

Experience Quality Rubric

How to use: Rate a specific learning experience, unit, project, internship, pathway, or program. Each row moves left to right from 1 to 4. The final two columns contrast conventional factory-model practice with stronger experience design.

Dimension 1 — Learners' Relationship to the Experience

Does the experience generate genuine purpose, ownership, belonging, and sustained engagement?

Dimension and criterion	1 — Minimal / absent	2 — Emerging / uneven	3 — Strong / intentional	4 — Transformative / embedded	Factory-model pattern versus stronger design
1. Interest, relevance, and personal meaning	Students are expected to engage because the activity is assigned, graded, or required. Personal meaning is neither explored nor designed for.	Relevance is occasionally discussed or students choose among narrow options, but work remains largely teacher- or curriculum-driven.	Students have regular meaningful options; relevance is explicit; many tasks connect to interests, identities, goals, or authentic purposes.	Students pursue questions, problems, roles, products, or outcomes connected to genuine interests, identities, aspirations, or community needs. Adults actively help students discover and develop those connections.	Factory model: relevance is assumed because adults selected the curriculum; choice is often procedural. Stronger designs: connect disciplinary learning to interests, identities, questions, goals, and public concerns. RPC examples such as Gibson Ek and One Stone show students entering meaningful work through interest and developing skills through it.
2. Student ownership and agency	Educators prescribe the topic, task, method, timeline, product, and evaluation. Students primarily carry out directions.	Students make procedural choices but have little influence over the question, purpose, audience, or criteria for success.	Students make meaningful choices about investigation, creation, revision, or presentation, within adult-defined goals and constraints.	Students help shape the problem, goals, pathways, roles, quality criteria, and/or public product. They make consequential choices and explain why they matter.	Factory model: agency is equated with compliance, independent work, or choices among teacher-created options. Stronger designs: adults establish productive constraints while students make consequential decisions, manage roles, defend choices, and revise based on evidence.
3. Purpose, audience, and consequentiality	Work is produced principally to complete an assignment, demonstrate compliance, or earn points.	Students simulate a purpose or audience, but the teacher's grade remains the primary consequence.	Work has a meaningful audience beyond the teacher and includes authentic feedback or public presentation, though practical consequences may be limited.	Work has a real or credibly situated purpose beyond a grade; a person, organization, community, client, audience, or field can use, respond to, or be affected by it.	Factory model: teacher is the sole audience and grade the main consequence. Stronger designs: use real clients, exhibitions, public products, community partners, professional critique, and problems that matter beyond school.
4. Belonging, trust, and relational support	Relationships are primarily transactional. Students navigate challenging work alone, or support is framed mainly as remediation or behavior management.	Individual educators provide supportive relationships, but access is uneven and not structurally guaranteed.	Supportive relationships and peer collaboration are common and intentionally designed, though mentoring access may vary.	Students are known by adults and peers and have reliable access to educators, mentors, and collaborators who communicate high expectations and help them persist through uncertainty, failure, and revision.	Factory model: schedules, coverage, supervision, and sorting can crowd out sustained mentoring. Stronger designs: build advising, coaching, critique, long-term adult knowledge of students, and partner relationships into the learning model.

Dimension 2 — Quality of the Learning Experience

Does the experience build usable, transferable capability through authentic, scaffolded, competency-based performance?

Dimension and criterion	1 — Minimal / absent	2 — Emerging / uneven	3 — Strong / intentional	4 — Transformative / embedded	Factory-model pattern versus stronger design
5. Authenticity and situated participation	Students mainly receive information, practice isolated skills, or complete decontextualized tasks with little connection to domain use.	Students complete projects that borrow the appearance of real work but have limited real purpose, context, audience, or consequence.	Students regularly engage in well-designed simulations, client work, fieldwork, or applied challenges that approximate domain practice and include external input.	Students participate in the core intellectual, social, and practical work of a domain in a real or credibly situated context, using genuine tools, constraints, standards, audiences, and problems.	Factory model: learning is separated from use—content, practice, test, then perhaps “application.” Stronger designs make domain practice central: investigate, interpret evidence, design under constraints, communicate to real audiences, and revise.
6. Competency-based progression toward performance	The system privileges coverage, pacing, credits, and recall-based assessment. Students may advance without demonstrating usable capability.	Skills appear in standards or rubrics but are assessed mainly through one-time products, grades, or completion rather than demonstrated growth.	Educators identify and assess important competencies and provide multiple demonstration/improvement opportunities, though progression remains partly course- or time-bound.	Learning is organized around explicit knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions. Students demonstrate performance, receive feedback, revise, and advance with increasing independence rather than merely accumulating seat time or completed work.	Factory model: organized around what teachers cover and students complete in fixed time. Stronger designs identify the performances learners must carry out and provide repeated demonstrations of growth. RPC schools foreground durable skills through curriculum, assessment, partnerships, and experience.
7. Scaffolding, coaching, feedback, and gradual release	Instruction mainly consists of directions, demonstration, independent completion, and grades. Feedback is sparse, generic, late, or disconnected from a next attempt.	Teachers explain and assess; feedback may arrive after completion, but students receive limited coaching while working or opportunity to revise.	Students receive routine feedback and some modeling/coaching during substantial work, but expertise, revision, or gradual release is inconsistent.	Experts, educators, mentors, and peers make thinking visible. Students observe models, attempt meaningful work, receive timely specific feedback, revise, and gradually assume greater independence.	Factory model: “explain–assign–collect–grade.” Feedback often arrives after the opportunity to learn has passed. Stronger designs use observation, coached practice, critique, revision, and increasing responsibility; adults model, diagnose, coach, challenge, and connect.
8. Integration of knowledge with real performance and transfer	Knowledge is taught primarily as information to recall. Application is assumed to follow automatically from exposure, practice, or correct answers.	Students apply content in an occasional culminating project or simulation, but application is largely separated from routine instruction and assessment.	Students regularly apply concepts in authentic or realistic tasks and receive feedback on how knowledge informs decisions, though varied transfer is limited.	Students acquire and use disciplinary knowledge in varied, increasingly complex contexts; they explain when and why it applies, select strategies, adapt to conditions, and demonstrate how to see, think, and act in the domain.	Factory model: assumes reading, lectures, memorization, practice, and tests automatically become usable capability. Stronger designs integrate concepts, vocabulary, models, and instruction into decision-making, evidence interpretation, communication, revision, and adaptation in unfamiliar situations.

Dimension 3 — Quality of Reflection

Does reflection turn activity into learning, judgment, revision, and increasing independence?

Dimension and criterion	1 — Minimal / absent	2 — Emerging / uneven	3 — Strong / intentional	4 — Transformative / embedded	Factory-model pattern versus stronger design
9. Reflection is ongoing and connected to work	Reflection is absent, optional, or a brief compliance task—such as a generic journal entry, exit ticket, or paragraph—after work is finished.	Reflection occurs at the end of an activity or unit but has limited effect on next steps.	Students reflect at multiple meaningful points during a project, placement, or unit and use some reflection to revise work or set goals.	Reflection is built into the full learning cycle—before, during, and after action—and informs immediate decisions, revisions, next steps, and future experiences.	Factory model: reflection is appended—“What did you learn?” or “What went well?”—and seldom changes work or support. Stronger designs: learners pause, notice, interpret, seek feedback, adjust, and return to the work. STEM School Chattanooga’s prototype reports illustrate recurring reflection tied to growth.
10. Reflection focuses on competencies, evidence, and decisions	Students recount events, summarize activities, or give generic reactions without examining performance, evidence, decisions, or next steps.	Students identify what they did or liked, but reflection is largely descriptive and only loosely tied to evidence, standards, or improvement.	Students use criteria, feedback, artifacts, or examples to discuss progress and improvement, though not consistently across core competencies.	Students use explicit competencies or domain practices to analyze evidence of performance, explain decisions and tradeoffs, identify strengths and gaps, and define a specific next move.	Factory model: prompts ask students to report what happened or whether they liked it. Stronger designs use portfolios, exhibitions, critique protocols, performance evidence, competency language, and conferences so students explain what they can do, what evidence shows it, and what comes next.
11. Reflection is dialogic and socially mediated	Reflection is primarily private, teacher-directed, or solitary. Dialogue is minimal and feedback is limited to evaluation.	Students occasionally discuss work with peers or teachers, but talk is unstructured, uneven, or disconnected from artifacts and next steps.	Peer discussion, conferencing, critique, or feedback occurs regularly and influences some revisions or goals.	Students routinely reflect through structured dialogue with peers, educators, mentors, and/or experts; they encounter differing interpretations, give and receive critique, revise thinking, and explain how input changed their work.	Factory model: reflection is individual writing submitted to the teacher as sole evaluator; discussion may be recitation-oriented. Stronger designs: critique, conferencing, exhibitions, advisory, peer protocols, mentor dialogue, and feedback from affected audiences help students test interpretations and revise judgment socially.
12. Expert, educator, and mentor support improves reflection	Students are expected to reflect independently with little coaching, no calibration against expert practice, and no meaningful feedback loop.	Adults provide general encouragement or end-of-task comments, but limited support for interpreting evidence, mistakes, or next steps.	Students have regular access to educators or mentors who provide targeted feedback and questioning, though access is not universal or sustained.	Educators, mentors, and experts use questioning, modeling, observation, feedback, and calibration to help students interpret experience accurately and develop increasingly independent judgment.	Factory model: large loads, fragmented time, and grading demands often make adult response generic or retrospective. Stronger designs: adults coach learners to notice what novices may miss, surface reasoning, connect feedback to standards, and decide how to improve.

Use as a Design Tool

This rubric does not require every lesson to be an internship, exhibition, or wholly student-directed project. Learners need direct instruction, vocabulary, models, practice, rehearsal, and lower-stakes simulations. The key question is whether those experiences function as intentional building blocks toward increasingly authentic, supported, reflective, and independent performance—or become the endpoint.

Scoring and interpretation

Each dimension contains four criteria scored 1–4, for a subtotal of 4–16. Total all twelve criteria for an overall diagnostic range of 12–48.

40–48: Strong, coherent experience design. Sustain quality and examine equity of access.

31–39: Substantially strong. Use the lowest criteria as the next design target.

22–30: Promising but uneven. The experience may have good activities but lack the conditions that make learning transferable and consequential.

12–21: Predominantly coverage- or compliance-oriented. Begin redesign with purpose, authentic work, feedback, and reflection loops.

Research and Evidence Base

This section separates the supporting theory and empirical research from the working rubric above, so the rubric itself stays compact for scoring while the full evidence base remains available for review, citation, or challenge. Each row corresponds to the criterion of the same number and name in the rubric.

Dimension 1 — Learners' Relationship to the Experience: Research and Evidence Base

Dimension and criterion	Research and evidence base (hyperlinked)
1. Interest, relevance, and personal meaning	Why it matters: autonomy, competence, and relatedness support internalized motivation and engagement. Niemiec & Ryan (2009): Classroom application of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ryan & Deci (2018): Comprehensive account of psychological needs, motivation, and development. Patall, Cooper, & Robinson (2008): Meta-analysis finding that meaningful choice can support intrinsic motivation and related outcomes. America Succeeds RPC: Qualitative field evidence on how schools intentionally build durable skills through applied learning.
2. Student ownership and agency	Why it matters: agency involves volition and increasingly responsible participation, not simply working alone. Niemiec & Ryan (2009): Explains autonomy-supportive practice and its relationship to motivation. Reeve (2009): Review of why autonomy support matters and how teachers can provide it. Collins, Brown, & Newman (1989): Cognitive apprenticeship: learners assume greater responsibility as support fades. America Succeeds RPC: School cases illustrate pathways from student interest to meaningful responsibility.
3. Purpose, audience, and consequentiality	Why it matters: authentic intellectual work requires more than activity; it involves disciplined inquiry and value beyond school. Newmann, King, & Carmichael (2007): Framework for authentic intellectual work: knowledge construction, disciplined inquiry, value beyond school. Nachtigall, Shaffer, & Rummel (2022): Systematic review of conditions and effects of authentic learning. Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver (2010): Design elements: authentic task/context, expert performance, collaboration, reflection, coaching, integrated assessment. America Succeeds RPC: Field examples of client work, public products, external critique, and professional partners.
4. Belonging, trust, and relational support	Why it matters: relationships support engagement, persistence, belonging, and willingness to take learning risks. Roorda et al. (2017): Meta-analytic update linking positive teacher–student relationships, engagement, and achievement. Niemiec & Ryan (2009): Relatedness is a basic psychological need supporting motivation. National Academies (2018): Learning is shaped by relationships, context, culture, and identity. America Succeeds RPC: School evidence highlights trusted adults, mentors, and professional networks.

Dimension 2 — Quality of the Learning Experience: Research and Evidence Base

Dimension and criterion	Research and evidence base (hyperlinked)
5. Authenticity and situated participation	Why it matters: knowing is bound to activity, context, culture, and participation in practice. Lave & Wenger (1991): Situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. Brown, Collins, & Duguid (1989): Seminal account of situated cognition and the culture of learning. Collins et al. (1989): Cognitive apprenticeship applies apprenticeship principles to cognitive domains. Nachtigall et al. (2022): Review identifies real-world connection, expert performance, collaboration, and reflection as authentic-learning conditions.
6. Competency-based progression toward performance	Why it matters: capability develops through supported performance, feedback, revision, and gradual independence—not seat time alone. National Research Council (2012): Framework for cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal competencies. Collins et al. (1989): Modeling, coaching, scaffolding, and fading support progression toward competence. National Academies (2018): Learning and transfer require opportunities to use knowledge across contexts. America Succeeds RPC: Qualitative evidence on schools that intentionally build and assess durable skills.

Dimension and criterion	Research and evidence base (hyperlinked)
7. Scaffolding, coaching, feedback, and gradual release	Why it matters: feedback is most valuable when it informs a next attempt; coaching makes tacit domain thinking visible. Collins et al. (1989): Defines modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, exploration, and fading. Hattie & Timperley (2007): Influential review: effective feedback answers where learners are going, how they are going, and what to do next. ISLS Cognitive Apprenticeship: Accessible synthesis of cognitive-apprenticeship instructional methods. Ambrose et al. (2010): Research-informed principles on practice, feedback, motivation, and course design.
8. Integration of knowledge with real performance and transfer	Why it matters: transfer is difficult and requires learners to recognize structure, select relevant knowledge, and adapt it in new contexts. How People Learn II (2018): National Academies synthesis on learning, context, culture, and transfer. Education for Life and Work (2012): Framework for transferable knowledge and skills. Brown, Collins, & Duguid (1989): Connects knowledge to the activity, context, and culture in which it is used. Ambrose et al. (2010): Practical account of conditions that help or hinder transfer.

Dimension 3 — Quality of Reflection: Research and Evidence Base

Dimension and criterion	Research and evidence base (hyperlinked)
9. Reflection is ongoing and connected to work	Why it matters: reflection is a process through which learners interpret experience and use it to guide action. Kolb (1984): Experiential-learning cycle: concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Boud, Keogh, & Walker (1985): Foundational account of turning experience into learning through reflection. Schön (1983): Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in professional practice. America Succeeds RPC: School cases document structured reflection tied to projects, portfolios, and exhibitions.
10. Reflection focuses on competencies, evidence, and decisions	Why it matters: deeper reflection moves beyond description toward evidence, assumptions, alternative interpretations, consequences, and future action. Moon (1999): Distinguishes descriptive accounts from analytic and deeper reflection. Boud et al. (1985): Connects reflection to making meaning from experience and future learning. Collins et al. (1989): Articulation and reflection help learners make reasoning visible and compare it with expert practice. Nachtigall et al. (2022): Authentic learning includes sustained reflection integrated with meaningful activity.
11. Reflection is dialogic and socially mediated	Why it matters: reflective learning and domain learning are social; dialogue enables learners to encounter other interpretations and calibrate judgment. Boud et al. (1985): Includes attention to the listener and social dimensions of reflective learning. Lave & Wenger (1991): Learning as participation in social practice and communities of practice. Mercer & Littleton (2007): Explores how classroom talk and dialogue support thinking and learning. America Succeeds RPC: Field examples include critique, exhibition, professional feedback, and collaborative work.
12. Expert, educator, and mentor support improves reflection	Why it matters: expert coaching supports accurate interpretation, makes tacit processes visible, and gradually builds independent judgment. Collins et al. (1989): Experts model, coach, scaffold, and fade support as learners develop competence. Schön (1983): Professional learning includes reflection and adjustment in the midst of action. Roorda et al. (2017): Positive teacher–student relationships are associated with engagement and achievement. EdSystems (2024): Work-based-learning quality criteria emphasize preparation, support, access, and continuous improvement.

How Educational Leaders Can Use This Rubric to Self-Assess

This rubric operationalizes the three conditions described in “Why the Experience of Experience Matters”: learners’ relationship to the experience, the kind of experience itself, and the kind of reflection built around it. Used well, it is a recurring, evidence-grounded conversation about what students actually experience — not a one-time form to fill out. The eight steps below describe how to run that conversation; the box at right describes what this tool is not for.

1. Decide what you are rating

Rate one specific, bounded experience — a course, unit, internship, pathway, or program — not “our school” as a whole. Rating an entire school at once produces a vague average that hides real variation. Rate two or three different experiences separately (for example, a required 9th-grade course, a signature pathway, and a capstone) to see whether quality is consistent or highly uneven across what students actually experience.

2. Assemble a team — do not score alone

One administrator’s impression is a starting hypothesis, not a self-assessment. Convene a small team — teachers who teach the experience, students who have been through it, and where possible a family member or community/employer partner — and have each person score independently before comparing notes. The gaps between people’s scores are often the most useful data in the whole process.

3. Ground scores in evidence, not impression

Before scoring, gather what you can: student work samples, the schedule or calendar, the feedback tools or rubrics actually used, exhibition or presentation recordings, and 15–20 minutes talking with students who have done the work. Score what you can point to, not what you hope is true. A 3 or 4 should be defensible to a skeptical colleague who was not in the room.

4. Score independently, then reconcile

Have each team member score all twelve criteria alone first, then meet to compare. Where scores agree, note it. Where they differ by two or more points, discuss why — differences usually mean people are seeing different parts of the same experience: a teacher sees the design intent, a student experienced the actual execution.

5. Read the three subtotals, not just the total

A 44 out of 48 can hide a dimension that is actually weak — the three subtotals (4–16 each) are the real diagnostic. An experience that is rich and authentic (high on Dimension 2) but never asks students to reflect (low on Dimension 3) is a common, fixable pattern that an overall average will mask. Look at the subtotals before you look at the total.

6. Pick one or two target criteria — not a twelve-point plan

Identify the lowest-scoring one or two criteria and design one concrete next step for each. Trying to move all twelve criteria at once usually moves none of them. Improvement compounds: strengthening purpose and audience this year often makes reflection easier to strengthen next year.

7. Check who actually gets the high-scoring experience

A 4 on paper can still be inequitable in practice. Ask who has access to this experience and who does not. Do the students who most need strong relationships, authentic work, and mentoring get less of it, not more? Disaggregate by whatever categories matter in your context — grade level, track, program, or demographic group — before treating a high score as a finished job.

8. Revisit on a cadence

Re-score the same experience(s) on a fixed cycle — once a year, or before and after a specific redesign — using the same evidence-gathering process each time. The rubric’s value compounds with repeated use: it becomes a shared vocabulary for design conversations rather than a one-time report card.

What this rubric is not for

- Evaluating individual teachers or making high-stakes personnel decisions. It examines the design of an experience — the schedule, structure, partnerships, and expectations around it — not any one educator’s skill.
- A single-lesson checklist. Score at the level of a unit, course, internship, pathway, or program — something with enough duration and structure for patterns to show up.
- A compliance instrument. The lowest-value use of this tool is filling it out once to produce a defensible-looking number. Its intended use is a recurring, evidence-grounded conversation about what students are actually experiencing.