

**Applying the Experiential Learning Cycle Through Service Learning Projects**

Jillian C. Ford and Misty D. Lambert  
North Carolina State University

NCSU Box 7607  
Raleigh, NC 27695-7607  
(919) 515-2707  
jrcasey2@ncsu.edu  
mdlamber@ncsu.edu

### **Introduction and Need for Innovation**

The National Council for Agricultural Education (n.d.) considers Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) the work-based learning portion of the three-component model of School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE). Due to its importance in a complete SBAE program, undergraduate Agricultural Education students at North Carolina State University are required to complete an experiential learning course that focuses on using Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) to implement SAEs in SBAE programs. In 2015, a new SAE model was adopted, SAE for All, which introduced Service Learning (SL) as a new SAE category for students to choose from (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2015). In this context, SL is considered to be when "students are involved in the development of a needs assessment, planning the goals, objectives and budget, implementation of the activity, promotion, and evaluation/reflection of a chosen project" (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2015, pp. 3-4).

Instructors for the experiential learning course noticed their students struggled to understand the difference between community service and SL as well as how their assignments could be applied to their future SBAE programs. Therefore, in the fall 2022 semester, instructors introduced service learning by modeling SAE facilitation and recordkeeping that aligns with Kolb's (2015) ELT cycle by requiring students to complete a service learning project (SLP) during the course.

### **How it Works**

Instructors modified the Service Learning Plan Template available in the Service Learning Independent Student Guide (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2018) and established expectations and due dates for the project to fit into the 15-week course.

- Week 1 - Instructors introduced SL and assigned the SLP, specifying that it could be completed individually or in groups up to four. Project expectations were shared along with due dates. Time was provided for students to brainstorm ideas using a community needs assessment worksheet.
- Week 2 - Students self-identified who was working together and their initial project ideas.
- Week 3 - Students set up their profiles in the AET and began weekly journals about their project. Journals continued through completion of the project.
- Week 5 - Completed SLP Plan was submitted. Instructors reviewed and prepared feedback.
- Week 6 - Instructors held individual SLP Plan meetings, resulting in a need to update plans.
- Week 7 - Instructors held a second round of SLP Plan meetings for students that had to make major updates to their plans.
- Week 12 - Final project completion date and completed single experience AET report due.
- Week 13 - Students presented posters about their projects to judges consisting of instructors, departmental faculty and state Ag Ed staff.

### **Results to Date**

Eight SLPs were completed by the 12 students in the class, including one group of four and one pair. SLPs varied across student interests and included a canned food drive, landscaping project, yard sale fundraiser for a community member's medical bills, bake sale for a local animal shelter, Operation Paperback book drive, creation of a plastic yarn sleeping mat, resume workshop, and an American Sign Language workshop. Half of the projects were completed in the students' hometowns while the other half impacted the community around the university.

All students were able to move through the four stages of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 2015). We saw students engage in active experimentation as they researched and planned their SLP. From there, students gained concrete experience through implementation of their chosen SLP and engagement with the recordkeeping system. We did require weekly reflections on their SLP and consider the final poster project to also be a component of their reflective observation. During the final poster session, we asked students to engage in abstract conceptualization both through the questions asked during the poster session and through their final report and poster themselves. All students were asked what they would do differently and how we should adjust the assignment to better support students in the future. Lastly, we moved all students to active experimentation as they engaged in thinking about how they would incorporate SLPs in their own SBAE program.

### **Future plans and Advice to Others**

Instructors intend to continue requiring students to complete a SLP as part of their experiential learning course with a few changes. The SLP Plan template will be revised into a more user-friendly version. When introducing the assignment, exact rubrics will be provided and possible funding ideas will be highlighted. Students requested an opportunity to practice their poster presentations in class to share their projects with each other. Students also requested that the poster presentation component be formatted as a friendly competition.

For others interested in incorporating a similar project into their courses, consider preparing some possible local ideas and community partners. Try to organize the project so students must identify their projects and prepare plans as early as possible to allow students the most time to implement their SLP. Try to wrap up the SLP several weeks before the end of the semester to help alleviate potential student stress from deadline overlap with other courses.

### **Costs and Resources Needed**

Incorporating a SLP into a course can be done at little to no cost. If a program has funding, items such as poster printing, grants for SLPs, and refreshments and prizes for the poster presentation could be purchased. To implement a SLP, instructors will need to dedicate time before the course to prepare the assignment and specific expectations. Instructors should also plan to incorporate time into the course regularly for administration of the SLP. It is highly recommended that instructors are aware of the required state SAE record book and require students to maintain records for their SLPs utilizing this tool.

**References**

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