Organizational Complexities of Experiential Education: Institutionalization and Logic Work in Higher Education

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Abstract

Background: Universities continue to experience pressure to prepare work-ready graduates. In Ontario, this has recently taken the form of new provincial funding metrics which include experiential education. This places more formal pressure on all provincial universities to foster experiential education. Purpose: This study focuses on the organizational dynamics within a selected university as it developed an Experiential Education Certificate (EEC). Methodology/Approach: Using a qualitative approach, this case study relies on multiple methods. Content analysis was used to analyze textual data that framed the EEC. Semi-structured interviews \((n = 12)\) with institutional actors were used to analyze how experiential education is framed administratively and practiced at the technical level of the university. Findings/Conclusions: Although the EEC reflected a management logic, it was not fully aligned with the academic logic of ground-level technical actors (e.g., professors). Institutionalizing experiential education has implications for multiple logics at play within universities and thus requires more “logic work” of those working within. Implications: This exploratory study lays the groundwork for further theorizing experiential education from an organizational perspective, namely, studying experiential education across disciplines, theorizing at the field level, and including administrators.

Keywords

experiential education, higher education, organizational theory, institutional logics, professional logics

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Experiential education is becoming institutionalized in many universities and colleges to enhance student learning and career development, and provide students with practical “real-world” skills (DiConti, 2004; Eyler, 2009; Fawell, 2017). While this pedagogical philosophy has been in place for some time, a unique development is currently underway in Ontario, Canada, that has inimitable organizational considerations and implications for practice. The province of Ontario recently forwarded a funding agenda that will further institutionalize experiential education as an institutional pillar of university education. Experiential education has been included as one of six funding metrics that could decide up to 60% of future government funding for universities (Government of Ontario, 2019; Greenfield, 2019). However, the activation of performance-based funding has been delayed until 2022–2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding approach is unique among the landscape of Canadian higher education (Buzzelli & Allison, 2017). Formalizing experiential education as a funding metric signals to universities that experiential education should be an institutional priority, and that they will need to articulate and demonstrate how they have applied it to their institutional practices. In Ontario, this signaling is primarily achieved through the Strategic Mandate process that all provincially funded universities complete (for more detailed discussion, see Government of Ontario, 2013).

Despite the broad emphasis on experiential education in university settings, the process of institutionalization has been relatively taken for granted, with a notable scholarship gap considering the organizational dynamics of universities. Some headway has been made by scholars such as Isaak et al. (2018) who offer commentary on instructor experiences with institutionalization projects. Studies analyzing experiential education often provide empirical examples of how experiential education has been implemented in a course or program, but these do little to theorize beyond a purely disciplinary or pedagogical context (for example, see Holtzman & Menning, 2015; Konak et al., 2014; Windsor & Carroll, 2015). Others focus more on forwarding scholarship on particular subsets of experiential education such as outdoor education (James & Williams, 2017), service learning (Collins et al., 2020), and community-based learning (Karasik, 2020), among others. In many cases, theorizing is limited to an overreliance on scholars such as Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), or other pedagogical models which are considered foundational for the inclusion of experience into education.

Utilizing institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), this study investigates the organizational complexities of experiential education, seeking to understand how competing academic and managerial institutional logics impact the institutionalization of this educational philosophy. It contributes to the literature on experiential education by utilizing an organizational approach rather than a pedagogical lens and analyzes how the coupling of organizational groups and their respective professional logics is impacted through the institutionalization of a new experiential education program at a Canadian research-intensive university.

**Literature Review**

Organizational theory provides useful theoretical and analytic tools for understanding change-making processes in organizational contexts. Theorizing has continued to
offer new and renewed perspectives on schooling as an organizational process (Aurini, 2006, 2012; Hallet, 2010). Unlike curriculum theories that focus on pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, using an organizational approach to analyze experiential education forwards the nuances of power, organizational pressure, and entrepreneurial spirit which often precedes organizational change. Not only are organizations arenas where multiple institutional logics meet and exert influence, they are also sites of compounding professions which are guided by their own logics that provide the rules and schemas for professional action. In universities, for example, one may appreciate how the professoriate has different professional goals and obligations than those in professional development roles.

**Institutional Logics**

Institutional logics are the “rules, standards, and values that shape conditions of rational, mindful behavior” (Hattke et al., 2016, p. 237). Within organizations, there is a mosaic of logics that influence the action of organizational actors (Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics essentially lay out the “rules of the game” in organizations and provide principles on how actors may interpret reality and carry out behavior, thereby bridging the gap between institutions and action (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Two prevailing logics that have been discussed in the literature on higher education are the managerial and academic logics (Lepori, 2016; see also Canhilal et al., 2015). These two logics are emblematic of ideological tensions between accountability and corporatization (i.e., managerial) and independent, autonomous scholarship (i.e., academic) (Canhilal et al., 2015).

The managerial logic is emblematic of new public management influences in higher education, where universities embrace a corporate enterprise ideology (Bleiklie, 2018; Brownlee, 2015). The university embraces a market-oriented and competitive practice to its operations, ordering their organizational structure hierarchically to legitimate decision-making from the top-down (Canhilal et al., 2015). Not only are performance indicators used within the university, but a managerial logic would also situate universities in an environment of competition with one another. The managerial logic has been contrasted to the academic logic, which has a distinct view on how universities should be envisioned. The academic logic adopts a liberalized approach to organization, where the university’s goal is to produce knowledge (Cote & Allahar, 2007). Classified more as a republic of scholars (Bleiklie, 2018), the academic logic does not differentiate between institutional autonomy and academic freedom, meaning that “leadership and decision making are based on collegial decisions made by independent scholars” (p. 1). While this logic does recognize seniority, the academic approach to collegiality and autonomy prevails (Canhilal et al., 2015).

These logics are often presented as oppositional, given their contrasting views on the role of the university (Cote & Allahar, 2007). As noted by Shields and Watermeyer (2020), “if shared institutional logics make organizations stable and durable, then competing logics explain how organizations can change over time” (p. 5). Institutionalization, then, is the change-making process of when a new logic becomes central to the operation
of an organization. Kezar and Sam (2013) note that “institutionalization is a particular type of change that becomes sustainable and embedded into the fabric of the institution” (p. 59). Experiential education, however prevalent in policy discourse, has yet to be theorized through an organizational lens which is able to interpret the institutional logics at play. While institutional logics operate at the macro level of the organization and influence its goals and priorities of the university, they also exert influence on those professional actors within the organization who are also subject to professional logics.

**Coupling Institutional Logics and Professional Logics: Macro-Micro Interaction**

While institutional logics speak to macro-influences on action, professional logics speak to the micro, practice-oriented identity and guidelines for carrying out professional roles. As defined by Hattke et al. (2016), professional logics “create normative isomorphism by establishing common cognitive values that legitimize occupational idiosyncrasies” (p. 238). The various aggregate groups on university campuses (e.g., academic departments, professional offices) are each guided by their own professional logics which dictate how they are to carry out their professional roles, and these may align or conflict with the macro managerial and academic logics that can change over time.

This is not to say that institutional actors operate as cultural dopes. Rather, they are able to make sense and reconcile their professional roles in accordance with institutional logics. Pache and Santos (2013) suggest that “the degree of influence of a logic on an individual may vary as a function of the degree of availability, the degree of accessibility and the degree of activation of the logic” (p. 8). Accordingly, the institutional logics’ influence on professional action will not be equally patterned on organizational members. Members engage in a process of bricolage to make sense of the compatibility between their own professional logics and broader institutional logics, as well as in comparison/contrast to other professional groups. Essentially, they must reflect on how aligned their organizational roles and priorities are with emerging and competing institutional logics.

The heterogeneous nature of universities presents fertile ground to theorize how the contrast between various professional logics at the micro level and the academic and managerial institutional logics at the macro level impacts the institutionalization project of experiential education. I use these concepts to capture how the loosely coupled nature of the university influences the prevalence of experiential education as an institutional priority by various campus constituents. As the university is a highly aggregated machine, meaning many different professional groups co-exist and interact in the same organization, those actors in each aggregate are guided by their own professional logic and organizational priorities.

**Methods**

To examine the institutionalization of experiential education, I conducted a case study at a research-intensive university in Ontario, hereafter referred to as Central University.
to preserve anonymity of the institution and participants. A case study method seeks to produce description and analysis of a bounded system, where the particular case is representative of a larger phenomenon occurring in society (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). In this instance, I chose an Experiential Education Certificate (EEC) as a particular institution’s effort to improve its capacity for experiential education corresponding to increasing field-level pressure for Ontario universities to formalize experiential education programming. Organizations are situated entities within particular organizational fields, and a qualitative approach was suitable given its ability to represent the situatedness of particular phenomenon (Levitt et al., 2017). The EEC is reflective of a larger social process of experiential education in higher education, and the case study method builds an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon (Aurini et al., 2016).

The EEC is of interest as it combines both curricular and co-curricular forms of experiential education, with a particular focus on work-integrated learning. The EEC comprises, in part, 21 pre-approved experiential education courses, as well as other ancillary workshops for students pursuing the certificate. As this study is interested in compounding institutional and professional logics, I focus exclusively on the perspectives of the institutional actors involved in the program delivery and course delivery. While the EEC is not generalizable to all experiential education initiatives, it is emblematic of the trend toward increasing experiential learning throughout higher education (e.g., see Isaak et al., 2018) and the particular Canadian context of Ontario.

I draw on a content analysis of a wide variety of institutional documents (see below) that frame the institutionalization of experiential education and semi-structured interviews with staff and faculty associated with the EEC. The combination of these two qualitative methods also provides a methodological contribution to the existing body of work on experiential education, which has relied heavily on surveys and self-report studies. This study was approved through Central University’s institutional ethics review board.

Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyze all publicly available descriptive content on the EEC program itself, to determine how the program is framed and communicated to those inside and outside the institution (e.g., program brochures, webpage, undergraduate calendar descriptions of preapproved courses). These data were collected from the institutional webpage, as well as Central University’s institutional mandate agreements with the provincial government. Altogether, this culminated in 190 pages of text. These text sources created an institutional snapshot of experiential education at Central University from 2013 to 2019 and helped to frame the interview questions for participants. Participants were asked for any additional documents they could supply which they felt would be pertinent to the research and supplement their interview contribution. For example, faculty members provided their course outlines which are not publicly available through the institution’s webpage.
Data were coded in two coding cycles on Microsoft Word. Documents were organized as outward-signaling documents (those which signal the institutional commitment to experiential education to the broader field, for example, Strategic Mandate Agreement) and inward-signaling documents (those which communicated the institutional commitment to experiential education to those within the university, for example, strategic plan, undergraduate course descriptions). In the first cycle of coding, documents were coded descriptively with codes such as “defining experiential education,” “disciplinary priorities,” and “institutional priorities” to get a flavor for how experiential education was being officially framed in policy documents. In the second cycle of coding, these descriptive codes were developed into analytic codes to analyze instances of coupling on campus and to understand the flow of policy discussions (e.g., departmental documents and course outlines scaffolding to high-level policy discussions in the Strategic Mandate Agreement).

**Interviews**

Qualitative interviews aim to uncover a rich and nuanced understanding of the attitude formation and consequent behaviors of those individuals relevant to the research project (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Given the small scale of this research project, it was imperative to include a variety of institutional constituents who had professional connections with the EEC. Participants ($n = 12$) included staff from Central University’s student professional development (PD) office ($n = 4$), teaching development staff ($n = 2$), and faculty teaching EEC-approved experiential education courses ($n = 6$). These participants were selected given their facilitation and implementation roles of experiential education on campus. Participants were asked about their experiences with experiential education broadly, the development of the EEC and their involvement with the program, as well as how they interpreted experiential education impacting their professional roles. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following a process of postinterview member-checking (Merriam, 2009), one PD participant withdrew from the study. My own positionality to this research was as a graduate student studying experiential education, and the difference in power between myself and these professional actors is indicative of what Nader (1972) refers to as “studying up”—in this case, professional actors and faculty who had more power and institutional status than me.

Data were coded in two coding cycles through NVivo software. In the first cycle, transcripts were reviewed to develop descriptive codes to explore the data more in-depth. For example, the code “Conceptualizing Experiential education” categorized how participants defined experiential education and what forms of experiential education they identified as taking place in the EEC program. Each interview was continually analyzed for descriptive codes and reanalyzed based on new codes that had emerged in other interviews.

During the second cycle coding, the first cycle codes were further refined and reorganized to build connections with existing literature and organizational theory. For example, the existing code “Conceptualizing Experiential education” became a master
node, with several parent and grandchild nodes that better captured the individual professional logics which shaped various participants’ interpretations of experiential education, as well as any associated benefits and challenges to its implementation. In this stage, the direct quotations from participants were selected for use. These data were concurrently analyzed with the textual data that were collected throughout the research process.

Findings

The institutionalization of experiential education at Central University is demonstrative of the contrasting managerial and academic logics and has further implications for the relationship between institutional and professional logics. Although participants from the PD office intended to further develop and refine the EEC, the implementation strategy meant that faculty did not have a solid understanding of the program. Organizational analysis of the PD office did not have direct control over faculty, they had managerial authority over the EEC program, under which the approved courses, and thereby faculty, needed to comply to maintain EEC designation. While some faculty expressed interest in further developing experiential education in their courses, some felt that an advanced teaching methodology such as experiential education was antithetical to their professional role as a researcher and would need to be further incentivized for them to consider adding it to their pedagogical toolkit. The managerial approach to institutionalizing experiential education therefore conflicts with the sort of academic freedom that was internalized and valued by the faculty participants.

Institutional Foundations: Institutionalizing Experiential Education

The inspiration to create the EEC was to offer experiential education opportunities to all undergraduate students, not just those enrolled in co-op. Central University formalized the EEC both in its own strategic planning documents and in its institutional mandate agreement with the Ontario government. One PD participant stated, in part, “...if we’re going to be known in the experiential education world, how can we really make an impact and be a leader across all forms of experiential education, of which co-op is one subset?” Questions such as these spurred an institutional effort to identify where experiential education was already happening on campus. The PD member recalled that during the development stages of the EEC, an institutional planning committee asked associate deans and department chairs to compile a list of courses in their respective disciplines which included experiential education. The participant reported that for a course to be preapproved as experiential education under the certificate program, the course would need to have at least 18 hr of student involvement with a third-party member (e.g., industry or community partner). This resulted in 21 EEC-approved courses. None of the participants in this study knew why 18 hr was chosen as the metric for constituting experiential education in a course, thereby serving as a sole inclusion criterion. One participant from the PD office elaborated that the intention of
the program was to foster work-integrated learning as the specific form of experiential education, stating,

I think it’s probably best described as work-integrated learning. So, there has to be interaction with an employer. So, it goes beyond just experiential and has to have that industry relationship and completing work for a third-party.

Although they were not able to elaborate on the time requirement, this participant did acknowledge the rationale for including partnerships outside the classroom. The framing exercise undertaken by the planning committee thus relied on revisiting existing experiential education initiatives taking place on campus and formalizing them under the banner of the EEC. Although students had to fulfill additional workshop requirements to complete this certificate, with respect to the course-based experiential education, no new courses were created, and no courses newly implemented experiential education to be included in the program.

The institutionalization of experiential education was viewed as a top-down administrative effort by some faculty. One faculty participant shared that “there’s sort of a top-down commitment from the university really pushing teaching and pushing experiential education. . . and I think there’s just more enthusiasm and support from the institution.” The top-down sentiment was echoed by a PD participant who noted that the development of the EEC program came out of “a recognition across campus that we need to broaden our role in experiential education.” Along with the institutional documents mentioned above, there exists a picture of an institutional commitment to fostering experiential education at Central University. However, as I discuss below, this institutional imperative was not equally valued by faculty participants.

**Micro-Foundations: Competing Institutional and Professional Logics**

Faculty participants in this study indicated that experiential learning changes the nature of teacher–learner interactions, and in many ways challenges “traditional” teaching roles such as knowledge-transmitter and evaluator (Major & Palmer, 2006). As communicated by these participants, the inclusion of work-integrated experiential education into their courses required them to take on new roles and challenges in their teaching. For example, the types of assignments students complete and the method of assessment were different from how faculty members themselves were taught as students, as noted by one faculty participant who said,

. . . the students are doing their [course] activities independently. I’m evaluating reflection exercises which is something I’ve never assigned before. I wasn’t myself assigned as a student. And the students’ final projects are a lot more creative or really innovative to some extent, right. So, it’s the students’ experience is different from what I’m used to supervising. My role as an instructor, the types of things I’m asking them to do is different.

This participant articulates not only the distinction between how they are teaching now and how they learned, but also the differences in how they teach their course with experiential education compared with other teaching experiences.
While the inclusion criteria for the EEC program required students to work with third parties, faculty participants indicated that this required them to have preexisting partnerships or develop partnerships with individuals and groups outside the institution. Their relationships with third-party members were either facilitated by themselves or were preexisting in the course prior to them being assigned as the instructor. None of the participants had brokered relationships with their industry partner for the purpose of having their course approved under the EEC. One faculty member noted that when looking for an industry partner it was important to consider the contributions they would make to the course, stating,

I tried to look for third parties that are experts in their fields- they bring some skill that I don’t have right [. . .] So I guess it comes down to if they’re experts in their field, if they have some skill that needs to be offered to the students that I can’t do then that’s where it’s best to bring in someone else that can do that aspect.

In this instance, the third-party connection was established to provide students with a professional certification to use in their field post-graduation. While this faculty participant sought out a new third party themselves, other participants used past personal or departmental contacts. One such instructor noted,

The clients are usually people that we have had conversations with in some other context, where we’ve said, you know, we’re talking to them about something they’re working on- they’ve come as a guest speaker and have talked about something- and then we’ve spoken to them afterwards and said would that be something you would be interested in having our students take a look at?

Just as this participant relied on past contacts from various department interactions, another faculty member indicated that they relied on those in their own professional network outside of academe to build connections and third-party involvement, stating,

Because I’m a clinician in the field, I have quite a few connections. I have been doing networking like for 15 years working in this area. So, people retire or sometimes- you know I’ve even had deaths. So, you constantly have to find new connections.

These perspectives suggest that faculty members engaged in experiential education (in this case, work-integrated learning) are required to continually network and explore third-party connections for future partnerships with their courses. In addition to the altered instructional methods, this networking requirement exemplifies how under experiential education the professional logics of instructors change.

Another change to the professional logic of faculty was with respect to balancing teaching and research. One participant suggested that experiential education may be antithetical to their research obligations and professional goals:

Most of us do not have an incentive to be good teachers. We’re interested in being good researchers because that actually gets you tenure. You get far more recognition for
research than you get for teaching and that’s why experiential education may not become a priority for tenure-track faculty members.

This faculty member interpreted that an advanced teaching methodology such as experiential education was more of a professional burden given that it was not legitimated in the same way as their research was (i.e., promotion and tenure). This suggests that the institutionalization of experiential education is not aligned with the academic logic, and that faculty members may require more incentives before embracing it in their teaching methodology.

**Discussion**

At Central University, the institutionalization of experiential education highlights the contrast between managerial and academic logics, and how implementation strategies devoid of meaningful consultation may result in confusion or resistance by faculty. In many ways, experiential education changes the professional logics of academic faculty without also changing how successful implementation is legitimized.

**Logic Work and Institutionalizing Experiential Education**

From an administrative level, it appears that experiential education has been woven into the fabric of the institution (Kezar & Sam, 2013). This was achieved through both outwardly and inwardly signaling documents that present a tightly aligned initiative for implementing more diverse forms of experiential education to students. To be sure, this process would suggest that experiential education has attained a level of centrality (Besharov & Smith, 2014) in the institution and should therefore exert influence on the professional logics of those carrying out technical functions at the university.

The presentation of tight linkages did not equate to tight implementation practices. In speaking with instructors, it appears that the administrative activities are in fact loosely coupled from the technical operations of teaching and research. This is hardly surprising from an organizational perspective, where the aggregate professional groups within the university are all influenced by multiple institutional and professional logics. This finding aligns with classic discussions of loose coupling in educational settings (Weick, 1976). The lack of technical change to existing practices was evident when I asked faculty participants about their knowledge and involvement with the EEC program. Very few faculty participants were able to detail what the EEC program was, the overall purpose and intent of the program, and the impact it had on their own teaching practices. Although experiential education practices shaped and impacted the ways in which these faculty participants facilitated their courses (i.e., the partnership with third parties), this was not necessarily attributable to the development of the EEC program. Rather, the faculty members and PD participants noted that these experiential education practices were in place prior to the development of the EEC program.

While the EEC program was still in its first year of operation, the relationships which were highlighted in this analysis suggest that managerial models of institutionalization
do not necessarily reverberate in the technical operations of the university. Highly aggregated organizations, such as universities, have buffered their technical core from administrative activities, and this may stand in the way of the institutionalization process. A lack of faculty incentive to foster experiential education meant that it was up to the pedagogical mindset of individual instructors as to whether they wanted to pursue approval by the EEC. This finding suggests that processes of institutionalization require the support of those inhabiting the technical core of organizations if a project is to be institutionalized. Moreover, the existence of multiple institutional logics requires a greater deal of “logic work” to align new institutional practices with the professional logics and forms of legitimation of the various groups which inhabit organizations. It is apparent from these findings that faculty members did not react favorably or were indifferent to the EEC program. However, there were small instances where faculty discussed the value of experiential education in general. There may very well be other examples on campus of faculty innovation related to experiential education not captured in this analysis, as they were not a part of the EEC program. The distinction that this analysis contributes is that the potential value of experiential education was harangued by organizational complexity and competing logics.

Viewed from another perspective, the buffering between the technical and administrative activities, and the academic and managerial logics creates what Whitchurch (2013) terms the “third space.” It is in this realm that binary approaches to higher education can be problematized and reconciled. The institutionalization of experiential education can be interpreted as a third space for reconciling faculty priorities of research and practice, and administrative priorities oriented to skill development and career readiness. Third space professionals are needed to bridge the divide between these two realms, which the findings of this study suggest are currently in opposition. Universities that are in the process of institutionalizing experiential education would do well to consider the necessity of these third space actors, such as scholar practitioners, who are able to wear many hats and liaise the different logic tensions that have been foregrounded.

### Conclusion

This study has highlighted the organizational complexity of institutionalizing experiential education. Broadly, the findings showcase that reframing existing efforts does little to accomplish substantive change, as there was a difference between the value Central University placed on experiential education and how it is valued and responded to at the faculty level. Ceremonially reframing existing efforts (i.e., preexisting experiential education courses) under a new program harkens back to classic institutional considerations of myth and ceremony, where the technical operations of organizations are necessarily buffered from their formal structure to ward off inspections that could otherwise expose inefficiencies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

The perspectives of faculty members and PD participants indicated that experiential education was certainly an administrative priority at Central University, and implementation flowed through the hierarchal organization, consistent with a managerial
logic. Although this top-down decision-making was facilitated through the PD office and the professional actors within, it clashed with the kind of instructional roles and reward structures that faculty members had come to expect within the logic of their profession. Accordingly, there was evidence of conflicting professional logics between those developing and implementing the EEC, and those teaching the courses which were preapproved for inclusion.

Universities will need to consider how they will implement experiential education in ways that do not overly conflict with the professional logics of organizational actors and how the opposition between managerial and academic logics may also impact processes of institutionalization. Third space actors like scholar practitioners may be such an option to liaise oppositional goals and reconcile logic tensions.

Limitations and Future Research

As this study is a single-case example of an institutionalization project, it is not generalizable to the broader field of higher education. Future works could consider a multisited approach to investigate how experiential education is institutionalized across multiple universities. This would expand theorizing to the organizational field level, thereby providing nuance to macro-organizational complexity. At the same time, there may be value to analyzing experiential education across disciplines and exploring disciplinary-specific concerns or considerations for the institutionalization of experiential education.

Administrative actors emerged from this analysis as an important group in the organizational complexity of experiential education. As their involvement emerged in the findings of this study, they were not included as participants. I would suggest that future work on experiential education consider these voices, as their organizational position is key for driving organizational goals, implementation strategies, and liaising with the organizational field. The same analytic extension could be made for third space actors who mediate organizational tensions related to experiential education.

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