

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22, 1995

THE INTERNSHIP PORTFOLIO: AN INNOVATIVE TOOL FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, CRITICAL THINKING, AND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The Internship Portfolio is a collection of work showing effort, progress, and achievement in the internship experience. While the resulting product is a valuable self-marketing tool, the real focus is on the development process. This process engages the intern to generate materials that document claims regarding skills, abilities, and understandings resulting from an internship. In the test project, portfolios included writing, self-reflection statements, photographs, sketches, models, and other forms of "evidence." Interns engage in class discussions of internship experiences, peer assessment of partners' work, and self-assessment. Interviews with industry professionals allow interns to present the portfolio effectively.

INTRODUCTION

The internship experience has long been viewed as one that is invaluable to students. Valued components include the hands-on experience and training as well as the high probability that many internship hosts will hire good interns in permanent professional positions. The internship period provides a time when the student and the host firm can assess the "fit" of the potential employee with the company, providing both entities with a safe testing field before making permanent employment commitments. The perceived value of internships infers that internship experiences incorporate components that contribute to professional success. Making the most of such valued components is vital when a graduate pursues full-time professional employment since there is increasing competition for jobs in the marketplace. The question emerges regarding how students can internalize the internship experience and capitalize upon that internalization when seeking employment. A possible answer to this question is use of an innovative tool for learning, thinking, and communicating — the Internship Portfolio.

To test the concept of the Internship Portfolio, a pilot project was implemented with a post-internship seminar of 25 undergraduate apparel design and merchandising students who completed internships with retail and design firms just prior to enrolling in the course. The entire format of the course was revised to accommodate development of a portfolio. This paper provides an overview of the process used to guide students through the portfolio development process, to link the portfolio process with other components of the post-internship course, and to help students internalize the experiences of the internship. In the context of the experiment, the Internship Portfolio a) serves as an

alternative assessment method for experiential internship learning, b) is a compilation of materials to communicate skills, abilities, and understandings unique to each intern, and c) involves experiences that allow higher-order thinking and verbal and written communication skills.

THE PORTFOLIO CONCEPT

Portfolio may be defined in various ways. Paulson and Paulson (1991) define *portfolio* as "a purposeful, integrated collection of student work showing student effort, progress, or achievement in one or more areas. The collection is guided by performance standards and includes evidence of student self-reflection and participation in setting the focus, selecting contents, and judging merit. A portfolio communicates what is learned and why it is important." (p.2) Murnane (1993) defines the portfolio as "a multidimensional collection of a student's work assembled in an organized fashion. The work may represent the cognitive, affective, or psychomotor dimensions of learning" (p. 1). These definitions articulate the concept used in development of the Internship Portfolio experiment outlined herein.

Portfolios have been used in design fields for many years to provide educators and employers with evidence of individuals' abilities in terms of sketching, photographing, ideation, graphic designing, typography, space planning, landscape designing, rendering, and a variety of other skills (Marquand, 1981; Metzdorf, 1991). In academics, the use of portfolios has expanded to various grade levels and to encompass a myriad of courses including writing, reading, mathematics, science, and social studies (O'Neil, 1992). As an assessment tool, the portfolio is being widely investigated and adopted by a growing number of school districts in the United States (Hansen, 1992; Vavrus, 1990). Portfolios have been identified by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development as one of the three current major trends in curriculum development (Mills, 1989). For students, portfolios can constitute a record of development of professional skills and abilities that is richer and more clearly illustrative than either a high school or post secondary school transcript (Cole, 1992).

While the use of portfolios for assessment and seeking employment has increased, there is little clear evidence in the literature of the portfolio concept being used to specifically focus on internship experiences and learning. The concept of the Internship Portfolio is consistent with Marquand's (1981) description of the "documentary portfolio" as being particularly helpful to

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a person who wishes to show a single project, process, or artistic activity, as opposed to a collection of finished objects or pieces of artwork. Marquand recommends that the documentary portfolio can be especially useful when it is used to supplement a professional portfolio.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE INTERNSHIP PORTFOLIO TO COURSE OBJECTIVES

Four course objectives were established to guide the development of the Internship Portfolio process and the overall plan for the post-internship seminar course. Each objective is presented with a brief explanation regarding how the Internship Portfolio process enhances achievement of that objective.

Integrating Internship Experiences

The first course objective is to integrate student internship experiences into a more complete understanding of the industry. During the development process, students bring materials to class, share experiences orally, and participate in peer and self-assessment. Through these experiences, interns are provided with a mechanism for hearing, seeing, and integrating a variety of experiences that clarify students' understandings of the industry in which they plan to be employed. The instructor emphasizes that sharing and listening is vital since each intern can offer valuable information about the industry. However, since each intern has valuable but limited industry experience, the instructor encourages students to formulate career plans on the basis of a more comprehensive view of employment options in the industry than their one experience. This more global view is made possible by sharing, listening, reviewing, and assessing.

Compiling Industry Information

A second course objective engages students in compiling information on different types of companies and the employment opportunities they offer. In addition to the facts shared about experiences of all interns, students have the opportunity to interact with each other to learn more about different internship host companies during class sessions. Since a variety of companies are represented among the interns, rich networking opportunities exist within the group for identifying contacts, learning about company philosophies and practices, and other information students may use in making career decisions.

Formulating Preferences and Goals

During the portfolio development process, students formulate and articulate personal preferences and beliefs concerning the types of industry positions that will best allow fulfillment of personal career goals. The portfolio process helps in achievement of this objective in ways that

conventional assessment tools such as objective tests do not. The portfolio process empowers students to "make decisions about their learning by actively involving them in setting goals, in developing criteria, and in self-evaluating" (Newman & Smolen, 1993, p. 28). Through self-reflection during writing and speaking, students are guided to engage in critical thinking about what they hear and see in order to formulate their own career preferences and beliefs. Rather than memorizing industry information and regurgitating responses on a test, students review their own experiences and performance in order to assess their own strengths and needs for improvement. These assessments help students to internalize and realize preferences in order to set personal and realistic career goals.

Assimilating the Internship Experience

A final course objective encourages students to assimilate internship experiences by engaging them in producing materials that communicate major skills and learning. While the portfolio "product" can be used as a valuable self-marketing tool, the involvement of the intern in the assimilation (absorption, digestion, internalization) process during completion of the assignment provides a valuable opportunity for experiential learning and for higher-order thinking.

How does the portfolio development process promote experiential learning? According to Kolb's (1984) account of learning, an individual progresses through a learning cycle which moves from concrete experience to observations and reflections, on to the formulation of abstract concepts and generalizations, through to testing the implications of concepts in new situations, and back again to concrete experience. During each student's unique internship, concrete experiences are abundant. The follow-up reflection on and review of those experiences, formulation of statements and claims regarding those experiences, and preparation to test those experiences in interview and other employment situations is directly related to Kolb's learning model.

The student mentally reviews a 320-hour work experience; uses abstract concepts and generalizations to identify major skills, understandings, and strengths; reflects on the value of the internship experience and ways he/she could have made it more valuable; prioritizes information for self-marketing; generates visual and written information to substantiate claims; and verbally articulates learnings, concepts, ideas, and understandings during class sessions and mock interviews. Commenting on experiential learning, Norman Evans (1992) indicates that "experiential learning is a key. This is for the simple reason that if men and women who think of themselves as ordinary.. can be given the opportunity to recognize for themselves what they have learned from.. experience without realizing it, then they can be encouraged and motivated to set

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about using their ability to learn to greater purpose” (p. 154). The Internship Portfolio process can play an important role in helping students to solidify and realize what learning has resulted from their concrete internship experiences.

How can the Internship Portfolio promote higher-order thinking? Richard Paul (1992), a leader in the critical thinking movement, describes lower-order thinking as learning by sheer association or rote. Using this method, students may try to remember names, dates, and places in order to simply state them on a history test. Literature may be viewed as uninteresting stories to remember along with what the teacher said is important about them. Paul says that to believe that most students actually understand what they regurgitate is to deceive ourselves as educators. He supports the concept of “true education” that encourages higher-order thinking, an education that promotes scrutiny. According to Paul (1992), “we use logic when we try to determine objectively whether our associations have a basis in reason or fact. Does the association make sense? Do we have evidence or reasons to support it? Does it fit in with other things that we know?” (pp. 15-16).

“When we analyze the logic of things, rather than simply associate them, we raise our learning to a higher order through critical thought” (Paul, 1992, p. 16). The element of logical reflection built into the Internship Portfolio process is key to encouraging critical thinking. This reflection involves figuring things out for oneself and pursuing the roots of what one learns in order to establish logical foundations (between what one already understands and the given concept to be learned). Reflecting on the logic of thought in the field of study, thinking as a retailer or designer or accountant or historian, promotes higher order thinking, to move the learner beyond the more common educational experience of simply memorizing and repeating information without the understanding that is based on logical thinking.

LINKING THE INTERNSHIP PORTFOLIO WITH OTHER COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A question most students have upon arrival the first day of class is “What are we required to do for a grade?” Thus, the grading components are clearly outlined in the course syllabus. The Internship Portfolio represents 60% of the semester grade. The course syllabus emphasizes that the portfolio is completed through accomplishment of several stages as the semester progresses. Attendance; active, skilled involvement during class sessions; a final conference with the instructor; and assessment of other class members’ work constitutes 20% of the semester grade. The remaining 20% of the grade is earned through a final exam which involves a) actual presentation of the Internship Portfolio to industry professionals and b) development of a “Self Reflection/Plans

for Improvement” statement related to a final conference with the instructor. Each of these grading components or learning opportunities is linked with course objectives previously outlined.

VITAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE COURSE DESIGN

Course revisions were based on certain assumptions that are supported by theoretical and pedagogical unpinings in the literature. For example, the assumption that students can improve their own work through learning to assess others’ work leads to incorporation of the peer assessment aspect of the course. The practice of “peer assessment” and corresponding “self-assessment” is an important component of the critical thinking movement which encourages making the student responsible for personal learning and growth (Paul, 1993). Besides gaining feedback from a peer, the value of peer assessment lies in learning to recognize the degree to which work conforms to established standards in order to transfer the ability in improving one’s own work.

The assumption that learning to communicate verbally and in writing enhances employment success is key to requiring the students to include writing in their portfolios, to write a “plans for improvement statement,” and to verbally present the portfolio to industry professionals at the end of the semester. Breaking portfolio preparation into stages and having students “show and tell” about their internship experiences during class relates to the assumption that hearing and seeing experiences different than one’s own experiences contributes to the objective of compiling information on different companies and beginning to formulate personal employment preferences based on personal values. The show-and-tell aspect of the course also provides valuable experience at practicing verbal skills, important in job interviews, formal portfolio presentations, and in future professional life.

To encourage each student’s self-reflection and internalization process, the instructor conducts an individual conference. The professor shares results of the industry supervisor’s appraisal of the intern’s work. Strengths and weaknesses are reviewed and the student is asked to respond verbally to information shared in the appraisal. Each intern is also asked to verbalize major goals he/she wishes to establish. With appropriate encouragement, students participate willingly in the conferences and frequently demonstrate their work on goals during class sessions. For example, an intern needing to increase self-confidence may volunteer to ask or answer questions in class. In addition, each student is asked to write a “self-reflection statement” and a “plans for improvement statement” as a follow-up to the individual conference; the student is

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encouraged to outline a specific plan for improvement during the next six months.

The sense of ownership promoted by compiling a useful and comprehensive record of one's achievements and abilities helps students feel that they are working toward self-enhancement rather than performing for a professor (Newman & Smolen, 1993). Ownership of the learning process is an important benefit since the learner is given flexibility to generate, organize, and present ideas in a unique manner that tells his/her "story." The added benefit of producing a self-marketing tool that can be used in the search for employment provides additional justification for use of the portfolio as an assessment/assimilation tool. Since compilation of an Internship Portfolio is uncommon, students having such a collection of materials may differentiate themselves from other job seekers during interviews for employment. This characteristic may make the Internship Portfolio process appealing to interns, especially if testimonies are shared of individuals who have found portfolios to be beneficial in the interview experience.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Since successful completion of the Internship Portfolio requires development and collection of materials, interns need adequate time to prepare and collect materials. To set the stage, interns receive an internship newsletter through the mail during their internship introducing the idea of the Internship Portfolio. The newsletter (Ownbey, 1994) includes short articles with one entitled, "Expand Your View of Portfolios" that introduces the Internship Portfolio concept. An article entitled, "A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words - Be a Creative Photographer!" includes tips for taking photographs during the internship. "What Should I Collect During My Internship?" is an article that provides a list of suggested ideas for materials to collect as supporting evidence and "Types of Portfolios" outlines various portfolio types and categorizes the Internship Portfolio as a documentary portfolio.

The post-internship course begins by celebrating completion of the internship experience, a significant milestone in each student's education. In addition to cake and soft drinks, the celebration day includes presentation of completion certificates, completion of news release forms by students to be sent to hometown newspapers, and photographs of each intern with the department head and the faculty internship coordinator. Besides providing students with portfolio documentation and certification, the celebration day serves to motivate the interns by reinforcing that this significant milestone in their educational careers is appropriately recognized.

Organization of the Portfolio

A class session introducing the concept of the portfolio is held including discussion of industry professionals' opinions regarding important components and characteristics of portfolios and the importance of the mechanics component of putting the portfolio together (Marquand, 1981; Metzdorf, 1991). A listing of possible supplies needed for the project is distributed. Example items are exhibited in class so that students may become familiar with materials they have not used previously.

Students also receive their "progress reports" which are submitted to the instructor during the internship experience. The progress report requires a listing of the hours worked each week, a signature of the supervisor, and a listing of new experiences during the week. The first task of the students is to review these progress reports to refresh their memories and make a list of major categories or issues into which their experiences and learnings fall. For the test project, examples of categories or issues included Communication, Leadership, Training of Employees, Manufacturing and Vendor Relations, Customer Relations and Service, Starting a New Business, Management, A Trip to Market, and Visual Merchandising.

Using a planning worksheet, students make an outline of experiences relating to each major category or issue they generate. For example, a student might list an experience such as "meeting with three different apparel vendors from companies X, Y, and Z to review merchandise lines and assist in selection of inventory." In a follow-up class session, students share their lists so that the class formulates a class list of categories. This activity allows students to adjust or re-label their categories during the discussion, shifting experiences and learnings into logical categories. The sharing session also provides a platform for demonstrating how each student may choose to logically group similar experiences differently, depending on the total experiences of a unique internship. Students are encouraged to have a minimum of four major categories or issues and to not exceed eight categories. These parameters were selected for the test project based on the types and numbers of categories the test class generated and on recommendations by industry professionals that typical design portfolios not include more than 15-25 well-selected "pieces" of design work. Since each category and issue in the internship portfolio potentially incorporates various components (parallel to pieces in a design portfolio), the parameters of four to eight is a flexible, but realistic, expectation.

After students solidify their categories, they are asked to bring and develop materials that show evidence of their involvement in each category. Students use various items including photographs taken during the internship experience; sample forms; sketches; floor

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plans/visual merchandising layout plans; training manuals developed; meeting agendas; promotional materials; information or facts from interviews with supervisor(s) or co-worker(s); information about equipment or technology used; and materials that summarize history, philosophy, and facts about the employing company (Ownbey, 1994).

Interns may also develop items, using critical and creative thinking, to support their claims. For example, one intern developed a well-designed flow chart illustrating the various channels through which she learned to communicate during the internship experience. Students label each support item with post-it notes or index cards to link it with a logical category or claim. Moving the materials around to find the best fit is encouraged and helps students learn to organize information. Peer assessment is then done by having each student pair with a partner. Each partner reviews the other person's categories and the labeling of materials and provides feedback. After peer assessment, each intern reviews his/her own work applying the same assessment principles to detect needed improvements. In addition, the student uses feedback provided by a peer, and makes final decisions regarding the organization of portfolio information.

The Substantive Content of the Portfolio

The "meat" of the portfolio, the real substantive content, is developed through a series of classes that alternate between studio, hands-on work and show-and-tell sessions. During most studio class periods, students are asked to work on a task such as writing a summary statement that provokes an overview of their involvement with or mastery of an identified category or issue, developing a concept for arrangement or order of their portfolio, or generating a professional theme or "look" for their portfolio. After a period of work time, students are paired and share their work, concepts, or plans with a partner. During the sharing, each student reviews and assesses the partner's work and his/her own work. At other studio class sessions, short demonstrations are presented on topics such as arrangement of the portfolio. Students leave the studio sessions to follow-up on work started during the class period.

During show-and-tell sessions, students are told they will be called upon at random to share one component of their internship experience that is being included in the portfolio. They are expected to plan how they will articulate their verbal presentation clearly and precisely (as they would wish to do in an interview or formal presentation of their portfolio) and speak so that everyone in the room can hear and see their ideas. These sessions lead to interesting discussions when other class members follow-up by sharing their related experiences. The presenter gains from the

experience of thinking critically and speaking spontaneously, in preparing for the final presentation of the portfolio to professionals, and through gaining self-confidence and poise to improve performance in future interview situations. The instructor interjects follow-up questions during students' short presentations in order to simulate interviews when interns will need to provide thoughtful and articulate answers to unexpected questions.

REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT BY INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

Professionals in the community are identified early in the semester and each receives a letter from the faculty internship coordinator describing the nature of the Internship Portfolio process and soliciting the professionals' expert assistance at the end of the semester. The students receive instruction during two class periods regarding how to visually and verbally present a portfolio during an interview. Emphasis is placed on professional dress, business etiquette, communication skills, and physical manipulation of the portfolio during presentation.

Each industry professional assesses four or five students. Prior to the interviews, the faculty internship coordinator meets with the industry professionals to provide an orientation. Example questions and an assessment form are provided to guide the interviewer through the assessment process. Interviewers are encouraged to ask typical interview questions and to ask each intern to verbalize reflections regarding the Internship Portfolio process.

At the final exam assessment, the student enters the room, introduces himself/herself to the interviewer, and engages in a mock interview. The interviewer asks questions similar to those expected in a real interview situation, giving the student another opportunity to reinforce and strengthen interview skills. Approximately 15-25 minutes are allowed for each interview. The interviewer is asked to write general suggestions for improvement as well as statements that reinforce students' strengths on the assessment forms. In addition, the interviewer assigns a numeric value to each component of the interview and the portfolio. Comments are shared with students to help them improve their portfolios and their portfolio/interview presentations.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND PLANS

At the end of the test-project semester, interns were asked to voluntarily complete a questionnaire regarding the Internship Portfolio experience/process. Of the 25 students in the test project, 21 interns completed and returned the questionnaire resulting in a response rate of 84%.

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The Questionnaire

The questionnaire administered to interns followed the Dillman (1978) Total Design Method for surveys. The survey instrument consisted of two sections; one included 18 opinion statements regarding the portfolio process with a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Example statements are “The portfolio assignment helped me practice my problem-solving skills;” “I have had deeper thoughts this semester about ways to market myself when I apply for jobs;” “I believe I improved in my ability to summarize my ideas in writing through doing this portfolio;” and “I am gaining more self-confidence about communicating verbally as we share our internship experiences.” A second section included five open-ended clauses allowing interns to provide general feedback and suggestions.

Survey Results and Discussion

Responses to the opinion statements indicated a majority of the interns perceived the portfolio process as a beneficial one. For example, 81% of interns agreed or strongly agreed that their ability to summarize ideas in writing had improved. In regard to using the Internship Portfolio process to practice problem solving, 71% agreed or strongly agreed that they had. In response to the statement, “Through looking at other students’ work, I gained some ability to judge my work critically in order to improve it,” 86% of interns agreed or strongly agreed. Approximately 90% of interns indicated that having a mock interview will help them improve their interview skills in general while 81% felt they gained more self-confidence about communicating verbally through sharing internship experiences. Responses to the remaining opinion statements were comparable in terms of interns perceiving positive benefits and growth as a result of the portfolio process. These results provide support from students for continuing the process.

One item of concern relates to the opinion statement, “I plan to use my internship portfolio when I interview for jobs upon graduation.” One-third of the interns (seven students) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (indicating indecision), five disagreed, and one intern strongly disagreed. Two students in the class had accepted jobs prior to completion of the questionnaire, which may account for their lack of need to use the portfolios in job hunting.

However, these negative responses are parallel with tentative feelings a few students exhibited during the semester about how use of the portfolio might be perceived by future interviewers. In general, students frequently indicate concern about being perceived as unusual or “off the wall,” by others. This pressure to be perceived as “normal” may influence their likelihood of actually using the internship portfolio unless they have “evidence” that the internship

portfolio will be viewed positively. Possible ways to reduce these feelings of concern include showing slides made of test-project portfolios and incorporating written testimonials (in the internship newsletter) and video-taped testimonials (during class sessions) of previous interns and other industry professionals indicating their support for and acceptance of the internship portfolio concept.

Assessment Results

During the interview process, industry interviewers completed an assessment form (linked with course objectives) which guided their assignment of points for each component of the mock interview and the portfolio. Students could earn a maximum of 70 points (60 points for the portfolio and 10 points for incorporation of the portfolio into the mock interview). The course instructor carefully examined the contents of the portfolios and completed independent assignment of points related to portfolio contents. Following the mock interviews, the course instructor reviewed all interviewers’ comments and point assignments in order to ensure that equitable grading was done across the class. For the test group, a mean score of 59 (84%) and median score of 61 (87%) were earned with scores ranging from 44 to 68. Nine (36%) of the students scored in the 90%-100% range while another nine (36%) scored in the 80%-89% range indicating that well over half (72%) of the interns demonstrated above average or high achievement of the course objectives.

Overall Results and Plans

In the test project, the portfolio development process helped keep students motivated throughout the semester since each class session’s activities were clearly related to completion of the portfolio. The writing and speaking aspects of the course are valuable to students although it is common for students to resist such activities at first. With preparation by the instructor, encouraging the class to serve as a support group for each student, and explaining why these experiences will positively impact one’s abilities and confidence, students become more interested in engaging in these creative risk-taking and communication activities.

Although the test project was conducted with apparel merchandising and design students, the concepts used in the project are easily adaptable for use with students in different subject matter areas. The design of the actual portfolio “product” may differ, depending on the field of study and the current preferences, practices, and expectations of professionals in a particular field. However, the portfolio “process” is a valuable one because of the manner in which it engages students to internalize internship experiences, organize information, communicate, and become involved in higher-order thinking.

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Industry professionals assessing the portfolios provide valuable input to help students improve. In addition, comments from the professionals are useful in helping the instructor refine the assignment so future students can enhance their abilities to learn, think, internalize, and communicate. Overall, the Internship Portfolio process is a win-win situation for students, academia, and industry.

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