INTO THE WILD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING YONDER: COMMUNITY CAFÉ PARTICIPANT HYPOTHESES ON WHAT'S NEXT FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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In this 25-minute conversation café, participants synthesized the findings of Braun, Kaipainen & Usman's (2018) environmental scan of experiential learning (EL) at the University of Calgary with their conference learning to create an experience and evidence-informed hypothesis of the next strengths, challenges, and required supports on the EL horizon. This paper summarizes participants' conversations and discusses what their hypotheses illuminate about the current EL postsecondary landscape, as well as emerging and recurrent features that may be of interest to explore in one's role, scholarship, or teaching practice.

Canadian postsecondary institutions are increasingly incorporating experiential learning (EL) into their strategic planning to enhance student learning, particularly given EL's benefits in heightening student engagement (Kuh, 2008), amplifying career development (McRae, 2015), and cultivating civic consciousness (Eyler, 2009). Broadly, EL encompasses a diverse range of definitions and activities that seek to connect learning with experience. EL scholarship commonly draws on David Kolb's (1984) definition of EL as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). However, there is considerable debate about whether a unified definition of EL is possible or desirable (Moon 2004; Beard & Wilson, 2013). Depending on the definition used, EL includes activities ranging from community-engaged learning, work-integrated learning, and other high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, study abroad, and capstone courses (Braun, Kaipainen & Usman, 2019; Kuh, 2008). In Fall 2018, the University of Calgary created the EL Working Group, tasked with creating an EL definition and framework unique to the University of Calgary. The following EL definition is utilized in this paper:

> Experiential Learning (EL) is learning-by-doing that bridges knowledge and experience through critical reflection. EL activities are intentionally designed and assessed. As such, they empower learners to enhance individual and collaborative skills such as complex problem solving, professional practice skills and teamwork. Reflecting critically on these activities helps individuals develop higher order thinking to challenge and advance their perspectives. The EL process prepares students to take on roles as active citizens and thrive in an increasingly complex world (EL Working Group, 2019).

The EL framework consists of 28 activities across five categories: co-curricular EL, community-engaged learning, curriculum-integrated EL, research-integrated EL and work-integrated learning (EL Working Group, 2019). At the time of publication, the definition and typology of each category continue to be defined in consultation with the campus community.

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ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF THE POSTSECONDARY EL LANDSCAPE

In Summer 2018, the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning conducted the *Environmental Scan of Experiential Learning at the University of Calgary* (Braun et al., 2018) to capture a snapshot of the EL landscape across North American postsecondary institutions. The scan included a literature review, qualitative analysis of EL definitions and activities at 29 North American postsecondary institutions (17 Canadian and 12 American), and a survey of the strengths, challenges, and desired supports for EL activities at the University of Calgary. For survey themes, see Table 1: Braun et al.'s (2019) themes of strengths, challenges, and desired supports for EL at the University of Calgary.

Table 1

Braun et al.'s (2019) findings of strengths, challenges, and desired supports for EL at the University of Calgary

Strengths	Challenges	Desired Supports
Connects students to something "real"	Pedagogical challenges	Funding
Are "rich" in nature	Buy-in	Institution-wide resources
Promote skill development	Finding placements	Student, staff/faculty, and program development
Enhance student employability	Time and resources	
Are evidence-based practices	Logistics Student work and preparedness	

Collectively, Braun et al.'s findings are relevant both within and beyond the University of Calgary given their emphases on shared motivations, challenges, and rewards for conducting EL in postsecondary education. The EL landscape continues to shift with new and continued national and provincial calls-to-action to reimagine higher education with EL opportunities provided for all postsecondary students (Government of Canada, 2019; Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), 2018; Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, 2016). In light of these findings and the ongoing changes across postsecondary EL, it is critical to continue conversations and reflection on the strengths, challenges, and desired supports ongoingly.

2019 CONFERENCE ON POSTSECONDARY LEARNING AND TEACHING

On the morning of April 30, 2019, the Conference on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching launched with the theme, Exploring Experiential Learning. Dr. Norah McRae opened with a keynote outlining the "Work-Integrated Learning Quality Framework: Aims, Actions, Achievements (AAA)" (McRae, Pretti, & Church 2017), and asserted that as there is stronger emphasis on increasing the number of work-integrated (and other EL) opportunities for postsecondary students, it is critical to ensure postsecondary institutions pay attention to the quality of these opportunities for all stakeholders. When used as a quality framework for continuous improvement, the Work-Integrated Learning Quality Framework: AAA would

identify potential gaps and provide success measures and outcomes based on stakeholders' aims, actions, and achievements (McRae et al., 2017).

Late that afternoon, the 25-minute conversation café that this paper is based on, "Into the Wild Experiential Learning Yonder", was conducted with two purposes: 1) to continue conversations about the findings of the scan, particularly, the strengths, challenges, and desired supports for postsecondary EL, and 2) to engage participants in synthesizing their conference learning with the scan's findings to create a unique hypothesis of future directions for EL research and resources. These goals were intended to prompt participants to reflect on what they wished to explore in their role, scholarship, or teaching practice. This session was designed to be reflective and conversational. In this paper I explore the content of participants' discussions via the question: what emerging and recurring features and desired supports for the EL landscape do participants hypothesize as relevant to their roles, scholarship, or teaching practice? The scope of this inquiry summarizes participants' conversations only.

CONVERSATION CAFÉ DISCUSSIONS

There were 13 participants at the conversation café; no data were collected about them. As the facilitator, I started the conversation with the prompt: "With those at your table, reflect on what stands out most from your learning at the conference this far". Next, they reviewed a brief summary of the environmental scan, particularly themes from the survey responses regarding the strengths, challenges, and desired supports for EL at the University of Calgary (see Table 1). Participants were then prompted to discuss three questions in their table groups:

1. Given the environmental scan's findings and our learning at the conference thus far, what can we hypothesize as future strengths for experiential learning?
2. Given the environmental scan's findings and our learning at the conference thus far, what can we hypothesize as future challenges for experiential learning?
3. Given the environmental scan's findings and our learning at the conference thus far, what can we hypothesize as future desired supports for experiential learning?

Each question was delivered one at a time, with 5 minutes discussion in between. Throughout, participants wrote their reflections on whiteboards. To close, participants shared back their table discussions with the group. I took notes throughout. Participants were then encouraged to find time during the remainder of the conference to individually reflect on, "In light of these discussions, what is one hypothesis about what's next on the EL horizon that I wish to explore in my own role, scholarship, or teaching practice?" After the session, I transcribed these whiteboards and my notes and analyzed them for the top five recurring themes using Norris, Nowell, White, & Moules' (2017) thematic analysis method, a process of familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, defining themes, and producing the final summary. This is the same method used to analyze survey data in the environmental scan. See Table 2: "Top five themes in community café discussions".

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Table 2

Top five themes in community café discussions

"Given the environmental scan's findings and our learning at the conference thus far, what can we hypothesize as future…"		
Strengths	Challenges	Desired Supports
Student skill development and application	Building a shared vision	Streamlining processes and procedures
Meaningful and practical experiences for students	Accessing teaching spaces, funding, and supports	Creating faculty development resources
Integration of EL into curricula	Addressing the value systems	Valuing teaching and learning
Increase in scholarly teaching	Balancing disciplinary norms	Dealing with "push back"
Stronger connections to community and industry	Navigating "scaling up" challenges	Communicating and liaising relationships with academia, community, and industry

Participants identified five emerging features of the EL landscape in addition to the 11 strengths, challenges, and desired supports identified in the scan. These new themes were the third or fourth-most discussed under each category. The other 11 shared themes were scattered throughout the ranks and interpreted as recurring features of the EL landscape.

EMERGING FEATURES OF THE EL LANDSCAPE

Scholarly Teaching

Under strengths, participants hypothesized an increase in scholarly teaching. This was the fourth-most discussed theme in this category. Here, participants stated that given the diverse stakeholders of EL identified in McRae's keynote (students, host organizations/employers, educators, governments, and institutions), faculty and staff will need to draw on evidence-based practices "even more" in order to ensure quality EL activities. This includes considering evidence in the multiple choices involved in curriculum design and educational resources, such as deciding between Open Educational Resources versus traditional textbooks.

Value Systems

Participants hypothesized two challenges emerging on the EL landscape. The first challenge was addressing the value systems of academia, community, and industry. This was the third most-discussed theme in this category. Participants reflected on the commonly oversimplified and assumed values for the purpose higher education held by key EL stakeholders; for example, academia views the purpose of higher education as advancing knowledge, industry views it as creating workers, and community views it as creating citizens. This led to questions of: What do these values really look like for the different groups? Participants discussed that without clarity about what these value systems entail, EL stakeholders

(particularly academia and industry) may face challenges in finding shared interests and being open to change.

Balancing Disciplinary Norms

The second challenge was balancing disciplinary norms with expectations from external stakeholders. This was the fourth most-discussed theme in this category. Here, some participants shared personal anecdotes; they had a common experience where they learned from a former student or industry partner that the program curricula didn't align with what employers were looking for in a recent graduate. The participants were left then to wonder which was more important for the student: traditional disciplinary learning and assessments (e.g., writing papers) or being "job ready" upon graduation. In the share-back at the end of the session, participants saw much overlap between the challenges of value systems and balancing disciplinary norms, particularly in their shared question about potentially misaligned ideas between academia and industry on the purpose of higher education. However, they differentiated them based on their intention. Whereas value systems focused on "why we do what we do", balancing disciplinary norms focused on "how we do it".

Valuing Teaching and Learning

Lastly, participants hypothesized two areas of desired supports emerging on the EL landscape. First was emphasizing the value for teaching and learning, particularly in SoTL and curriculum development. This was the third most-discussed theme in this category. As McRae stressed in her keynote, a work-integrated learning activity (and by extension, all activities under EL) needs to meet the requirements of the Pedagogy, Experience, Assessment, and Reflection (P.E.A.R) framework in order to differentiate itself as a high-quality program (McRae, Pretti, & Church 2017). In connection to this point, participants expressed curiosity about how SoTL, given its principles of good practice (inquiry into student learning, grounded in context, methodologically sound, conducted in partnership with students, and appropriately public), might contribute to conversations on the value of EL for postsecondary teaching and learning (Felten, 2013).

Push Back

Second, participants hypothesized "Dealing with 'push back'" as an emerging area for desired support on the EL landscape. This was the fourth most-discussed theme in this category. Participants voiced concerns that the greatest resistance to EL will come from some faculty and staff not wishing to challenge the traditional "siloed approach" in the academe. Change is difficult in any field. Taking a more skills-oriented approach to curricula could be met with resistance, even with broader conversations about value systems and disciplinary norms. Participants agreed that a shared vision for EL in higher education would be the greatest desired support in responding to push back and ensuring student learning is kept the key priority.

RECURRING FEATURES OF THE EL LANDSCAPE

Participants hypothesized 11 recurring features on the EL landscape. In particular, student experience, skill development, curriculum development, and engaged connections with community and industry will continue to be strengths of EL. With curricula becoming more skills-focused, participants hypothesized that students will develop increased confidence in their abilities and institutions will gain greater connections with their local communities. The benefits

of EL for students' learning are widely recognized in scholarship (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Coker & Porter, 2016; Eyler, 2009; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008; ad). However, as Sattler (2011), McRae (2015), and McRae, Pretti & Church (2017) note, there is considerable work yet to be done treating students, institutions, and community and industry partners as interrelated stakeholders.

Creating a shared EL vision and scaling-up EL will continue as recurring challenges. At all milestones of the EL landscape, faculty and staff will need the appropriate resources to do this work. Recurring desired supports include streamlined processes and procedures, faculty development opportunities, and relationship liaisons between academia, community, and industry. As Wurdinger and Allison stated in a 2017 study of faculty perceptions of EL, just because faculty know EL enhances student learning, doesn't mean they are implementing (or are able to implement) EL activities in their courses (p.36). On this theme, participants noted that as in any field, change in postsecondary education is a slow process. Scaling-up EL would stand a greater chance of short and long-term success with the right resources and processes in place.

LIMITATIONS

This community café had a number of limitations. First, no data about participants were collected during or after the session. Even though this session did not have a formal research design, this is a significant limitation given the highly contextual nature of much teaching and learning scholarship. Participants' role and institutional context would have certainly impacted their café discussions. Second, data was not audio-recorded. This could have captured the depth and breadth of conversations better than handwritten notes could, especially in light of the very fast pace of the sequence of questions. Third, there was no follow-up with the participants regarding their answers to the closing reflection, "In light of these discussions, what is one hypothesis about what's next on the EL horizon that I wish to explore in my own role, scholarship, or teaching practice?" This would have generated additional insights into what features of the EL landscape participants wished to explore the most. Knowing whether participants were most interested in recurring or emerging features of the landscape for their own role, scholarship, or teaching practice would have been a useful insight for this paper.

SUMMARY

In this paper, I summarized community café participants' hypotheses of the emerging and recurring features and desired supports for the EL horizon. Participants identified five emerging features of the EL landscape. Participants concluded that a strength of EL will be its increase in use and creation of scholarly teaching, and that there will be two interrelated challenges regarding the value systems of academia, community, industry and balancing of disciplinary norms. Finally, participants believed that EL will require resources and supports in valuing university teaching and learning, and dealing with "push-back". The goal of the session was to prompt participants to synthesize the findings of a 2019 environmental scan with their conference learning to hypothesize strengths, challenges, and required supports for EL that may be of interest to explore in their role, scholarship, or teaching practice. As a member of the EL Working Group, I know that there is considerable EL expertise across all faculties. Every day at the University of Calgary, students, faculty and staff engage in EL across disciplines. The conversation café was intended to be reflective and conversational to promote EL practitioners (from any institution) in envisioning the current and potential impact of their great work. As the

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EL landscape continues to shift in Canadian postsecondary education, I hope faculty and staff will continue to reflect on the strengths, challenges, and desired supports for their work in enhancing student learning through experience.

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