

## Tools for Assessing Experiential Learning

The following suggestions provide instructors with some basic tools for teaching courses that involve experiential learning – that is, that have students participate in programs, events, projects outside of a classroom. These simple strategies allow the students with different abilities and viewpoints to engage with complex and nuanced settings, and to see their own views and those of others more clearly. The strategies also provide ways for students and the instructor to see the expansion of thinking and keenness of observation that develop over time.

**Provide an explicit but simple framework** for students allows them to make better use of each experience. Complicated questions can build from a simple framework, one that allows students to exercise different kinds of observation and critical thought. Using a framework also helps some students learn to balance an attention to “doing the assignment” with “seeing with their own eyes,” which is sometimes hard especially in earlier years of college.

An excellent one simply involves students writing before and after:

1. Before the experience, students write down something straightforward about what they might observe, something informational (e.g. What do they expect to see at...?).
2. After the experience, have students write in response to a *set of different kinds of questions*, e.g.,
  - a. Describe the *personal* response they had (especially if the experiential terrain was unfamiliar or powerfully moving)
  - b. Echo the *information* question used beforehand, especially noting what was unexpected. (e.g., What *did* they see at...? )
  - c. Describe a *pattern*, *make a comparison*, *make an analysis* of what they saw.
  - d. Then, ask students to take their analysis to a higher level, to draw on the theoretical framework of the course, for example.

**Provide a structured question, and setting, for students to compare** their observations, experience, and commentaries with those of other students. Students can get great insights from one another this way; and they can better value their own styles of observation, engagement, and commentary. The setting can be in small groups, or in online chats or blogs. Students can also discuss as a whole class, but this is the least inclusive practice, and it elicits the least careful listening... unless the instructor is especially skilled in drawing out students.

**Chart the transformation of students’ commentaries** during the course. Create a list or rubric of the kinds of thought, response, and reflective you want students to get from the experiences you plan (see over). Note the students’ abilities after each major assignment. Keep students’ written work from earlier and later in the course, and track the progress of individuals and of the group.

Let **students do their own self-report**, based on the data you and they collect, on what they’ve learned.