

## 2. Teaching & Learning Culture

### Innovation

Learning does not occur in a vacuum. The need for knowledge, the ability to seize the opportunities available and the ways in which one learns are dimensions largely determined by society.

At Syracuse Academy, learning is understood as a way in which a student acquires, interprets, organizes, modifies or assimilates groups of information, skills and attitudes that are connected to each other and constitute meanings to be attributed to daily life and ways of thinking.

We believe that globalization and technology are two forces that affect the events that cross the context in which we live and, therefore, influence learning. In fact:

- globalization connects economic assets, lifestyles, consumer behavior and cultural affiliations;
- technology is an integral part of the global economy, it has contributed to bringing about the change towards a knowledge society.

These forces interact with each other and are embodied in the value system of the culture in which one lives. Our educational model reflects and responds to these forces.

Indeed, as technology-mediated learning develops, the traditional processes of teaching have changed, by erasing the space-time dimension. Accordingly, at Syracuse Academy we count on pedagogical frameworks, strategies and tools, such as cloud-based LMS platforms, to respond to the needs of an integrated and inclusive learning culture. The LMS can be used to upload ebooks and documents, videos, exercises, questionnaires, quizzes and tests for learning, associated with the use of specific contents. In addition, it fosters the development of a local Community of Inquiry (CoI) through the use of discussion boards, reflective blogging and other multimedia tools, where students can collaborate and have discussions to share different viewpoints. At Syracuse Academy we maintain an innovative approach through the learning design processes that support and enable educators to implement the most appropriate teaching and learning strategies and tools, selected among an array of pedagogical options based on research from the learning sciences.

### Learners and Learning Environment: the role of experiential learning

Instructors who participate in the teaching culture at Syracuse Academy, have a great deal of latitude for how to teach courses.



It is essential to ask ourselves what are the conditions that make it possible to facilitate and support the learning processes. Outline educational interventions that help students identify frames of reference and structures that influence how thoughts, actions, decisions and experiences are processed.

Numerous authors have emphasized the fundamental role that the experiential component plays in learning processes<sup>1</sup>. A new experience can offer a challenge, a problem to be solved, or a vision of a future condition. The learning environment within which this experience occurs from a personal, social, professional and cultural point of view, plays a key role in influencing people's interpretative methods, their choices, the actions that they undertake and the resulting learning (see *Figure 1 below*).

Considering that experiential learning is a process

- of active construction of experience,
- influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs,

that is

- socially and culturally constructed,

we acknowledge that it is essential to select experiences that actually produce learning, increase self-confidence and foster reflection and action.

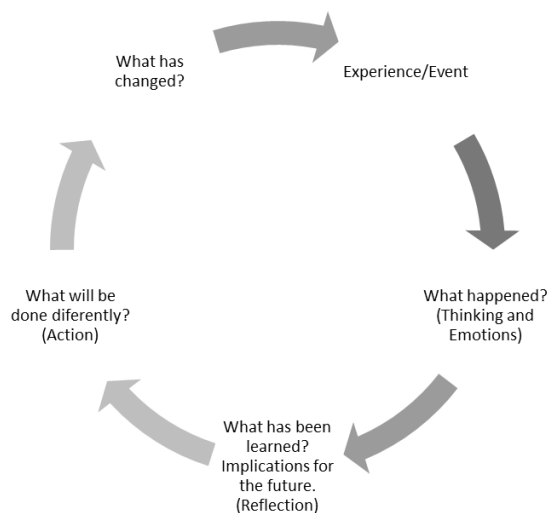
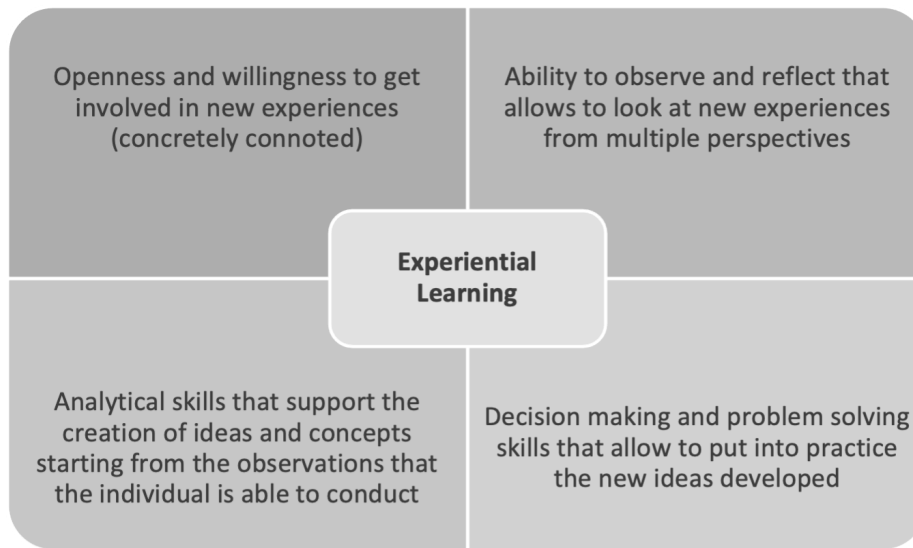


Fig. 1 Model of reflective thought and action inspired by Kolb (1984) and Jarvis (1987).

<sup>1</sup> Kolb D.A. (1984), *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Jarvis P. (1987), *Adult Learning in the Social Context*, London: Croom Helm. Usher R., Bryant I., Johnston R. (1997), *Adult Education and postmodernism Challenge: Learning Beyond the Limits*, New York: Routledge. Jarvis P. (2006), *Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*, New York: Routledge/Falmer Press.



## Experiential learning: core competencies



In order to grant the most comprehensive experiential learning through first-hand observation in an immersive environment, all courses are designed to take full advantage of the host city and region. At this end, faculty are encouraged to conduct some lectures on-site and involving local organizations and experts. In fact, during field visits, students can address a strong emphasis on active participation.

Field visits are to be considered an extension of the class time and, thus, as an integral embedded curricular activity (i.e. not extracurricular/recreational). In order to be effective, instructors are asked to prepare students for the visit beforehand by introducing the topics. The below activities and tips are considered and shared with students before the field visit occurs:

- preliminary preparation: share adequate information and digital/paper documents about the visit (e.g. location, business, organization, environment);
- in-class exercise to facilitate the data collection during the field visit, including, but not limited to, the following activities:
  - define specific objectives associated to the field visit and desired outcomes;
  - create a questionnaire and a checklist from which to extract the necessary data and information;
  - define the methods to be used for the data collection;
  - define how to organize and analyze the data;
- remind students to bring the necessary material (notebook, pen, pencil, checklist/questionnaires in digital or paper, ipad, camera, recorder if allowed or necessary) to ease the data collection activity;
- encourage the students to be curious and to alternate observation, taking pictures, and making focus group questions;



- prepare the students to share preliminary results in the planned debriefing sessions.

For information about the procedure on how to organize a field visit, please refer to *Annex 1: Planning a field visit - Flowchart*.

### **Pedagogical strategies, tools and assignment types**

Below is a non-exhaustive list showcasing the teaching and learning activities that foster Experiential Learning at Syracuse Academy:

- **Field Trips:** Visits to sites relevant to the course material, such as historical landmarks, museums, companies, or ecological sites, followed by reflective essays or presentations about the experience.
- **Practicums:** Placement in a working environment related to the student's field of study to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.
- **Service-Learning Projects:** Combining learning objectives with community service to provide a pragmatic, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs.
- **Case Studies:** Analysis of real-world cases to apply theoretical concepts, encouraging students to think critically and apply their knowledge to solve complex problems.
- **Simulation Games:** Participation in simulations or role-playing scenarios that mimic real-life situations, allowing students to experiment with decision-making processes.
- **Research Projects:** Conducting original research or projects that require students to apply course content to investigate a specific hypothesis or question, including fieldwork or laboratory work.
- **Peer Teaching:** Students prepare and deliver lessons or parts of lessons to their peers, fostering deeper understanding of the material and enhancing communication skills.
- **Portfolios:** Compilation of students' work over the course of a term to showcase learning progress and reflections on their learning journey.
- **Digital Storytelling:** Using digital tools to create stories or presentations that integrate personal experiences with academic content, enhancing digital literacy and creative expression.
- **Reflective Journals:** Encouraging students to keep journals where they reflect on their learning experiences, challenges faced, and how these experiences relate to their academic and personal growth.
- **Debriefing Sessions:** Holding regular meetings or discussions following experiential learning activities to reflect, share experiences, and integrate the learning with academic content.
- **Group Discussions and Peer Feedback:** Facilitating discussions among students to share experiences, insights, and challenges faced during the learning process, including peer feedback on assignments and projects.



- **Problem-Based Learning (PBL):** Presenting students with complex, real-world problems to solve in teams, encouraging research, critical thinking, collaboration, and application of knowledge.
- **Project-Based Learning:** Assigning long-term projects that require students to explore real-world problems and challenges, promoting deep engagement with the subject matter.
- **Learning Contracts:** Developing agreements between students and educators outlining the learning goals, strategies, and assessments for individualized learning experiences.
- **Workshops, Seminars and Roundtable Discussions:** Organizing interactive sessions where students can engage in hands-on activities, discussions, and presentations on specific topics related to the course.

## Collective Mission

Our teaching also contributes to our collective mission where learning is understood as a dimension of social practice and is a process distributed among the participants, not an individual act. This implies an integrated and distributed knowledge in the life of the community, and the contribution to the community development. To this extent, with community we intend a group of people (students, instructors, and external stakeholders) who share an interest, a set of problems, a passion for a topic and who deepen their knowledge and experience in this area through continuous interactions. The concept of participation refers not so much to local involvement in specific activities with certain people, as to a more inclusive process of being active participants in group practices and in the construction of identity and expertise<sup>2</sup>.

The aim is to promote the students' knowledge through reflection and questioning previous learning, through new possibilities of interpretation and an evaluation of alternative points of view, which allows them to replace or integrate their own perspective with another. To that end, we believe that this approach can foster the engagement of students in learning, where students are motivated to learn, intellectually stimulated and challenged.

In this context of action, the instructors ought to support and orient educational practice of students in a reflexive sense and with a narrative sensitivity through:

- shared languages;
- common goals;
- joint commitment;
- shared knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> Wenger E. (1998), *Communities of Practice, Learning Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



The educators must therefore be able to continuously reorient the acquired conceptual references and the frameworks of knowledge, the models of thinking and the sedimented cognitive approaches, to better adapt and understand the students' contexts. From time to time, the educator is thus forced to observe what happens in the classroom, to interpret the dynamics present, and to direct specific actions in terms of functionality to specific needs.

This allows the educators to have an attitude capable of "optimal" guidance: supporting students, giving feedback and, at the same time, suspending the action, such as to allow the adequate adjustment between "not being too present" and "not being too absent". This process is also integrated with the assessment, where assignments and tests are part of the learning process. This way, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and learning progress.

## Assessment

At Syracuse Academy we believe that assessment is a tool for fostering and measuring learning and change among the students. It is a qualitative process aiming at researching the understanding of the results achieved by the students, at visualizing the changes that teaching has had on the students.

We consider three factors when assessing students' competencies:

1. the different components of a given competence (knowledge, skills, attitudes);
2. the contextualization of a competence (it can be observed in the performance of a task of reality, in the resolution of a situation or problem);
3. the multiplicity of points of view.

Competencies require knowing how to choose and apply knowledge and skills in new contexts, it can thus be assessed through level indicators by proposing to the person a task as complex and authentic as possible. Therefore, to evaluate competencies it is necessary to collect elements and information on three different dimensions: cognitive, affective-motivational, and metacognitive<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). "Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview". *Theory into Practice*, 41(2), 64–70. Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.). (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Ifenthaler, D., & Lehmann, T. (2012). "Preactional self-regulation as a tool for successful problem solving and learning". *Technology, Instruction, Cognition and Learning*, 9(1–2), 97–110.



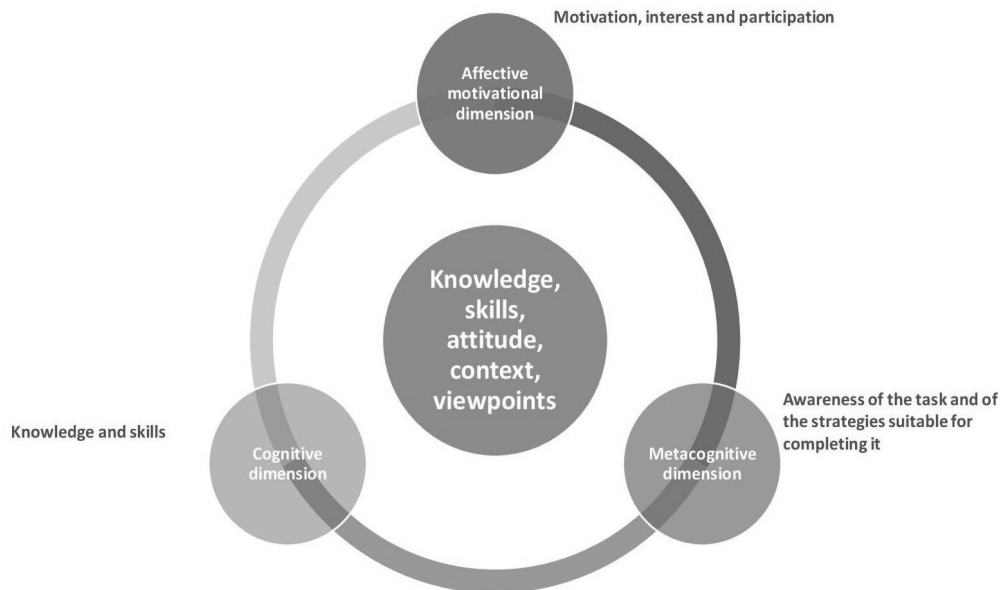


Fig. 3 Dimensions of Self-Regulated Learning

Hence the need for differentiated procedures and tools. (see *Annex 2\_Toward a Functional Assessment*)

## Assessment process

The active assessment process at Syracuse Academy is divided into:

1. formative assessment;
2. summative assessment.

The **Formative Assessment** intervenes during the learning processes and aims to provide instructors with continuous and detailed information about the way in which individual students access the learning procedure. The results of this evaluation exercise do not affect the summative assessment in terms of grading.

The Formative Assessment is divided into:

1. initial assessment
2. continuous formative assessment.

**Initial Assessment** is the one carried out in the initial stages of the educational process and aims to ascertain the general and specific intellectual abilities required for a given learning. This initial moment also serves to understand what are the cultural learnings previously made by the students. The results are useful to understand if it is necessary to review the



objectives of the course, adapting them to the particular educational situation, or it serves to suggest the use of more functional tools for the purpose.

The tools used are: a pre-course survey with MCQs and open questions, and individual interviews at the beginning of the course.

**Continuous formative assessment** is the form measurement of student progress and provision of teacher and/or peer feedback, carried out throughout the course. The availability of this information is essential in order to make timely didactic decisions to correspond to the needs of each student and of the group, differentiating the teaching proposal. Furthermore, this evaluation is useful to ascertain, in an analytical way, which skills the students are acquiring, with respect to which skills they are having difficulties with.

The tools used are different: MCQs, quizzes, tests, reflective papers, short essays, debates or group discussions both in-class and online, thanks to the forum discussions and blog available on the Syracuse Academy LMS Platform.

It should be added that, both in the intermediate and in the final learning phase, a Program Evaluation Survey, based on the Community of Inquiry framework and survey model, is administered and analyzed in order to timely collect students' feedback on the program<sup>4</sup>.

The **Summative Assessment** is conducted with the aims of:

- A. being the expression of an overall evaluation on the learning outcomes achieved by each student;
- B. ascertain the overall analysis of the quality of the education activated and of the didactic choices made.

It is carried out at the end of specific teaching sessions/units and at the end of the course; it focuses on the results of the program. Unlike the formative assessment, the summative assessment has a score, which is why it is used to determine if the student is in a position to pass a course or to move on to the next level in the learning path<sup>5</sup>.

## Curricular Programming: Syllabus development

By syllabus we mean the systematic description of the course designed by one or more instructors for a limited period of time. It is an articulated work plan aimed at preparing, implementing and evaluating a course.

In this case, the syllabus shall include a more or less articulated list of subjects of study, the general educational objectives and outcomes (NB. the use of relevant action verbs from the

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<sup>4</sup> See Annex 3: Template for Mid-Term Program Evaluation.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex 4 for Grading Scale and Grading Criteria.





relevant categories of the revised Bloom's taxonomy<sup>6</sup> is recommended), the framework of teaching methods and procedures, the selection of the most suitable materials, the general didactic organization; norms, procedures and values; expectations of instructors with respect to teaching, assessment and innovation; the methods for verifying and assessing the results achieved and the possible feedback mechanisms.

The development and definition of the syllabus is a task that is entrusted, in its operational specification, to the planning activity of the instructors, as individuals and as groups, then to the elaboration and discussion (individual and departmental) of articulated and integrated work plans.

From the instructors' point of view, the curriculum is configured as a personal, but objective way of planning the work, whose reference framework is given by their collective discussion with possible revisions and adjustments, by planning agreed in view of a general program or curriculum, and the enunciation of hypotheses that can be verified in the students' outcomes.

From the Institutional point of view, the syllabus must be distributed in class and posted on the Syracuse Academy LMS Platform. All syllabi must use the template provided by Syracuse Academy (with the exception of specific template requirements for partner university programs). While the content of the syllabi will obviously vary, their design must be consistent throughout the different Syracuse Academy. All syllabi must be provided in their final version three months to six weeks ahead of time, so as to provide students with all of the information they need prior to departure for the program and to allow time for logistical arrangements. Minor adjustments will be allowed at a later date in order to accommodate, for example, site visits that need to be scheduled at a specific time; however, the core of the syllabi has to remain the same.

## **Promoting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Our multicultural community has an impact on the way we educate. Our commitment to a learning environment that is not just free from harassment and discrimination but also one that recognizes the ways diversity improves our teaching and contributes to the richness of ideas and viewpoints includes our support for diversity and equity. Syracuse Academy places a high focus on the educational process, student welfare, and the promotion of flexible, creative learning settings. By doing this, we hope to encourage cohorts of academically motivated and career-driven students who are varied in their sociodemographics and academic areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into practice*, 41(4), 212-218.

