

Student Experiences of University-Based Cooperative Education: Do They Eat in the Lunchroom?

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Abstract

Cooperative education experiences are integral to many university programs in sport and recreation. At Auckland University of Technology (AUT) there are numerous opportunities for students to undertake their placements 'on-campus' within the Division of Sport and Recreation. Sociocultural views of learning suggest that students learn through participation in the activities of the workplace and social interaction with work 'colleagues'. The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of students undertaking their placement with the academic department within which they were enrolled. Focus group interviews with students and academic staff were used to explore the impact of the staff/student relationship and social interaction on student learning. The findings suggest that effective learning requires supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues. The 'on-campus' students felt that more social interaction would have made them feel part of the team and generate a sense of belonging. In contrast, socialization, during work or out of hours, allowed the 'off-campus' students to learn more about the workplace culture. Cooperative education aims to help students understand the real world context. If the career direction for students is further education and research, then a placement on-campus at AUT within the Sports Performance Centre or within the Research Institute is appropriate and begins the process of enculturation into this community of practice.

Introduction

Industry placements or cooperative education experiences are integral to many tertiary programmes in a wide range of discipline areas. This strategy of applied learning has been practised for almost a century (Sovilla & Varity, 2004). Students are placed into real world contexts where they may have the opportunities to take on responsibilities, develop relationships with colleagues and supervisors and to work as a member of the team (Howard & England-Kennedy, 2001). The benefits of these experiences for student learning have been well documented. Research has highlighted academic benefits such as applying theory into practice (Van Gyn et al., 1997) and improving motivation to learn (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2000; Weisz, 2000). Students also gain personal benefits such as enhanced self confidence and increased initiative (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Parks, 2003; Weisz, 2000). Cooperative education programs have been shown to help develop positive work values, attitudes and beliefs, (Hayward & Horvath, 2000) and to build relationships (Fleming & Eames, 2004). The socio-cultural views of learning suggest that, "learning can be seen as a social process within a culturally determined community of practice" (Eames & Cates, 2004, p. 43). Students therefore may learn not only through participation in the activities of the workplace but also through social interaction.

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of students undertaking their cooperative education placement with the academic department at AUT within which they were enrolled. The experiences of students undertaking their cooperative placement within the university were compared with students placed with external organizations. The impact of the staff-student relationship and social interaction on student learning was explored. The study also examined potential ethical issues from the student and staff perspective.

Context of the Study

Most cooperative education students gain work experience with organizations external to the university or tertiary institution in which they are studying. However, at Auckland University

of Technology (AUT) there are opportunities for student placement within the Division of Sport and Recreation where students are undertaking their Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) degrees. Due to the nature of the staff-student relationship opportunities for social interaction may be limited when students undertake their experience within their own university environment.

The BSR degree is a three-year program designed to prepare students for careers in the areas of sports science, sports management, coaching, physical activity, physical education or outdoor recreation. During their final year the BSR students complete 600 hours of placement experience, where work and learning are integrated through the development of partnerships between the university, the student and a sport or recreation organization.

Cooperative education papers (Cooperative 1 and Cooperative 2) are structured such that the student spends the equivalent of two days per week during the two semesters of the academic year within one organization. Industry placements include national or regional sports organizations, community recreation and fitness centers, outdoor recreation operators, schools (physical education departments or sports departments), and regional sports trusts. Placements within AUT include the Sports Performance Centre (SPC, a sports science consultancy service), the Research Institute, located within the Division, and assisting the Sport and Recreation Coordinator to provide on-campus sport and recreation services. The students are supported in their learning experience by an industry supervisor, and an academic supervisor from the university.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used for the study. Four focus groups were used to collect the data. Focus groups were considered the best alternative because, (a) the researchers could interact directly with respondents, and (b) respondents could react to and elaborate upon the responses of other group members.

The first two focus groups were conducted with Bachelor of Sport and Recreation students who had just successfully completed their cooperative education requirements. One focus group (N=8) consisted of 'on-campus' students who had undertaken their placement within the Division of Sport and Recreation. A second focus group (N=7) was conducted with 'off-campus' students. These students had completed their placement with an external organization. Focus groups with both student types explored the following: the learning experience during the placement, the relationship with industry supervisors and other staff of the organization including the extent of social interaction with staff, the students' views on employment prospects, and any other emergent issues and concerns.

A second set of focus groups was conducted with staff from the Division of Sport and Recreation. One focus group was conducted with academic staff involved with cooperative education students as industry supervisors. As industry supervisors, the staff were responsible for directly facilitating and managing the workplace experience for the student. A further focus group was conducted with other academic and administrative staff from the division. The focus groups with the staff explored the following: the role of students within the Division, the relationships with students as 'colleagues', and issues and concerns created by students being located within the Division.

Focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were content analyzed to determine emergent themes. Two researchers were involved in coding the focus group data. 'Check coding', a technique whereby the same data is coded independently by two researchers and then compared for consistency was utilised to enhance reliability. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the AUT Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Research Findings

Cooperative education aims to provide opportunities for students to learn in the context of the environment in which their skills and knowledge will be used (Eakins, 2000). Students in traditional cooperative placements are required to develop relationships with colleagues and supervisors, take on responsibilities and work as members of teams. The findings will be discussed using the following

themes: the on-campus learning experience, socialization within the workplace, workplace interpersonal relationships, and career clarification and employment.

The On-campus Learning Experience

Learning emerges from and builds on the experience. The focus groups provided an insight into the difference in the experiences, from the student perspective, between the on-campus and students undertaking a 'traditional' placement with an organization external to the University.

'On-campus' students spoke of the high expectations held by their industry supervisors regarding their performance. Carol felt that "there were really high expectations as to what my project was going to be ... it was expected to be to a standard that was publishable". Jane said, "they knew who we are and what we are capable of, that would hopefully work to our advantage".

These students also acknowledged that they were aware of these expectations before the commencement their placement. The staff felt that for students who are academically focussed, an on-campus cooperative could be a positive experience. This is confirmed by the comment from John (on-campus student), "you are here to learn and it is not so much a job role, it's an educational experience". Such comments reinforce the notion that the effectiveness of the cooperative education experience is optimised when there is congruence between the expectations held by the student and industry (Coll & Eames, 2000; Fleming & Ferkins, 2005).

The focus groups also revealed that the placement was not consistent for the on-campus students. The students based in the Sports Performance Centre spoke enthusiastically of their contact with the athletes, teams and coaches 'in the real world'. The students in the Research Institute felt that they had a more academic focus than many other students, and were often involved in pure 'academic research' rather than what could be termed 'industry projects'.

Jane commented: "The academic stuff was great – but as far as practical it just seemed like we weren't needed". Alison felt that, "I didn't really have one thing that they gave me responsibility to do. I never felt that I had one thing that was mine". However, she "didn't regret it because the amount of knowledge here is amazing and there are always people you can ask". For a quality learning experience students need challenging tasks for which they can take responsibility and see that they are contributing to the organisation. The work needs to seem legitimate and real and provide opportunity for growth, (Atchison & Gotlieb, 2004).

The off-campus students felt that the experience within an organization external to the University had provided an insight in to the 'real world'. However, when the 'off-campus' students were asked to comment on their perceptions of the on-campus placement, they had the following impressions:

They didn't get a shot at the real world unless their career was in research, then that would be excellent. (Ross)

You learn so much, who is out there, what is out there and what everyone does. When you talk to students in here they've just got no idea, they are still in the confines of AUT. (Louise)

They have access to awesome academics but have no exposure to the industry. They possibly come away with a less diverse range of skills, they weren't getting a wide range of roles. (Karen)

I don't know how stimulating it would be, that small community syndrome, you come to uni, you have a lecture with one person, then you see your industry supervisor, who is in the same place, and then your academic supervisor who is in the same place and you do your work activities, with people who are in the same place. (Christine)

Socialization Within the Workplace

Socialization provides opportunities for learning about the culture of the workplace. The interviews highlighted that the on-campus students felt that the opportunities for social interaction with their work colleagues were limited: “There was no staffroom. No ‘hi’ meet everyone” (Jane).

This is in contrast to most of the off-campus students who utilized the staffroom or had lunch with workplace colleagues. Karen however felt, “that at the start it was quite intimidating, but as time goes by it becomes more familiar and accepting”. This suggests that with increased socialization she was becoming part of the workplace community.

Informal gatherings can be used to help generate a sense of belonging. Mary, an on-campus student, commented that if they had been able to go to the lunchroom it would have made her feel “...more part of the team, [the academic staff] are human too and they do eat sandwiches”. Alison also didn’t really feel part of the organization, “we were just the co-op students”. However several on-campus students noted that, “many lecturers just ate their lunch in front of the computer anyway as they were so busy”. The emergent concern in this regard is that the informal social interaction is not occurring within the everyday workplace environment, and students may therefore be missing a significant opportunity to understand the workplace culture.

The amount and type of social interaction varied for off-campus students and depended on the organization. One student didn’t socialize at all, whereas all others interviewed described varying degrees of social contact, both during working hours, and out of hours. Karen commented that socialization enabled her to, “get to know people on a very personal level and it is of benefit because you get along, but you still apply yourself in a professional way”. Ross felt that “you get to see a whole new side of people, what they are like, and then when you are at work it gives you reasons for the way they work”.

Informal social gatherings helped students to learn more. Karen comments:

I guess you are a lot more relaxed and you learnt a lot more about the company because you were in the situation where you were just talking about it ... when you are in the social environment everyone is quite open.

The staff interviewed had mixed reactions regarding whether students should eat in the staff room, responses ranged from a definite, “no they shouldn’t”, (Carla), to “... co-op students should shadow everything you do” (Barry). Anna remarked “if the co-op students were in the lunchroom then you would need to modify what you say”. However in any work place situation there are times when conversations in the lunchroom need to be modified depending on who is present.

Concern was voiced by the academic staff regarding the ability of on-campus students to hear the “organizational chatter that goes on” (Barry). Students may hear conversations about other students and staff who they may be involved with in a different context. All staff felt that it was inappropriate for students to attend staff meetings despite their belief that it was important for external students to do so. This is clearly a limiting factor for integrating the cooperative students into the culture of the workplace in both formal and informal settings. In contrast off-campus students were often encouraged to attend such meetings.

Workplace Interpersonal Relationships

The most significant relationship that develops within the cooperative education placement experience is between the student and supervisor. Effectiveness of supervision was a key theme that emerged from all focus groups. Time and availability of the industry supervisor was an important focus with both negative and positive comments from the students. The support and guidance of supervisors was also highlighted as being important for student learning: “Mine was really good because she was always there but she always pushed me to use my initiative and try and solve problems for myself” (Ruth).

In the on-campus placement it is possible for the industry supervisor also to be the lecturer of the student in another paper. This created the following impressions from the on-campus students:

I felt obliged to have a very high standard of work when I was in his classes ... there was more pressure to perform in his classes because I was his co-op student. (John)

You have to work to a really high standard because he is watching what you are doing. (Jane)

An academic staff member raised the following related issue:

Potentially a power relationship can develop when a student is enrolled in a paper that is lead by an industry supervisor and their coop is not working well. Would a student be able to complain? Could they complain to their academic supervisor who was a colleague of the industry supervisor? Students often look at lecturers as people who have got power and from the student perspective they don't want to upset them. If their industry supervisor is lecturing them in a paper then they may feel intimidated. If a lecturer asks them to go above and beyond, then for a student to say no could be difficult. (Anna)

From the perspective of a staff member (Gill), the realities of the "real world context" are, "that there are potential conflicts and things don't always work". However, in the on-campus placement the student may not develop the skills necessary to address conflict because of the power imbalance. This whole learning experience then may be worked through differently when compared to the off-campus situation.

Examination of the themes related to relationships also highlights other ethical issues that were of concern. The on-campus students felt that off-campus students perceived that they were getting good marks because they were with the SPC and that they were getting inside information about exams and assessments. On-campus students recited comments from classmates such as:

You are one of them – that's why you are getting good marks. (John)

Don't worry about that- you'll be fine because Graham is marking it ... He's taken the lecture but he will give you another two hour lecture in his office. (Jane)

Issues of security in the photocopy and printing room were of concern to most staff. The staff were concerned that students would have access to student grades or assessment information. A system to ensure that the students were not put in the position where their integrity could be compromised was suggested.

Career Clarification and Employment Opportunities

Career pathways in sport are not well defined and therefore the placement provides a vital stepping-stone for career planning (Ferkins & Fleming, 2004). Some academic staff felt that on-campus students did not have the exposure to the wider industry, were not out there establishing networks, and that the University did not have opportunities to create employment for them on graduation. However, it was acknowledged, by both students and staff, that there are limited numbers of sport science organizations and placement opportunities for students other than the SPC at AUT. In support of her on-campus placement, Carol said:

This has been the best opportunity I could take up. I have learnt so much that there is no way anybody in industry would have been able to cover so many aspects. In terms of long term development I hope to come back and further my education, [maybe a] masters, but at the moment I think my employment options are limited from doing my co-op here, but it is just a stepping stone for the long term.

The on-campus students felt that the experience had prepared them to go on to further education. However in terms of employment prospects Jane commented:

I'd like to think that people would look at this and know this was a valuable experience and that my knowledge is good but I perhaps would have had more opportunities if I had been working in an external organization. I don't feel I got a lot of practical knowledge but I don't know whether that makes me totally unemployable.

Overall students who have undertaken cooperative education programs have been shown to have a competitive advantage in employment over non-co-op graduates (Hayward & Howarth, 2000; Ricks & Van Gyn, 1997). In addition students that have had structured work experience have developed, "desirable work values, attitudes and beliefs that make them valuable employees" (Hayward & Howarth, 2000, p. 6).

Conclusions

According to Atchison and Gotlieb (2004): "Learning is a social activity and cooperative education should provide a social context in which and from which students can learn" (p. 265). Effective student learning requires supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues. However in the on-campus cooperative education placement experience there are limiting factors because of the nature of the relationship between student and academics that can minimize the opportunities for socialization.

Cooperative education aims to help students understand aspects of the real world by exposure to authentic work that is related to their career aims (Coll & Eames, 2004). If the career direction for the student is further education, such as a masters degree, then a placement on-campus at AUT within the sports performance centre or within the research institute is appropriate, and may begin the process of enculturation into this particular community of practice.

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