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Comprehensive curriculum planning to improve student learning in experiential learning placements

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Universities are increasingly required to complement a focus on student acquisition of specialist knowledge and practical skills, with ensuring that students begin to develop the values, dispositions and identity of their professions. Experiential learning provides opportunities to integrate university-based theoretical and practice elements with real world experiences involving practicing professionals and consumers. Through these opportunities, classroom-based knowledge becomes relevant. Students begin to build their sense of professional identity and reinforce their understanding of the importance of lifelong learning. They can also develop some understanding of their possible role in their profession and as a citizen.

While many valuable experiences within experiential learning are unplanned and 'just happen', explicitly defined outcomes and comprehensive planning and scaffolding which link learning and assessment tasks are also essential.

Research funded through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly Carrick) in 2007 regarding pharmacy experiential placements has highlighted the valuing of experiential learning by students, practitioners, professional bodies and academics. However, further integration of university learning within the workplace context through systematic planning and preparation in pre-placement, during placement, and post placement phases will enhance student learning.

This paper is relevant to many health and other professions. It presents a model highlighting curriculum processes for lifelong learning and professional identity building and involving planned approaches to reflection and action planning for future skill building.

Keywords: Experiential, curriculum planning, health

University students, in their preparatory studies for the professions, undertake several years of classroom-based instruction and learning activities, including learning about ethics and building practical skills. However, health sciences programs are often structured with foundational courses such as physiology and chemistry in the early years in which there is little meaningful connection to the profession or workplace. Experiential placements usually occur within the later years of their programs. Yet experiential placements are extremely important. In these contexts, students begin to apply the skills they learn in the classroom to actual situations, and they learn to challenge the rule-oriented theoretical models and build their understanding of the nuances of individual client contexts. Of key importance is that, within the workplace, they begin to develop their professional identity, to apply their values

and ethical frameworks and to take some responsibility for their impact on others (Orrell, 2004; Waters, 2001; Flinders University, 2003). While applying their skills with varying degrees of confidence, students on placements also need to acknowledge their limitations and identify areas for future learning.

Many placements provide high quality experiences, but there is considerable variation dependent on the supervisor skills and interest, facilities and range of available learning opportunities (Owen & Stupans, 2007). To ensure that experiential placements provide consistently high quality experiences, there needs to be integration and comprehensive curriculum planning of the university classroom-based instruction and placement site learning. Kolb (1984) highlights that while much learning within experiential placement situations is unintended and will just happen, Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' conceptual framework emphasises that learning can be accelerated through scaffolding of activities and structuring learning into manageable 'chunks'. This may involve peers, teachers, books, laboratories, role plays, websites and sharing experiences within technological communities of practice. Experiential placements may also be enhanced through linking more closely with classroom-based work, thus scaffolding experiential learning activities and vice versa – experiential activities helping to scaffold classroom learning. In this way, one can use Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model of concrete experience, review and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and experimentation with new concepts, supplemented by the planning aspect as highlighted by Vygotsky (1978) and others (Littlefield et al., 2004; Gibbs, 1988).

Kolb's (1984) focus on reflection is similarly emphasized as an important aspect of learning by other researchers (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Moon, 1999; Cowan, 1998; King, 2002). Reflection is about *"those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation"* (Boud et al., 1985). This is very important in terms of lifelong learning skills, ethics and professionalism, frequently specified university graduate attributes and entry level competencies for a range of professions (Griffith University, 2007; McAllister, 2006) (*Competency Standards for Pharmacists in Australia*, 2003; Owen & Stupans, 2007). For example, in the pharmacy profession, a competency that must be developed prior to registration (following university graduation and after twelve months of preregistration experience and other education and training is: "Practice pharmacy in a professional and ethical manner" including a particular unit of "pursue life-long professional learning and contribute to the development of others" (*Competency Standards for Pharmacists in Australia*, 2003).

With the current ever-changing workforce context and the importance of flexibility and constantly considering new directions while updating skills, development of high quality reflection skills is an essential aspect of university studies. Reflection is used throughout professional careers to continuously identify strengths and weaknesses. Reflection-in-action (during events) and reflection-on-action (after events) are important aspects within the process (Schon, 1983). While reflection-in-action may tend to be about recall and description of events (Anderson et al., 2001), deeper reflection involves application to action for the future. Analysis and considering alternative ideas, synthesis and linking to a broader context, also including evaluating and creating of new ideas occurs, with consideration of emotional responses and values changing personal behaviours and action in the future (Anderson et al., 2001; Boud et al., 1985). Therefore, critical reflection moves beyond reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and includes reflection-for-action within a broader context.

Planning provides a structure within experiential placements, such that knowledge gained in the classroom is applied in the experiential setting, with the university role being one of supporting preceptors i.e. workplace supervisors. Planning also provides students with guidance prior to the placement, through a framework for reflection and action planning to identify areas for improvement within a lifelong learning continuum. During the placement, preceptors can ask interrogative questions and provide feedback. This challenges the student to go beyond surface learning, recall and descriptive reflection and to begin to engage in analysis, and to consider alternative courses of action as described in double-loop learning (Greenwood, 1998). Debriefing at the university within post-placement phases can provide further support for deeper reflection and action planning and also provide a clear link to lifelong learning.

However, deep reflection and action planning related to developing a professional identity within the workplace and lifelong learning context needs an integrated curriculum approach, with scaffolding within the university and built on within the workplace context in experiential placements. Clear outcomes related to competencies and graduate attributes, a range of scaffolded learning activities, relevant assessment tasks with explicit criteria are involved at the university at the pre-placement, during placement and in post-placement phases.

A survey of literature over the past 20 years indicates that while Kolb (1984) and Vygotsky (1978) have highlighted experiential learning processes, the challenge of application and integration of curriculum planning between university classroom learning and experiential placement situations and at the pre-placement, during placement and post placement levels has not been explored for allied health professions such as pharmacy. This paper presents Australia-wide research regarding pharmacy experiential placements, which was funded in 2007 through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). The research outcomes highlight the importance of comprehensive curriculum planning especially in regard to professional identity formation and lifelong learning through scaffolded approaches to reflection and action planning.

Methodology

The focus of the research was to find out what was actually happening in placements around Australia and to develop a series of recommendations for further work with the intent of improving experiential learning in Pharmacy programs. Preliminary forums, literature review, contact with other professions, interviews with thirteen Australian university pharmacy schools for program mapping, and analysis of experiential placement handbooks were the research methods used. Thirty-six focus groups were involved and a total of over 250 participants. Focus groups were conducted in each state and territory for specific groups including students, registration/professional organization representatives, academics and preceptors. Most focus groups involved 3–10 people attending voluntarily or as a representative of a particular organization.

A discussion paper, presented in a number of versions (for university academics, preceptors and professional organisations), was forwarded about three weeks prior to the consultation meetings. The discussion paper provided an overview of the fundamental principles of experiential learning. The version of the discussion paper forwarded to university academics sought detail such as experiential placement scheduling arrangements. University academics

were also asked to provide access to their own university's placement handbooks or manuals, which generally provide detailed advice to students regarding the tasks or activities to be carried out whilst the student is undertaking the placement. If access was provided, permission to refer to the content of the handbooks (de-identified in all but the case of one university) was then confirmed in writing. For other stakeholder groups, such as professional organisation representatives and preceptors, the discussion paper was focused to seek consultation participant views on strengths, quality indicators and relevant issues encountered in experiential placements.

Focus group discussions and interviews were documented, and key themes were analysed through manual processes. These processes included scanning and sorting notes; organising and using coding categories; and labelling and segmenting, with systematic data collection and analysis highlighting key themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). University placement handbooks (both student version and preceptor version if available) were analysed and comparative tables prepared.

Results

Analysis of experiential placement handbooks and findings from focus groups and interviews indicated varying degrees of realisation in programs across Australia of comprehensive planning processes and integration of university classroom and placement experiences, particularly in relation to lifelong learning and professional identity building.

Consultation findings

Some aspects raised in the consultations in regard to professionalism, ethics and lifelong learning focused on reflection and action planning, with reflection particularly valued in placements as indicated:

"You learn lots in reflection, and you identify issues that you need to work on."

(Student)

"As a profession, pharmacists haven't been good at the reflection processes."

(Preceptor)

However there were varying comments about the need to build student skills and provide them with a structure for written responses, with these aspects indicated in the following comments:

"I like basic structure... but then reflection used to show interesting things."

(Student)

"We found we needed to give them quite specific guidelines." (university)

In terms of structuring learning activities in the pre-placement phase to support students and preceptors, many students indicated that little structure and preparation was provided for reflection activities. Sometimes these exercises had essentially become daily logs, descriptions of events with limited usefulness that involved considerable amounts of time:

"I didn't understand what to write in there... (I) needed a bit more instruction in what to write." (Student)

"A lot of time potentially wasted because you had to do it everyday." (Student)

During the placement, while many students were very positive about their preceptors' roles and the university preparations involved, some indicated that little specific feedback had been provided about areas for improvement. In terms of lifelong learning and students learning to develop their own objectives, there were significant numbers of students who indicated that they had little guidance from the university or from preceptors:

"The pharmacist says make up your own objectives – pharmacists need more ideas about what to do with students."

Mapping of experiential placement handbooks

The context of stakeholder comments was very interesting within the mapping and handbook analysis process. A significant aspect of handbooks was about reflection on learning activities occurring within the experiential placements. Six out of eight university final year handbooks examined included reflection exercises, which were variously called reflection journals, daily journals and daily reflection logs. There were a variety of types of tasks and degrees of structure provided for reflective writing although scaffolding processes were generally not evident from examining the handbooks. Two examples from the handbooks are displayed below as examples which guided students explicitly through the task.

Specific details of a four-part structure, which was identified as providing staged questions for reflection – as outlined in one university handbook – are described in Example 1 as follows:

Example 1: structured questions for reflection

Situation: What actually happened? This can include people, environment, words, events, activities, images, other relevant.

Affect: What did you feel about situation – intuition/gut reaction? Were you surprised, uncomfortable, confused, intrigued, disturbed, engaged, inspired?

Interpretation: What did you learn? Outline own conclusions from experience, reflect on how this relates to what learnt in the course.

Decision/follow up: What will you do as a result e.g. further reading, observation, what would you do differently next time?

Several universities required students in their latter year placements to develop action plans in regard to their strengths and areas for improvement. One of the examples which provided a detailed structure in relation to continuing professional development and lifelong learning within the context of the competency standards of the profession and professional practice standards is shown in an abbreviated version in Example 2 as follows:

Example 2: Lifelong learning – continuing professional development (CPD)

CPD is the process by which a profession person maintains safety, quality and relevance of professional services throughout his or her working life. CPD is professionally focused and follows lifelong learning principles.

In this exercise, you will be asked to undertake Stages 1 and 2 in regard to continuing profession development and a four stage process involving reflection

on current practice, formulation of a plan, implementation and evaluation. In real life practice, you would complete all four stages.

Stage 1: Reflect on your current practice

At this stage of your professional development, it is acknowledged that you do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and professional experience of a pharmacist. However, that does not prevent you from considering how you can improve your ability as a future practising pharmacist.

Your preceptor has been asked to outline your strengths and weaknesses, taking into account that you are a final year student. You will use this feedback, together with your own reflections over the period of the placement to develop your plan. These assessments are to be entered into the table. [Table 1]

Stage 2: Formulating your CPD Plan

Having identified your areas of improvement, the planning begins. You need to identify your learning goals and actions that will achieve those goals. These actions must closely relate to the issue that needs addressing, must be specific in describing the action and must have a timeframe of a starting and finish date. Refer to the ENRICH (note ENRICH is a state specific registration body CPD plan) program for guidance. Use the table to write your plan. [Table 2]

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses

Preceptor assessment: strengths areas needing improvement	
Student reflection: strengths areas needing improvement	

Table 2: The CPD plan

Stage 1: What areas have you identified for professional development?	Stage 2: What action will you take to meet your professional development needs?

This exercise will contribute 10% of your workbook marks. You will be expected to show original thought, critical reflective analysis, a practical approach to the plan, clarity of the plan and use appropriate English expression.

The pharmacy research involving stakeholder focus group consultations and university handbook analysis in relation to building student professional identity through experiential placements indicated varying degrees of success in meeting the challenge of integrating and building on university skills and knowledge within the workplace environment.

Discussion

Across all professions, while there are some technically-oriented practical skills and knowledge that can be supported solely in the university context, it is in the actual workplace where thinking like a professional, being confronted with significant ethical dilemmas, and really identifying the areas for further development starts to happen. Consultations carried out in the course of the project indicated that some supervising practitioners are able to challenge students to engage in deep reflection, and to provide explicit feedback during the placements as various learning opportunities arise. However, other supervisors do not have this level of confidence in their teaching and support (Owen & Stupans, in press). Our findings indicate that through integrated university and placement curriculum planning, students can be better prepared with the necessary background knowledge and skills from their university studies so that they undertake learning and assessment tasks effectively within the placement situation. Handbook example models of scaffolded reflection frameworks and future skills planning are outlined in this paper. They provide a clear framework for activities, and assessment criteria to provide clarity for students and supervisors regarding goal setting during the placement.

However, there is no uniform evidence of such frameworks being provided in experiential placement handbooks to students. So many are left without a sense of clear outcomes, suggested learning activities, or assessment and associated criteria. An integrated approach to building professional identity within experiential placements in terms of reflection and future skill-building is needed regarding pre-placement, during placement and post-placement phases, as indicated in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the five aspects of student self directed goal setting and reflection are indicated. This includes setting professional goals, evaluating strengths and weaknesses, planning the learning agenda and active change through experimentation and practice. Pre-placement, during placement and post-placement phases and reflection-in-action, on action and for action are indicated. The fifth aspect provides the context of self-directed goal setting and reflection occurring within supportive networks.

Conclusion

This paper explores the application and integration of curriculum planning between university classroom learning and experiential placement situations at the pre-placement, during placement and post placement stages in Australian pharmacy programs. The model presented in Figure 1 potentially has wide application across other professional programs. Of significance in this model is the linking between the experiential learning cycle with reflection and future skill building. The development of learning activities by university staff to support students in their experiential placements and, although not referred to in this paper, in all learning activities, is obviously critical to student learning. Such development also provides guidance for preceptor activity.

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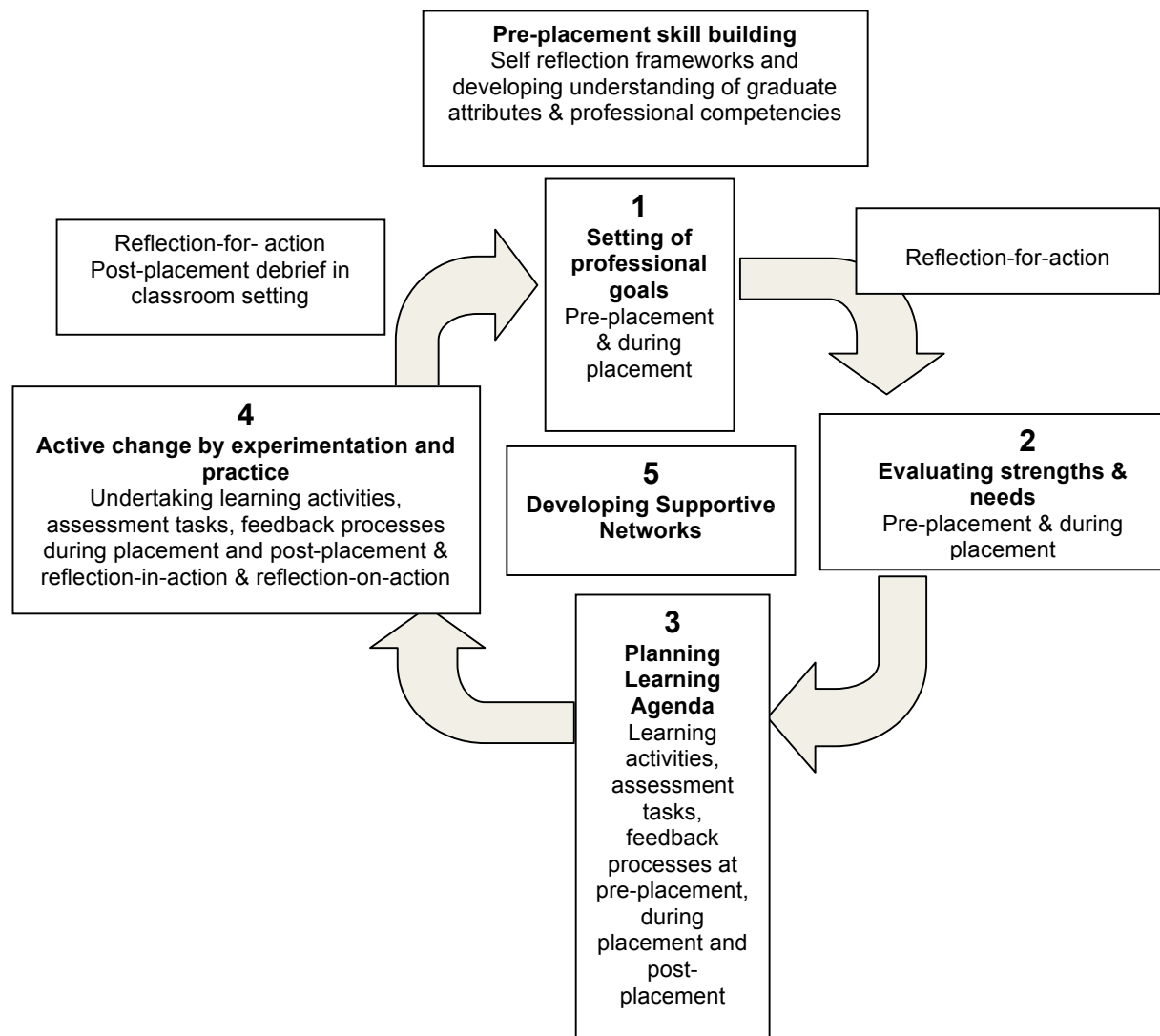


Figure 1: Reflecting and Goal Setting within Experiential Placements
(Adapted from Boyatzis, 1982; Boud, 2001; Moon, 1999; Owen & Stupans, 2007)

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