



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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RAISING THE BAR ON THE PRACTICUM—SOME SURPRISING BENEFITS OF FIELDWORK

The young man standing before me after class asked, “How can I be proactive?” He continued by describing his work: “All I do is unload boxes from the truck and take them to the storeroom. They don’t even let me stock the shelves.” I responded: “Think about it this week while you are at work. Stay alert to possibilities for making your job more efficient or improving the situation for your employer.” He looked doubtful, but he said he would think about it as he worked at the upscale kitchen store in the mall near the college. Like several of my students, he had taken a job working 20 hours a week to fulfill the requirement for Practicum, a fieldwork class that is required for all management, accounting, and real estate majors. Nevertheless, in a short time he had devised a plan that saved his employer thousands of dollars by reducing theft and minimizing the time it took to unload the delivery trucks. Not only was his supervisor happy, the student received special recognition from the regional office.

When a local grocery store opened a small filling station in its parking lot, one of my students took a job working in the cashier’s office. He observed that there was a thick manual of instructions for operating the station that included all the safety procedures—hardly available at a moment’s notice. His project was to create a short safety document that could be used for quick reference in an emergency. He also received district-wide recognition for his simple, but helpful, project.

Another student worked as an assistant to the Human Relations Manager for the South Texas region of a national hospital chain. Hospital staff had held a number of meetings about how to improve nurses’ morale. The student, who had recently completed a supervision course at the college, suggested that the problem stemmed from the behavior of the nursing supervisors. Her project was tested later in the hospital.

It was so successful that it was implemented quickly in all the chain’s hospitals in the region. Some time later, when her supervisor was promoted to the national office, this student was offered the regional position. Clearly, the success of her project brought her to the attention of the decision makers.

Raising the Bar

Many critics believe that fieldwork courses are not serious learning experiences, that students simply are receiving college credit for working—something that most of them do anyway. When I arrived at my college seven years ago, I had a similar impression of these courses—although I admit that I knew little about them. Like many other instructors, I believed that fieldwork experiences were primarily a way for students to observe how things are done “in the real world.” I soon realized that for these experiences to be more than observations, the course had to be redesigned to help students discover these things for themselves and participate in activities that would lead to success.

My students receive three credit hours for Practicum, meet with me 50 minutes each week as a class, and work at least 20 hours a week. The first semester was an organizational nightmare as I tried to keep track of students, paperwork, and assignments; and meet with the supervisors. Before the second semester, I took an analytical look at the course and identified opportunities for improvement. I was convinced that report writing was not the best use of their time nor did it help them achieve an important objective—actively participating in their own learning. I decided to raise my expectations and the bar, and I discovered that my students were capable of designing (and helping implement) some extraordinary initiatives, projects, and ideas.

Achieving Similar Results in Other Settings

The Practicum’s basic objective is that students apply what they have learned in their management classes to their work experiences. They must have completed at least six hours of management courses—preferably



nine—successfully. The critical factor in achieving extraordinary outcomes is that I help students have the best learning experiences possible by requiring practical linkages between learning in the classroom and action in the workplace. I decided *to plan for success*—and, in a short period of time, it was clear that students and their employers/supervisors were the beneficiaries of that decision!

Some Surprising Benefits of Practicum

- **Supervisors often admit that they are surprised that the practicum students are so knowledgeable, well prepared, and able to think creatively.** While they may like the students, think they are reliable, and/or believe that they have potential, many supervisors are surprised at how much the students actually know about management. Once students are able (required) to *demonstrate* how capable they are, they become more valuable employees in the employer's estimation—and, ultimately, they demonstrate the value of the practicum as an instructional tool and as a practical strategy for helping students shine in the real world of work.

- **Students learn the importance of proactive work.** Currently, a primary objective for the project is that students design and implement improvements in the workplace. A proactive project requires that students take new looks at their workplace environment.

- **Students gain confidence in their abilities to succeed.** When students demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy, their supervisors are inspired to place more confidence in them and put them in positions where they can go beyond observation to performance.

Planning for Success

- **Don't settle for a report.** Early on, students are puzzled about the report topic and should be reminded about being proactive and using information and examples from prior course work. The supervisor, student, and I all must agree on the project, but I want the student to propose it and lay out the design.

- **Let the student negotiate; you coach.** I assure students that I am willing to speak on their behalf with their supervisor but that I prefer they negotiate the details of their projects and time-off to attend class. I call on the supervisors and visit in their offices, but they have much more respect for students' abilities if students settle details for themselves.

- **Assure the students of your support.** Occasionally, situations arise in which a student needs my assistance. It is important that students are confident that you will stand behind them. If they do not come to you immediately, a minor situation could become a real problem. A

few years ago I had an accounting student who was a master woodcrafter. His employer recently had invested in a very expensive computerized piece of equipment and sent this student to the manufacturer for training. Initially, his supervisor, who also was one of the owners of the company, did not want to cooperate with the accounting project out of fear that the student would leave once he received his diploma. The student was understandably upset, and I scheduled a meeting with the supervisor immediately. I shared the student's degree plan with the supervisor and explained that the student must take Practicum in order to complete his degree. However, I assured her that we definitely did not want to interfere with his woodworking or disturb her office in any way. I explained that, under the circumstances, the student could do an accounting project based on a publicly traded company in the same field. It would be her choice whether she even saw the project. In the end, the student was allowed to complete his project with information from his own company and had the complete support of his supervisor.

- **Meet weekly.** The opportunity to touch base with students is valuable for keeping communication open, helping students stay on track, and discuss workplace issues that may not be included in other classes—for example, learning the finer points of table manners, shaking hands, and making introductions; using e-mail; having job interviews; identifying local resources for small businesses; and the like.

- **Set high goals.** My goal is for every student to earn an "A" Dividing large projects into small segments or tasks improves student motivation and helps students avoid being overwhelmed by the enormity of the project. One segment is due almost weekly, and work that is not acceptable must be redone for full credit.

Conclusions

Many of my students have made significant contributions to their workplaces as a result of their Practicum projects. While every class is different and my students work in a wide variety of occupations, these instructional procedures have worked well for us all.

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