

ACHIEVING THE GOALS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH INTERNSHIP: CASE STUDY OF AN INSTITUTION TRAINING COUNSELLORS

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Abstract

Best practices by an educational institution deals with not only methods and techniques adopted to produce superior results but also adopting initiatives that are reflective in nature. Experiential learning has proved to be a powerful learning experience which guides students to become competent, efficient and “Industry Ready” professionals. Experiential learning is a creative approach to the modern curriculum and an effective tool in engaging students to become efficient and pro-active learners. “Experiential [learning] is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education). Experiential education is a unique and rewarding educational experience for students. Knowledge and theory learned in the classroom comes alive allowing the student to explore and reflect on academic theory in practice in a dynamic organisational environment. Internship is one form of experiential learning which has been declared by The American Association of Colleges and Universities as one of the ten “High-Impact Educational Practices”. Internships help integrate class theory and knowledge with practical applications towards professional as well as personal growth.

This paper is divided into two parts. PART A deals with the relevance of experiential learning and the benefits of student internship as a form of experiential learning. PART B of the paper highlights the initiatives taken by the SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education to provide experiential learning experience through internships to prepare students to become effective counsellors.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, Reflective, Professional, Industry-ready, Internship*

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INTRODUCTION

Tell me and I forget, Teach me and I remember, Involve me and I will learn

-Benjamin Franklin, 1750

SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education as an Institute training future counsellors recognises its duty to provide the best possible training to its students. The Institute is constantly introspecting its teaching methods and students' learning outcomes. Experiential learning programs are a valuable constituent of a students' educational experience. Classroom knowledge comes alive, and the student is too able to explore and reflect on theory in a dynamic organisational environment. Internship as a form of experiential learning has been found to be one of the best career investments for a student.

This paper is divided into two parts. **PART A** deals with the meaning of experiential learning and the importance of student internship as a form of experiential learning. **PART B** of the paper highlights the initiatives taken by the SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education to provide experiential learning experience through internships to prepare students to become effective counsellors.

PART A

I hear and I forget, I see, and I remember, I do, and I understand. ~ Confucius, 450 BC

The above maxim beautifully describes the importance of experiential learning. Over the years educators have acknowledged that there is a need for innovative teaching techniques which will provide beneficial learning experiences to students. Educators realise that students learn the best from experience.

David Kolb's work on the experiential learning cycle is among the most influential approaches to learning.

The experiential learning cycle consists of four stages:

- Concrete Experience : feeling
- Reflective Observation : watching
- Abstract Conceptualization : thinking
- Active Experimentation: doing

Students learn through student- rather than instructor-cantered experiences by doing, discovering, reflecting, and applying. The focus of experiential learning is on the process of learning and not the product of learning

According to Jackel (2011), *the variations among the terms used to describe outside –the – classroom learning opportunities can be condensed into a single phrase: experiential education*. The various forms of experiential learning as given by Moore (2010) include:

- Internships
- Clinical education
- Student teaching
- Cooperative education
- Research experience
- Community-based research
- Field work
- Service learning
- Study abroad

Experiential learning is an engaged learning process whereby students “learn by doing” and by reflecting on the experience. Internship is a form of experiential learning and is considered as one of the ten “High-Impact Educational Practices” as given by The American Association of Colleges and Universities.

An internship is defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) as *a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.*

According to the Council of Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2015) the mission of internship is to engage students in experiences that are planned, practical and

purposeful in work related settings that will benefit not only the students' academic but also career goals.

Martin and Wilkerson's (2006) study displayed that interns' found internship had concretised their understanding of their prior academic work. Since it strengthens their conceptual understanding it would be beneficial for future academic work and lead to a better appreciation for their course.

According to Anjum (2020) there are numerous benefits of undertaking internship are:

- An excellent source of practical experience,
- Facilitates learning of working in a team
- Creates impressive resumes
- Facilitates the building of personal and professional relationships.

The hands-on experience will result in confidence when seeking jobs and going for interviews. A crucial point made by Jackel (2011) was internship helps the student to understand if the career is right for them, whether it is of their interest and thus helps to further their career choice.

If the intern proves to be an asset to the agency through his work, he would be able to secure good references and recommendations and in the best scenario the agency may hire him for a permanent position. Many agencies/companies prefer to hire applicants who have had internship experience (www.meca-nyc.org) as they have received professional guidance and formal on-the-job training thus develop superior work habits, possess good soft skills, and have better specialised and industry-relevant skills.

By successfully completing an internship, the positive recommendation can be used not only for future employment but also for college admission and scholarship applications.

Internships supply valuable and competent job applicants to agencies. It provides trained employees to companies thus saving their supervision and training costs (Hurst, Good, 2010). Knouse and Fontenot (2008), found that students with internship experience had an upper hand in the job market and were hired more readily in subsequent jobs. These interns also received higher salaries and experienced higher job satisfaction (Gault, 2000)

A study conducted by National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2016) revealed that

- 72.2% of college graduates with internship experience received a job offer as opposed to 36.5% who had no internship experience
- 95% employers are looking for college graduates with experience
- Organisations converted 58.6% of their interns into full time hires.

Internship Programs are extremely beneficial to students as they develop leadership skills and other critical talents for their careers. Internships also greatly benefits the interning agency. Interns can provide valuable support for the agency and its existing employees. Future talent can be developed through internships. An intern can fit in the job after internship faster than an external hire.

An internship program allows the organisation to build a pipeline for future full time permanent employees. Internship can ease the workload of existing employees. The interns may bring with them enthusiasm and fresh ideas to the agency.

PART B

SIES Institute of Comprehensive Education (SIES ICE) has been conducting the Mumbai University affiliated Postgraduate Diploma Course in Counselling since the last 22 years.

The students of the Post Graduate courses in Counselling have chosen one of the most challenging vocations of their times. The students are budding counsellors and once they become full-fledged professional counsellors. The field of counselling is dynamic. Counselling issues a counsellor must deal with are constantly changing. Keeping this in mind SIES ICE recognises its responsibility of developing students into sensitive competent professionals, who will be able to deal with challenges of the counselling field. We try to incorporate innovative teaching techniques in order to give the best learning experience to our students. We have incorporated experiential learning in various forms out of which internship has proved to be the most beneficial to the students. The students undergo a rigorous practicum in which, Internship plays a particularly important part. The Institute tries to ensure that internship is a meaningful learning experience for the student.

Internship is provided by the Institute in several settings. Students can pick from a variety of internship organisations including

- Psychiatric OPD at hospitals
- Counselling Center at schools
- Counselling Center at Colleges
- Marital Counselling Centers
- Family Welfare Centers
- Centers dealing with special children
- Private Psychiatric Clinics
- Non-Government Organisations which deal with specific issues such as Cancer, Substance abuse etc.

The counselling internship centres are chosen very carefully by the Institute. Each centre has a competent professional counsellor/psychologist who would provide relevant supervision to the students. The supervisor is a professional who has the expertise and educational and professional background in the field of the experience. The agency is one which would provide the necessary resources, facilities, and equipment (if needed) that will support and promote the learning objectives and goals. The supervisor is one who is willing and will be accessible to the students. The supervisor is orientated by the coordinator of the counselling courses regarding the requirements that must be fulfilled during the internship period. The supervisor and the coordinator of the course work together so the internship will provide valuable learning outcomes for the student. The internship lasts for approximately 100 hours spanning over a two-to-three-month period. Initially the student gets acquainted with the organisation, staff, policies, and procedures. Though the various areas of counselling are covered in the classroom to make the interning experience as enriching as possible the student is required to do a self-study and thereby familiarise themselves with the area of counselling the agency is working in. For example, students interning in the Psychiatric OPD of a hospital and private psychiatric clinics read books on Abnormal Psychology and other material provided on mental health by the agency and the educational Institute.

Once the student understands the functioning of the organisation, she/he may start to shadow some of the staff. When the supervisor deems the intern ready, he/she observes the supervisor counselling clients using various theories and therapies taught in the classroom. Thus, theory

taught in the classroom comes alive in real life. Many students have claimed it was a magical moment for them. After each session there is a discussion regarding the case and the doubts of the students are cleared. The students observe and later conduct individual as well as group counselling sessions. Ongoing feedback by the supervisor is necessary so they can reach their highest potential.

The coordinator of the course is in constant touch with the agency supervisor, both to monitor the progress of the students till completion of internship. When both feel the student is ready, they are given their first case. The supervisor monitors the intern to ensure they complete the assigned tasks, evaluate the interns progress, and provides feedback to the course coordinator.

The student is constantly supported by the course coordinator also, who regularly holds case discussions with the student and offers the necessary guidance. An important part of experiential learning is reflection, which is done by the student. Internship not only includes handling of counselling cases but the whole gamut of working in the organisation. The intern helps in administrative work, publicity work and conduct presentations. The internship program at SIES ICE allows the student to develop a perspective which they could not have gained from mere reading and by mere study of theory in the classroom. It enhances their skill set which increases their employability value. Internship as a form of experiential learning provides an extremely valuable experience for the student. Internship gives the student perspective which they could not otherwise receive from classroom lectures. Internship gives them direction, helps them to identify their strengths, hone their existing skills and helps in financial aspects if it is a paid internship.

CONCLUSION

The National Educational Policy 2020 has highlighted the need to adopt experiential learning at all stages of education. Innovative pedagogical practices are essential to shift the student from traditional rote learning and memorization to learning by doing through activity and experience. The world is rapidly changing, and education must meet these changes. Education needs to focus on learning not limited to traditional knowledge collection and dissemination but one which is experimental and experiential.

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