

INCREASED CUSTOMER SATISFACTION DURING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A pilot programme was run (2004 – 2005) with Tourism Management students at the Central University of Technology, Free State to enhance the satisfaction levels of both the student and relevant employers during Experiential Learning. The goals were to try and better prepare students for their Experiential Learning experience by means of a formal orientation programme in addition to the normal briefing session held and to enable both students and employers to achieve higher satisfaction levels in terms of pre-determined aspects as a result of the programme. The pilot programme was based on and informed by theories of learning in cooperative education, best practice requirements as well as a study of possible benefits to all parties concerned.

Key words: Experiential learning, formal orientation programme

1. INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of clarity, Experiential Learning is regarded to be classified as a component of Cooperative Education.

1.1 Terminology

The National Commission for Cooperative Education (2007) defines Cooperative Education as a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Cooperative Education is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party.

Experiential Learning refers to the practical component completed by students with employers in the relevant industry of study and monitored by the educational institution.

Goldsmith (1997) is of the opinion that Experiential Learning involves complex interactions between the learner and industrial/commercial environment. The learner's learning while on placement owes much to the workplace supervisor, colleagues, culture and practices of the employing organization. There is thus a need for all the partners (student, employer and educational institution) to have a common understanding and goal to achieve success.

Engelbrecht (2003) supports this statement and reasons that the core principle of best practice in Cooperative Education appears to be the willingness to understand the other partner and to recognize the other's expertise, needs and goals.

1.2 Best Practice

The Higher Education Quality Committee (2004) as a permanent committee of the Council on Higher Education interprets Experiential Learning as Work-based learning as follows: It is a component of a learning programme that focuses on the application of theory in an authentic, work-based context. It addresses specific competences identified for the acquisition of a qualification, which relate to the development of skills that will make the learner employable and will assist in developing his/her personal skills. Employer and professional bodies are involved in the assessment of experiential learning, together with academic staff. Emphasis is also placed under criterion 15 for the various parties (or partners in this case) to agree on their roles and responsibilities.

The Accreditation Council for Cooperative Education (2007) requires the following (amongst others) as best practice:

- Students in the program are provided with an orientation to program purposes and policies and the expectations for their participation.
- Policies and practices of the program are communicated to employers to help ensure that the employer, students and institution, equally, meet individual objectives from participation in the cooperative education program.

The Southern African Society for Cooperative Education's quality cycle (2007) includes the following key components:

- Orientation or Work Preparedness of Students and Employers
- Placement Process
- Mentoring
- Monitoring and Visitation
- Assessment and Evaluation

1.3 Theories of Learning in Cooperative Education

Cates and Eames (2004) state that the principal goal of any educational program is to facilitate student learning. Learning occurs in two distinct settings, the educational institution and the workplace. A key tenet of cooperative education is that the student will integrate learning between these two settings. Appropriate curricula and pedagogy are required to facilitate this integration.

Piaget's Cognitive-Development Theory

As co-op students are developing reasoning strategies related to the classroom they are also developing reasoning strategies related to industry while they are completing their co-op work assignments in the workplace. Jean Piaget proposed that logical thinking occurs when the learner simultaneously coordinates an operation and its inverse and predicts the changes that will likely occur (Piaget, 1985)

The simultaneous development of reasoning strategies for both education and work enables students to maintain the organisation of their cognitive structure more easily. It also explains why the co-op students make the transition to work immediately upon graduation whereas the non co-op students undergo an adjustment period (Gardner & Koslowski, 1993).

Atkinson's Model of Achievement Motivation

One of the claims about cooperative education is that it increases student motivation (Dawson, 1980-81; Fletcher, 1989). But what could it be that motivates students to learn? One model to describe student motivation is the expectancy-value model derived from Atkinson's model of achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1964). In this model, expectancy, in combination with task value, leads to task involvement and subsequent achievement. Atkinson defines expectancy as the student's belief regarding his/her probability of success (or failure) on a particular task, and value as the value the individual attaches to the success or failure of the task. Cooperative education has the potential to influence both sides of the expectancy value model of student motivation.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

Perhaps one of the most familiar learning theories to co-op practitioners is Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb, Rubin, & McIntyre, 1984). It describes the learning process as a four-stage cycle, which co-op students move through on a continuing basis:

- Concrete experience followed by
- Observation and reflection which lead to
- The formation of abstract concepts and generalizations which lead to
- Hypotheses to be tested in future action, which in turn lead to concrete experience.

Within this model of the learning process, the learning cycle is constantly recurring.

1.4 Benefits of Cooperative Education

To what extent can Co-operative Education benefit the three parties involved, i.e. the student, the institution and the employer?

1.4.1 Student Benefits

What evidence can be presented to substantiate benefits accruing to students as a result of Co-operative Education? The following research results are applicable for students in terms of their academic studies, as well as personal and career-related development.

- **Academic Benefits**

1. Improved learning: taking responsibility for learning, Grantz & Thanos, 1996; learn how to learn, Howard & Linn, 2001;
2. Improved motivation to learn: Weisz, 2000; Burchell, Hodges, & Rainsbury, 2000;
3. Improved performance in the classroom: Diaforli, 1980-81; Van Gyn et al., 1997;
4. Higher retention rate: Avenoso, 1994; motivation to persist to graduation, Parks, 2003

- **Personal Benefits**

1. Enhanced self-confidence: Diaforli, 1980-81; Weisz, 2000; Burchell et al., 2000; Coll & Chapman, 2000; Calway & Murphy, 2000; Parks, 2003
2. Enhanced decision making: Diaforli, 1980-81; Peterson & Nelson, 1986;
3. Increased ability to follow-through: Parks, 2003
4. Increased ability to manage money: Parks, 2003
5. Increased teamwork and cooperation: Weisz, 2000; Parks, 2003
6. Maturity: Diaforli: 1980-81; Mueller, 1992; Parks, 2003
7. Improved interpersonal relationships: complex interactions, Seeman, 1984; social adjustment, Carrell & Rowe, 1993

- **Career Benefits**

1. Career decision-making/planning: Heller & Heinemann, 1987; Hackett, Croissant, & Schneider, 1992; Mueller, 1992; better understanding of the workplace and career alternatives, Van Gyn et al., 1995; realistic expectations, Sharma, Mannel, & Rowe, 1995
2. Gain practical experience in disciplined-related career areas: Diaforli, 1980-81; Parks, 2003

3. Increases employment opportunities: Eyler, 1993; Calway & Murphy, 2000; into major-related jobs, Riggio & Kubiak, 1994; high rate in graduate employment, Weisz, 2000; enhanced international prospects, Coll & Chapman, 2001

1.4.2 Employer Benefits

The following can be reported in terms of research findings regarding benefits to employers:

Abel & Love, 1998 found that employers benefit from more cost-effective recruitment; Braunstein, 1999 reported students to be more motivated and enthusiastic, progressed faster with less training required and enabled better recruitment as a whole; Dobreci, 1996 experienced more flexible employees with better skills and Ricks & Van Gyn, 1997 determined that students were more committed in the workplace and developed better mentoring relationships, as well an increase in work success and recruitment efficiency.

1.4. Educational Institution benefits

Student Recruitment and Enrolments

Weise and Chapman (2004:247) explain that the majority of educational institutions are funded to a greater or lesser extent by government. Under these funding models, institutions are faced not only with the need to attract and retain students and thus funding, but also the need to satisfy the high expectations of students completing their programmes of study. This helps to develop the reputation of the university, which in turn is an important attribute in attracting students.

Pauling (1996) suggested that as universities compete to become centers of excellence they would seek support from commerce, industry, and the professions so that they appear the most attractive to students by providing clear pathways to jobs and careers. He concluded that universities who couple their academic programmes with co-op would have an edge in any competitive education marketplace.

Enhancement of Student Qualities in Relation to the Institution

The improved academic performance (Eakins, 1997) through enhanced self-esteem brought about by the co-op experience is certainly an indirect benefit to the educational provider. The fact that students study better under co-op in response to mentoring both in the workplace and in the university (McGarry, 1997), obtain higher grades, and progress through their degrees at a faster rate, is a significant factor not only for the student but also for the universities which are constantly striving to meet their related key performance indicators.

Curriculum Development

According to Weise and Chapman (2004 & 247) a major benefit to academic institutions through participation in co-op is curriculum development and content. Any one or combinations of, the three co-op partners can drive curriculum change.

Probably the most exciting facet of curriculum development has involved interaction between academic supervisors and the world of work (Apostolides & Looye, 1997a; Baird & Groenewald, 1999; Faraday, 1999). Enormous benefits to academic institutions result from these interactions in the form of new courses, course relevance, and the importance of continuous consultation with industry to ensure that class material is meeting industry needs. The concept of total education (Apostolides & Looye, 1997b) is better met by the integration of academic study with the co-op work experience.

2. TOURISM MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Students enrolled for the National Diploma: Tourism Management must complete six (6) months of experiential learning with an approved employer in the tourism industry. The experiential learning is done during the second semester of the third year of study.

2.1 Research

Employers were asked to complete a questionnaire on an annual basis to determine their satisfaction in terms of services rendered to them regarding Experiential Learning by the Co-operative Education Unit, as well as the performance of students. This feedback together with ad-hoc discussions with employers have shown the following aspects to be of importance for employers regarding experiential learning:

Expectations from students in terms of:

- Working hours
- Dress code
- Work ethic
- Attitude towards staff and clients
- Knowledge of the process of EL: reports and evaluation
- Exposure offered by employer
- Role clarity in terms of employer, student, CUT
- Adaptation to work environment

The following additional aspects were also identified by employers:

- Quality and correctness of CV's
- Interview skills

Students have also completed an annual questionnaire regarding services rendered to them by the Co-operative Education Unit in terms of experiential learning. The following were common trends identified in the feedback from students:

- Availability of placements in South Africa and abroad
- Application procedures
- Processes and procedures for experiential learning
- Clarity in terms of expectations from employers
- Clarity in terms of expectations from the CUT

The expectations of students and employers were thus identified and the importance thereof in terms of the relevant theories and best practice requirements realized. It was decided that the normal one briefing session with the students per annum would not suffice if we were to meet the needs and expectations of both students and employers, ensure that optimal learning and customer satisfaction occur and that each partner in the process can derive as many from the stated benefits as possible.

The result was the development of a manual for experiential learning for the Tourism Management students, as well as the introduction of an experiential learning period per week for the students during the first semester of the third year of study. It was further decided to retain the normal information session, but to move it forward to the second semester of the second year of study to start to sensitize students towards Experiential Learning.

2.2 Manual for Experiential Learning

The manual was developed to serve as guidelines for the Tourism Management students to explain the process of Experiential Learning, logistical and practical arrangements, as well as relevant information to prepare students for their Experiential Learning experience.

The aim was to provide information and guidance to ensure that students will reap the maximum benefits possible from Experiential Learning and to address the following needs of employers:

- Working hours
- Dress code
- Work ethic
- Attitude towards staff and clients
- Knowledge of the process of EL: reports and evaluation
- Exposure offered by employer
- Role clarity in terms of employer, student, CUT
- Adaptation to work environment

The introduction of a Code of Conduct as part of the manual was also something new to specifically address employer demands in terms of work ethic and attitude of students.

The manual would also address the following needs of students:

- Application procedures
- Processes and procedures for experiential learning
- Clarity in terms of expectations from employers
- Clarity in terms of expectations from the CUT

2.3 Experiential Learning Period

Two areas of concern that we could not address by means of the manual were the following:

- Quality and correctness of CV's
- Interview skills

To effectively address these issues of importance to employers, we turned to the Careers Office of the university. The role of the Careers Office at the Central University of Technology, Free State is to better prepare students for life after graduation. The development of interview skills and CV writing are two aspects that the Careers Office focuses on.

Sessions were scheduled with the Careers Office during the experiential learning period to address these issues.

The assistance of the Careers Office in preparing students for interviews and guidance in drafting a CV and cover letter proved to be very fruitful. The sessions presented to the Tourism Management students had a positive effect on the feedback received from employers.

The availability of a period for experiential learning on the time-table of the students was not only utilized for sessions with the Careers Office and the manual for experiential learning.

During this period employers were also invited to address the students on what employers expect of students during experiential learning. It was deemed necessary to expose students directly to employers to further lend credibility to expectations from employers and role clarity between the student, employer and CUT.

This period was also used to address the following need of students:

- Availability of placements in South Africa and abroad

As opportunities become available for experiential learning, the location of each employer and the practicalities and logistics involved were discussed with students. The knowledge of employers was directly imparted to students by the Unit for Co-operative Education who had negotiated the opportunity for experiential learning with the particular employer. The following aspects and implications there of to be considered by students before applying at an employer were discussed:

- The remoteness of an employer from bigger cities, especially employers located in the Drakensberg.
- The practicalities and logistics of doing experiential learning in a big city such as Cape Town.
- The cost of accommodation and transport.
- The realities of being away from home, relatives and boyfriends/girlfriends.

3. COMPARISON OF RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRES

The impact of the pilot programme can be illustrated as follows:

2002 – 2003 (Information session only)

2005 – 2006 (Pilot programme)

Please note:

1:Poor; 2: Below average; 3:Average; 4:Good; 5:Excellent

3.1 Students

3.1.1 Were the following made clear to you?

3.1.1.1 What experiential learning is?

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	37.5%	25%	37.5%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	14%	86%

3.1.1.2 When do you have to do experiential learning?

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	12.5%	87.5%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	21%	79%

3.1.1.3 How do you qualify for Experiential Learning?

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	25%	25%	50%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	18%	82%

3.1.1.4 Availability of placements in Bloemfontein, South Africa & abroad?

1	2	3	4	5
-	37.5%	12.5%	50%	-

1	2	3	4	5
-	3%	22%	36%	39%

3.1.1.5 Application procedure for Experiential Learning?

1	2	3	4	5
12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	25%	37.5%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	7%	41%	52%

3.1.2 Administration of Experiential Learning

3.1.2.1 The Usefulness of your CV

1	2	3	4	5
-	12.5%	-	62.5%	25%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	31%	69%

3.1.2.2 Advertisements of opportunities for Experiential Learning

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	12.5%	62.5%	25%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	15%	50%	35%

3.1.2.3 General handling of your application

1	2	3	4	5
12.5%	25%	25%	37.5%	-

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	4%	41%	55%

3.1.3 Staff of the Unit for Co-operative Education

3.1.3.1 Assistance provided to you

1	2	3	4	5
-	12.5%	25%	12.5%	50%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	7%	11%	82%

3.1.3.2 Answering of your questions

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	50%	50%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	25%	75%

3.1.4 Please rate your overall experience with the Unit for Co-operative Education

1	2	3	4	5
-	12.5%	37.5%	25%	25%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	27%	73%

3.2 EMPLOYERS:

3.2.1 Are you well informed by us regarding the requirements of experiential learning of students?

1	2	3	4	5
		34%	44%	22%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	16%	56%	28%

3.2.1 Are your questions answered to your satisfaction?

1	2	3	4	5
		30%	52%	18%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	28%	48%	24%

3.2.3 Students

3.2.3.1 Documentation used for the placement of students

1	2	3	4	5
		56%	33%	11%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	28%	59%	13%

3.2.3.2 Our administration of the placement of students

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	16%	13%	71%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	-	31%	69%

3.2.3.3 General Attitude of Students

1	2	3	4	5
-	12%	55%	12%	21%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	17%	31%	52%

3.2.3.4 Student performance in the workplace

1	2	3	4	5
-	14%	46%	22%	18%

1	2	3	4	5
-	8%	43%	31%	18%

3.2.3.5 Adaptation to the workplace

1	2	3	4	5
-	17%	48%	21%	14%

1	2	3	4	5
-	3%	47%	41%	9%

3.2.4 Your overall impression in dealing with the Unit for Co-operative Education

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	40%	32%	28%

1	2	3	4	5
-	-	23%	51%	26%

4. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be made based on the comparison of the results produced by the questionnaires:

(i) The pilot programme did address the following needs of employers effectively:
Expectations from students in terms of:

- Working hours
- Dress code
- Work ethic
- Attitude towards staff and clients
- Knowledge of the process of EL: reports and evaluation
- Exposure offered by employer
- Role clarity in terms of employer, student, CUT
- Adaptation to work environment

As well as:

- Quality and correctness of CV's
- Interview skills

- (ii) The needs of students have been met, but still more attention needs to be paid to the availability of placements.
- (iii) More contact with the Unit for Co-operative Education through the introduction of an experiential learning period together with a manual for experiential learning and contact with employers during the experiential learning period seem to have borne positive results with students.
- (iv) The introduction of a Code of Conduct was an innovation welcomed by employers. It provides employers and students with role clarity as well as clear expectations.

An increase in customer satisfaction was achieved through the initiatives employed as based on sound theory, research and best practice requirements.

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