

**Beyond the Classroom: An Experiential Immersion into Agricultural Industries and
Agencies**

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

“... the teacher-centered, often didactic approach to formal instruction that most of us have experienced in the field and classroom needs to be re-examined (Bonney & Drury, 1992, chap. 1, pt. 2, para. 3). According to researchers in the discipline, contextualized experiences combined with active involvement in the content provide learning opportunities exceeding traditional classroom-based learning (Dewey, 1986; Kolb, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

The philosophical foundation for modern experiential learning theory (ELT) lies in the work of John Dewey. Dewey's philosophy posits that knowledge and education originate from inquiry. Crucially, this inquiry must be established in the context of human experience. John Dewey was the key figure who led the Progressive Education movement and is recognized for introducing a fundamental shift toward experiential approaches in teaching and learning (Cox, 2019, July 29).

According to Drewery et.al., a form of experiential learning known as work-integrated learning assimilates academics with experiences such as in the workplace or learning environment. By bridging student experiences and theoretical knowledge, student learning is enhanced (CEWIL, 2021). Experiential learning enables students to actively engage with course concepts, fostering a deeper and more practical understanding of how those ideas operate in real-world settings (Kolb, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). What is more, according to Dressler and Keeling (2011), students involved in WIL gain greater clarity regarding their desired careers and feel more effective at pinpointing relevant career paths based on their academic background and personal interests. As such, recognition that experiential learning can be powerful to individual cognition, work-integrated learning should be designed.

Bridging the divide between academic instruction and real-world agricultural practice is essential in preparing students for the evolving demands of the agriculture sector. The *Agricultural Industries and Agencies Immersion Wintermester Travel Course* was created to offer students first-hand exposure to regional agribusinesses, production systems, and governmental agencies. In alignment with the 2023 AAAE Research Values, this immersive model provides the kind of applied, stakeholder-engaged, and systems-focused educational innovation necessary to advance research in agricultural, food, and natural resources (AFNR) systems (AAAE, 2023).

How It Works / Methodology

The initial phase of the course includes a week of structured exposure to agricultural industries and agencies within a 100-mile radius of the university. Students visited four to five diverse stops daily (e.g., feed mills, extension agencies, commodity processors, farm operations). Pre-travel preparation included “Pre-flection Infographics” summarizing site backgrounds and formulating professional inquiry questions. During the journey, structured discussions, networking sessions, and on-site reflections were embedded. After the trip, students submitted a comparative analysis, maintained a networking journal, and evaluated each stop’s educational impact. The course design intentionally aligns with Experiential Learning Theory through:

- Incorporating systems thinking by sequencing visits to complementary sectors in the agrifood chain.
- Engaging stakeholders (industry professionals, agency personnel) in authentic dialogue.
- Fostering innovation awareness via exposure to emerging technologies or practices.
- Promoting human capacity development through mentoring and networking.
- Emphasizing resilience and sustainability by selecting enterprises with ecological or socio-economic adaptive strategies.

Results / Student Feedback and Implications

Student evaluations ($n = 13$) indicate that students experienced significant growth in key professional domains: 100% reported enhanced knowledge of agricultural systems and networking skills, 69% indicated gains in professionalism, 62% in communication, and 46% in critical thinking. Every student (100%) said they would recommend the course to peers. Qualitative feedback emphasized the significance of interacting directly with industry leaders, the variety of site visits, and the value of career insight opportunities. Students frequently remarked that seeing the “behind-the-scenes” operations reshaped their perception of agriculture as a dynamic, interconnected sector. These outcomes suggest that immersive, systems-oriented engagements can successfully foster student readiness, contextual understanding, and bridging between academic and professional domains—consistent with the ambitions of the 2023 Research Values to connect scholarship, stakeholders, and real-world systems (AAAE, 2023).

Future Plans / Recommendations

Moving forward, future course planning will focus on three key areas. First, the site selection process will be refined to maximize systems diversity and interactivity, ensuring students engage with a wider and more varied range of real-world contexts. Second, the course will embed additional reflection opportunities throughout the curriculum to actively strengthen students' metacognitive learning and their ability to analyze their own learning processes. Finally, there will be an expansion of mentorship pairings to facilitate greater engagement between students and industry contacts. For others seeking to replicate this experiential learning model, three critical recommendations emerge:

1. Engage local industry and agency partners early to co-design interactive experiences.
2. Embed structured reflection (before, during, after) to help students integrate observations with theory.
3. Balance exposure and autonomy, allowing students space for inquiry while providing scaffolding aligned with professional norms.

Costs / Resource Requirements

Students participating in the program incurred a \$200 program fee, which was applied beyond standard institutional tuition. This fee covered essential logistical costs, including transportation, fuel, meals, and incidentals. A key factor in maintaining the program's cost-effectiveness was the strategic minimization of overhead, primarily through the utilization of existing institutional partnerships and university-owned vehicles.

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