INTERNSHIP AS A CONTINGENCY BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM FOR MORE EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

M. Tom Basuray, University of North Dakota

ABSTRACT

Internship, as a learning process, is considered to be experiential in nature. Data gathered about the design and administration of ongoing internship programs operated by academic departments within a state university indicate that internship program, as an experiential learning device, is a flexible tool capable of being targeted towards multiple objectives. In this paper, design considerations for one such objective--organizational socialization--have been conceptualized.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that business and management education is incomplete until the student has had a change to experience real life business challenges and acquire practical know-how is endemic in our culture. Such ideas have led to the proliferation of a wide assortment of business internship programs at the nation's universities and colleges. In a recent survey of the College of Business' internship practices (Zigli, 1982), sixty-eight percent of the respondents acknowledged the existence of internship programs for business students. The concept of internship as an educational tool is significant in its own right. However, the effective utilization of such a tool is a function of the realistic comprehension of the tool's nature, process, and potential.

Literature review of the internship program design and administrative practices, especially those in the business schools, indicate an overwhelming emphases towards technical and professional skill acquisition by the interns. Such skill acquisition is considered 'de rigeur' for a quality education whose primary objective appears to be the preparation of the student for a work oriented career. The pursuit of this objective, if not monitored carefully, may lead to the initial suboptimization and ultimate destruction of the fundamental goal of any education--to help the individual get a sense of 'self' and to help him identify with the society. What is needed then is a search for ways through which educational tools such as internship may be designed to complement the broader-based learning process, and can be harnessed in a number of different dimensions, all of which are vital to the ron of developing a "fully educated person." This paper is an attempt towards conceptualization of one such dimension of business education--more effective socialization of organizational members through internship programs. The ideas incorporated in this paper are the results of a study conducted to investigate the differences in the design and administration of internship programs as operated by the various academic disciplines in a north-central state university.

The present study is based on data generated from die two-year pilot project on internship initiated by the Management Department. Additionally, survey was conducted of other academic departments within the university that operated internship programs for students pursuing educational programs within these disciplines. Fifteen academic departments were surveyed by a specially designed questionnaire that generated data under four categories. These were the context, the design, the implementation, and the control and evaluation of those departments' internship programs. The departments surveyed represented the spectrum of academic disciplines within the university. More specifically, these departments were within the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Education, Human Resource Development, Medicine, and Nursing.

The analyses of clustered data indicated that there were significant characteristic differences between internship programs administered by academic departments whose curriculum led to a clearly identifiable profession (such as Engineering, Nursing, Medicine, Physical Therapy) and those that were administered by academic departments whose educational programs did not lead to a clearly identifiable profession (Political Science, Economics, Business and Vocational Education, Physical Education, Recreation). Generally, the profession oriented internship programs exhibited the following characteristics:

a. Existence of stated formal goals

b. Uniformly held opinions that the program is an <u>essential</u> means to learning goal accomplishment

c. Program as a requirement rather than an elective

d. Absence of financial compensation to students participating in the program

e. Existence of a formal structure, with full-or-part-time coordinators in the academic departments administering the program

f. Clear distinctions made between the cognitive, affective and skill dimensions of learning and the establishment of priorities among these dimensions to be achieved through the program

g. Provision for moderate to substantial student inputs in evaluation of learning

The internship program of the academic departments in the second category (those whose curriculum did not lead to a clearly identifiable profession) failed to exhibit specific trends on any of the characteristic dimensions cited above.

The implications of the survey results are fairly obvious. When the objective of the academic discipline is to educate the members of society towards a profession with established measurement criteria, then the respective internship program will be designed and operated within formalized structures and standardized procedures that facilitate the attainment of learning goals with efficiency. There is a high degree of integration of the internship program to the overall learning process. In contrast, the academic departments whose educational objectives are more open-ended (such as liberal studies programs) have internship programs that reflect

this open-endedness in their structures and processes. The goals of these programs (internship) appear to be broader and more diffused, which prevents the establishment of effective control and evaluation mechanisms.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND INTERNSHIPS

In view of these findings and their implications, the question, 'are internships inappropriate for certain academic disciplines?' requires a reasoned response.

Internship, as a learning process, is considered to be experiential in nature. The steps that a student takes in learning are sequential and follow a logical pattern. Kolb (1974) depicted experiential learning as a process that requires the activation of four distinct mental capabilities in the individual. These four mental activity dimensions have been termed concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). The entire experiential learning process propels the learner through the CE→RO→AC→AE loop.

The learning process described above parallels the learning through internship programs. However, the learner undertaking the experiential learning journey may not be equally strong in each of the four dimensions described above. Learners exhibit various degrees of these dimensional combinations. Specific combinations of these learning dimensions have been termed 'learning styles'.

If the internship program parallels the experiential learning process, then we can postulate that each intern entering the program will bring with him his particular learning style. It has been determined empirically that a student with a particular learning style tends to utilize the respective learning strengths in order to identify and solve problems. This indicates that, given a learning situation, each learner will apply slightly different skills to accomplish the objectives and will exhibit different degrees of learning accomplishments.
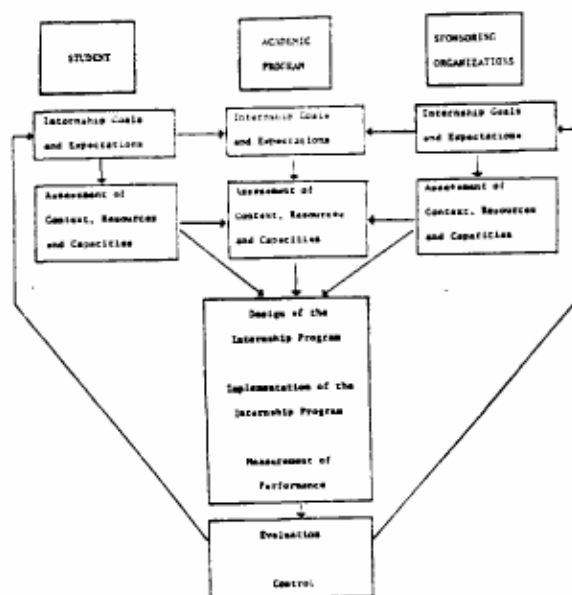
The findings and analyses from the present study indicate that internship program, as an experiential learning device, is a flexible tool capable of being targeted towards multiple goals. The conceptual framework for such a process is exhibited in Figure 1. The distinctive feature of this model is the program's contingency-based design principles. The contingency is activated when the program consciously incorporates the participants' goals and expectations and rationally assesses their respective contexts, resources and capacities. Such a design process makes eminently feasible the establishment of internships by an academic discipline.

INTERNSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

A primary objective of internship program is to provide the participants with a reality based experience from which the students can draw the necessary 'skills' that will help them 'fit better' into an organizational career.

In current management literature, the 'fitting' process has been termed, organizational socialization. Schien (1968) defines this as a process by which new members learn the value systems, the norms~ and the required behavior patterns of the organization. According to another definition (Feldman, 1981), socialization is the process by which employees are transformed from organization outsiders to participating and effective members. It should be clear from these definitions that, from the organization's point of view, the new members,

FIGURE 1
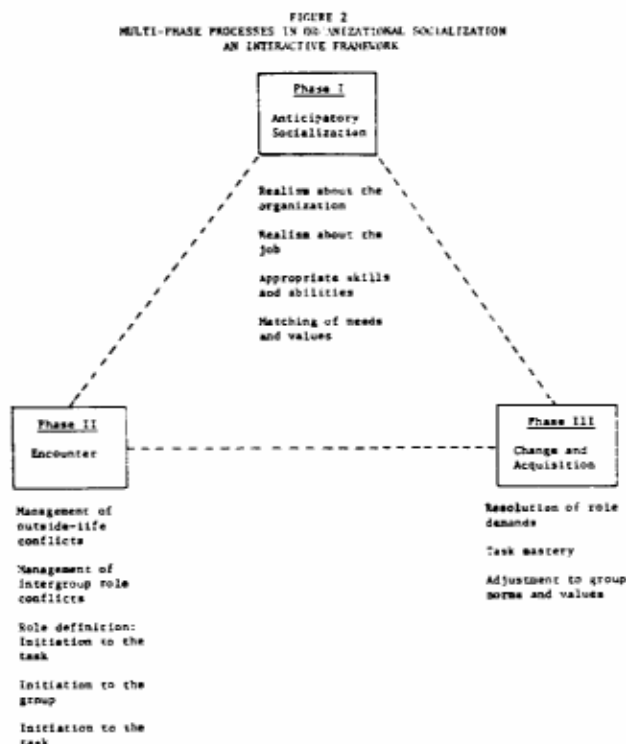CONCEPTUAL SCHEME OF A CONTINGENCY-BASED
INTERNSHIP PROCESS

to be considered effective, would require competence not only in job related knowledge and skills but also in the areas of interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Van Maanen & Schien, 1977). Hence, a statement as to the failure of the member-job matching process may, and usually does, include evaluations on more than one dimension.

What is needed then is a clearer explanation and description of the process of socialization. According to Schien (1971), a new member undergoing socialization~ voluntarily or otherwise, learns to accept five specific elements of the organization's value system. When the entering member correctly anticipates these norms and values of the organization and voluntarily accepts these, then the matching process has a high probability for success. However, in another situation, the process of socialization may not be as smooth. If, at the time of entrance, the individual encounters an organizational value and norm network that is opposite to the individual's value system, then the socialization process would require a modification of the member's value system. In such cases, the individual will be required to move through an unfreezing, change and acculturation, and re-freezing process. These changes are not always smooth or pleasant. If the degree of unpleasantness experienced by the incoming member during the socialization process is sufficiently high, then the individual may resist the process. At one extreme of such resistance, the individual may, if free to do so, quit the organization. At the other extreme, the individual may choose to conform totally to the organization's value system. In either of these two extreme cases, the results of the socialization process would be deemed as failure.

The dynamics of socialization as a process is better understood when it is characterized by stages (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman. 1975; Van Maanen, 1975; Feldman, 1976). Feldman (1981) proposed a three-phase socialization process. These are anticipatory socialization,

encounter, and change and acquisition. Each of the three phases, in turn, is characterized by a specific set of processes which are interactive. The conceptualization by a specific set of processes of this interactive process is presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
MULTI-PHASE PROCESSES IN ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION
AN INTERACTIVE FRAMEWORK

The socialization model described above can be incorporated into the internship framework for analyzing the member-task matching process. The model clearly exhibits the complex interaction of a number of variables that result in the success or failure of the socialization process. The concept of internship as an educational tool is significant in its own right. However, it becomes a far more powerful tool when internships are designed and operated within the framework of socialization. How such programs can be designed has been discussed in the following paragraphs.

EFFECTIVE DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

From the discussions held so far. it can be concluded that all internship programs are essentially simulations of subsequent career socialization processes which the student will encounter in work organizations. It is, therefore, extremely important that the program designers and administrators in both the academic institutions and the participating business organizations be competent in guiding this simulation as well as creating the necessary learning environment that supports the simulation process. Socialization has been described above as a three-phase activity with specific processes contained in each stage. The first two phases--anticipatory socialization and encounter--can be effectively simulated through a contingency-based internship program design (Figure 1). The third stage of change and acquisition, being a long term residual variable, is difficult to simulate under short-term internship conditions. However, for simulation purposes, the processes contained in this stage can be used to evaluate the internship program effectiveness.

A successful operation of an effective internship program requires close coordination between the sponsoring academic institution and the participating business organizations that provide the learning experience to the student. The ultimate control of the program and its design must, of necessity, rest with the academic institution. But a major portion of the operational control has to be delegated to the organization where the student is exposed to the experience.

In order to establish an effective program, the objectives of the academic institution, as well as those of the business enterprise, need to be stated explicitly. For example, the participating organization needs to know the type of climate that prevails within its boundaries, the type of values and norms that it considers pivotal and essential for its functioning and survival, and the type of skills it desires for the performance of various tasks. In other words, the organization needs to take inventory of the multiple elements of its preferred socialization process. The data from such analysis can be extremely helpful for designing the ideal internship objectives. It is more than likely that many business enterprises will be unable to conduct such analysis on their own. In such instances~ the sponsoring academic institution should provide the appropriate assistance in getting this done.

Next, the curriculum for the internship program needs to be established in detail. The task becomes a lot easier when the data gathered in the earlier steps are taken into consideration. The learning objectives are explicitly stated and plans are worked out so that the intern is propelled through the experiential learning phases. In view of the discussions held earlier about the nature of the experiential learning process, it should be evident that the internship program must be custom designed to fit the learning strengths of the student. Because the student is the centerpiece of the internship program, the student should be extended help in those areas where he exhibits learning strength deficiencies. This help can come from either the faculty in charge of the program or from the supervisor in the participating business organization, or both. Therefore, an assessment of the intern's learning style is a prerequisite to the process. Under such detailed program outline, the control task becomes relatively easy. A predetermined progress track is established for the intern based on data generated from the intern, the academic institution, the business organization and the situation. Actual progress is recorded and checked against the standard. Periodic feedback sessions are necessary between the faculty and the intern, and between the faculty, supervisor, and the intern. Various evaluation tools such as written and/or oral reports, term papers, examinations and interviews should be employed to assess the degree of learning achieved.

SUMMARY

Internships, as experiential learning tools, are being increasingly utilized as integral parts of reality-based educational programs. However, analyses of actual designs and processes (as practiced by the different academic disciplines in a university) do indicate that lack of clear understanding of the nature of the process precludes an effective utilization of the tool. In many instances, ill designed internships perpetuate learning style abuse.

Results of the present study indicate that a contingency approach for establishing internships is a more viable

process for achieving effectiveness. If the educational processes are to transcend the shadowy world of expediency, then efforts to establish broad-based theoretical foundations are critical.

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