

Teaching Excellence at Yale

Experiential learning engages students in course content.

Sarah LeBaron von Baeyer,

Lecturer in Anthropology, engages students in course content by incorporating field-based experiences. “I often share concrete examples from my prior work to help illustrate methodological and theoretical issues,” said von Baeyer. Students can develop new interests in a topic when considering examples from an instructor’s experiences. Faculty can also pique interest by assigning fieldwork. Von Baeyer creates assignments “that help students learn to explore collaborative ethnography,” a team approach for studying the customs of people and cultures. Students appreciate the applied approach, describing “a great balance of being critical but then having to find practical solutions to those critiques.”

Students in anthropology often explore complicated issues. Considering experiences from the field can help students navigate these topics by imagining real people and scenarios. To help students understand the complexities of transnational migration, von Baeyer draws from work she’s done with Japanese-Brazilian labor migrants and Syrian refugees. In another class, von Baeyer assigns relevant,



accessible fieldwork (for instance, an ethnographic analysis of social behaviors at Yale Law School). Students practice vital skills like observation, interviews, and notetaking. These experiences can also provide non-majors with valuable transferable skills. Through the Law School analysis, students learn how to develop good questions, collaborate in a team, and think independently while pursuing ideas in the field.

When sharing and designing field experiences, von Baeyer also shares challenges she’s faced. “By revealing some of the mistakes, detours, and moments of confusion I experienced along the way, I hope students will feel less cautious about going out and doing something daring or unexpected.” The approach excites students to explore disciplinary work with growing confidence as practitioners and thinkers.

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Research and resources exploring the benefits of experiential learning:

Arran Caza, Associate Professor of Business Administration at the University of Manitoba, et. al found that experiential learning can improve student satisfaction and confidence with course material. [Read “Effects of a Holistic, Experiential Curriculum on Business Students’ Satisfaction and Career Confidence” in The International Journal of Management Education.](#)

The Poorvu Center offers space and resources to think about incorporating experiential learning in your classes. [Register for the Summer Institute on Course \(Re\)Design, a 3-day workshop](#) on all aspects of effective teaching with significant time devoted to working on your teaching materials in the company of peers.

