities to support their learning (Tremblay, Lalancette & Roseveare, 2012). Considering this, we set out to transform an existing, extra-curricular student volunteer opportunity into a meaningful co-curricular EL opportunity with demonstrable student LO. Since we were targeting health science students, our context was the Health and Performance Centre (HPC), an allied health provider clinic that is independently operated but located on our University campus.

Our objectives were twofold. First, we updated the existing HPC volunteer program to include critical EL elements and developed clear and measurable LO to guide students learning and articulate the expectations of the program. Second, we tracked volunteer participation across a variety of activities within the program and collected self-assessments and practitioner-feedback to document LO achievement. This paper describes the steps we took to develop a volunteer-based EL opportunity and presents key LO data from the first year of running the program. We also discuss the advantages and challenges of delivering EL using a student-led, not-for credit program, and the lessons we learned which may be helpful to others considering non-traditional EL structures.

STEP 1: TRANSFORMING AN EXTRA-CURRICULAR VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY INTO A CO-CURRICULAR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Existing Volunteer Program

The volunteer program under study was run through the Health and Performance Centre (HPC), an independently-operated allied health care clinic located on the University campus, offering physiotherapy, chiropractic, nutrition, massage and sport medicine services to university members and the greater community. An informal extra-curricular volunteer program, comprised mostly of undergraduate students shadowing a practitioner for a set shift each week, had been operating via graduate-student oversight to varying degrees for at least ten years. Anywhere from 20 to 50 students had been involved through the centre in a given year. Graduate students, through a form of a teaching assistant (TA) position, would coordinate volunteer shadowing schedules (2hr/week) and help liaise between volunteers and practitioners

as problems arose. Opportunities for additional involvement in 'supplementary activities', broadly categorized as i) outreach activities (eg: hosting high school groups), ii) discipline specific activities (eg: chiropractic journal club) or iii) content development (eg: writing a monthly newsletter) had been a sporadic part of the volunteer program over the years, reflecting changes in practitioner engagement, special events etc.

Experiential Learning Updates

In order to adapt this volunteering opportunity into a co-curricular EL opportunity, we reviewed the existing HPC program against i) Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning and ii) The six MAESD criteria for EL. We then made any necessary updates to the program during the summer semester and developed clear and measurable LO that could be used to document student learning during the subsequent academic year.

To satisfy Kolb's cycle of EL, our program must provide opportunities for students to progress through 4 distinct stages. We were confident that volunteers had consistently been engaging in concrete experience, through practitioner shadowing and participation in a range of other HPC sponsored activities, but they were lacking intentional reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. To address these specific deficiencies, we added guided reflections, goal-setting exercises and multiple points of feedback throughout the 8 month volunteer program. Specifically, graduate TAs guided volunteers through reflection exercises at the end of each semester, and all volunteers were required to submit their individual written reflections as documentation. This addition satisfied the *reflective observation* stage. In order to address *abstract conceptualization*, (i.e. the learning from experience stage), volunteers were instructed on how to set goals (short and long term) at the beginning of the program and then were required to update these goals midway through the program after reflecting on their experience to date. Volunteers also completed structured self-assessments at the end of each semester to document their learning in 5 key domains and practitioners provided individualized feedback to volunteers each semester using the same structured form. Together, intentional goal-setting and constructive feedback allows students to learn from their early experience in the program and make a deliberate plan to continue to develop for the duration of the program. Finally, *active experimentation*, (i.e. where the learner applies what they have learned), can now take place as the volunteers continue in the HPC program for a full academic year (8 months) and are given the opportunity to become involved in more supplementary activities. Notably, graduate TAs engaged with practitioners before the start of the academic year to ensure that a variety of supplemental activities would be available for volunteers to contribute to over the course of their 2-semester commitment. With these additions, all volunteers should be progressing through the complete EL cycle (Figure 1).

When this updated program is compared against the six criteria of EL set forth by MAESD, our program is now fully compliant. Specifically, our HPC program would be considered a co-curricular EL opportunity because volunteers are 1) learning in a *workplace setting*, where they are exposed to 2) *authentic demands*. The program is structured with 3) *a variety of purposeful activities*, where the student must 4) *apply their program knowledge*. Notably, the program now includes multiple points of 5) *self-assessment and practitioner-feedback* for each volunteer. Finally, while the HPC volunteer opportunity does not 6) *count towards course credit or credential completion*, it can still satisfy this sixth criteria providing the *university formally recognizes* that the opportunity *meets the 5 criteria above*.

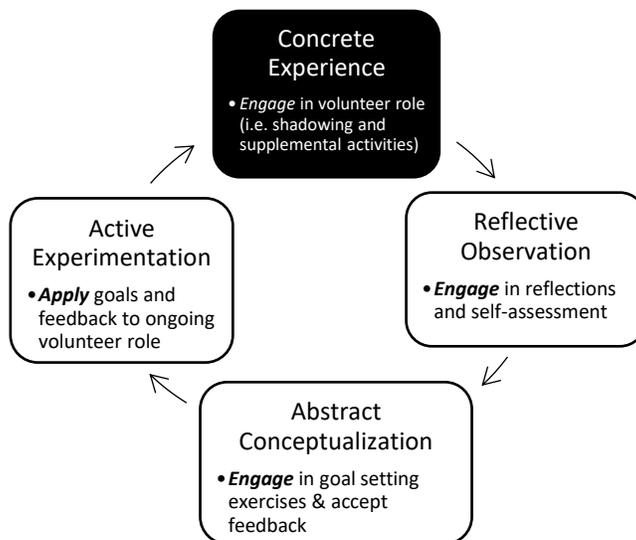


Figure 1. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle applied to the HPC Co-curricular EL program.

Once all updates were in place, we reflected on the entirety of the revised volunteer program; including the mandatory practitioner shadowing, the intentionally added supplemental activities and the newly incorporated reflection, goal setting and assessment exercises. With this perspective, we created HPC specific LO that reflected the range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that a volunteer should be able to achieve by fully engaging with all elements of the program. Specifically, five domains were identified: Application of Knowledge, Integration and Synthesis, Communication, Collaboration and Professional Development, with basic and advanced levels of achievement possible within each domain (Table 1). The syntax and language used to write the LO was based on guidelines from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Adelman, 2015). These LO aligned well with BSc and University wide LO (University of Guelph, 2012).

Table 1

HPC Volunteer Program Learning Outcomes.

Learning Outcome Domain	Description of Levels
Communication	<u>Basic</u> : student effectively communicates information in written or oral format but may not adapt the information to their audience.
	<u>Advanced</u> : student adapts their messaging to meet the audience’s needs by providing examples, altering how information is presented.
Application of Knowledge	<u>Basic</u> : student can answer questions during an in-clinic session based on academic material previously learned.
	<u>Advanced</u> : student can use what they know from academics and their experiences at HPC to apply it in more complex scenarios.

Table 1 (continued)

Investigation & Synthesis	<u>Basic</u> : student researches information from three sources to produce information in a written or oral format.
	<u>Advanced</u> : student shows comfort considering different perspectives and can integrate opposing information to formulate a cohesive message.
Professional Development	<u>Basic</u> : student takes initiative to become involved in three different activities at HPC.
	<u>Advanced</u> : student is able to indicate how the skills they have learned through their involvement at HPC will help them in future.
Collaboration	<u>Basic</u> : student shows accountability within their various roles as a team member at HPC.
	<u>Advanced</u> : student takes a lead role within the program and is able to motivate with other volunteers to ensure successful task completion.

STEP 2: DOCUMENTING STUDENT LEARNING IN A CO-CURRICULAR EL OPPORTUNITY

Once the HPC EL program had been developed, our second objective was to track volunteers' self-selected participation in the variety of available activities, and document learning in our five identified domains using self-assessment and practitioner-feedback reports. Ethical approval was obtained for this research.

The first offering of the updated HPC EL program took place over the 2017-2018 academic year. One hundred students applied to the program and 30 students were offered and accepted a position following a competitive application and interview process. Most volunteers were upper year students (3rd & 4th year), in a health science major (HK, Biomed), with equal distribution between males and females. Two graduate TAs were assigned to oversee the program, and each TA committed 5hr/week for two semesters (i.e. 140 hours total per TA).

Each volunteer was assigned to shadow and engage with a specific practitioner during the same 2hr shift each week. Shadowing hours were recorded manually using sign in sheets at the clinic but were then transferred by GTAs onto an HPC volunteer course website. Participation in supplemental activities was recorded on an ongoing basis by having volunteers submit a standardized 'supplemental activity form' to the course website for graduate TAs to approve. It should be noted that shadowing is assigned to all volunteers and is considered a core/mandatory component of the HPC program, while students can voluntarily sign up for supplemental activities over the course of the semester.

Over the 2017-2018 academic year, volunteers participated in an average of 50 total hours (range: 39-82.5 hours), with 46 of these hours coming from one-on-one practitioner shadowing (range: 39-54.5 hours) and only 4 hours coming from supplemental activities (range: 0-39 hours). Fourteen volunteers did not complete any supplementary activities. Although volunteers are strongly encouraged to engage in at least 10 hours of supplemental activities each semester (communicated during orientation and welcome back meetings), there were no formal repercussions if someone chooses not to. Therefore, while disappointing, it is perhaps not surprising in hindsight that nearly half of the volunteers did not participate in activities beyond the in-clinic shadowing.

At the end of each semester, both volunteers and practitioners were asked to complete self-assessment/volunteer-feedback forms. These forms were developed by graduate TAs and

required the assessor to select whether a volunteer had met the basic or advanced level for each LO. HPC specific examples were provided for each LO and an open box was included for the assessor to provide their own supporting example to justify their rating. The graduate TAs reviewed all returned forms for completion.

By the end of the academic year, all volunteers report meeting the basic levels for application of knowledge, communication and collaboration (Figure 2). Most volunteers also report having achieved the advanced level in the application of knowledge and communication domains (89% and 73% of volunteers respectively), indicating that they had developed sufficiently to apply both academic and practical knowledge to in-clinic scenarios that arose, and when sharing information with others, they had adapted their communication methods and messaging to suit the needs of their audience. Less than 30% of volunteers met the advanced level of collaboration, suggesting that while volunteers were being accountable in their role on the HPC team (basic collaboration), they were not seeking out leadership positions to motivate their fellow peers. Interestingly, more volunteers report having met the advanced level of professional development compared to the basic level (66% vs. 44%). This surprised us as LO levels were intended to be successive, however upon closer investigation, this result indicates that volunteers are able to articulate how their HPC experience will assist them in future professional activities, despite not participating in the variety of HPC activities available. This suggests that the added reflection exercises were having an impact on students, however student engagement in the multiple opportunities within the program could be improved. Finally, students had the least success meeting the investigation & synthesis LO, as less than 50% achieved the basic or advanced level. This finding aligns well with our participation data. Volunteers would have had to engage in supplementary activities such as developing information for outreach events or newsletters to showcase this skill, and only 50% of volunteers collected any supplementary hours. Similar overall patterns in LO achievement were observed based on practitioner-assessments, although practitioners rated volunteers as slightly more advanced.

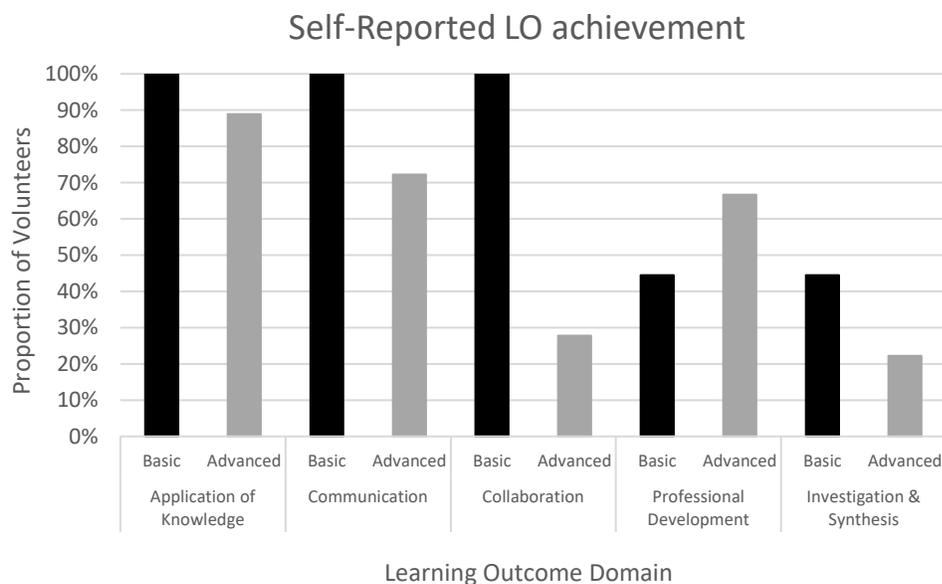


Figure 2. Proportion of volunteers achieving HPC program LOs by the end of the academic year according to volunteer self-assessments

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This project sought to determine if an existing, student-led, volunteer opportunity could be enhanced to meet accepted EL criteria and frameworks and engage students in meaningful learning, despite being not-for-credit. Our experience suggests that yes, an extra-curricular activity has the potential to be converted to a meaningful co-curricular EL opportunity on a relatively short timeline and with limited financial and personnel resources. Notably, all improvements and updates for this project were initiated and executed by graduate TAs over a summer semester (in consultation with practitioners and faculty). Furthermore, we have shown that student motivation and interest to become involved in these activities is high, although engagement in the varied aspects of the program was not as consistent as we had anticipated. Despite this limitation, volunteers can develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes in key employability domains, although more complete engagement in the program would likely result in more LO being met at an advanced level.

Our novel student-led, co-curricular EL model presented us with several advantages compared to more traditional curricular-embedded EL designs. Specifically, the volunteer program was reviewed, updated and ready to be delivered over the course of a summer semester. If we were to launch this experience using a traditional for-credit course model, it would have required significantly greater lead-time and multiple approval stages. Also, the program is relatively cost-effective. While graduate TAs do receive financial compensation for their involvement, this absolute cost is quite efficient considering 30 students are involved in the program for two full semesters. A final unforeseen advantage of this model is an invaluable experience provided for the graduate TAs who, rather than primarily grading course assessments, have the opportunity to develop their own professional skills in areas such as volunteer management, program administration, and communicating with stakeholders.

However, challenges also arose with our model, primarily related to engagement. Volunteers and practitioners easily engaged in the status quo (i.e. shadowing) but both groups were more resistant to fully engage in the updated elements (supplemental activities by volunteers, and individualized feedback by practitioners). We recognize that neither students nor practitioners receive any explicit incentive for participating in the program, such as course credit or monetary compensation. Nonetheless, engagement within the program offers students and practitioners the opportunity to develop professional skills through participating in and supervising EL, respectively. Managing contributions of practitioners and volunteers will be an ongoing and evolving discussion.

Our take home findings from the development stage of this project is that, while many volunteer or similar on-campus activities can provide students with a 'concrete experience' that has significant learning potential, special attention should be given to ensure that students have the opportunity (and guidance) to intentionally reflect on their experience, receive constructive feedback from others and be given the time and space so that they may continue to experiment with their learning. Also, clear LO should accompany any EL opportunity as a way to guide students and set clear expectations. These seemingly simple elements may be what differentiate *participating* in an activity from meaningful *experiential learning*.

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