Active Learning in the Workplace

In This Issue

- *The focus is on fieldwork and work-integrated education (WIE).*

- *A PolyU teacher makes suggestions about field trips.*

- *Former PolyU students describe problems encountered in work placements.*

- *Suggestions/resources are provided for optimising students' workplace learning.*

- *The assessment of WIE is explored.*

Professional education programmes at all levels aim to provide students with a wide range of learning experiences. Increasingly, these include practical experience in the workplace. Students benefit enormously from observing, reflecting on and participating in the industry or profession they intend to join. Working with others and solving problem in authentic situations allow students to develop and/or enhance professional and generic skills as well as appropriate work attitudes.

At PolyU, both fieldwork and work-integrated education (WIE) opportunities are recognised as playing a key part in moving students on from learning about being a professional to actually being a professional.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork (field trips or study visits) takes students out from the classroom into the "field". Out in the field, abstract becomes concrete and students can directly observe situations and collect data that is relevant to their intended profession. Back in the classroom, discussions and other exercises are potentially more meaningful because they are based on personal observations rather than being seen through the eyes of others.

Work-Integrated Education

Some departments at PolyU have a long history of providing workplace experience. Building on the success of these programmes, and as part of PolyU's curriculum revision for the 2005-08 triennium, all full-time UGC-funded undergraduate programmes will include a mandatory, credit-bearing WIE component which is:

- **Structured** (programmes must specify the intended learning outcomes and not just rely on incidental learning) and
- **Measurable** (students are required to document their workplace learning experiences, and their work is assessed vis-à-vis the intended learning outcomes).

While the WIE component is mandatory, departments can choose formats (e.g., block placements, internships, cooperative projects, clinical placements or summer jobs) and locations (Hong Kong, Chinese Mainland, or overseas). This flexibility provides multiple opportunities.

Meeting the Challenge

Making provision for students to have first-hand experience in the workplace, whether it be WIE or fieldwork, is – in itself – insufficient. In addition to thinking carefully about the learning outcomes and how to assess these, teachers must also consider the support that their students need and how to work effectively with employers in this process. We hope the ideas provided in this issue will help you with these challenging tasks.

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Getting the Most Out of Field Trips

Associate Professor John Ap from the **School of Hotel and Tourism Management** takes his Tourism Planning students on field trips to visit theme parks and tourist attractions. He sees these as valuable learning experiences that students enjoy and which give them an opportunity to relate what has been taught in the class to what is happening currently in the industry.

"I organise field trips for students at both masters and undergraduate levels. Each field trip is carefully planned with a predetermined purpose and objectives. I remind students that these are not a simple escape from the normal class schedule or just simply for fun! The trips relate to major projects or assignments and link what we have covered in class to actual real-life conditions. Field trips are a compulsory element for a number of our tourism courses so students know this will incur additional costs. However, for UGC-funded students who receive a grant and loan, lecturers need to inform the SAO at the beginning of each academic year to register compulsory field trips so that the students receiving a grant or loan may be able to have the field trip fees re-imbursed. From experience, I've found the following useful:

Well before the trip

- Consider scheduling. If possible, schedule the trip for a weekend or on days where students have no/few classes.
- Talk to colleagues whose classes may be disrupted and discuss 'catch-up' options.
- Make a preliminary visit to the site to check the arrangements and timings.
- Complete the risk assessment paperwork and any other departmental requirements.

Shortly before the trip

- Invite a guest speaker, if appropriate, to brief the students.
- Brief students carefully so that they are aware of all the practical arrangements, their responsibilities and the trip objectives.
- Remind students to ensure their travel documents are up-to-date and that they must bring them if travelling out of Hong Kong.
- Give students handouts containing all necessary practical information.
- Remind students to contact other teachers whose classes they will miss.

During the trip

- Keep students focused on their objectives and tasks.
- Ensure students think about health and safety issues.
- Point out key elements that students must pay attention to.
- Encourage students to complete observation forms or keep a good record of what they experience, see and think about.
- Enjoy the experience!

After the trip

- Run a debriefing session while things are fresh in students' minds.
- Make explicit links between what has been covered in class to what has been observed in the field.
- If appropriate, feed student views back to industry to strengthen the partnership.

"When doing a site visit my tourism students take on the role of 'industry consultants'. They typically have to think about a wide range of issues such as the planning and design principles, the guest perspective and experience, human resources management issues, maintenance and safety issues, and industry trends. They are expected to be observant and ask questions. I ask students to develop appropriate criteria for assessing what they observe and experience and to keep notes. There is a tricky balance here. I try not to be over-prescriptive so that students have some flexibility because they may have an original perspective on what they observe and see happening.

"We often share a meal during the field trip which is fun for the group and allows plenty of informal discussion. We have a formal debriefing session immediately after the trip to discuss what has been learned. Although field trips can take a lot of time and effort to organise, I know that my students get a lot out of them and can actually learn something."

Online Resources about Fieldwork

1 **Information Fieldwork Safety** provides a good model of making behavioural expectations explicit so that students behave appropriately and are safe when participating in fieldwork.

Dr Heather Viles, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford

http://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/information/safety/hs_ftrips.html

2 **Learning Support for Disabled Students Undertaking Fieldwork and Related Activities** This link takes you to six guides describing how to enable students with different types of disability to participate in fieldwork. Although the legislation referred to relates to the UK, most of the information is applicable to Hong Kong.

The Geography Discipline Network

http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/disabil/index.htm

Maximising Students' Learning in WIE

In "The Video Interview Project", PolyU students identified different benefits that came from work placements during their courses of study. At the same time, the interviews laid bare difficulties and frustrations that some students experienced.

Problems

> My work was rather mechanical. I did the same thing over and over again each day. I didn't learn much at all.

> Staff did most things themselves, just giving me very simple tasks.

> I didn't like disturbing people with my questions.

> I was seen as free labour and placed wherever an extra pair of hands was needed.

> My training report simply required me to state the name of the company where I was placed and to keep a descriptive log of my daily work.

> I missed my classmates during the training period because I had no-one to talk with about the problems I faced.

Solving the problems: Learning support for WIE

The problems the students identified are not surprising because learning in the workplace is very different from learning in a classroom. How you prepare and support your students (and the employer partners) will make a tremendous impact on whether learning does (or doesn't) take place. Teachers who have successfully used WIE recommend these practices:

Ensure that students, teachers and employer partners understand the purpose of the placement

Looking at websites from other universities provides an insight into how other institutions are tackling this task. See:

Work Placement Guide, the Keynote Project, Leeds University
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/textiles/keynote/Keynote_WPG/index.htm

Work Integrated Learning from Accounting and Law, RMIT University
http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse;ID=6afyjgr6aa0o

"Click here" as instructed on the opening page, and then follow the links for "employers" and "students".

Help students set learning goals

A learning contract (see Issue 5, p.4) is useful for doing this. Find out more at:

Strategic Learning Contracts from **Bacal and Associates**
http://www.work911.com/articles/lcon.htm

Independent Studies: Learning Contracts from The University of Waterloo, TRACE Tips
http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/tips/is_learningcontracts.pdf

Prepare students for the reality of the workplace

A pre-placement briefing from employers or past students may be a convincing way to prepare students about the demands that lie ahead.

Provide good documentation for students

RMIT and Leeds University (see above) provide good examples. PolyU staff, using their netID and password, can also look at PolyU examples:

Guidelines for Students from the **School of Design**
https://www2.polyu.edu.hk/cr/files/sdinternguide.pdf

Co-operative Education Handbook from the **School of Hotel and Tourism Management**
https://www2.polyu.edu.hk/cr/files/htmbawiehb.pdf

Use non-traditional methods of assessment

Because WIE is centred around reflection on work practices, it is important that students review their experience, reflect on it, and learn from it. As well, keep in mind that "to prove competency means having to *demonstrate* the attainment of skills and attitudes, not just having to write about them" (Gray, 2001, p.6). Therefore there is a need for: assessment that demands reflection, criterion-referenced assessment, and assessment that is directly related to the work situation.

Use the Web to support students during their WIE

Set up a system for students to communicate with each other and you during their WIE. Electronic communication is useful for sharing information, reflection, collaborative problem solving, and providing an early warning system that there may be a need for support or intervention.

Meet students and employers together during any site visits

Find out if there are any problems and explore ways that these might be resolved. Make sure the students get some positive feedback too!

Arrange a post-placement debriefing

Students will learn from each others' experiences, and you will get information for improving the ongoing WIE component of your programme.

Q & A   About Assessing WIE

Q In the next academic year, I am coordinating WIE for the first time and I am starting to think about how it should be assessed. It seems to me that there are some significant differences between assessing learning in the workplace and assessing learning in traditional contexts but that is as far as I have got. What advice can you give me?

A While assessing learning in the workplace is complex and the considerations go beyond the scope of this issue, there are several suggestions I would make to get you going:

1. Keep in mind that your **assessment methods should measure the intended learning outcomes,** which for WIE will be both professional and generic. In relation to professional knowledge and skills, you might be looking at how students apply knowledge, relate theory to practice, their ability to understand work problems, and the development of technical skills. Amongst other things, the generic skills include work attitude, communication, team work, dependability and self-confidence.

2. Remember that **assessment methods should acknowledge the practices of the "real-life" workplace** and they must be feasible in that context.

3. **Decide upon who will assess what.** What is best assessed by the students themselves, the visiting teachers and the workplace supervisors? Do these stakeholders require any training in assessment? Workplace supervisors certainly have an important role to play given their ongoing contact with the students, but you need to be realistic about how much you can expect from them. Consider designing some user-friendly, straightforward checklists that don't take up too much of their time.

4. **Don't assume that students know what is required when you ask them to reflect.** They may not understand that reflection requires them to go beyond their successes and that much can be learned by reflecting on problems (what caused the problem, what might have prevented it, what they learned from the episode).

Learning journals/logs and critical incidents are very useful for getting students to reflect on their learning. But be aware that it may be necessary to provide students with prompts that will get them to think and write about the totality of their experiences throughout the duration of their WIE, rather than just write up a catalogue of events at the end. More information about these vehicles for learning and assessment can be accessed at:

Learning Journals and Logs, Reflective Diaries by **Jennifer Moon**, writing for **University College Dublin** (written for teachers)
http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/good/lea.htm

Learning Journals from **The Adult Education Centre, University College Dublin** (written for students)
http://www.ucd.ie/adulted/main/pages/stu_journals.htm

Critical Incident Analysis from **Centre for Higher Education Development, Coventry University**
http://legacywww.coventry.ac.uk/legacy/ched/research/critical.htm

5. **Don't stop reading here!** There are other issues to think about, assessment methods to consider and case studies of good practices to learn from. Start with:

Assessment Series No.11: A Briefing on Work-based Learning written by **David Gray** of the **University of Surrey (2001)**. It is found on the **Higher Education Academy Website.**
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic&id=11

Also, watch out for PolyU's upcoming WIE website.

Note: All links worked at May 2005.

Thanks to ...

Further Information

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