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## Practica: Practical Learning Outside of the Classroom

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### **Abstract**

Dewey's (1938) theory of "learn by doing" is the underpinning pedagogy for the practica course design discussed in this chapter. Experiential learning and other approaches similar to practica are explored for business curricula. CityU's instructional design and approach to practica is clearly defined, and research demonstrates how successfully learners are engaged in a relevant manner for real-life application of business management concepts and learned skills. Additional research provides corroboration of a global trend in adopting this method of practical learning.

### **Introduction**

Practica (the plural of practicum), experiential learning, service learning, performance-based learning, problem-based learning, internship,

on-the-job training, integrated business core, and work-integrated learning are related pedagogical approaches. All are based on Dewey's (1938) theory of "learn by doing"; however, each "learning" can mean something different.

Educational theorist John Dewey suggested that education can be an active, involved process through which learning can be achieved not just by observing or reading about something but by doing something with the phenomenon being studied (Hutchings & Wutzdorff, 1988). Dewey believed that by putting the learner directly in touch with the subject of study, reflection on the experience would result in learning (Keeton & Tate, 1978). The pedagogy is experiential learning, which is the foundation for each method of delivery identified. The variation of terms stem from which decade the concept originated, the authors, the universities where employed, and often the industry of affiliation. Since all terms describe experiential learning, they are often used interchangeably. Practicum is an umbrella term very similar to internship for acquiring "practical" experience. Shariff and Saad (2010) determined that a meaningful internship or practicum experience for today's business students is vital for both the institutions and industry.

Wesch (2009) challenged the traditional teacher-centered approach, arguing that students today retrieve knowledge much differently than even five years ago, accessing through laptops, cell phones, and iPods. Traditional classrooms "built to re-enforce the top-down authoritative knowledge of the teacher are now enveloped by a cloud of ubiquitous digital information where knowledge is made, not found." Behind this massive shift away from such a narrow focus on information, "there is still the question of 'what' is to be learned" (Wesch, 2009, para. 2).

## Purpose of Practica

Practica are designed to prepare the student for the work environment and provide documented, practical experience that can be used in a professional portfolio for future employment. Empirical research performed on business school graduates revealed that those with internship experiences tend to be hired more quickly, receive a higher starting salary, and report greater job satisfaction than their non-internship counterparts (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). The practicum at City University of Seattle

(CityU) is similar to an internship in that the student is exposed to real-life problems in a company or nonprofit. However, one significant difference is that the MBA practicum student serves as a consultant rather than a short-term employee (intern). Silva (2008) stated that decades of research revealed that there is no reason to separate the acquisition of learning core content and basic skills from more advanced analytical and thinking skills.

## Related Strategies and Activities

Before the practicum can be defined for CityU, it is appropriate for all related methods within this pedagogy to be identified. The foundation established with these terms is that experiential learning, service learning, performance-based learning, and problem-based learning are learning approaches or strategies, while internships, on-the-job training, integrated business core, work-integrated learning, and practica are the *activities* of learning. In an effort to explain the various methods of learning as they pertain to university-level business education, each related pedagogical approach is reviewed by the practica strategies and activities as they pertain to CityU's program.

## Practica Strategies

Habermas (1971) introduced a domain of knowledge called "emancipatory," which states that through critical self-reflection, knowledge is gained, which is seen as a component of the constructivist paradigm. The following strategies offer the student the opportunity for critical and self-reflective processes that can elevate them to Habermas's level of emancipatory knowledge. An explanation is given for how the strategies are employed by CityU's practicum courses.

Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as knowledge that is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences: (a) the learner must be willing to "involve themselves fully and openly without bias in new experiences"; (b) the learner must be able to "reflect on and to observe their experiences from many perspectives"; (c) the learner must be able to "create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories"; and (d) the learner must be able to "use these theories

to solve problems” (p. 30). Experiential learning is the foundation of the practicum experience at CityU.

Jacoby (1996) created a working definition of service learning as a form of experiential education that addresses human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote learning and development. Different forms of service learning, such as community service and volunteerism are offered by colleges and universities as a vehicle for creating a learning environment that links campus-based learning experiences with the larger community (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoeker, & Donohue, 2003). The service learning strategy is often used as a practicum project with a nonprofit community organization or a department within CityU.

According to Nickel and Osborn (2010), performance-based learners are informed of performance expectations in advance of instruction. CityU students are operating under performance goals established by the curriculum design.

Problem-based learning is an instructional method in which students learn through facilitated problem solving. Student learning centers on a complex problem that does not have a single correct answer. Students work individually or in collaborative groups to identify what they need to learn to solve a problem (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). A practicum project often includes a problem that the student researches, analyzes, and resolves through a proposed solution.

## Practica Activities

Practica activities are best described by Mezirow’s (1991) learning domains: (a) instrumental, the gaining of technical knowledge and (b) communicative, the gaining of practical knowledge, which he borrowed from Habermas’s (1971) three domains of knowledge. The following learning activities are less reflective in nature and more physically engaging.

Internships are a practical activity for learning within a period of four to twelve months where a student performs work for an organization. Often considered as OJT (on-the-job training) for white-collar jobs. Some interns are paid with a stipend, while many are unpaid. Practica activities are not day-to-day work assignments, rather the student “acts” as a

consultant to an organization and does not “work” for an employer like an intern. Practicum activities include research, analysis, and writing.

On-the-job training is designed to help students acquire practical knowledge and develop desirable work attitudes and skills (Arroyo, 2011). This approach aligns with Mezirow’s (1991) communicative learning domain. On-the-job training is frequently used for “hands-on” job functions such as engineering, hotel and restaurant management, and interior design, while the practicum student is not “on the job.”

The integrated business core method of practical learning lets students run businesses as part of an integrated experience. Since the early to mid-1990s, several universities have integrated business core activities into their curriculum (Walker & Black, 2000), attempting to bridge the gap between academia and the world of work (Bell, 2010). The integrated business core is often composed of four fundamental business classes: Marketing, Finance, Organizational Behavior, and Operations/Supply Chain Management. CityU’s program has many similarities to integrated business core, but it is not as structured, nor does the student “work” on-site.

The experiential learning component of a cooperative education or work-integrated learning program can complement classroom learning, and education thereby becomes a more holistic, three-party endeavor in which students, employers, and educational faculty work together to produce graduates who are more work-ready (Eames & Cates, 2011; Groenewald, Drysdale, Chiupka, & Johnston, 2011). Note: Other terms used interchangeably with work-integrated learning are cooperative learning and service learning (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Vyvyan, 2010). A typical feature of work-integrated learning is a partnership between an external organization and an educational institution in an effort to increase employability as well as practical learning exposure for the student, a potential employee in the making (Boud & Solomon, 2001). CityU’s practicum courses are quite similar; however, CityU does not currently have formalized partnerships with organizations for the purpose of the practicum, nor does the student “work” at the business.

The remainder of the chapter is focused on how CityU utilizes practica in its MBA program. The strategies employed by CityU are performance-based in establishing goals and problem-based for researching and recommending solutions.

## Practica at CityU

The objective of the CityU practicum is to provide an opportunity to apply what the student has learned throughout the MBA program. It is also an opportunity for the student to select an area of specialty to gain additional skills through a focused, time-limited project that adds value to a company or service organization. Throughout the process, the student employs a performance analysis approach to an identified, real world problem, whereby the student analyzes a business environment, identifies the root cause of an existing problem, implements a solution, and evaluates its impact (CityU, 2008).

Practica are formal sessions or programs that attempt to incorporate the basic professional skills demanded by an employer in an independent online setting. The practicum is often a limited project in a professional environment that provides hands-on experience in the field or industry chosen by the student. The client deliverable is focused on a project that could be implemented by the client. This session is closely monitored by the professor and a client contact called an on-site supervisor (CityU, 2008).

## The Curriculum at CityU

The MBA practicum at CityU takes place over two quarters. In the first quarter the student identifies the client and crafts the practicum agreement with the practicum site supervisor with oversight from the practicum advisor, the instructor.

The goals of the CityU practicum involve (a) utilizing the MBA program content in challenging and meaningful ways; (b) applying knowledge, skills, experiences, and strengths to the work environment; (c) enhancing an electronic portfolio of MBA program accomplishments; and (d) developing professional skills and networking contacts.

The criteria for the practicum include (a) the practicum must provide a new and significant learning opportunity; (b) the practicum must be related to the academic degree and should integrate previous learning with a new learning experience; and (c) the practicum student must be supported by appropriate supervision (CityU, 2008).

## The Practicum

The practicum requires the student to act as a consultant to an organization to research, study, analyze, assess, and ultimately recommend or report the findings. The report is the final deliverable, and the student does not produce or implement the recommendations. The practicum project is doable and narrow in scope. The student can take on a research or analysis project that the company or nonprofit does not have the staff or funding to accomplish, but the project is not critical to the operations and success of the organization.

Preferably, the practicum is not conducted at the student's place of business. There are certainly exceptions, which are approved on a case-by-case basis. If a practicum is available at the workplace, it must be in another department with a site supervisor who is not the student's supervisor, directly or indirectly.

A practicum analyzes secondary research data, as gathering primary research data is often too time-consuming and begins to take on the characteristics of an internship. Marketing plans are the more popular projects and can be narrowed down to segments, such as Competitor Analysis, Target Market Review, SWOT, Promotions, etc.

## The Students

Currently the method is applied at the master's level in the School of Management over two quarters for a total of twenty weeks as a capstone course with the population being mature students. Students who have a specific emphasis, such as finance, marketing, or project management do not have the option for the practicum, as the capstone course applies only to an MBA without an emphasis.

## The Practicum Advisor (Instructor)

The two-quarter practica are conducted in a fluid manner with the instructor being continuous and the quarters being sequential. The responsibilities of the instructor who oversees the work on the practicum from the university's perspective include:

- helping with logistical, procedural, and other issues related to the practicum
- providing final approval of site and project
- approving practicum agreement and nondisclosure agreement with signature required
- grading practicum report and report presentation
- providing assistance and advice (CityU, 2008)

## The Client Contact—Practicum Site Supervisor

The practicum site supervisor plays a vital role in the success and quality of a practicum. The supervisor should be an experienced professional who has been selected by the site in collaboration with the university to oversee and evaluate the practicum student. The practicum site supervisor maintains regular contact with the student and should expect to spend one hour per week, on average, over the course of the practicum project.

The following is a general list of practicum site supervisor responsibilities. This list may change or grow, based on the planned practicum.

- Personal interview with the practicum student to discuss parameters of possible project that the student can undertake. It is important to discuss the site's contribution to the practicum student's learning, how supervision will be provided, and time commitments at the site.
- Informs the student of all relevant personnel policies and procedures.
- Meets with the practicum student during the first weeks of the practicum and develops the practicum agreement.
- Provides activities that are both challenging and consistent with the goals of the student.
- Provides the practicum student with any necessary training related to the experience. The training aspect of the program may also include relevant reading material, videotapes, or company manuals.
- Schedules regular meetings with the practicum student. These meetings provide an opportunity to evaluate the progress of the practicum student and to make appropriate adjustments. The

practicum Time and Activity Log should also be reviewed and signed by the supervisor at these meetings.

- Completes the practicum evaluation for practicum site supervisors at the end of the project (CityU, 2008).

## The Client Selection Strategies

All students bring varied academic backgrounds and interests to the practicum. The student is required to identify the practicum site, also known as "the client." Students are responsible for creating a meaningful practicum. The careful selection of a practicum site is the most significant step in this creative process. Selection of the site must be based on the learning opportunities that it can provide related to the individual student's emphasis, and on the availability of appropriate supervision. Projects can often be difficult to find, and it is possible the students will need a long lead time to conduct the search (CityU, 2008). The instructor should be prepared to guide students in the right direction.

Selection may be done by pursuing community contacts such as classmates, instructors, current or previous employers, family, or friends. In many cases, students are aware of opportunities in the community. The practicum advisor, the instructor, is available to assist in determining the appropriateness of the site(s) under consideration (CityU, 2008). *The practicum advisor must approve any practicum site.* Students are encouraged to use and develop their own network of contacts for locating their sites.

Students may establish a practicum at the business or agency where employed. If so, the following three criteria must be met: (a) students are performing in roles other than their usual job; (b) new learning is related to their degree; and (c) supervision is provided by someone other than their current supervisor or manager.

## The Documents

Documentation of the practicum is critical and serves as an essential learning experience. The nondisclosure agreement demonstrates a high level of professionalism, while the practicum agreement serves as a contract and a memo of understanding (MOU). In either case, the student is

protected from potential misunderstandings if the documents are properly executed. The documents required for CityU's MBA practicum over the course of two quarters are:

**Nondisclosure Agreement**—This document is intended to ensure the practicum site supervisor that any data or materials used during the practicum will not be shared with any other organization without the site's permission.

**Practicum Agreement**—A contract between the student, the City University practicum advisor, and the practicum site supervisor. The agreement serves as a starting point for the project, clarifies expectations, and formalizes the process. Through the agreement, goals, objectives, and expectations are established for the pending practicum. The agreement also aids later in evaluating their experience.

**Activity and Time Log**—Should be completed each time the student works on anything related to the practicum. Logs will be maintained and turned in at the end of the practicum as part of the final practicum report, and the practicum site supervisor should sign the form. Any activities, such as research, communications, meetings, and computer work that pertain to the practicum are recorded.

**Client Deliverable**—Agreed upon by the practicum site supervisor and the student. It can be a report of any nature that is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation to the supervisor alone, or to a group. Note: The client deliverable is not submitted to the instructor.

**The Practicum Report**—Summarizes and assesses the work that was completed during the practicum, which includes (1) description of the project and a problem statement, (2) summary analysis of steps that were taken to ensure that the practicum would address the site's needs, (3) possible solutions that were considered and ultimately selected, and (4) evaluation and overall impression of the practicum and its long-range effect on the selected site.

**The Practicum Presentation**—Summarizes the contents of the report and is presented to the instructor (CityU, 2008).

## The Lessons Learned

The lessons learned through the implementation of these practica experiences can be synthesized into three categories: (a) selection of practica sites, (b) selection of projects, and (c) the students' experiences. The lessons learned outlined below include what works, recommendations on what to avoid in the selection process, and direct feedback from students about their experiences.

### The Lessons Learned: Practica Sites

Practica sites are as varied as the students when it comes to location, industry, and size. They range from an Internet start-up company to major corporations such as Microsoft and Boeing, along with many nonprofit organizations. The lesson learned from start-ups and smaller companies centers around the stage of development. If a start-up business is past its first year and is organized sufficiently to accept a "practicing" MBA student to analyze an aspect of the business, then the company could be a good candidate as a practicum site. A business that is within the first year of organization is probably too young to spend the time supervising a practicum student, and the work that needs to be accomplished is likely to be operationally critical to its success. The student is learning and should not be put in the position of managing a project that could negatively affect the firm's assets.

The other end of the spectrum includes large corporations such as Nintendo, Microsoft, and Boeing. It is highly unlikely that a non-employee of these employers would have an opportunity to serve as a "practicing consultant." CityU has many students from major employers and several practica projects have been quite successful. To honor the client selection strategies of CityU's practicum program, the student must take on a project outside of his or her immediate department and avoid direct and indirect supervisory relationships. One of the benefits for the major corporation is an opportunity for cross training, expanding the knowledge base of an existing employee, and a fresh perspective from someone outside of the department.

Nonprofit organizations are one of the better options as a practicum site because they are usually understaffed and short on funding for research and business analysis. Nonprofit groups are also accustomed to overseeing volunteers. The downside of this site is that volunteers usually “produce” a service for them, while the CityU student needs to act as a consultant to research, analyze, and make recommendations on a project.

Public organizations such as schools, government offices, state and county services, and political organizations have historically had a more difficult time serving as a good option since time frames and schedules are often not adaptable to the student’s two-quarter class. Other challenges involve privacy, policies, and risks. CityU (as a private university) has hosted a few students for their practica and has been quite accommodating.

### The Lessons Learned: Practica Projects

The instructor plays a significant role when reviewing and approving the practicum project. It is imperative to keep the scope focused and manageable during a two-quarter time frame, which includes finding, identifying, researching, analyzing, and delivering the project.

Projects that are manageable with proper parameters include a review of existing business plans, marketing plans, labor analyses, customer base assessments, operations analyses, workflow analyses, product development costs, market analyses, financial trend analyses, cost of resources/materials analyses, strategic plans, and systems analyses.

Some projects are not suited for a “practicing” student consultant due to financial liability, legal responsibilities, and privacy issues for the company and the student. Types of projects that are not recommended are full business plans that include sourcing the information, marketing plans with deliverables such as logo design and brochures, and contract processes due to legal liabilities. Risk factors include students’ liability to the organization for results of findings and implementation of the program by the corporation. It is critical for the instructor to scrutinize the Practicum Agreement between the student and the site supervisor, as it is virtually a contract. Therefore, a section on limitations with terms and conditions are necessary to protect the student.

### The Lessons Learned: Student Experiences

The practicum is the solidification of course work theories that are put into direct application. Whether the recommendations are adopted or the study proves that the project is not doable, the student has a valuable learning experience in real time in the real world. Students have written glowing recommendations regarding the practicum course of study stating that it should be a requirement for all graduates and that it fully utilized all courses of study with direct application. Following are quotes from students who valued the practicum course:

“I found this class to be the most valuable course throughout my entire MBA program at CityU. I loved this whole practicum idea, and I learned more from my practicum than anything else. It was actually life changing (being able to take what I’ve learned throughout the program and use it to improve a real-life organization that I care about).” —Anonymous, Fall 2010

“I have learned a tremendous amount working through the practicum execution with Vine Maple Place (VMP) as my object. I have been looking at the nonprofit viewpoint and comparing it with the for-profit viewpoint that I am accustomed to, as well as applying the concepts that I have learned during my MBA career to the different business model. It has been exciting to work with VMP and their changes of direction. This has been an excellent experience for me, and I can definitely carry it forward in my business life.” —Anonymous, Fall 2011

“The recommendations I made are being used in my organization. It has really opened doors for me and allowed visibility into higher levels of the organization. The practicum increased my confidence in my abilities and what I could contribute to Microsoft. I think that the practicum should be a requirement, not an option.” —Anonymous, Summer 2010

“My feasibility study looked at improving quality standards for two Boeing vendors, one local and the other in Japan, to capture a larger market share. The practicum experience was excellent—a true way to apply MBA learning to a real-world environment that I found to be very beneficial.” —Anonymous, Fall 2011

“These last two quarters have been challenging to say the least. I have had to operate independently and initiate and lead meetings with both my advisor at CityU and practicum site supervisor at Nintendo. I’ve grown

from the experience and think the program should continue at CityU.” — Anonymous, Winter 2013

These statements are evidence of success with better visibility for the students’ employers after the project, and for others the practicum serves to enhance their work experiences for prospective employment.

## Conclusion

Student feedback has confirmed that practicum projects are useful for teaching performance-based learning. When a student can complete a course and a degree plan feeling ready to take on a new career with new options, then the instructor and university can be confident that the curriculum is successful. Based on the feedback from practicum students since 2008, CityU’s MBA practicum program has been successful and is meeting the needs of the students.

This study indicates that experiential learning outside of the classroom is a valuable commodity. Staff members at one of CityU’s partner universities, University of Southern Queensland, share similar conclusions. The career services staff members recognize a correspondence between their programs of career development learning and work-integrated learning. This perception of correspondence is interpreted as a positive sign of the pragmatic implementation of theory in the practice of career development learning in higher education. Further, they interpret this relationship as a dimension of career development learning contributing to the overall objective of graduate employability through its curricular influence upon work-integrated learning (McIlveen, Brooks, Lichtenberg, Smith, Torjul, & Tyler, 2011).

Future improvements to CityU’s practicum program would be to formalize partnerships with corporations and nonprofits for practicum projects similar to the integrated business core and work-integrated learning programs offered by other universities, rather than resting the responsibility upon students because the task is sometimes overwhelming and is quite time-consuming. By enlisting corporate partners for the practicum, a more uniform experience could be offered and the quality of the opportunity and supervision would be ensured.

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