

# Experiential Learning: **Law School Learning Beyond the Classroom and Why It Matters**

By Francine Proctor and Laura Pringle



**L**aw school provides students with a robust and comprehensive academic experience. Most students come to law school expecting this, but many are unaware of the incredible value of incorporating experiential learning into their legal education. Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL) is the lead organization for work-integrated learning in Canada. [CEWIL defines work-integrated learning](#) as “a form of curricular experiential education that formally integrates a student’s academic studies with quality experiences within a workplace or practice setting.”

A key feature of this type of experiential education is that the formal integration takes place while a student is attending university, and the experience is a direct complement to

the [academic curriculum](#). Further, students who participate in experiential education engage in “direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop their capacity to contribute to their communities.”

Like many law schools, students at the University of Victoria (UVic) Faculty of Law in British Columbia, Canada have many options for incorporating experiential education into their legal studies, including clinics such as the UVic Law Centre and the Environmental Law Centre; student clubs such as Pro Bono Students Canada; mooting programs; and volunteering with public interest organizations.

In addition, UVic Law students can enroll in one of two programs that provide them with

the opportunity to combine their academic learning with practical legal experience, and to participate in a reflective learning process. Through the Law Co-op Program, JD students can complete multiple full-time work terms with a variety of legal employers. The Law Work Experience Program (LWEP) gives JD/JID students, those pursuing a degree in Indigenous legal orders alongside their JD, the ability to complete one work term with a legal employer. A diverse range of legal employers from a variety of sectors and locations hire through both Law Co-op and LWEP. Students move through each work term with intention, setting learning goals and objectives at the outset and assessing these, in collaboration with both their workplace supervisor and a UVic Law staff member, during and at the end of each work term.

All UVic law students are encouraged to incorporate some form of experiential learning into their legal education. Here are a few benefits that are particularly worth noting.

### 1. Complement to Academic Learning

Classroom learning provides students with a strong foundation in the law and legal principles; however, this foundational knowledge alone is not enough for a successful legal career. As students move from law school into legal practice, they typically encounter a

gap between their academic learning and the practical realities of legal practice. Experiential learning can help bridge this gap. For instance, students taking a family law class will learn the relevant case law and legislation, but they likely won't review actual separation or marriage agreements, prepare pleadings for a divorce application, or acquire an understanding of how negotiation and mediation play a role in resolving family law cases. Experiential learning gives students real-world experience, enhancing their legal education and preparing them for their careers.

UVic Law student David Hiebert (JD, 2026) completed a co-op work term for the Purchasing Services department at the University of Victoria and says:

“My time at purchasing gave me a lot of perspective on what was taught in first year contracts, in that it allowed me to see which aspects of the course were really important, and which things really don't come up all that often. It also taught me about the nuance of real-world negotiations and allowed me to learn what it feels like to actually redline a contract and decide which clauses are non-negotiable. It certainly was complementary to my 1L learning and I'm glad I was able to work there.”

This can go the other way too. Students bring knowledge they have learned while participating in an experiential learning experience to the classroom. For example, students who have worked as Hearings Officers with the Immigration and Refugee Board before taking administrative law will find that the legal principles taught in class land with more depth because of the contextual knowledge gained in a workplace setting.

### 2. Exploration of Career Options

While some law students come into law school with a strong vision for their legal career, others

are unclear about their path. Then there are those who start with specific career goals before discovering that their chosen path may not be a good fit for them, or that the opportunities in the legal profession are much broader than they had originally thought. Experiential learning gives students the chance to test out various areas of legal practice, which helps them determine what aligns with their career and life goals. Specifically, participating in the Law Co-op Program lets students job hop while they are still in law school before they feel the pressure to settle into a longer-term career choice.

Speaking about his Law Co-op work term with the Province of British Columbia's Ministry of Attorney General, Andrew Terrett (JD, 2026) notes:

“I started law school with my heart set on a career in policy and law reform. Through UVic Law's Co-op program, I took a strategic risk — accepting a litigation-focused role with the Ministry of the Attorney General to gain experience within government. The gamble paid off, I made key connections in policy development, contributed to legislative projects, and — quite unexpectedly — discovered the excitement and challenge of litigation. Co-op didn't just confirm my interests — it expanded them.”



Co-op students like Andrew set learning objectives early in their work term, including those related to career exploration, and reflect on these throughout the term. This reflection is formalized as part of the co-op assessment process, which includes a work site visit, during which students are supported with their learning and goals by both their workplace and university supervisors.

### 3. Expanded Legal Network

Throughout law school, students are provided with many networking opportunities enabling them to connect with the legal community. Experiential learning takes networking to the next level, allowing law students to work directly with members of the legal profession. Through this immersive experience, students meet different types of people and personalities in law and can use these interactions to reflect on what they want their own career to look like. The built-in reflective components of experiential education can also include goals related to communication and interpersonal skill development — essential for building a legal network. As encouraged during UVic Law Co-op’s recent session on neurodiversity in legal practice, students can take advantage of their work terms as an opportunity to “find their people.” Students are supported in meeting members of the profession who have goals and

values that align with their own, and others that do not. Ultimately, this all helps students find their place in the profession and a meaningful legal career.

### 4. Confidence, Well-being, and Growth

Law school is an exciting yet demanding time for most students. Alongside completing a rigorous academic curriculum, it is the first time many students have considered a job as a career and not just a temporary source of income. The pressure to be successful, to secure certain jobs, and to follow the same path as their peers may be strong. Experiential learning empowers students to think more deeply about themselves and their individual goals for their life and career. Students can create their own pathway into their legal career, along with the confidence of knowing they are capable and belong in the profession.

Law Co-op student Garikai Chaora (JD, 2025) completed several co-op work terms and notes:

“Participating in the Co-op program at the University of Victoria’s Faculty of Law has given me the opportunity to apply the legal skills I have learned in the classroom in a real-life work environment. Consequently, my co-op placements have helped me become more confident in my ability to work effectively

in a legal setting. This experience has not only enhanced my professional skills but also contributed significantly to my personal growth and development. Furthermore, the co-op program has allowed me to build connections with lawyers and other professionals within the legal community. I am able to rely on these relationships for advice, career guidance, and mentorship.”

### Final Thoughts

While it may seem obvious that work experience during law school helps student candidates stand out for future employment opportunities, the impact goes far beyond boosting their resumes. An educational approach to practical experience benefits students and employers alike. In addition to being able to explore the wide world of legal and law-adjacent careers while they are still in law school, students graduate knowing how to set goals, understand and articulate their strengths, accept and use feedback, and to consider how their experiences fit into their larger career goals. In doing so, students can move into their careers not only with experience under their belts, but with intention, purpose, and greater clarity. In turn, the profession benefits by hiring graduates with enhanced skill and knowledge development, and greater direction about the future. +



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