

Guidelines for practice: Integrating practice-based experiences

The guidelines are derived from a synthesis of the findings from 20 projects across six Australian universities that sought to improve students' learning experiences through the provision of practice-based experiences. The projects comprised the ALTC National Teaching Fellowship 'Curriculum and pedagogic bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences within higher education'.

These guidelines aim to assist people teaching in higher education to make decisions about organising and integrating their students' experiences in practice settings (ie workplaces) to support their students to develop the capacities for making smooth transitions to their selected occupations upon graduation and be effective in those roles.

- The guidelines focus on:
1. purposes for organising and integrating experiences;
 2. key learning outcomes;
 3. key considerations for providing practice-based experiences;
 4. different ways of providing practice experiences for students;
 5. sets of principles and practice associated with organising those experiences (ie curriculum); and
 6. enriching them (ie pedagogic practices).

Work integrated learning: why would you do it?

Some reasons for attempting to integrate work-based learning experiences into the higher curriculum include:

- learning about an occupation
- learning about some of the variations of that occupation
- extending the knowledge learnt in university settings
- gaining an orientation to the kinds of places where the occupation is practiced
- building the capacities required to engage in and be an effective professional practitioner
- developing occupationally specific forms of knowledge required for particular practice settings
- meeting requirements of occupational or professional licensing.

Key learning outcomes

Some key learning outcomes identified through providing practice-based experiences include:

- the development of students' occupational capacities (ie procedural, conceptual and dispositional)
- different kinds of activities (eg placement, project, shadowing) led to distinct kinds of learning outcomes
- building students' confidence to engage in their selected occupations
- assisting students to learn more about their selected occupation
- transformation of students' personal perspectives
- informed insights into the world of work and work practices
- the importance of engaging with practice as part of occupational preparation.

Key considerations for organising students' learning experiences.

The key considerations for organising learning processes associated with integrating experiences in practice settings identified through the projects include:

- having only workplace experiences is insufficient for effective student learning; they need to be augmented by teacherly interventions (ie pedagogic practices)
- the importance of engagements with students that: prepare (ie before; eg briefing), support (ie during; eg, sharing, guidance) and assist them to connect the two sets of experiences (ie after; eg, focus groups, critical reflective sessions)
- students' readiness (ie interest, realism, capacities) to engage is a key factor shaping their learning
- students' diverse prior experiences shape their engagement and learning in these processes
- providing and managing experiences for students who are 'time jealous' is an emerging challenge
- educators' conceptions of the worth and competence with practice experiences are diverse
- beyond supervised placements, options such as students' paid part-time work and observations of work might provide a useful resource of experiences
- centrality of the 'experienced curriculum': how students construe and engage in practice settings and integrate their experiences from both university and practice settings

- incremental exposure to practice-based experience and progression is preferred (ie a series of experiences being built upon, different levels of support over time)
- importance of aligning all participants' (ie students, staff, industry partners) understandings of the purposes of work integrated learning and its processes
- integrating insights from practice into the broader curriculum using WIL as a platform
- preparing students for workplace expectations is essential.

Options for securing practice-based experiences

Those teaching in higher education institutions need to look beyond supervised placements and include:

- students' current paid employment associated with their studies
- students' paid part-time employment
- observation of occupations being enacted (eg observing law court proceedings)
- students' prior experiences
- simulations of substitute activities.

Supervised placements are essential in some circumstances, but other ways of securing instances of authentic practice are quite appropriate for others.

Definitions

The following definitions aim to assist understand the concepts used here.

Curriculum – the kinds of learning experiences in practice settings and higher education institutions and how they are organised, sequenced and enacted.

Within this definition, sub-categories of curriculum are defined as follows

Intended curriculum – what is intended to occur by sponsors or developers in terms of educational goals (ie what should be learnt) and learning outcomes as a result of the curriculum being implemented.

Enacted curriculum – what is enacted as shaped by the resources available, the experiences and expertise of teachers and others, their interpretation of what was intended, their values and the range of situational factors that shape students' experiences.

Experienced curriculum – what students experience when they engage with what was intended through what is enacted, and how they learn through that experiencing, even that which is unintended by those who plan and enact the curriculum.

Pedagogy – the kind of guidance provided to assist students' learning, in the form of teacherly engagements, and information resources, learning support and interactions. This includes promoting learner agency.

Personal epistemologies – the bases by which individuals come to construe and construct knowledge from what they experience, including their interests, intentionalities and subjectivities, which shape how they engage with the process of learning.

In the two tables that follow, sets of curriculum and pedagogic practices that likely can support the effective integration of students' experiences in practice settings are presented. The first table sets out some principles for the intended, enacted and experienced curriculum. The second sets out some pedagogic practices for enhancing those experiences, before, during and after the students' practice-based experiences.

Table 1: Curriculum consideration for organising and enacting practice-based experiences, and how students might engage with them.

Intended curriculum

Key considerations associated with the intended curriculum comprise:

- being clear about what is to be learnt for identifying what experiences are likely to secure that learning
- aligning the kinds of experiences provided for students with the intended learning outcomes
- a gradual and staged engagement in practice-based experiences suits most educational purposes
- aligning the duration of particular experiences with their educational purpose (eg orientation versus skill development)
- acknowledging practice settings as providing important and worthwhile educational experiences and plan accordingly
- intentionally sequencing preparatory experiences and opportunities to secure, consolidate and reconcile learning from practice experiences in the curriculum.

These preparatory processes of greatest value for students when they:

- come before the first practicum experience
- are strongly focused on discipline-specific information and procedures, rather than content they perceive to be irrelevant or untimely
- use their time effectively
- draw on their existing experience
- provide opportunities for developing procedural capacities (ie how to do things).

Enacted curriculum

Key considerations associated with the enacted curriculum comprise:

- teachers' interest in practice settings, and capability to enact effective students' experiences profoundly shape what is enacted
- these capabilities may extend to coaching and assisting students to reconcile their experiences
- teachers' knowledge of and engagement with practice settings influence how they enact experiences for their students
- the availability of resources, and access to practice-based settings, determines the range of possible experiences for students
- the need to augment or maximise the available opportunities (eg in regional settings)
- the level of supervision needs to balance managing potential harm with securing students' learning
- considering options other than supervised placements to secure learning experiences
- accounting for students' readiness (eg interest, capacities, confidence) when enacting particular kinds of experiences
- organising orientations before students engage in practice, utilise opportunities for support during practice-based experiences, and providing interludes for sharing and reflections after them
- additional or specific experiences may be needed for particular student cohorts (eg overseas students)
- gradual and staged enactment of experiences in practice settings are well aligned to building confidence, capacities and interest.

Experienced curriculum

Some key issues associated with the experienced curriculum are:

- students' interest and readiness is central to their engagement and learning in practice settings, and reconciling it with what they have learnt in their courses
- the level of readiness is most evident when there are conflicts or contrary demands between workplace and university requirements
- different kinds of readiness have particular implications for students' learning (eg international students' lack of knowledge about social, institutional and local practices, domestic students' naïveté and idealisation of their selected occupations)
- the need to view issues associated with readiness as a duality comprising i) students' experience; and ii) the requirements of workplace and academic settings
- immediate and pressing concerns such as performing adequately in practicum likely to be the focus of students' interest
- students' interest and engagement are salient for enacting and realising effective learning outcomes in practice settings
- students' confidence likely mediates their engagement in practice settings
- early and staged engagement in practice settings boosts many students' confidence to re-engage and learn effectively
- challenges to personal confidence and competence can be redressed by effective group processes, including sharing of experiences.



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Table 2: Pedagogic practices that can promote the integration of experiences before, during and after students' practice-based experiences

Before practice-based experiences

Before the practice experience, it is helpful to engage with students to:

- orientate them to the requirements for effectively engaging in the workplace
- establish bases for experiences in practice settings, including developing or identifying capacities required for practice settings (ie practice-based curriculum, interactions)
- clarify expectations about purposes of, support in, and responsibilities of parties in practice settings etc (ie goals for learning, how to engage)
- inform about purposes, roles, and expectations of different parties
- inform about and prepare students to engage as agentic learners, including the importance of their observations, and engagement in the workplace interactions, and activities through which they learn
- develop any procedural capacities required for effective with tasks in the practice setting
- prepare them for contestations that might arise in the practice setting.

During practice-based experiences

The effective integration during practice-based experiences was better supported when there is:

- direct guidance by more experienced practitioners (ie proximal guidance)
- sequencing and combinations of activities (ie 'learning curriculum', practice-based curriculum)
- active engagement in pedagogically rich work activities or interactions (eg handovers)
- effective peer interactions (ie students' collaborative learning)
- active and purposeful engagement by the students as learners in workplace settings.

After practice-based experiences

After practice-based experiences, it is helpful to:

- facilitate the sharing and drawing out of students' experiences (ie an opportunity for comparing the commonalities and differences in requirements for practice)
- explicitly make links to, and reconciliations between, what is taught (learnt) in the academy, and what is experienced in practice settings
- emphasise the active and selective qualities of students' learning through practice (ie personal epistemologies)
- generate in students critical perspectives on work and learning processes.

Students' personal epistemology –

Developing students' capacity to actively engage in, learn from and intentionally focus on their development is central to not only maximising their learning through these educational processes, but within and throughout their professional practice. Hence, the emphasis on enacting the above pedagogic practices need to emphasise these outcomes

The full report of the National Teaching Fellowship from which these findings are drawn can be found on the ALTC website <http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-integrating-practice-based-experiences-griffith-2011>