

Enhancing Best Practice in Cooperative and Work Integrated Education

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Abstract

Twenty years ago the development of a sports management program at Massey University was then the only one in New Zealand. Professional rugby was still a couple of years away. Kit McConnell, Head of the 2011 Rugby World Cup and Tournament Director for the International Rugby Board, was a Masters student back then. He indicated “the academic staff were doing something new – and special. For me, there was a good balance between having enough structure and learning about the elements of the industry and having freedom within the curriculum to explore what interested me”. This video presentation provides reflection from graduates on the benefits of work based experiential education sport management and coaching related practicum programs at Massey University. The key implications are reflective practice, pedagogy development and enhancing graduate attributes. The practicum provides a graduate point of difference that employer’s value. Through their placement projects, the students also provide significant benefit to the industry organisations. Evidence is provided to support the reflective teaching and learning process, which enhances students learning, industry relationships and focuses on improving learner outcomes. Students are encouraged to be increasingly proactive rather than reactive, demonstrating initiative and adding value to the organization; aiming to move beyond the student persona. An outstanding professional performance (A) adds value to the organization, takes work away from the supervisor and exceeds expectations. From 2011-2013, 40% of practicum students (internal, distance and postgraduate) achieved A grades (the University guide for A grades is between 5-30%), with 47% attaining B grades.

Keywords: Reflective practice, Pedagogy development; Graduate attributes

Introduction

Despite the best intentions of academics to enhance graduates’ employability within classroom settings, Bates (2008) and Cranmer (2006) indicated that the limitations consistently produce mixed outcomes. It has been argued that work-integrated curricula (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008) and applied learning experiences (Schwartzman & Bouas-Henry, 2009) positively affect graduates in the



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transitional stage into employment (Cranmer, 2006) and as on-going professional development (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Massey University offers applied learning programs in real world community and industry contexts across business, education, science, humanities, health and creative arts degrees in related colleges. The aim of these courses is to embed applied learning opportunities increasingly across the curriculum, maintaining qualification relevance and opportunities for research partnerships and staff professional development.

This paper provides critical reflection of pedagogical aspects of applied experiential learning in sport management (Foster & Dollar, 2010). Specifically, it outlines the phases of development that influenced the sport management practicum course design over the past two decades (1994-2014).

It also gives examples of how these applied experiential learning approaches have assisted graduate employability, highlighting aspects of learning as I developed as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) involved in coordinating practicum programs. A cyclical process of personal reflection on action is central to the process of experiential learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Kolb, 1984; McNiff & Whitehead, 2001).

Enhancing Student Learning

Whole course design

Feedback from sport management graduates indicates the value of the practicum, with the whole course of study being important, rather than the applied part as a stand-alone component.

It's like part of a coherent course of study and I think particularly, the introduction of the sport management planning paper [2nd year] has assisted with that because now you're not trying to cram everything into one paper in the third year, so it actually preps them and gives them some understanding of what they actually need to do ...how to manage a project, so they're going to get skills around financial planning, budgeting, running a project, risk management, writing press releases (academic supervisor, as cited in Martin et al., 2010).

However, it is the overall business context which is most helpful to graduates in their employment positions (Martin & Leberman, 2005). The course assists students in understanding various aspects of business philosophy or theory (e.g. finance, marketing, economics), but also provides links to practical or real life sport contexts and situations.

Although the practicum was the most rewarding aspect of my study I felt that all sports papers were relevant as together they provide a comprehensive grounding in the sports management industry (graduate feedback, as cited in Martin & Leberman, 2005, p. 25).



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Facilitating critical reflection

The third year capstone and postgraduate practicum requires students to undertake 180 hours of project based work within a sport organization during a double semester period. The aims of the paper are for students to:

1. Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the role and responsibilities of effective sport managers.
2. Apply sport management principles to industry situations.
3. Apply knowledge of sport management skills and techniques, which benefit the host sports organisation.
4. Analyse their learning with respect to sport management theory and practice.

The use and development of critical reflection strategies throughout the program helps them learn how to think in different ways – potentially outside the square. They are primarily encouraged to develop skills by following Gibbs (1988) and Moon's (2000) stages of reflection involving analysis, evaluation and planning future action. The level of critical reflection is also impacted by prior experiences (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993).

For undergraduate students, the practicum may provide more personal development opportunities (self-confidence and self-esteem) and an initial stepping-stone to employment. Whereas postgraduate and distance based students often value the opportunity to enhance their professional development through the reflective process (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Investigation of the facilitated reflective strategies utilized illustrated the value of critical reflection to students' personal learning, professional growth and increased self-confidence (Fleming & Martin, 2007).

Often they will go out and do their thing when they're out on placement and they come back into the class and we discuss what they experience and we reflect on it. So it's about giving them the theory, letting them go out there and have a go at it. Then when they come back they discuss it and that's where the most learning happens. 'Cos they don't have time to reflect when they're out in the work environment often, so on campus provides them with this opportunity (academic supervisor, as cited Martin et al, 2010, p. 34).

Processing of their 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' (Boud et al, 1993) over the period of their work placement is through a document analysis of their reflective journal. Student feedback emphasises the skills learnt, the value of linking theory to practice, and the positive nature of their practicum experiences as professional preparation for careers in the sport industry (Fleming & Martin, 2007).



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Setting great expectations

McGregor's X and Y theory (1960) relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1962) in how human behaviour and motivation in the workplace assists in maximizing output. In relation to Theory Y, as a supervisor I aim to create the most symbiotic relationship between the supervisors and student, which relates to aspects of self-actualization and self-esteem (Maslow, 1962). The importance of managing and communicating both students' and supervisor's expectations is emphasized in the induction process (Martin & Leberman, 2005).

Students are encouraged to be increasingly proactive rather than reactive, demonstrating initiative and adding value to the organization; aiming to move beyond the student persona and doing just a good (grade C) or very good job (B), but towards producing an outstanding professional performance (A) that adds value to the organization, takes work away from the supervisor and exceeds expectations. From 2011-2013, 40% of practicum students (internal, distance and postgraduate achieved A grades (the University guide for A grades is between 5-30%), with 47% attaining B grades.

It is often through the support and advice of peers, supervisors and the development of industry networks, and the achievement of an A grade in the practicum paper, that provides the opportunity of immediate post practicum paid positions. Top students are often subsequently employed in their practicum organization or by previous graduates of the same program in other sport organizations.

I was interviewed by [the manager] and the team leader... both who were graduates with the same degree. It sure shows the impressiveness and status of the degree. (Graduate feedback, 2011)

Focus on personal & professional development

Reflection on the whole experience often draws parallels to organization and management theories. It provides a means for developing the whole person as advocated in the management education literature (Boyatzis & McLeod, 2001; Gray, 2007). These practicum experiences highlight that personal and professional development of managers often cannot be separated.

As I reflect on the whole course experiences and draw parallels to organizations and management theories it becomes clear that the personal and professional development of managers cannot be separated and that they are two sides of the same coin. (Leberman & Martin, 2005, p. 328)

Integrating theory & practice

Pedagogies that aim to integrate theory and practice, praxis (Bates, 2008), have been found to be implicitly or indirectly fostered by a variety of means (Coll, Eames, Paku, Lay, Ayling, Hodges... Martin, 2009). In the sport management context (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma & Coll, 2010), the principal means for fostering integration of on- and off campus learning is by assessment via, for example, reflective journals and assignments/reports post-placement (Hodges, 2011).



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I kept a diary and reflective journal to express my thoughts and feelings and to reflect on activities, responsibilities and certain situations. These records helped in the varying coop assessment and presentations but also allowed me to track personal changes and improvements in the way I deal with situations. To reflect back on my work activities and the perceptions and attitudes I had towards them allowed me to read deeper into situations and experiences and identify areas of personal growth. (Student feedback, cited in Fleming & Martin, 2007, p. 118)

This integration mostly consists of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991), after the learning activities (Leberman & Martin, 2004), and is primarily orientated towards personal growth for younger (aged 18-21) undergraduate students, and professional development for (older) distance based or postgraduate students.

Developing graduate competencies

Graduate feedback has indicated that to enhance employability in the sport and recreation industry, work integrated learning programs need to be designed so that students are provided with opportunities to facilitate the development of various competencies (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009).

The company isn't interested in the fact they've got a degree... that's [technical knowledge] kind of taken as a given... what they want to see is can the students' communicate... what sort of personality they have... can they work in teams. (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011, p. 11)

In this context, attributes that are highly valued include the ability and willingness to learn, enthusiastic participation (passion for sport), use of initiative/self-sufficiency, and personal organizational skills. Success in this industry relies on relationship building/ developing professional networks as well as teamwork and cooperation. Developing attributes such as strong oral and written communication skills, self-confidence, and customer relationship management highlight once again the importance of both personal and professional development throughout the practicum experience (Fleming et al., 2009).

Conclusions and Implications

Drawing upon the experiences of the author/researcher, this case study has allowed the development of an in-depth description of practicum course design across different sport management education contexts. These applied experiential learning experiences enhance graduate attributes and provide a point of difference that employers' value. The bar has been set high in terms of expectations of students, academic and industry staff. These learning opportunities focus on professional development through enhanced business and industry knowledge, but also personal development of a range of soft skills competencies (Martin, 2013).



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The examples provided have illustrated the importance of integrating a variety of critical reflection opportunities over time to enrich whole course curriculum and program design. A defining feature of these applied learning practicum experiences is praxis, which links scholarship, critical thinking, research, and theory with practice. It is hoped that these findings will be transferable to other contexts to support the ever-expanding field of experiential learning in sport management globally (Martin, 2013).

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Martin, A. J. (2013). Reflections on 20 years of practicum, partnership and practice. *Asia Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 14(3), 89-98.

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