Bridging the Theory/Practice Divide in Professional Programs: Is Experiential Learning the Solution?

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Abstract:

This paper presents the results and synthesis of a scoping review focused on how experiential learning is conceptualized in academic literature and what is currently known about the outcomes of these teaching methods within professional degree programs in terms of bridging the theory/practice divide and preparing students for the transition from academia to the workforce. Experiential learning encompasses a grouping of pedagogical methods often utilized to bridge the gap between theory and practice for students and recent graduates through the pursuit of experience-based learning activities. Despite the fact that experiential learning is becoming increasingly prominent in undergraduate programs, its actual impact remains widely understudied and poorly described in academic literature. Our scoping review of studies which examined curriculum-based experiential learning in undergraduate professional programs such as nursing, social work and midwifery to name a few, revealed three

central findings: that experiential learning lacks a clear description; that there is an uneven distribution of disciplinary engagement with learning methods identified as experiential learning; and that few scholars discuss measurable outcomes. These findings highlight the need for increased emphasis on outcome driven scholarship to further enhance our understanding of the ways in which experiential learning is understood, how related teaching strategies impact student learning outcomes, and how educators can improve on these strategies in curricula and teaching pedagogies, specifically within professional programs.

Key Words:

Post-secondary education, experiential learning; theory practice divide; teaching and learning.

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Introduction: Context and Background

Post-secondary education in North America is in a state of change and evolution. While discussions about moving away from the Ivory Tower are long-standing, increasingly there are new demands on post-secondary institutions to better prepare students to be career-ready through the provision of practical, hands-on learning activities. Described as a form of active, iterative, and hands-on learning, incorporating a process of ongoing reflection (Smith, 2010), experiential learning is touted as an important teaching strategy within higher education that provides a bridge from the academy to the working world by giving students the opportunity to develop professional skills that can be transferred to the workplace (Bowen, 2008; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Schwartz, 2015; Whitaker, 2004). It is also considered a strategy to help develop socially responsible, civic-minded citizens with a strong sense of social justice (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Buschlen & Goffnett, 2013; Itin,

1999). Accordingly, calls for the expansion of experiential learning opportunities are expanding in Ontario universities (Council of Ontario Universities, 2014) and other post-secondary institutions across North America.

Through the experiential learning process the learner has a 'raw' experience, in contrast to mediated learning, a process in which material is synthesized and modified to shape the learning experience (Moon, 2004). It is promoted as a student-centred approach that leads to individual change as a result of reflection on an experience, as well as "new abstractions and applications" (Itin, 1999, p. 92). However, the pedagogy supporting experiential learning outcomes is under-researched (Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Preble, 2014). There is a lack of consistency in how experiential learning methods are defined and described. Current academic literature tends to focus on descriptions of methods that can be associated with experiential learning. Such methods include learning opportunities in and out of the classroom, such as placements, internships, field trips, international experience, extra-curricular workshops, guest lecturers, live actor simulation exercises, role play, video-making, and reflective activities (Moon, 2004; Schwartz, 2015; Wehbi, 2011). Given the variety and range of scholarly reflections on experiential learning taken with the societal interest in the expansion of these opportunities, this research team sought to systematically examine experiential learning to the specific context of professional programs in an urban university. Specifically, our scoping review, which we report upon in this paper, sought to understand how experiential learning is conceptualized and implemented in professional service fields of study, included in a Canadian, community service focused university Faculty, in which the authors are employed. The research synthesis presented in this article explored how experiential learning is described in the academic literature relevant to the professional fields included in this study. We also explored what we currently know about the outcomes of these undergraduate curriculum based teaching methods in bridging the theory/practice divide for students as well as new graduates transitioning into the workplace.

Improving our understanding of experiential learning will assist the efforts of educators as well as students. Experiential learning is an integral part of our institution's pedagogical approach: 90% of all undergraduate programs include an experiential learning component (Ryerson University Learning and Teaching Office, 2015). It is a core curriculum-based (e.g. mandatory field and/or practice placements, internships, studios, classroom teaching/learning methods) feature of the eight full-time professional degree programs, located within the authors' Faculty, namely: Child and Youth Care, Early Childhood Studies, Midwifery, Nursing, Nutrition, Occupational and Public Health, Social Work and Urban and Regional Planning. However, as noted earlier, the field of experiential learning remains under-researched and fragmented. For example, there is insufficient information about the extent to which experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, broadens career prospects, and contributes to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Given that experiential learning is increasingly being incorporated into the student experience across diverse academic programs, studies of curriculum-based experiential learning that address the identified insufficiencies would have the potential to inform the implementation and evaluation of experiential learning more broadly.

In this scoping review, we explored these issues to help arrive at a shared understanding of the description and purported outcomes of experiential learning that are evidence-informed. While there are several studies in the academic literature, including systematic reviews, about the nature and outcomes of experiential learning, these have been limited in focus. As our scoping review demonstrates, available literature has focused on individual disciplines (with a preponderance of studies from nursing, and social work to a lesser extent), or on examining the use of specific experiential methods in the absence of a shared understanding of what constitutes experiential learning. Even among the available systematic reviews, there is a quasi-absence of academic literature that provides a broad range of explorations of multiple disciplines and critical examination of learning outcomes of experiential methods in general, and specific to bridging the theory/practice gap.

Specifically, available academic literature is premised on assumptions about experiential learning that have implications for learning and teaching (Moon, 2004). However, providing a student with a "raw" learning experience or a chance to "learn by doing" does not necessarily mean the learning experience is an experiential learning opportunity. It is also important to explore how academic administrators select experiential learning opportunities, such as field placements. All programs within the authors' Faculty consistently provide opportunities for experiential learning by sending students out into the field; however, with the exception of formal (i.e. field placement evaluations of student performance) and anecdotal feedback from students and field instructors, we have little information about the actual outcomes of these experiences within and at completion of students' academic programs. We particularly lack information about their efficacy in relation to bridging the theory/practice gap both during the placement/field experience and post-graduation. Further, student participation in mandatory placements does not necessarily mean they are engaged in experiential learning. Analyzing these learning experiences is further complicated because placement experience is often dependent on the strengths and interests of the educators and placement partners (Cope, Cuthbertson, & Stoddart, 2000).

Additionally, curricula must be designed to accommodate rapidly expanding experiential learning opportunities and the challenges associated with those opportunities (Jackson, 2015). In our experience, administrators and educators generally operate under the assumption that experiential learning is primarily about sending students out into the field, but they do not know the degree to which those students are engaged in experiential learning. Our project attempted to clarify the experiential learning process and address the assumptions and vagueness around this learning strategy, with the goals of informing current experiential practices and student learning and their potential efficacy in preparing students or new graduates to transition successfully into work/employment or bridge the gap between theory and practice. The findings have the potential to benefit scholarship by examining whether this rapidly expanding learning strategy actually addresses the theory/practice gap, and contributes to career success and the development of critical thinking skills necessary for our knowledge economy, and the enhancement of the university learning experience.

Methodological Approach: Scoping Review

We conducted a modified scoping review of studies, which is a systematic process for exploring the nature of the literature on a particular topic (Armstrong, Hall, Doyle, & Waters, 2011). Scoping studies, which "map" out the nature of the evidence in order to examine the breadth and depth of a field, often precede full systematic reviews or are completed when little is known about a topic (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010). We followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework in designing our scoping review. The components of this framework, as described by Arksey and O'Malley and Levac et al., included: a) developing the research question; b) searching for relevant studies; c) selecting the relevant studies; d) charting the data; e) collating, summarizing and reporting the results; and f) consulting with stakeholders to better understand the findings.

In order to develop our scoping review research question, we created a table outlining our Population of interest, Intervention, Comparison group and Outcomes (PICO). The research team then further refined the PICO criteria and developed the following research question: "*How does experiential learning (field or classroom professional education) help to prepare undergraduate students or new graduates to transition successfully into work/employment or bridge the gap between theory and practice*?" Our outcomes of interest were: a) to better understand the impact that experiential learning (intervention) had on bridging the theory/practice gap within the context of curriculum-based clinical/field placements for students; and b) to better understand the impact of experiential learning (intervention) on fostering an easier transition to the workplace for new graduates.

Our population of interest was current undergraduate students and new graduates in professional fields, specifically, Child and Youth Care, Early Childhood Studies, Midwifery, Nursing, Nutrition, Occupational and Public Health, Social Work and Urban and Regional Planning. The articulated specificity of our research question makes our scoping review an improvement from Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) original recommendation, in that our research question is sufficiently broad to explicate the nature of the literature, but explicit enough that it defines the concept, target population and outcomes of interest so that an effective search strategy can be developed.

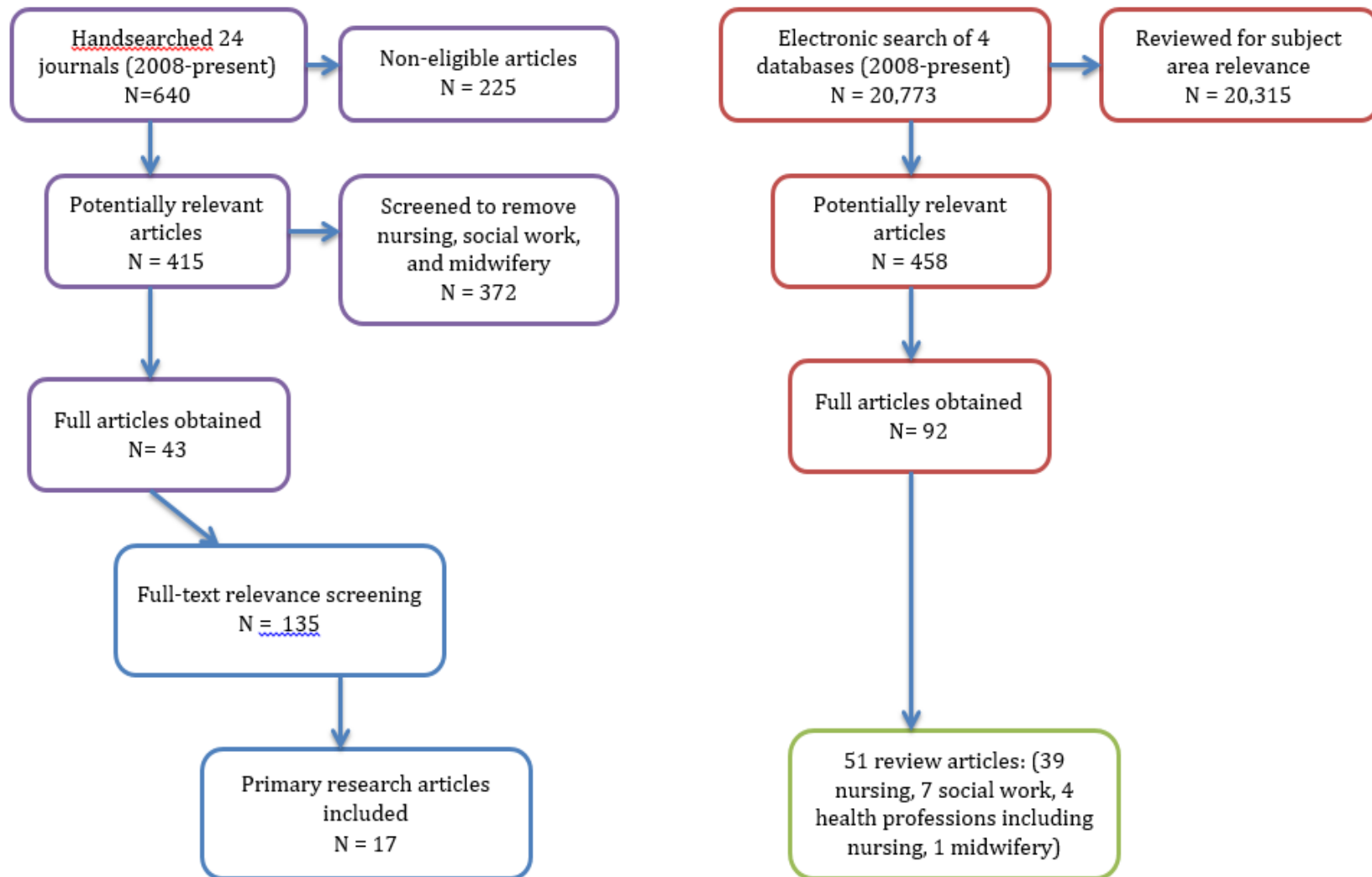**Search Strategy and Study Selection**

In order to ensure that we were accessing the widest range of potentially relevant literature specifically focused on our research question for the scoping review, we sought the input of a health and social sciences librarian with extensive experience designing and carrying out search strategies for systematic and scoping reviews. We employed a rigorous search strategy involving six databases: ERIC, Medline, CINAHL, Social Work Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts from 2008 to August 2015. The search combined subject heading and keyword terms for experiential learning as per the parameters of our research questions. All searches were limited to English language studies. In addition, a supplemental search was conducted in Social Sciences Citation Index using the same parameters limited to the topic of "urban planning" because the initial search did not return many results. Due to the large number of recent systematic reviews on experiential learning for medical

professionals, a decision was made to limit the searches in Medline and CINAHL to systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

In addition to electronic bibliographic database search, we conducted a hand search of 24 relevant journals as recommended by experts in the fields of interest from 2008-2015. Together, this search yielded 21,413 peer-reviewed publications for initial consideration. After screening the reference sets for topic area relevance, all systematic or literature reviews were identified and screened. This approach was selected as a means of expediting the scoping review process. The majority of review articles found through this process were in the nursing domain, followed by social work and midwifery. Primary studies for the remaining fields of interest were also reviewed for the hand search.

Study selection involved an iterative process where two team members independently reviewed titles and abstracts and the full text of articles using predetermined criteria. When necessary, a third reviewer made the final decision if disagreement between the two reviewers could not be resolved. Before the list of inclusions were finalized, three core members of the research team completed a final screening using the inclusion criteria. The overall screening process was managed using Distiller, a systematic review software that converts all documents to PDF, facilitates the development of data extraction forms, assists in organizing data, helps in creating summary reports, and allows team members to collaborate from any browser in real time. Our first step was to screen all titles and abstracts for potential relevance. The criteria guiding relevance screening of titles and abstracts were: English title/abstract, address one of the practiced fields under study, title/abstract reference to experiential learning, and title/abstract reference to undergraduate students or new graduates. If a title and abstract was deemed relevant, it moved to inclusion screening. Any titles and abstracts that were deemed to have uncertain relevance moved forward to inclusion screening.

Second, we reviewed all relevant and uncertain titles and abstracts for inclusion. The full text of the articles was examined using the following criteria: full text of the article described experiential learning including an intervention, examined an experiential learning intervention for undergraduate students or new graduates, and discussed how the study addressed the theory/practice gap in relation to one of the fields/disciplines that were a focus for this study. If the full text met the criteria, it was included. If there was uncertainty or disagreement, the two members of the research team discussed the article until a decision was made to include or exclude. A third reviewer was consulted when an agreement could not be achieved. Any article that did not meet inclusion criteria was excluded. Please see Figure 1 for a flow diagram that summarizes the screening process used in this scoping review.

Figure 1: Peer-reviewed journal articles reviewed in the synthesis

Handsearched 24 journals (2008-present) N=640	Non-eligible articles N = 225
Potentially relevant articles N = 415	Screened to remove nursing, social work, and midwifery N = 372
Full articles obtained N= 43	
Full-text relevance screening N = 135	
Primary research articles included N = 17	

Electronic search of 4 databases (2008-present) N = 20,773	Reviewed for subject area relevance N = 20,315
Potentially relevant articles N = 458	
Full articles obtained N= 92	
51 review articles: (39 nursing, 7 social work, 4 health professions including nursing, 1 midwifery)	

As part of the scoping review, we also examined grey literature in addition to published, empirical evidence. We contacted key experts, who suggested higher education websites for relevant reports, documents, published articles, and relevant grant projects. In addition to university websites, we also included information from the websites of Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and Canadian and international higher education associations. Each external website had a publications section which was searched for potentially relevant reports and documents.

Data Extraction and Collating the Results

Since scoping reviews do not involve quality appraisal (as do systematic reviews), we undertook data extraction. This is what Arksey and O'Malley (2005) would call charting the data. In order to extract the data from each study, we created a "data-charting" form (Levac et al., 2010) for systematic review and primary studies (obtained from the electronic database search) and for grey literature. The types of data extracted were the discipline, definition of experiential learning, discussion of theory/practice gap, study design, population, intervention, length of follow up, outcomes, results, and research recommendations. Once these data were extracted, we examined them for major themes, contextual information related to experiential learning, and differences across fields and types of learners (e.g. new graduate vs. current student). We also considered the meaning of the findings in relation to our study purpose and research question and examined how our findings impact future research, practice and policy.

Findings

This research project had two goals to be informed by empirical studies and outcomes. The first goal was to assess the quality, accuracy and rigour of the current state of knowledge about experiential learning in Canada (e.g. how experiential learning is described and implemented by educators, and the assumptions that underlie the application of the term "experiential"). The second goal was to determine the outcomes of experiential curriculum based teaching methods specific to the impact of these methods on bridging the theory practice gap in the professionals for which our Schools train students. Key findings indicate three main themes. First, there appears to be no widely accepted description of experiential learning; in addition, there is an overemphasis in research on a few methods of experiential learning (e.g. simulations, problem-based learning, practice/field placements) despite the fact that there is a broader range of methods being discussed in the literature. Second, there is an uneven disciplinary engagement with experiential learning in the various bodies of literature we consulted. Of the professional fields included in the analysis only three (Nursing, Social Work and Midwifery) had engaged in systematic reviews of the literature/research on experiential learning. Finally, there is a focus on using the techniques and skills involved with experiential learning to bridge the theory/practice gap. These methods are used as a way to help students be better prepared to address the increasingly complex nature of community-based practice settings as they transition from their studies to the workplace.

Finding One: Defining "Experiential Learning" and Diversity of Methods

Of the 51 systematic reviews that we identified in our literature review, only three actually provided a definition of experiential learning. Importantly, two systematic reviews (Arveklev, Wigert, Berg, Burton, & Lepp, 2015; Rourke, Schmidt, & Garga, 2010) relied on the work of the educational theorist Kolb who defined experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). One nursing systematic review offers this definition:

> Experiential learning: engages students in both active processes and reflection on those processes. Experiential learning offers a multi-sensory, multi-modal environment that allows students to interact in real-life contexts, to construct individual meaning, and to engage in complex actions that mirror life outside school. (Thomas as cited in Popil, 2011, p. 94)

Other studies alluded to elements of experiential learning such as active learning or simulations, offering definitions of these methods. For example, Waltz, Jenkins and Han (2014) focus their nursing systematic review on active learning and offer the following definition: "For the purpose of this review, active learning was characterized as student/learner-based learning" (p. 392-393). Similarly, Stallwood and Groh (2011) in another nursing systematic review on service learning, rely on a definition of active learning as a strategy that "engages students in a hands-on fashion in their own learning" (p. 298).

The majority of reviewed studies, however, did not begin with an overarching description of experiential learning and instead, focused on describing specific methods. Specifically, of the 51 systematic reviews, 27 articles focused on forms of simulation (high and low fidelity); seven on problem-based learning; five on service-learning, four on field placements; and two on use of technology. Less frequently found were methods including case studies, role-plays, Second Life, blogs and active learning. Definitions for those methods found most frequently in the systematic reviews are provided below; while other definitions of these methods exist, we provide information emanating from the scoping review we conducted.

Simulations include high fidelity patient simulations—"pre-developed patient scenarios utilizing computerized manikins that respond to intervention by providing instant feedback. It is proposed to be the highest level of realism offered with patient simulation" (Weaver, 2011, p. 38). Also discussed are human simulations capable of realistic physiological responses to learner intervention (Shearer, 2013). Moreover, the studies reviewed discuss simulation strategies that guide students in learning those skills necessary for professional practice (e.g. games, models, games and multimedia presentations; Rothgeb, 2008); as well as, "teaching and learning activities, and their application to teach and assess skill acquisition through an interactive experience" (Ricketts, 2011, p. 650).

Within the literature we examined as part of the scoping review, problem-based learning is defined as a student-centred approach to learning wherein students work together in a collaborative manner to solve problems (Yuan, Williams, & Fan, 2008). It is considered to be an educational approach that encourages learners to identify and apply their own knowledge and skills to new situations (Shin & Kim, 2013); and a

student-centred, inquiry-based method of instruction that fosters the development of critical thinking (Oja, 2011).

Service learning is discussed in the reviewed studies as a teaching strategy that combines community service with direct teaching and student reflection. The use of this method is intended to: "enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen community" (Murray, 2013, p. 621); foster "equal and symbiotic relationship between academic study and service" (Stallwood & Groh, 2011, p. 297); and relate real-life experiences to theoretical learning (Gillis & MacLellan, 2010).

Field/placement experiences are defined as a primary method of teaching and learning in helping students to perform their professional roles (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011). These types of methods could include rotational field placements—"students systematically move between two or more field internship sites within a given year" (Gough, 2012, p. 90); and international field work — provision of services at a global level which can also include social work practice with immigrant populations (Nuttman-Schwartz & Berger, 2012). Also included in discussions of field/placement methods are study abroad programs, where the purpose is to enhance students' self-efficacy and help them develop a global perspective with particular emphasis on building cultural competence (Edmonds, 2012).

Finally, technology-based methods are briefly discussed in the reviewed studies. Examples include the use of avatars and virtual worlds—"computer animations of a human or the projection people use to depict themselves… allowing educators to present an activity that would be difficult to read or demonstrate with a static picture" (Miller & Jensen, 2014, p. 38). Also discussed is the use of mobile technology—"handheld platforms that incorporate hardware, software, and communication abilities" (O'Connor & Andrews, 2015, p. 138).

While we welcome the diversity of methods used to enact experiential learning, this makes it difficult for institutional leaders to make use of this data and there is no common description guiding the selection and use of these methods that would define them as experiential learning. There is no across the board acceptance for what elements need to be in place to define a method as experiential learning. This absence of a description further limits the ability to transfer methods between disciplines or even between courses.

Given the momentum behind experiential learning within undergraduate-level education in Canada, the dichotomy between the popularity of experiential learning and the absence of its description was surprising. Two implications emerge from this finding. First, our assumptions about the frequency of provision of experiential learning opportunities may be distorted. While many disciplines within the community services umbrella purport to offer experiential learning opportunities, we cannot conclude, based on our research, that these disciplines are offering comparable learning opportunities, despite the fact that they use the same term. Without a description, we run the risk of drawing broad and sweeping conclusions about disparate activities. Second, methodologically, we cannot presume to make meaningful or rigorous comparisons about experiential learning outcomes without first explicitly considering how experiential learning is defined and implemented to see if there is a legitimate basis of comparison.

Without this certainty, comparative experiential learning research may be comparing "apples" to "oranges."

Finding Two: Uneven Disciplinary Engagement about Experiential Learning

We believed, from the outset, that there would be considerable breadth of scholarly work across the disciplines about experiential learning. And while, in the end, our results are drawn from 51 systematic reviews and 17 individual articles, we were surprised by the uneven disciplinary engagement in this type of outcome-based research. Of the 51 systematic reviews that met our inclusion criteria, 26 were from nursing, eight were from social work, six were from other health care professions which explicitly included nursing, and one was from midwifery.

Part of this finding may be due to differences between these disciplines' research cultures. The practice of using research review methods (e.g. systematic reviews, scoping reviews, metasynthesis and narrative reviews, among others) is not widespread across community services disciplines or even within disciplines themselves (Norman & Griffiths, 2014). While these kinds of reviews have been common in nursing subfields with a health-science focus for the last ten years, other nursing subfields such as mental health nursing are not widely engaged (Norman & Griffiths, 2014). In urban planning, the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, a top-ranked urban planning journal, by contrast, only just announced in July, 2015, that it would begin to accept review articles.

We do not propose that review methods should be a key prerequisite of research culture in every discipline. Moreover, we do not argue that the absence (or paucity) of reviews across some disciplines indicates a lack of engagement with efforts to critically assess the use and impacts of experiential learning methods on student learning. However, while research reviews are not the only method to assess efficacy of teaching methods and student outcomes, we believe that there is a need to further examine the impacts of experiential learning more thoroughly across various disciplines. Considering the widespread use of experiential learning methods, we are calling for a greater disciplinary engagement with questions related to student outcomes, especially considering how our reliance on these methods impacts attempts to bridge the theory/practice gap for both students and new graduates, which is at the heart of many of our professional disciplines.

Finding Three: Bridging Theory/Practice Gap Tied to Experiential Learning

The majority of studies consulted in this scoping review emphasized the need to use experiential learning to bridge between the theories, skills, and values learned in class and in the workplace in increasingly complex fields of practice. As noted earlier, the most referenced method was that of simulations (which also included high-fidelity simulations, and the use of standardized clients). It bears noting that most of these studies focused on the implementation of the selected method, rather than providing evidence of the efficacy of the method in bridging the theory/practice gap. The use of simulations as well as other methods of experiential learning, such as problem-based

learning, field education, in-service learning, and technology, to bridge the theory-practice gap centred on several outcomes described more amply below.

Experiential learning methods were linked to enhanced student learning, specifically the development and application of knowledge and skills. For example, a nursing systematic review of simulation-based learning noted that while this method does not necessarily increase knowledge, it allows students to bridge the theory/practice gap through application of "knowledge to clinical contexts, narrowing the 'know' vs. 'do' gap" (Cant & Cooper, 2010, p. 12). Similarly, Phillips (2011), in a social work systematic review, discusses service learning as a method that enhances student knowledge and skill development and allows for the application or integration of theory to practice.

Moreover, some of the studies in this synthesis focused on personal development in relation to bridging the theory/practice gap. Examining student development included a focus on: increased sense of self-efficacy (e.g. Oh, Jeon, & Koh, 2015); development of self-confidence (e.g. Neill & Wotton, 2011); greater feelings of preparedness for practice and transition to the workplace (e.g. Leigh, 2008); and an enhanced sense of competency (e.g. Nickless, 2011).

Finally, experiential learning methods were frequently discussed as powerful techniques through which to enhance student acquisition of competencies and skills necessary for practice that safeguards patient safety and care (e.g. Leigh; 2008; Mendenci, Solis, & de Moya, 2014; Norman, 2012; Yuan, Williams, Fang, & Yeo, 2012). A common thread in these discussions is the idea that methods such as simulations or case studies, for example, allow students to be confronted with real life scenarios that could prepare them for the complexity of field practice settings and allow them to gain the requisite skills, knowledge and competencies. In turn, this greater preparedness *prior* to joining the workforce helps them to develop an awareness of patient safety and care more quickly.

It is indeed encouraging that scholars attend to the question of bridging the theory/practice gap. However, as highlighted earlier, many of the studies reviewed do not address outcomes, but focus on specific experiential learning methods. Moreover, as many scholars note, there is a lack of, or insufficient evidence to support the claim that experiential learning does indeed assist in bridging the theory/practice gap (e.g. Garrity, Jones, VanderZwan, Burla de la Rocha, & Epstein, 2014; Gelman & Tosone, 2010; Shin & Kim, 2013; Stallwood & Groh, 2011; Waltz, Jenkins, & Han, 2014).

Implications and Conclusion

This article provides an overview and analysis of the current understanding of how "experiential learning" is conceptualized, implemented and evaluated in professional service fields of study. And while this review focused on community-service focused professional disciplines, it flags broader issues for consideration across post-secondary education. As experiential learning is growing in popularity and demand, educators need a better, evidence-based understanding of this educational approach to inform curriculum and also to benefit students. Despite its prevalent use, the field of experiential learning remains under researched and the research that has been done is fragmented. There is a lack of evidence to support the extent to which this type of

learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, broadens career prospects, and contributes to the development of students' critical thinking skills. Key messages from the scoping review clearly illustrate an uneven disciplinary engagement with experiential learning in community services fields' literature, with only three of the aforementioned disciplines, Nursing, Social Work and Midwifery, having engaged in systematic reviews of experiential learning.

Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of a commonly-accepted description of experiential learning. The review also highlights the disproportionate amount of research that focuses on a small number of types of experiential learning methods, including simulations, problem-based learning and practice/field placements, in spite of the fact that a broader range of methods are discussed in the academic literature. There is a need for further research to enhance our knowledge of the impacts of experiential learning in general, and specifically in terms of bridging the theory/practice gap both within academic programs and post-graduation. Based on this research synthesis, we propose several areas of development for future research.

We have emphasized the need for a more conceptual engagement with experiential learning, and for descriptions of experiential learning. Addressing this need is key, as it impacts the quality of research and evidence to support the efficacy of experiential learning. It is difficult to rigorously assess the outcomes of experiential learning methods beyond a single study if the literature does not have a consistent description of experiential learning and how it underpins these teaching methods. Put differently, we need to begin to develop more consistent ways of speaking about experiential learning so that we can grow a body of academic literature that explores this educational approach (beyond a collection of studies that each measure or assess a variety of related teaching methods).

This is not to say that we need to eschew diversity in how we discuss experiential learning. We understand the need for contextual and discipline-specific understandings of methods categorized under the umbrella of experiential learning. Indeed, there is a need for greater emphasis on the context within which experiential learning methods are situated (e.g. faculty/preceptor/student relationships, resources for implementation, and so forth). A better understanding of the diversity of contexts allows us to further understand the efficacy of experiential learning. However, we need to bear in mind that our understanding of these methods continues to be tempered with a lack of clear and consistent descriptions and guiding principles specific to experiential learning. Hence, any broad claims about the efficacy of experiential learning need to take into account an understanding of the limitations of the academic literature and the contextuality of experiential learning.

Moreover, as Stallwood and Groh (2011) argue, reliable and valid measurements and standardized methods are also key to the development of research-based evidence regarding the efficacy and outcomes of experiential learning. Indeed, a greater emphasis on outcome driven research would further contribute to knowledge about whether these methods are actually contributing to student learning, and how they are bridging the theory/practice gap. In other words, increasing our focus on assessing outcomes would further enhance our understanding of the ways in which experiential

strategies contribute to student learning, and would allow us to improve upon these strategies in curricula and teaching pedagogies.

Finally, future research should shift from a teaching to a learning paradigm. Kaakinen and Arwood (2009) describe the difference between teaching-focused experiential learning and learning-focused approaches: "Teaching is what the educator provides the student in terms of goals, methods, objectives, and outcomes. Learning refers to the processes by which the student changes skills, knowledge, and dispositions through a planned experience" (p. 1). Speaking specifically about simulations, which we have noted is the area of greatest focus in experiential learning in the literature we examined, the authors contend that scholars have primarily focused on teaching methods rather than theories about how students learn. This need for a shift to a focus on learning is supported by our findings that demonstrate the need to understand how students learn through experiential methods to bridge between their classroom learning and practice experiences. As we have noted, while it is important to arrive at a greater understanding of how experiential methods are applied, there is a further need to understand how students receive and benefit from these methods. Put differently, we need to shift our emphasis from what the educator does, to how the student learns if we are to better understand how experiential learning can provide the skills, values and knowledge to help bridge the theory/practice gap.

This paper began with the recognition that in post-secondary institutions across North America there are increasing demands to prepare our students for careers. Although the scoping review conducted here focused on community services disciplines, educators from other fields could take note from the limitations uncovered in experiential learning scholarship within these contexts. The provision of experiential learning opportunities to bridge theory/practice gaps may be widespread but its ubiquity does not ensure consistency in conceptualization, operationalization or evaluation. For scholars outside of the disciplines covered here, the outcomes of this scoping review signal the need to more critically interrogate "experiential learning" curriculum keeping in mind that better student outcomes emerge from evidence-based curriculum development, implementation and evaluation.

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