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Small Teaching Meets Experiential Learning: A Case and Framework for Accessible Experiential Learning in Post-Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

Many post-secondary institutions have mandates to ensure access to high-quality experiential learning (EL) for all undergraduate students. Historically, EL initiatives have focused on immersive, high-impact practices like co-op and internship placements, honours research theses, and global exchanges, which are time- and resource-intensive for both students and institutions. While there are many benefits to participating in these experiences, not all students have the resources or interest to take part in these immersive types of EL. To broaden participation in EL across campus contexts, we advocate for a strategic shift in EL's typical focus on highly immersive programs to include smaller-scale, course-embedded experiences—what we call "Small EL"—that maintain pedagogical value while removing traditional barriers to access. As we define them, Small EL activities are time bound, focused, and lower risk, making them adaptable across disciplines and accessible to diverse student populations. Through an exploration of the experiences of five academics in different roles, we provide a framework for developing, implementing, assessing, and supporting Small EL across a large research-intensive university. This approach to scaling EL not only addresses equity concerns by making EL accessible to historically underserved populations but also offers institutions a scalable strategy to meet performance metrics while enhancing student engagement and skill development.

KEYWORDS

course-embedded experiential learning, small experiential learning, inclusive education, accessible learning

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is facing mounting pressure to equip students with practical skills and career-ready experiences (Green, Sanczyk, Chambers, Mraz, and Polly 2023; National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2018). Research demonstrates that experiential learning (EL) enhances student engagement, career readiness, and civic consciousness while developing crucial professional and interpersonal skills (Cuthbert, Arunachalam, and Licina 2012; Duchatelet, Cornelissen, and Volman 2024; Eyler 2009; Kuh 2008; Lopatto et al. 2020; McRae 2018). Given strong connections between EL and career readiness, many institutions issue mandates ensuring all students have access to EL, with some institutions making it a universal graduation requirement. Furthermore,

in certain regions, governments place external pressure on institutions to provide EL, and they use EL participation as a performance-based metric linked to institutional base funding. This reflects a "neo-liberal . . . trend within postsecondary to promote student engagement through co-curricular experiences" (Martini, Verby-Verutis, Grose, Clarke, and Elder 2019, 114).

While high-impact EL practices, such as co-op programs, internships, research, and international exchanges, remain valuable, they frequently require substantial time commitments, financial resources, or scheduling flexibility that many students cannot afford, creating barriers to EL participation (Finley and McNair 2013; Hora, Chen, Parrott, and Her 2019; Stowe, Flanagan, Loy, Laios, Braun, Fung, and Dizon 2022; Wolfgram, Akram, and Vivona 2020). These barriers can have a disproportionate impact on equity-deserving groups (Braun 2020; National Survey of College Internships Report 2024; Stowe, O'Connell, Chew, Braun, and Kaipainen 2022). In response to the tension between the recognized benefits of EL and accessibility challenges, some institutions and instructors have started to explore more inclusive approaches to embedding EL within their curricula (Banerjee and Bingen 2024; Graves 2021; Green, Kolb, Kolb, and Kuh 2024).

In reflecting on how to enhance EL within the genuine constraints on faculty and student time, resources, and energy, we found inspiration in Lang's 2016 book, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Lang articulates how instructors often struggle to make radical changes to their teaching practices, emphasizing instead that "fundamental pedagogical improvement was possible through incremental change" (Lang 2016, 4). Lang defines "small teaching" as:

> an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices. Small teaching as a fully developed strategy draws from the deep well of research on learning and higher education to create a deliberate, structured, and incremental approach to changing our courses for the better. (5)

Lang demonstrates how brief activities lasting five to ten minutes or single course modifications can significantly impact student learning while remaining manageable for faculty. These evidence-based approaches increase engagement while requiring minimal preparation and grading. Though Lang didn't develop these strategies specifically for EL, the underlying principles—intentional design, manageable scale, and evidence-based implementation—provide valuable groundwork for reimagining experiential education.

Just as small teaching practices can transform traditional classroom learning, we propose that Small EL can deliver many of the benefits of larger-scale EL while remaining feasible within existing course structures and resources. We define Small EL as experiential learning that is intentionally narrow in scope, concentrating on a particular aspect of a subject, experience, or skill that can be integrated into regular instruction. To ensure Small EL maintains pedagogical integrity, we use the A.I.R. framework for EL—authenticity, intentional design, and reflective practice (Flanagan, Stowe, Martineau, Kenny, and Kaipainen 2024)—plus three additional characteristics:

1. **Time-boundedness**—Activities fit within a single class, lab, tutorial, or a defined and short timeframe (e.g., a single-day job shadow, a 20-hour micro-placement, or a field trip). These experiences have very clear beginning and end points that students are aware of at the outset, though they may also recur throughout the term.

2. **Focused—**The EL opportunity is focused on a specific skill or topic, or is a chance to "dip your toe" into an experience. This often involves identifying a particular topic/lecture that students find challenging and redesigning it as an experiential learning activity.
3. **Lower risk**—The experience has a relatively low risk for both students and faculty. It does not substantially impact the student's grades or require a significant time commitment, making participation in Small EL a low-stakes opportunity to practice hands-on learning.

We distilled these three characteristics from years of conversations among our research team, the Small EL Community of Practice (described below), and relevant scholarly works, including Lang (2016). Examples of Small EL include case studies, interactive simulations or demonstrations, student-led classes, poster sessions, debates and discussions, role-play exercises, field trips, brief field observations, guest speakers, short problem-solving challenges, mini-performances, and more. Many instructors already use such Small EL activities in their classrooms. However, students, faculty, and institutions may not recognize these activities as EL and may benefit from additional, intentional development in dialogue with the A.I.R. framework. Moreover, Small EL differs from "active learning" through such elements of intentional design. A recent study by Doolittle, Wojdak, and Walters (2023, 10) found definitions of active learning typically include "(a) students engaging in and reflecting on activities (i.e., doing), and (b) not engaging in passive lecture (i.e., listening and note taking)." The A.I.R. framework narrows these definitions by focusing on authenticity ("meaningful, relevant, embodied" engagements with "purposeful challenges or problems") and intentionality (in design and integration into programs/ curricula) (Flanagan et al. 2024, 66). While all EL could also be considered active learning, not all active learning is necessarily EL.

We are not the first to propose that EL can be meaningful when it happens in smaller ways. Scarce (1997) first characterized field trips as "short-term" EL opportunities. Wright (2000, 116–17) built upon this, describing short-term EL as assignments that "ask students to integrate course material with a brief excursion to observe or participate in a related social phenomenon," adding that short-term EL "can be incorporated into a course for a brief period, often lasting less than a day." In large classrooms, small EL activities, such as 20-minute performative presentations that incorporate acting, music, dance, and role-play, enhance student engagement (Donovan and Hood 2021). However, previous research paid less attention to how smaller-scale EL can deliver similar benefits to a broader student population. This gap is particularly relevant for large research universities, where resource constraints and high enrollment numbers make scaling immersive EL challenging.

Here, we explore how intentionally designed Small EL initiatives can advance institutional goals for EL while promoting equity and inclusion. We invite instructors to engage in careful, intentional forms of curriculum design that make EL accessible and feasible despite the many resource limitations faced by faculty and students. We undertake a multi-perspective methodology that blends a conceptual inquiry into EL design and culture with reflective case studies from successful implementations in arts and science courses, as well as the perspective of an associate dean involved in supporting and implementing EL. Using these narratives as evidence, our work gives practical guidance for instructors and administrators seeking to implement Small EL within existing courses. By highlighting the value of Small EL and providing concrete strategies for its implementation, we expand the conversation around experiential education beyond traditional immersive practices. Embracing smaller-scale, course-embedded experiences is a crucial step toward making EL an inclusive, high-quality, and low-barrier component of higher education.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING LANDSCAPE AND EVOLUTION

The University of Calgary, a large Canadian research institution with 29,000 undergraduates and 8,000 graduate students, has explicitly prioritized EL in recent years with the institution's first EL Plan (Kaipainen, Braun, and Arseneault 2020). In 2021, the provincial government introduced performance-based funding for post-secondary institutions, tying five percent of the base funding to the provision of work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities. By 2025, the university aimed for all undergraduate students to complete at least two EL opportunities during their degree programs. The 2020 EL Plan prioritized reducing barriers and ensuring quality standards. An institutional mapping project revealed that despite diverse opportunities across all faculties, participation gaps persisted, requiring deeper investigation into why students weren't accessing available experiences.

Two major UCalgary studies revealed significant barriers preventing students from accessing EL. A 2022 report on the National Survey of Student Engagement results highlighted that while students recognized EL benefits, they identified numerous obstacles, including financial challenges, academic scheduling conflicts, and time constraints (Stowe, Flanagan et al. 2022). Impostor syndrome emerged as a significant barrier, with students feeling unqualified or unable to "see themselves" in EL opportunities. The 2022 *Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning Project* survey of over 2,000 students reinforced these findings: 86% of survey respondents cited a lack of time or exhaustion from academic commitments as preventing EL participation, while 78% expressed doubts about their qualifications (Stowe, O'Connell et al. 2022). Additional barriers included part-time jobs, financial limitations, and family responsibilities. These findings suggest that EL is often designed around an idealized student with ample time, economic stability, and minimal outside commitments, and this doesn't align with many students' lived experiences. Students feel excluded not because opportunities are unavailable, but because the structure of their lives and the design of EL activities make participation out of reach despite their academic merit.

The gaps and barriers experienced by students in accessing EL emphasized the need to rethink how students and faculty engage with it. Our learnings over the past five years motivated us to name, celebrate, resource, and validate Small EL as an essential aspect of the work we do towards our institutional EL goals. In the following sections, we outline how two academic leads in the Office of Experiential Learning (co-authors Lisa Stowe and Kyla Flanagan) are working to create a microculture for Small EL through a Community of Practice (CoP). We highlight how an associate professor in the Faculty of Arts (co-author Derritt Mason) designs and assesses Small EL in both online and in-person modalities. Through multiple examples, a professor (teaching) in the Faculty of Science (co-author Mindi Summers) shows how students as partners informed the design of Small EL activities and discusses the "messy tensions" of moving between small- and large-scale EL. Finally, we finish with insights from an associate dean of teaching and learning (co-author Dawn Johnston) on administratively supporting and resourcing Small EL to make it sustainable. We are inspired by Halpern (2023) to not present Small EL as a "story of redemption" where we "self-righteously" improve teaching and learning. We strive with humility to explore the nuances of Small EL with the inherent "trade-offs," "limits of individual agency," and "just what is" in the work we do in EL (Halpern 2023).

MAKING VISIBLE A CULTURE FOR SMALL EL

A community of practice—big conversations about Small EL: Lisa Stowe and Kyla Flanagan

In fall 2023, we established an institutional CoP called "Big Conversations about Small EL," inviting faculty and staff working in this field to participate. Those in the CoP engaged in "significant conversations" to solve shared challenges, share ideas and resources, and learn from others (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009) about reducing barriers to implementing Small EL. Approximately 20 participants, including faculty and staff from four academic units and one co-curricular unit, met for one hour, three times per semester, to share ideas and resources and to support each other in developing, designing, and implementing Small EL. Our understanding of Small EL evolved through a non-linear dialogue between our conceptual framework and practitioner experiences. These conversations led to the CoP developing Small EL supports, resources, and rubrics for new and emerging EL practitioners. Conversations, especially those with associate deans and academic advising managers, helped raise the visibility of Small EL across campus.

The following section examines the application and reflection on Small EL in two distinct academic settings: arts and science. Both faculty members (co-authors Derritt Mason and Mindi Summers) engaged in conversations with the academic leads prior to the launch of the CoP, and they were early attendees of the CoP. Their classroom initiatives were iteratively developed through reflection, experimentation, failure, reiteration, and many formal and informal conversations. The cases chosen as exemplars demonstrated how the A.I.R. framework (Flanagan et al. 2024) and the three key elements of Small EL (time-bounded, focused, and lower-risk) can guide the design and implementation of meaningful EL. These examples illustrate how institutions can successfully integrate Small EL into diverse disciplinary contexts while maintaining the core characteristics that make it accessible and effective for students and instructors.

DESIGNING, IMPLEMENTING, AND ASSESSING SMALL EL

Faculty of Arts—Small EL in queer theory and video games: Derritt Mason

My Small EL activity took place in an upper-year, undergraduate, 40-student English class called Topics in Contemporary Theory, which I designed as a class on "Queer Theory and Video Games." I taught this class twice: first online during the COVID-19 lockdowns and again in-person. I provided students with three options for their term project: they could write a scholarly essay, make a "Let's Play" video essay (wherein they capture their gameplay and then script and record a narration to accompany it; see Mason 2021), or create a game using free software of their choice. Students who created a game submitted it alongside a critical reflection in which they drew connections between their game design and themes to queer theory. In this reflection, they considered the lessons gleaned from learning new software, designing, and ultimately creating their game—lessons that often included numerous challenges and failures along the way.

Playing a video game and reflecting on the experience is itself EL in the same way that engaging with or reading any text can be shaped into a kind of "learning by doing" when accompanied by intentionally "structured periods of reflection and integration," which Green et al. (2024, 11) argue are essential to EL. English classes, in the way they often invite profound and emotional connections with literary and other texts, frequently offer "spaces where learners can get in touch with their personal experience," another crucial attribute of EL according to Green et al. (2024, 11). Yet, despite this, EL activities in my disciplinary and institutional context are typically understood to include only community-based learning opportunities, WIL, or specialty courses like our print- or paper-making options. As a result, I didn't initially frame my activities as EL or understand them to be EL as such.

My conversations with colleagues from the Small EL CoP transformed my perspective and encouraged me to design EL with more intentionality. When I reworked the course for in-person instruction, I decided to incorporate a recurring, in-class Small EL activity. My goals were to:

- Offer a meaningful, embodied, low-stakes, and student-led interactive experience aligned with the course topic (lower risk and focused);
- Create an ongoing and iterative experience (time-bounded) that invites students to build community and strengthen their capacity for term projects;
- Challenge myself to live with the unpredictability, complexity, and uncertainty that comes with a student-led experience, and;
- Make space for learning to occur in unexpected ways and for students to play/have fun.

I designed a course component called "GameLabs." The class ran on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I divided the students into two sections, the "Tuesday Mutant Ninja Turtles" (TMNT) and the "ThursdayCats" (TC). I would meet with the TMNT in class on Tuesdays for discussion and with the TC on Thursdays. On alternate days (i.e., Tuesdays for the TC and Thursdays for the TMNT), the groups would meet online for a GameLab on Discord—a gaming-focused communication platform with live-streaming capabilities. I would check in with the GameLab group at the start of every class, but otherwise, these were entirely student-run sessions. I used an ungrading approach for the entire course, and students had to attend and participate in a minimum number of GameLabs in order to receive credit in the GameLab category. I have reflected upon my low-stakes approach to assessment in this course elsewhere, in an essay where I also consider some surprising resonances between "ungrading" and queer theory (see Mason 2025 for this reflection as well as my detailed assignment instructions).

In the assignment description, I explained to students that the GameLab goals were:

- To foster supportive communities of play;
- To provide insight into different narrative/ludic elements of a game (by watching another person's gameplay), and;
- To offer some relief to in-class attendance schedules, given that we continue to learn together under challenging circumstances [at the time, we were still feeling the ongoing effects of the pandemic quite profoundly].

One student hosted the GameLab each week. The host played the week's game and broadcast their gameplay to the group. Another student wrote and uploaded a report that summarized the GameLab, commenting on any recurring or emerging themes and noting technical or other issues. I encouraged the rest of the class to participate enthusiastically and supportively in the chat according to "best practices" that we composed together at the start of term using a collaborative document (e.g., "Recognize that everyone has a different level of experience with games!" and "Don't criticize someone's gameplay. Laugh with them, have fun with them, and support them"). Retroactively, I can see that the community-oriented objective of my GameLab activity also aligns with the A.I.R. framework: in addition to learning by doing and reflecting, I invited students to learn "by connecting," that is, "the learning that takes place when students connect with others and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom" (Flanagan et al. 2024, 64).

Initially, the GameLabs caused me tremendous anxiety; having a portion of the course run completely beyond my control felt risky and unpredictable, despite my explicit desire to push myself to tolerate this uncertainty. Indeed, the GameLab sessions possessed a chaotic element, something that was perhaps unavoidable when students were playing and commenting on games that often

dealt openly with queerness and queer sexuality (see, for example, Yang's *The Tearoom* (2017), a "historical public bathroom simulator"). Many students, however, expressed delight in the occasional carnage, and I received no reports of students contravening their agreed-upon code of conduct. As one student, Femke van Son, wrote in some end-of-term feedback (which I share with her permission): "My favourite thing about the course . . . has been the GameLabs and how they are both simultaneously intelligent literary conversations with like-minded people and the stupidest, most obscene chaos you can possibly imagine. I absolutely adore it."

This comment returns me to Halpern's (2023) critique of "the morphology of the SoTL article," mentioned towards the outset of our essay. I am compelled to reflect on the morphology of EL—that is, what is the narrative trajectory of the typical EL experience? Might Small EL, in some way, invite us to move away from a narrative of "unfettered progress and redemption" (Halpern 2023, 1)? Must EL be necessarily instrumentalized, transmitting real-world skills, boosting career prospects, aligning with neoliberal institution- and government-imposed metrics? Could some Small EL activities focus on play, fun, and even wasting time? As my students and I discussed in this class, queer theory's critical force lies in how it asks us to challenge sedimented ideologies and structures of power and relationality. We take up the popular critique of video games as "a waste of time," and instead recuperate games as potential sites of learning and productivity. In doing so, we ask: What's wrong with wasting time? Similar accusations of wastefulness are also levelled at queer people, who are understood to choose hedonism and pleasure over (re)production and normative social bonds (Stockton 2017). Again, we query: What's wrong with pleasure for pleasure's sake?

This is not to dismiss the relevance of EL, which offers students opportunities to develop skills, solve socially relevant problems, or carve a clearer pathway into the workforce. But maybe Small EL has the potential to do other things, similar to how the GameLabs combined useful learning with moments of wasteful and pleasurable play, or in the context of this course, it mixed "literary conversations" with "obscene chaos."

Faculty of Science—partnering with students and finding the fun: Mindi Summers

Students as the drivers of innovation in Small EL

I led or co-designed the most authentic and impactful Small EL activities in my courses in partnership with undergraduate students. This students-as-partners approach (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) drove innovation in my teaching practice across various course settings, including classes with over 100 students enrolled. The examples that stand out most for their sustainability over time align with the Small EL design criteria, can be iteratively updated in collaboration with students in order to fit different contexts, and, arguably, most importantly, cultivate a sense of joy and fun in teaching.

The goal of providing students with the opportunity to develop and demonstrate creative practices motivated the co-designing of Small EL (see Kelly 2016) in a science context. I developed the first Small EL activity after students suggested that student-led presentations could replace the last week of lectures. When designed, this focused and intentional group project launched with collaborative question generation and grounded the topic in students' interests (see Summers, Fernandez, Handy-Hart, Kulle, and Flanagan 2024). Students created team contracts and engaged in collaborative decision-making, with fun and engagement being key criteria for what the team decided to present on and how they shared their learning. The project emphasized a few authentic research skills, such as asking a question, creating a team contract, researching a specific and narrow question, and communicating about a science topic.

Through the co-design process, students led numerous discussions on the classroom environment, particularly regarding assessment practices. As we designed the activity and rubrics, we carefully considered how to foster engagement in creative practices, such as by creating a classroom culture that expands perceptions of creativity, encourages collaboration, and supports risk-taking (Davies, Jindal-Snape, Collier, Digby, Hay, and Howe 2013; Gajda, Karwowski, and Beghetto 2017; Hong, Hartzell, and Greene 2009). The resulting assessments were lower-risk with a few simple criteria. For example, presentations were assessed solely based on the accuracy of information, timing, and delivery that was understandable and engaging to the audience. The goal in simplifying the assessment criteria was to provide time and space for students to engage in informal individual and group reflection throughout the process.

Once I developed the scaffolding (activity format, rubrics, and reflection prompts), this science communication model was adopted by new groups of students to co-design context-specific Small EL for other courses. Bio-inspired design projects enabled science students to share insights from nature with engineers, architects, and designers. I added a consumer guide to a seafood identification barcoding project (Morris, Summers, Kwan, Mee, and Rogers 2024) so that students could share their findings with the public. I expanded an animal behaviour literature review project to include the option for collaboration with a community partner and to present the findings in any preferred format. Students in the course showcased their work in a public symposium through various formats, including videos, infographics, podcasts, comics, art displays, social media, and Girl Guide activities. Similarly, students produced an online gallery on why we should care about insects at the end of an entomology course (https://biodiversity.ucalgary.ca/resource/insect-science-communication-gallery/). This experience inspired students to design an activity where they created a virtual timeline of significant evolutionary events in another course.

These examples demonstrate the power of a students-as-partners approach in transforming thinking and fostering a supportive classroom culture for modelling, practicing, and developing creativity in science (DeHaan 2009). Students could see their peers in the course, as well as former students, undergraduate researchers, the teaching assistants, and me, all taking risks and developing our creative skills. By allowing students to lead these projects, the activities have also evolved to align with students' interests and the current context, preventing them from becoming stagnant or fixed features of the curriculum. As an instructor, I find these time-bound Small EL activities particularly meaningful because they enable students to explore their interests, showcase their personalities, and see themselves in science, all while developing authentic and transferable skills for careers in science.

Small EL in community: Navigating the messy tension with immersive EL

While student partnerships launched Small EL in my courses, my personal journey towards Small EL began with immersive EL. The benefits of learning through doing were what I connected with most as a student, so when I began teaching, this became foundational to my philosophy. I supervised honours theses, taught field school and study abroad courses, and developed full-term course-based research experiences. Although the activities associated with immersive EL aligned with my views on how people learn (through active participation and reflection with others), I recognized tensions with other values for my teaching. I felt frustrated with the limitations of immersive EL, especially regarding accessibility and the unsustainable workloads for students, instructors, and staff.

The trade-offs of immersive EL motivated me to find ways to integrate small parts of these immersive experiences into my courses by choosing one aspect (the literature review, data collection, data analysis, or science communication). When I first started doing this, I struggled with narratives

that drew my attention to what was missing compared to traditional immersive EL, such as an honours thesis. By partnering with students, I began to both feel and witness the benefits of Small EL on student experience and sense of belonging in science. In many ways, these small opportunities to try EL allow students to develop the skills they will need for the diverse careers after graduation. However, when reviewed by peers, the focus tended to be on the extent of students' impact on the discipline through publication versus the impact for students or the community.

Participation in the Small EL CoP introduced me to the concept of Small EL and the A.I.R. framework (Flanagan et al. 2024). This framework both liberated and validated my personal experiences in the classroom and working with students. The Small EL CoP challenged the argument that immersive EL is more valuable than Small EL. This group helped me to reflect critically on the core values of my teaching practice and the messy tensions of practices associated with these values. This cohort of colleagues provided the validation that Small EL is beneficial in and of itself and does not need to be compared to or valued against immersive EL. The outcomes of EL to the discipline or field are not what matters most. The language and design criteria allowed me to identify what mattered most in these activities and ensure that I kept the scope narrow and activities intentional. I was permitted to "let go" and be intentional about what I included and what I excluded in my teaching practice. Moreover, it allowed me to connect with others and to align efforts across courses in our curriculum, creating a bigger picture of student experience in our programs.

My Small EL journey began with students, was fueled by the joy of having fun in teaching and learning spaces, and grew through a supportive community. Through conversations within the EL community, I recognized that working with students allowed me to truly re-envision and to innovate in order to create meaningful EL opportunities for science students. Others in that community continue to inspire me, and I hope this reflection encourages readers to explore the messy tensions of what EL is and what it could be, let go of ideas and practices that no longer fit the context, and seek out and cherish communities where they can innovate.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESOURCING AND SUPPORTING SMALL EL

Supporting faculty in their Small EL journey: Dawn Johnston

In my work as an associate dean with a portfolio focused on teaching, learning, and student engagement, I've been able to channel my interest and background in EL into supporting faculty colleagues who want to incorporate EL into their course design. While it's increasingly common to find junior faculty members who are familiar and comfortable with EL, one of my "sweet spots" for faculty development is the mid-career folks who are intrigued but apprehensive. Faculty members often approach me with an idea for a Small EL activity that has great potential, but that they've almost talked themselves out of in anticipation that it will be a) too labour-intensive; b) against the "rules"; or c) logistically impossible. One of the moments of pure joy in my job is being able to say, "Yep—we can make that work."

Academic administrators like program directors, department heads, or associate deans are often perceived by others as (and, indeed, often self-perceived as) middle managers who have little ability to make significant changes or utilize their offices to support pedagogy meaningfully. This can feel particularly true in large post-secondary institutions that have entrenched and well-known bureaucracies. Many of us have observed the frustrations of the simultaneous growth of EL initiatives and risk management policies in North American universities in the twenty-first century. However, we do have some tools at our disposal to support faculty exploration of Small EL opportunities as well.

Timetable thoughtfully

While timetabling may not be an administrator's most fulfilling activity, it's actually a space in which there is great potential to support Small EL activities. So many academic units fall into an annual timetabling process where the first rule of engagement is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." So, instead of starting with a blank slate and considering the pedagogical needs of individual courses, they begin with last year's timetable and see what, if anything, needs to be changed. Similarly, many units will timetable classes based on their place in the program—junior courses three times a week, intermediate courses twice a week, and senior or graduate seminars once a week. This approach, while pragmatically useful, overlooks the pedagogical design of the course. It can be enormously helpful—and encouraging of pedagogical innovation and curriculum renewal—if the specific pedagogical plans of individual instructors can be taken into consideration in the timetabling of courses. Is someone planning to take students outside of the classroom during class time? They're likely going to need more than 50 minutes to do that. Are they considering a small-scale partnership with a community organization that only has flexibility to meet in the afternoons? Don't timetable that course in the mornings. Sometimes, it can even be as simple as, in timetabling season, asking this year's faculty members whether they intend to do anything pedagogically different next year. That invitation to think differently while faculty are currently teaching can actually prompt some to consider how they'd like to revise their classes at the moment when the context is most front of mind.

Such considerations are not always straightforward. In some instances, the timetable is created before many of the instructors of the classes are even known, which makes it difficult to imagine which courses might need a second look. Or they are bound by institutional imperatives to timetable certain courses in certain ways. This, for many, creates a self-fulfilling prophecy—a course that could have incorporated field trips or land-based activities in a three-hour block is timetabled three times a week for 50 minutes, so the instructor continues to teach it the way it has always been taught.

Provide access to small but flexible amounts of funding

While many universities, including our own, provide access to funding for SoTL projects or thoughtfully considered, evidence-based teaching and learning initiatives, one thing that my faculty has done with great success is make available small, flexible, easy-to-access funding for teaching and learning initiatives. Our Teaching Activities Grant provides funding of up to $750 to interested course instructors (full-time faculty, contract instructors, and graduate teaching fellows) on a rolling basis throughout the year. With the completion of a straightforward online form that asks for a description of the initiative, a budget, and an explanation of how the activity will help to achieve course learning outcomes and align with faculty and university priorities, instructors can request funds to cover small costs, such as guest speaker honoraria, field trip admission fees, or materials and supplies for creative projects, for instance. The applications are received by the associate dean and approved, declined, or returned for more information within a week, allowing instructors to make an in-term decision to incorporate a high-impact activity for this group of students during this semester. Our large Faculty of Arts generates approximately 20–30 applications a year, for amounts ranging between $100 and $750, and the vast majority of applications are for Small EL activities. Many instructors who have received these grants have identified the grants' speed and flexibility as the primary reason that they incorporated this kind of activity into their courses.

Assign TA support meaningfully

Again, the assignment of teaching assistants to courses often follows a formula—for junior courses with X number of students, one TA is assigned, and if you double that enrollment, you'll get a second TA. Sometimes, assessment structures factor into that formula—courses with exclusively multiple-choice exams get fewer supports, and those with written assignments get more. Rarely do pedagogical activities factor into this decision. Even the smallest EL activities—group projects and research showcases—can be overwhelming for one person to organize, but they become quite manageable with the assistance of a TA or two.

Activate networks of support

Academic administrators often have closer access to helpful networks across campus, including their counterparts in other faculties, the registrar's office, and the risk management team, among others. In some instances, the network of administrative colleagues from different units may result in the opportunity to share previous challenges and clever solutions to comparable Small EL activities. In other instances, when a faculty member wonders about, for example, possible scheduling patterns for a course, a quick call to the registrar can often yield that answer within minutes, not weeks. Department and faculty-level leaders also usually have a big picture view of other work that's happening across units or campuses and can connect curious "beginners" in Small EL to more seasoned practitioners for supportive conversations.

Advocate, celebrate, and reward

For many faculty members, particularly those whose practices are rooted in scholarly approaches to teaching, EL is an exciting and meaningful way to engage students. Yet those who incorporate it into their classes know that it is labour-intensive, time-consuming, and not often recognized in the important career processes like academic hiring, tenure, and promotion. Many junior colleagues (who often have the most knowledge of EL and the energy to take it on), recognize that they could spend the same amount of time producing an article for publication, which is a "safer bet" in terms of recognition. For educational leaders who have the opportunity to champion this work, it is key to make clear to committees and decision-makers that this work enhances and increases student engagement and success.

Get out of the way

After providing a list of ways for educational leaders to intervene and support Small EL, it may sound counterintuitive to say, "get out of the way," but to be frank, that's often the best advice. There are days when my job feels like a thousand nos, as folks approach me with creative and innovative ideas that may present financial, logistical, or administrative challenges. Sometimes, we have to make a point of maintaining (instead of deflating) the enthusiasm of a course instructor and offering empowerment and support to build a relationship of trust that can genuinely facilitate growth and confidence.

Lest I make this all sound too easy, there are myriad barriers to all the things I have proposed. No matter how thoughtful we are about the allocation of resources in teaching and learning (time, access to teaching assistants, careful timetabling of courses, all with pedagogy and student experience in mind), we face real institutional barriers to decision-making and enacting. As Halpern (2023) points out, one of the most under-told stories in SoTL is one "that considers the limits of an instructor's agency in solving a problem because of larger societal or institutional forces at play" (11). Many (if not most) public universities are facing a litany of pressures related to class sizes, enrollment targets, student workloads, faculty workloads, and budgetary restrictions, to name a few. As much as

context matters when it comes to incorporating EL into curricular spaces, issues of context in relation to supporting Small EL matter as well. In a large and diverse faculty like the one in which I work (14 departments, 8,000+ students), it's simply not possible to give everyone who requests it a classroom with flexible seating or a three-hour once-weekly block for their class. But in instances where there is room to exercise discretion, having an awareness of instructors' pedagogical plans makes it much more possible to support innovative curricular EL.

CONCLUSION

There is no perfect solution for scaling experiential learning; however, given financial and time constraints for both students and faculty, reducing the immersive-ness and duration of experiences can help expand access. Here, we name, validate, and provide a framework for Small EL, demonstrating how to integrate it into curricula in meaningful ways that help institutions meet EL goals while reducing barriers.

From our vantage point, the rhetoric of accessibility in EL often emphasizes increasing the number and variety of opportunities. However, the issue is not merely a matter of quantity; it is about intentional design that addresses the realities of students' lives. Our approach embodies the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST 2018) by fundamentally transforming design considerations in order to eliminate barriers and expand access to learning for students. There is a misconception that EL requires fully immersive experiences to be meaningful, when in fact the experience serves as the foundation and stimulus for learning, regardless of scale (Beard 2022).

Many faculty already implement Small EL without recognizing it as such. With increased intentionality, existing EL activities can become even more impactful. In the context of institutional recognition for Small EL, the microcredential movement's shift towards smaller, more targeted units of recognition mirrors the Small EL approach and offers a practical mechanism for validating and rewarding these focused learning activities. Small EL lowers barriers for practitioners to experiment with EL design, assessment, and reflection as part of regular teaching practices, serving as an essential component of an institution's comprehensive EL landscape rather than replacing immersive experiences.

While Small EL offers numerous benefits, implementing it across different contexts presents various challenges. Our two examples are from small to mid-size classes, and larger enrolments make it difficult to ensure active engagement and workload management. Nevertheless, opportunities exist for Small EL in large classes through peer-led discussions, real-world employment contexts, and activities that advance soft skills acquisition (Enstroem and Schmaltz 2023; Hilliard 2021). The emphasis on student autonomy in EL can enhance larger classes where instructors rely on learner-centered assignments outside class time while managing teams of teaching assistants, technology assistants, and students in "networked teaching" (Mantai and Huber 2021, 734). Large classes benefit from diverse student bodies, allowing instructors to design EL activities focused on community and social network development (Kofinas and Tsay 2021). Future research could explore Small EL's impact in larger classes, as well as the joy, play, and even wasteful fun that emerges from Small EL.

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