# Assessment in Experiential Learning: The case of a public policy internship

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## Abstract

*Assessment is a significant issue for learning in the workplace. In some professions there are key indicators of success shared by workplace and academic supervisors alike. Beyond specific professions, however, assessment becomes more diffuse in workplaces that do not have explicit criteria established to judge performance of students in experiential learning. Assessing learning in these workplaces may be associated with methods that rely more upon student self appraisal and workplace supervisor reports. This paper reports on the approach used for assessment in a public policy internship program in one Australian University – Deakin University in Victoria.*

*It is argued that assessment, rather than being an add-on or a test of pre-ordained information, is central to the process of learning itself. This means that before students embark upon a policy internship they need to build their critical thinking abilities; i.e. a process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. Secondly they need to discuss how to negotiate their tasks in different workplaces and how to produce the criteria to be used in their evaluation.*

## Introduction

The term experiential learning can be summarised in the phrase, 'there is nothing more obvious than saying that people learn from experience' (Evans, 1994, p.2). Experiential learning in this sense is the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work that are not credentialed in a formal educational sense (Evans, 1994). Experiential learning is also used in formal educational settings as a means of promoting the growth and development of individuals or empowering individuals by developing self-confidence or greater access to, and participation in other forms of knowledge (Evans, 1994). However, it is most often used as a teaching technique for practical activities such as field work or work placements.

The approach taken in this paper focuses on the notion of experiential learning as a practical activity especially in what has been termed 'work-based learning' (Brown, *et al.*, 1997). Work-based learning can be defined as a 'special form of experiential learning in which the students can develop as part of their course, a range of social skills, academic and technical knowledge and expertise in the work place' (Brown, *et al.*, 1997, p. 192). Generally work placed learning requires some type of student placement in an organisation external to the formal learning institutions of schools and universities. Such placements involve some partial training arrangement within a minimum period of time. Generally work placements have specific outcomes attached to them for student skill development and at the completion of the placement students should have acquired new skills and a broader knowledge base.

An important issue for workplace learning, however, is assessment, especially in workplaces that do not have explicit professional criteria established to judge the performance of students. This paper reports on a process of assessment used for public policy internships in one Australian University. The argument advanced in this paper is that assessment, rather than being an add-on or a test of pre-ordained information, is central to the process of learning itself. This means that before students embark upon a policy internship they need to build their critical thinking abilities; that is a process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. Secondly they need to discuss how to negotiate their tasks in different workplaces and how to produce the criteria to be used in their evaluation.

## The place of assessment in workplace learning

### Assessment as part of learning

In specific occupations there are key indicators of assessment shared by workplace and academic supervisors since the workplace and the university course share common course accreditation criteria. For example entry into professions such as social work and nursing are regulated by professional bodies that have significant input into the structure and content of university courses. There is a shared set of conceptual and practical skills that have to be assessed by both academic and workplace supervisors. The types of assessment may vary but at the end of the course the students are meant to demonstrate competency in practising the professional skills in the workplace. To that end there is a

range of work specific skills that a student needs to acquire and these can be assessed in their practical and theoretical work.

Any assessment of students in formal education involves choices on the part of the teachers and learners as to the best way to achieve the learning outcomes. Teachers are also accountable to a range of other stakeholders including their employer, professional bodies, governments and the general public for demonstrating that they have fulfilled a number of pre-ordained objectives (Banta, *et al.*, 1996). In this respect teachers often have to use some forms of summative assessment to assure that students can demonstrate requisite levels of achievement for certification purposes (Falchikov, 2005). Wiliam and Black (1996) define summative assessment as 'those assessments given at the end of units, mid-term and at the end of a course, which are designed to judge the extent of students' learning of the material in a course, for the purpose of grading, certification, evaluation of progress or even for researching the effectiveness of a curriculum'. The aim of summative assessment is to test for shared meanings between the given (or teacher supplier) and the student (or learner receiver).

If, however, the emphasis is not upon merely matching prior skills to individual learners then a different approach is required. Wells (1999, p. 329) suggests that there is an increased understanding among educators that teaching involves much more than appropriately selecting and delivering a standardised curriculum and assessing the extent to which it has been correctly received. The emphasis is more upon the learner who is 'believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of the relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world' (Fenwick, 2000, p. 248). In this way learning is theorised as an activity of construction rather than merely reception and is driven by the learner's agency (Watkins, 2003). Shepherd (2000, p. 6) argues that 'in contrast to the past mechanistic theories of knowledge acquisition, we now understand that learning is an active process of mental construction and sense making'.

Learning in this approach becomes an active exploration at both practical and conceptual levels where learners are engaged in the construction of their own understanding (Haigh, 2001). In work-place learning, the learners construct their understandings through reflection and meta-cognition of their experience. These experience-based concepts, developed through and tied to the learner's experience, are abstracted from concrete situations and then generalised for use in a broader framework (Otero, 2006). The focus is on the way that the

learners make sense of their experiences and then imbue them with meaning (Watkins, 2003). Experiential learning then becomes more than merely a collection of experiences. There is a further process where the learning begins with the experience but is followed by reflection, discussion, analysis and evaluation of that experience (Wight, 1970). Experience in and of itself is not learning unless there is some reflection upon how the experience fits within a more general framework of an individual's knowledge (Kolb, 1984). As Wight (1970, p. 245) suggests '[t]he assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims, ambitions and expectations'.

If we view learning as an individual making sense, the focus turns from reception of given information towards learner-centred behaviours where the individual is able to construct their knowledge around the process of reflection. In so doing learners are then encouraged to plan and reflect before proceeding to new tasks in an explicit learning model of 'Do-Review-Learn-Apply' (Watkins, 2003). Reflection focuses on what learners perceive they have or have not learned, and then provides the opportunity to ask further questions about the relationships of their experience to other forms of information they receive (Stead, 2005). It is the emphasis on critical reflection that is central to experiential leaning where there is a recognition, a judgement and a justification of a person's ideas and actions (Brookfield, 1987).

Under these circumstances assessment becomes learning as individual sense-making where individual refection is a central part of the learning process (Watkins, 2003). Shepherd (2000, p. 10) argues that what is needed to make assessment more useful is to place it in the 'middle of the teaching and learning process instead of being postponed as only the end point of instruction'. What this achieves is a review of learning itself rather than purely a measurement of performance, where the focus is only upon testing the reproduction of given sets of information. For Schuwirth and van Vleuten (2004, p. 810), a reflective approach to learning recognizes that 'assessment is an issue of instructional or educational design rather than a mere measurement problem'.

Assessment can be employed as a tool of learning when it aims to review and build upon previous iterations of learning. The aim is to help students learn in a meaningful and productive manner that leads to greater motivation for further discovery learning in the future (Athanasou and Lamprianou, 2002). In this sense assessment can be an

important part of workplace learning as it helps students to understand their own experiences in the light of their previous studies. Accordingly, choosing appropriate assessment strategies is essential if the workplace experience is to be treated as deep learning.

*Assessment strategies for learning*

According to Gibbs (1987) there are a range of strategies that can be used for assessing workplace learning. First there are action plans where students are given general rules about undertaking particular tasks from which they derive action plans about applying these general principles to the workplace. Here assessment is based upon how the student applies the specific tasks judged against the general principles outlined by teacher. A second approach allows students to set objectives for themselves before embarking upon their placement. In this instance assessment is based upon how well the students achieve their own objectives. A third approach is to allow students to design their own set of problems to solve. This approach can be problematic in a workplace situation because students will have little understanding of the particular workplace before they enter it. However assessment under these circumstances will be based upon how well the students can indeed solve the problem that they have set. A fourth approach is to give students a checklist that they will use as a means of testing their ability to understand the processes that are occurring in the workplace. This approach has inbuilt assessment as there will be a list of outcomes that the student will be expected to observe. Essentially checklists are a form of student test that have minimum requirements. Checklists may have drawbacks since student experience will be circumscribed by the particular lists and other experiences may be excluded as inconsequential. A fifth approach is to discuss with students the criteria that they would use for the evaluation of their work placement. Here the aim is to get the student to make some judgements about what they think are the conceptual aspects of their practical experience.

Perhaps the most satisfactory approach is a combination of setting objectives, devising criteria and developing action plans that can be formulated in a formal learning contract between the student and the academic and workplace supervisors (Gibbs, 1987). The aim of this approach is to combine the ideas of the students with the experience of the workplace held by the workplace and academic supervisors. In this process the learner is able to establish the criteria for assessment in a multi-faceted manner. By setting objectives the students are able to test

whether they have achieved their own desired results. Moreover, by discussing and devising criteria for workplace experience in conjunction with workplace and academic supervisors, the students give both supervisors the means by which to assess their work. Lastly, action plans allow both the students and supervisors to evaluate the progress of the workplace experience.

An important element here is the use of the learning contract that helps the students to focus their attention in a number of ways (Earl, *et al.*, 2003). First, it gives them a central place in the outcomes of the placement by giving them responsibility for negotiating the agreement. Second, it helps them to understand the rationale for the placement and the types of actions that are intended to occur. Third, it can assist the students to plan the experience within the placement in a manner that best suits their skills and time. Fourth, it can be used by both the students and the supervisors to evaluate the progress of the placement. Fifth, it can outline how the output and the results will be presented. Finally, the learning contract reveals the criteria that will be used for assessment. This is especially important in the context of this paper because getting the students to elicit their own performance criteria involves them in a collaborative process; a vital ingredient for workplace assessment (Marshall and Mill, 1993). The process is also constructive and responsive to the needs of the students as they perceive them.

One strategy for assisting students in a systematic reflection on their experience is some form of log or diary that records their reactions to particular workplace events. The main reason for this is that it makes the students self-conscious of the development of their learning and encourages them to reflect on what is being learnt and how (Haigh, 2001). In this way students can distinguish the activities of learning from the content of their experience, since the record is not a mere story of the event but an analysis that reflects upon the implications of their experience in a broader theoretical framework. By maintaining a record there is also 'significant learning, expressed in precise statements, constituting claims to the possession of knowledge and skills' (Evans, 1994, p. 8). Students will be made aware of either the new knowledge that they are attaining or the evidence that they are compiling to substantiate or critique their understanding of the issues with which they are dealing. This can be used to synthesise their evidence for their own discussions about the issues or problems they wish to resolve.

### *Policy Internship at Deakin University*

The Policy Internship program at Deakin University, Australia, was established in 1998. The initial proposal was that third year students should have the option of working with and doing research for both public and private agencies. The plan was to place students in organisations for a period of one day per week for a semester in third year where they could demonstrate their skills to prospective employers. There were two major processes to consider in developing the internship program. First, there were the pedagogical issues of how to achieve the best learning outcomes for students, including assessment. These included preparation, implementation and reflection. Second, there were the network issues of ensuring that students could do their internships in places relevant to their own interests.

### *Preparation for the Internship*

Following discussion within the Politics and Policy Studies Stream at Deakin University, it was suggested that the internship would need to be supported by other subjects in the program if students were to be prepared for the complex tasks involved. The final proposal included a preliminary subject that focused on the development of competencies that students could choose for understanding analysing and evaluating policy processes in the workplace. A subject entitled 'Working with Government' (WWG) was developed for the semester prior to the work placement. This subject was designed to give students an understanding of the professional, industrial and social contexts in which an internship takes place. In this respect the unit poses questions about the political nature of all research and how students should be wary of the major pitfalls.

In the WWG subject students are involved in an iterative process of learning about different tools of assessment. While the subject outlines a number of approaches to critical evaluation of report writing it also gives the students a chance to apply an evaluation process to a special case study of their own choosing. The purpose of the assessment in the subject is to allow the students to develop an understanding of evaluation processes so that they can later apply them to their own work placement. The formal assessment for the unit is progressive with each assignment leading to a final critical essay on their chosen report. In this sense it is a formative assessment process in which students

apply an evaluation framework in a progressive way as the subject unfolds.

*Work placement*

Following completion of the preparatory unit students choose a work placement that suits their own interest. Once that placement is confirmed the students begin negotiations with their workplace supervisor about the tasks they will perform. In the negotiation process students determine:

- The aims and outcomes of the project

- The research methods to be used

- The duties of the student in the workplace

- The resources that the host organization will supply.

Once a contract has been agreed upon and signed by both the student and their workplace supervisor, the student is required to spend 100 hours spread over a thirteen week semester in the workplace. During that time they produce a substantial piece of research of around 7,500 words. The type of research will vary according to the requirements of the task and type of workplace in which they are located. However, the students are expected to set a deadline for their final report as part of the research contract. They are also advised to plan their work to cover a range of contingencies including the absence from work of their supervisor through sickness etc.

The development of the research contract begins the assessment process for the work placement. As argued by Gibbs (see above) the process is a combination of setting objectives, devising criteria and developing action plans that can be formulated in a formal learning contract between the academic and workplace supervisors, and the student (Gibbs, 1987). By establishing the criteria for assessment in a multi-faceted manner the students are involved in formative assessment because they suggest the actions that are intended to close the gap between desired and actual levels of performance (Wiliam and Black, 1996). Furthermore, by devising criteria in conjunction with workplace and academic supervisors, students give each supervisor both a guide to assist the students towards their established goals and a set of criteria for a final assessment of their placement. There are also spin off effects for the workplace. Engaging employers in research contracts helps them

develop their organization both as a productive and a learning environment (Evans, 1994).

The final research output goes to both the academic and the workplace supervisor thereby ensuring a balance of good academic writing and plain language skills. Students are encouraged to support their research with adequate citation of their sources and a comprehensive bibliography, however, they are also encouraged to show drafts of their work to their workplace and academic supervisors as they progress to ensure that they are fulfilling the terms of their contract.

*Reflections on work placement*

While students are involved in their research project they are also encouraged to keep a journal. They use the journal to develop a reflective essay that analyses their experiences in the light of their knowledge derived from previous studies of public policy. The final reflective essay is not merely a story of their time in the placement, nor is the journal simply a written diary but rather a collection of supporting material such as workplace newsletters and public documentation about the workplace.

Students are reminded that the reflective essay is an analysis of the implications of their experience within the broader framework of public policy. They are made aware that what they are doing is collecting evidence to substantiate or critique their theoretical understanding of the issues with which they are dealing (Cox and Gibbs, 1994). By doing so they are increasing their understanding of what they are learning and how it is integrally tied up with a theoretical understanding of public policy. They demonstrate this through the final reflective essay that synthesises their evidence into a sustained argument about the issues or problems that they encountered.

*Networking*

Finally, students are encouraged to take advantage of the networking opportunities offered to them in their placement. For many of them it offers a unique opportunity not only to experience the workplace but also to discover and make contact with people in the specific policy network. While this aspect of the unit is not formally assessed the students are constantly reminded of the importance of making as many connections as possible both within their workplace and in the broader

policy network. Networking is seen as an important element because some students may develop networks that lead to subsequent employment. All students must attend at least two seminars during their placement where issues of progression in their tasks and discussion of networking opportunities are raised.

Networking forms a part of student learning and self-assessment that can be shared with others in the internship program through discussion with other students in seminars. One specific way in which students are able to assess their impact on their chosen workplace is whether they receive some affirmation of their work though letters of support or, as in most in most instances, the chance to use workplace supervisors as job referees. Learning in this sense is assessed by the students through the exchange of goods or favours and not in the formal sense of achieving *a priori* goals.

## Conclusions

What the Policy Internship program at Deakin University shows is that it is possible to design a learning environment that is collaborative, constructive and responsive to the student's needs in the workplace. The challenge has been to design an assessment regime that suits the learning environment; one that allows the students to understand an evaluation framework and then to apply it to their own circumstances in the workplace. It is assumed that if students learn how to assess they can then apply the process to their own experience. Consequently preparation for learning is an important element of an assessment regime in workplace learning. What the Deakin program does is draw together the three major elements of preparation, collaboration and reflection into a holistic approach to assessment.

First, preparing students to develop assessment criteria for their own experiential learning requires that they have an initial experience of assessing the work of others. This also means that they be allowed to develop the critical skills required to apply an assessment regime. At Deakin, the WWG subject is designed to engage the students in an evaluation that allows them to produce a final task using a range of assessment approaches. By progressively evaluating different aspects of a public policy document they build the skills necessary for use in the ensuing workplace task.

Second, through the collaborative process of negotiating a research contract the students are able to set down the basic goals for their placement. These goals are a combination of setting objectives, devising criteria and developing action plans that can be formulated in a formal learning contract. Using the knowledge that the students developed in the Working with Government unit they are able more easily to focus on a range of approaches to their goal development. By formulating these goals in conjunction with workplace and academic supervisors the students not only develop a guide for progress in the project but also a set of criteria for an assessment of the placement.

Third, by engaging in a reflective approach to their experiences in the workplace students are able to focus on the broader policy framework of their placement. In this way they link their previous theoretical study of public policy to their specific case study. The emphasis is on critical reflection where there is a recognition, a judgement and a justification of the student's ideas and actions. The final reflective essay synthesises the evidence they develop in their journals or diaries into a sustained argument about the issues or problems they have encountered.

The Deakin Policy Internship can be seen as a model of experiential learning that allows students to conceptualise, synthesise and integrate an assessment process into their workplace experience. Through preparation, collaboration and reflection students and supervisors alike can build an assessment regime that has the imprimatur of all concerned. In this sense assessment becomes an integral part of their experiential learning.

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