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DUEL (sic) VIEWS OF INTERNSHIPS AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an example of dueling opinions, in this case on the topic of whether business internships provide a basis for good experiential learning. It discusses criteria constituting experiential learning and then evaluates internships on these criteria. Problems encountered in the process include the authors not agreeing as to what an "internship" is and thus whether it constitutes experiential learning. The compromise conclusion is that internships, if properly administered, can be excellent vehicles for experiential learning. A warning should be made though, that such administration efforts may lead to burnout and to negative consequences for the administrator's career.

DUEL (sic) VIEWS OF INTERNSHIPS AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

ABSEL conferences have witnessed previous presentations on the business internship as an approach to experiential learning (Giamartino and van Aalst, 1986; Mancuso, 1978; Vik, 1980). To some extent, such presence on ABSEL programs would tend to support the contention that internships belong in the experiential learning domain. However, it was evident from comments made by some of the session attendees that there was not unanimity on this point. As it so happens, there is not total unanimity on the topic between the two authors of this paper (thus, its title).

Our intention in this paper is to discuss briefly the criteria delineating the scope of experiential learning and then to evaluate internships on these criteria. The authors do not agree as to just what an internship is. Nevertheless, the final goal of the paper is to make suggestions as to how the internship process can be handled so that experiential learning is enhanced while at the same time preventing the administrative burden from being overly strenuous.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CRITERIA

The question of what is experiential learning has been the title of two ABSEL Newsletter columns (Gentry, 1981; Ward, 1981), a chapter in the forthcoming The ABSEL Guide to Experiential Learning and Simulation Gaming (Gentry, 1988), an issue raised in a recent study by AACSB Deans (Carter, et al., 1986), and was the focal topic in the Spring 1988 ABSEL Newsletter. Unfortunately, there are still questions as to the exact domain of experiential learning; the current paper is evidence in support of this last contention. We will rely on the criteria specified in Gentry (1988) as a starting point in our evaluation.

Briefly, the ABSEL version of the components of experiential learning include:

Business curriculum related. Our focus is on internships being undertaken by business students.

Applied. The internship is to be an opportunity for the student to apply previously learned theory and skills.

Participative. Experiential learning is an active rather than a passive process.

Interactive. Experiential learning involves more thin instructor/student interaction. Internships usually offer interactions with supervisors, with co-workers, and with the environment.

Whole-Person Emphasis. Experiential learning can involve learning on the behavioral and affect Lye dimensions as well as on the cognitive dimensions.

Contact with the Environment. The "experience" should be at least real-world like, if not real-world in nature.

Variability and Uncertainty. The "experience" should involve some degree of ambiguity in order to be more "real-world like."

Structured Exercise. The experience should be structured and monitored.

Student Evaluation of the Experience. Students need to have the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and feelings as to what the experience involved.

Feedback. Students need to receive both process and outcome feedback as the experience evolves.

WHAT IS MEANT BY AN "INTERNSHIP"

Before internships can be evaluated on the criteria specified above, there needs to be some agreement as to the nature of what an internship is. There does not seem to be much uniformity in what previous ABSEL authors (Giamartino and van Aalst, 1986; Mancuso, 1978; Vik, 1980) have discussed, not to mention programs bordering on internship programs such as the ones discussed by Calás (1979) and Smiley (1980). Similarly, the first author's experience at three different universities in the last three years indicates that there is little consistency as to what an internship entails. At some institutions (for example, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln), there is a university-wide administrative unit that seeks positions and then matches students with them. Whether the student is able to get course credit for the internship is left up to the student and to the student's academic department, although the administrative unit tries to maintain good relationships with the departments. Nonetheless, those students without departmental academic sanction are undergoing a part-time work experience for no college credit, although they can list the "internship" on their resumes. Thus, there is sonic question as to whether these students would be doing internships, given our definition. On the other hand, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and at Oklahoma State University, internships usually involve summer Jobs for which the student also seeks college credit. In general, the student has to convince a faculty member that the job experience is

a sufficient learning experience and then has to produce additional work (usually an extensive paper relating theory to the Job experience) in order to get course credit. At all three universities, the awarding of credit is largely dependent on the relationship between the student and the faculty member involved. Since the faculty member takes on the monitoring of the student's learning experience on an unpaid, largely unappreciated overload basis, s/he either usually has had a positive previous classroom experience with the student or is persuaded by an articulate (or, upon occasion, desperate) plea by the student. In general, the first author's observation of the internship process will be labeled the Haphazard Internship.

The second author's experiences at The College of Charleston, The Citadel, and St. Joseph's University have involved more structured types of internships. The program described in Giamartino and van Aalst (1986) provides an example of the Structured Internship. The program was supported by a local Work-Education Council and was designed to provide summer work experiences (largely blue-collar in nature) for high school teachers in order to help them understand better the environment for which they were preparing their students. The teachers would work four days a week and then meet with the author on the fifth day. At the start of the internship, the participants in this program completed a learning contract which assisted in establishing objectives for personal learning. AU students were required to keep journals of their experiences and to write a final paper. In addition, they had to write three separate lesson plans which could be presented to their students in classes or to colleagues in an in-service workshop. This model was developed over several years of directing internship programs and has been used at all three institutions at which the second author has worked, including in an international internship at St. Joseph's University. It should be noted that the Structured Internship model is not a model used institution-wide at the three institutions; it (s a modal developed and used by the second author as a condition of accepting the role of internship director.

As opposed to the structured nature of the second author's experience with internships, the first author's experience with the Haphazard Internship indicates that there is a wide variety of requirements made in order to obtain the course credit. In general, instructor/student contact is somewhat minimal, usually briefly once a week at most. For those students working in a distant city, contact may be limited to a meeting at the end of the course time period. The final written requirement may also take on a variety of formats. As the internship may be viewed as somewhat of a nuisance, the faculty member may not want it to be too elaborate In order to reduce grading time. Depending on the situation, the first author has frequently required students to write a case and a case solution about the firm. An alternative assignment has been the writing of an internship manual describing the nature of the tasks performed, the people contacted. etc. This seemed appropriate for especially ill-defined internship positions (for example, one developing a first time ever promotional campaign for a girls' volleyball team), and was intended to prevent future interns from re-inventing the wheel.

The administrative difficulties experienced by the first author are probably quite. prevalent at universities throughout the United States. It is the opinion of the second author that these difficulties arise from the American university system's lack of uniform recognition of the value of experiential learning. The suspicion which characterizes many individual faculty members' reactions to any form of experiential learning is manifested on the organizational level, as well. The lack of familiarity and trust has led to haphazard implementation of university internship programs, often developed solely through the initiative (or benevolence) of a sympathetic faculty member. Few institutions have regulations about the criteria to be used in determining whether credit should be awarded for an internship. Few have regulations regarding the amount of student/faculty contact required or methods of demonstrating learning outcomes. The diversity of forms of internships reflects the duelistic (sic) nature of universities which often make public statements about the value of experiential learning but do not support those statements with appropriate resource allocations, i.e., faculty training, academic regulations, and recognition of internship in course load planning.

EVALUATION OF INTERNSHIPS ON THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CRITERIA

Internships meet most of the criteria of experiential learning quite easily. Clearly, they are highly participative in nature, as the student is working in a job (although some may border on slave labor (Vik, 1980)). They are interactive, and the environmental interaction is not a simulated one as in other types of experiential learning. Given the real world contact, most internships involve variability and uncertainty. The applied criterion is met somewhat, as the students are usually in their junior or senior years and a theoretical base of sorts should have been presented prior to their starting the internship. The quality of the applied nature of the internship obviously depends on the fit between the students background and the nature of the work obtained. The written requirement common to most internships provides the student with an opportunity to relate the work experience with his/her academic training and to evaluate the nature of the learning that took place.

In the opinion of the first author, the two criteria on which internships may receive the most criticism would appear to be the need for structure and the presence of outcome and process feedback. The ability to structure the experience for the student is limited in any case, but especially for the Haphazard Internship. Even the Structured Internship, as discussed by Giamartino and van Aalst (1986), can involve a wide variety of work experiences due to factors largely out of the control of the academic advisors. They noted that problems occurred when the work supervisor was unaware of the purpose of the program. A bad work experience in the internship can result in negative learning (poor work attitudes, for example). Controlling the nature of the experience requires extremely good university/ business relations and a great deal of effort on the part of the faculty in charge. As programs become successful, size problems often make them unsuccessful as administrative burnout occurs. Frequently, young assistant professors with strong interests in student contact become involved in internship programs, partly because they may be teaching the introductory courses in the academic area (and thus meet the likely intern candidates) and because they may be seen as being more approachable than senior faculty by students having to beg for course credit. Given the nature of the output needed for promotion/tenure decisions, assistant professors may well soon come to the realization that the internships are an unneeded time drain. As their use of student contact time becomes more efficient, the

internship process probably becomes less effective for the student.

Clearly the same problems associated with structuring the experience (distance, lack of contact, and time constraints) also affect the nature of the feedback that can be provided. feedback based solely on the final report is basically outcome feedback, and process feedback opportunities are generally somewhat limited. In the Structured Internship process, periodic feedback from supervisors is expected. In the Haphazard Internship, the faculty member usually has no idea what the nature of feedback is that takes place in the workplace. It is often extremely difficult to monitor the student's learning as it takes place. And, even if were possible, many faculty question whether the effort required to provide process feedback is worth it. From the faculty perspective, they are doing the student a favor by working with him/her and there is no reward available in the system for monitoring the process closely.

The second author is in basic agreement with the limitations presented above. However, it is the second author's opinion that the Haphazard Internship is not an internship at all. Unless all the criteria of experiential learning can be satisfied, the experience is more like a part-time job, not an internship. The difference is more than semantic. The specific details of what is needed in order to qualify as an internship are summarized in the next section.

If proponents of experiential learning do not clearly delineate what constitutes experiential learning and what does not, then they will constantly be shadow-boxing in the dark. ABSEL and The ABSEL Guide to Experiential Learning and Simulation Gaming should recognize the internship as a form of experiential learning that should be offered as part of business school curricula if the experience meets the experiential learning criteria. (The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, an organization composed primarily of human services educators, has recognized the value of internships and experiential learning since their inception in 1971.) The recognition provided by a professional organization such as ABSEL could initiate the process of influencing business schools and universities to develop academically sound internship programs.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

While a detailed presentation of internship guidelines is beyond the scope of this paper, The following are some suggested ways in which internship programs might be improved: 1) Standardize expectations for academic requirements to obtain academic credit. Standardization, including consideration of time spent working, number of faculty contact hours, student preparation, etc. would help to remove any suspicions of gratuitous credit granting. Professional organizations such as ABSEL could take a leadership role in developing and recommending standards. 2) Provide incentives for faculty involvement as internship advisers. Recognition of the work involved could be demonstrated by including internship work as part of a faculty member's normal teaching load. 3) Provide administrative assistance to faculty sponsors of internship programs. Investment of resources would be one way for an institution to demonstrate its support for experiential learning. Vik (1980) has shown how the use of undergraduate and graduate student assistants can be a cost effective means of relieving faculty members of administrative burdens.

4) The theory or process by which learning is supposed to occur in internship programs should be clearly articulated. If the faculty member or institution believes that learning occurs haphazardly in internships, that expectation will probably be fulfilled. Giamartino and van Aalst (1986) demonstrated how learning in internship programs can be facilitated by using Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning. This and other theories should be empirically tested in internship programs.

Internships are a potentially powerful form of experiential learning. The forms and processes of internship programs, however, vary considerably across academic institutions. As a result, learning may occur in often unnecessarily haphazard ways. We need to initiate more critical investigations of internship programs and learning outcomes so that they can indeed live up to their promise of being powerful forms of learning. ABSEL can take a leadership role in this process.

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