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## UNDERSTANDING STUDENT WORK EXPERIENCE: A CONTENT-ANALYTIC APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

There has been little research to date dealing with the process student's go through in attempting to make sense of their Initial work experience. In an exploratory study, content analysis was used to track student's reactions to their socialization to the workforce over a three-month period. While pragmatic concerns dominated student attention throughout the experience, emotional and analytical dimensions emerged toward the end of the experience. It appears that content analysis offers a useful methodology for examining changes in student reactions over the course of an experiential situation.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is an exploratory study, which uses a small sample of students to demonstrate how content analysis can be used as a tool to evaluate and monitor the progress of students in an internship experience. The methodology can easily be applied to experiential situations other than internships.

As students go about learning the ropes in an experiential setting, variations are often found in their context or definition of the situation (Stryker 1972). E.g., one student may define a situation in terms of the interpersonal relationships involved, while another student may emphasize the learning opportunities. Furthermore, even students who share a common context (definition) for the situation may disagree on the concepts or components of the situation--e.g. two students may define an internship experience in terms of goal achievement, yet one student may focus on achieving the goal by learning requisite skills, while the second student may focus on achieving the goal through better time management. Finally, students may change their contexts (definitions) of their experiential learning situation over time.

This paper uses content analysis to examine these three issues: differing contexts among students experiencing similar situations; differing concepts that define situations for students with similar contexts; and changes in contexts over time.

### MINNESOTA CONTEXTUAL CONTENT ANALYSIS

A computerized content analysis technique developed by McTavish's models the experiential process in several different ways (Catrell and Kennedy 1986):

1) McTavish's Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis (MCCA) program defines a situation in terms of four alternative contexts. The four contexts are: a) traditional - the salient context features are defined around standards, rules, codes of behavior, conformity, norms, values, and ethics. b) pragmatic - the primary context features involve the rational achievement of goals, power, control, and a means-end orientation. c) emotional - the affective perspective dominates the context and emphasizes individual involvement, personal concern, comfort, primary relationships, and positive and negative expressions of emotion. d) analytic - salient features of the context imply objective evaluation or analysis, explanation, understanding, rationalization, inquiry, and the organization of information or knowledge.

2) MCCA codes the words for each text-case into 117 concepts. Using the profile of scores for the 117 conceptual categories, differences in the pattern of ideas across texts can be quantified and graphed as a proximity matrix.

3) The words that the program codes into the Idea categories constitute different operationalizations of the same variable. The program uses a dictionary that defines words for each concept category, and this dictionary is capable of disambiguating the meaning of a word in the text that has more than one meaning or usage.

4) The MCCA program can compare up to fifty texts at a time, and can analyze the same case, or several cases, over time. An error term can be approximated for each case's model of a social context when a criterion text is available for inclusion in the analysis.

The MCCA approach to content analysis allows variation in behavior to be examined at two very different levels: the context of the overall situation, and the concepts used for defining the context. We can use this technique to look at two behavioral components: individuals socialization relative to defining a social situation, and how that individual decomposes and defines that situation.

### METHODOLOGY

For this exploratory study, subjects were five upper division undergraduate college students participating in an undergraduate business administration internship program.

Data were collected from the students at the beginning of weeks 4, 8, and 12 of their 16-week internships. The data consisted of several hundred words of reflection on their internship site experience ('What is the biggest problem you see at your internship site?'), as well as reflections on the internship program ('What changes would you recommend in the internship program and in your specific internship site and job?'), and on the outcomes ('What was the most important outcome of your internship experience?'). As a comparative measure, or criterion text, selections were included from the Faculty Internship Advisor Manual supplied to the faculty member supervising the student, and from the Student Internship Manual which was received by all students in the program. The final piece of data consisted of an Interview with the college's Internship Director, who was also the author of the two manuals. The data were analyzed using MCCA and were examined longitudinally.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The major contextual dimension of pragmatism dominated the student's view of their work experiences. [There were only two exceptions--one student (emotional) and the director's interview (analytical).] The pragmatic context is defined by McTavish and Pirro (1984, p. 20) as follows:

Individuals with this perspective tend to be motivated by a sense of personal interest in achievement, success, getting ahead, or goal attainment. New people in these contexts are trained and often learn by doing...

Overall, this research indicates that the internship experience focuses on role clarity (Buchanan 1974)--what the students are expected to do, when, and their feelings about it. Most of the students experienced changes over the course of the internship experience. The fact that change occurred supports much of the rationale for the experience. An experiential opportunity is an exploratory process the results of which are, optimally, changed perceptions about oneself and one's environment. However, the changes these students showed were fairly small. This may reflect the limited duration of the internship experience (three months, a rather short time for significant change to occur) as well as the stability of duties over the three-month period.

Discussion. This study illustrates that content analysis can be a useful methodology for examining student reactions to an experiential situation and for tracking changes in their reactions over time.

References furnished on request.