Maintaining Connections: A Web-Enhanced Approach to Undergraduate Internship Supervision

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Abstract

Academic departments in kinesiology and physical education have historically struggled with the important issue of interdisciplinary collaboration in the areas of teaching, research, and service. The resultant lack of coherence can prove problematic as undergraduates attempt to complete the often difficult transition from student to professional during culminating field placements. Student interns frequently experience difficulty with a variety of challenges that can be partially attributed to the lack of interdisciplinary connection and collaboration across the undergraduate curriculum. In an attempt to improve both the academic rigor and level of student connectivity during the senior year internship experience, faculty members at a regional public university designed, implemented, and evaluated a web-enhanced approach for internship supervision.

Across college and university campuses, the senior year experience represents a critical developmental period as undergraduate students prepare to make the difficult transition from their familiar academic surroundings to the world of work (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1997). In addition to the usual academic and social pressures of college, seniors are suddenly confronted by a multitude of new possibilities and challenges related to their own continued personal and professional development. In the interest of supporting students during this potentially difficult time and establishing meaningful relationships with graduating seniors, universities should assist students in completing a successful transition to post-college life. In various academic programs, this assistance may come in the form of a senior seminar, career services workshops, academic advising, senior research project, and so forth.

For undergraduates studying kinesiology and physical education, transitional issues are commonly addressed through the completion of a semester-long internship or field placement. Experiential learning requirements provide students in a wide range of academic majors with the opportunity to apply the technical knowledge, skills, and abilities that have been developed in an authentic work environment. This type of practical experience is thought to be a critical factor for graduating seniors attempting to complete the transition from student to self-directed, lifelong learner. Internships provide students with a number of other significant advantages that are unlikely to occur in more traditional teaching-learning environments (e.g., career exploration, resume building, professional networking, practical application, knowledge integration). For the participating employer, a quality internship program represents an excellent opportunity: (a) to infuse new ideas and concepts directly from institutions of higher learning; (b) to recruit and observe new talent; (c) to train prospective employees at lower cost; and (d) to help improve the quality of undergraduate preparation in the field through the provision of regular mentoring and feedback regarding student intern performance (Grantham, Patton, York & Winick, 1998).

In some instances, student interns unfortunately gain considerable experience but do very little meaningful learning during the course of their internship placement. Several factors contribute to

this less than desirable educational outcome including inadequate academic preparation of the intern, lack of accountability of the intern, inadequate university supervision, and inappropriate internship site placement (Campbell & Kovar, 1994). It is also not uncommon for student interns to experience some measure of isolation and disconnection while engaged in off-campus field placements (Casey, Bloom & Moan, 1994; Mayer, 2002). In an attempt to improve both the academic rigor and level of connectivity during the internship experience, faculty members at a regional public university developed a web-enhanced approach for internship supervision. With the support of instructional technology personnel on campus, an online learning community was developed using Desire2Learn (D2L), a campus management system for web-based and web-enhanced instruction. The D2L operating platform affords course designers the use of a wide range of instructional and communication tools including e-mail, discussion boards, chat groups, electronic drop-boxes, online surveys/ quizzes, and electronic grade book. The purpose of this paper is to describe the design, implementation, and evaluation of a web-enhanced course for internship supervision within an undergraduate program.

Course Goal and Objectives

Experiential learning requirements within a curriculum are intended to enhance student self-directedness and help integrate conceptual theory with practical application (Washbourn, 1996). Furthermore, experiential learning should be approached from a highly interdisciplinary perspective where students are encouraged to make meaningful connections regarding content learned in previous academic courses (Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Cassidy, 1996). In keeping with the ambitious overarching purpose of experiential education, curriculum developers adopted the following learning objectives for the internship program described in this paper: (a) To facilitate the students' transition to post-college life; (b) to provide regular opportunities for self-reflection regarding one's professional readiness; and (c) to help integrate and bring successful closure to the undergraduate experience (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1997). Faculty members were particularly concerned with fully integrating the broader goals of the Baccalaureate experience (e.g., problem solving, self-reflection, communication, ethical behavior) with the more specific technical knowledge, skills, and abilities traditionally addressed within the internship placement. In addition to highlighting the important role of the internship as the capstone experience within the curriculum, these clearly delineated learning outcomes serve as the basis for a student assessment plan that requires them to describe and apply what they are learning (Ryan, 1999).

Course Learning Activities and Assessment

A large assortment of instructional strategies have been recommended for promoting and assessing student learning during experiential education placements (e.g., learning contracts, journals entries, portfolios, reading and writing assignments). While the strategies selected depend in large part on the specific instructional context, the involved activities should strongly encourage the engaged students to be both self-directed and self-reflective regarding their own learning (Ryan & Cassidy, 1996). In keeping with this basic philosophical premise, faculty members elected to use individual learning plans, self-reflective journals, electronic bulletin board discussions, and formal performance assessment as the basis for determining student progress toward the previously described course goal and learning objectives.

Individual Learning Plan

Toohey and Ryan (1996) described the following five models for assessing student learning during a practicum or internship placement: the attendance model, the work history model, the

broad abilities model, the specific competencies model, and the negotiated curriculum. While some academic programs employ characteristics from multiple models of assessment, an emphasis is often placed on one approach over the others. In the interest of accommodating the broadest range of student interests and internship placements, the course designers adopted the negotiated curriculum model in which specific learning outcomes and related responsibilities are negotiated by the university internship coordinator, site supervisor, and student intern. This process of negotiation is formalized in the individual learning plan which serves as an important basis for performance assessment. Individual learning plans are a form of behavioral contract in which the student determines a series of measurable learning outcomes that he or she intends to make significant progress toward prior to the completion of the internship. The student completes the individual learning plan using an electronic form and receives specific feedback from the internship coordinator via e-mail. Student progress toward the mutually agreed upon learning outcomes are documented in the form of an internship portfolio.

Self-Reflective Journal

One of the most significant instructional challenges associated with the implementation of an experientially-based course relates to the instructor's ability to facilitate meaningful student self-reflection. Accordingly, the use of self-reflective journals has received considerable support as an effective instructional strategy for encouraging students to engage more deeply in understanding the significance of their internship experience (Campbell & Kovar, 1994; Ryan & Cassidy, 1996; Young & Baker, 2004). In order to accomplish a higher level of cognitive engagement, "interns should learn the difference between an account of what they did at work on a given day and observation and analysis of their work that sharpens their skills in observing accurately and thinking critically" (Ryan & Cassidy, 1996, Other Options section, ¶ 1).

In the most recent iteration of the self-reflective journal, student interns are required to complete weekly electronic journal entries via the course website. In the interest of focusing student attention, the course instructor provides a behavioral-based question on experiences that are both work-related and aligned with the goals of a liberal education. In responding to behavioral-based questions, the students are required to reflect on and describe their past experiences during the internship and/or undergraduate experience. Many employers currently use this type of behavioral-based questioning during a job interview setting because past performance is perceived to be the best predictor of future performance.

Electronic Discussion Boards

In describing the challenges commonly associated with traditional practicum experiences in teacher education, Mayer (2002) reported that "preservice teachers are often isolated from any type of continuous communication with university lecturers and other preservice teachers, and construct their professional selves in relative isolation of the on-campus components of their programmes (Shlagel et al., 1996; Cohen, 1999)" (p. 181). In order to address this instructional concern within this program, a series of electronic discussion boards were added to the internship requirements (a) to enable regular contact and interaction among peers, (b) to keep students connected to the university community, and (c) to provide an avenue for the exchange of strategies or ideas between placement sites (Mayer, 2002).

From an administrative standpoint, the student interns are required to periodically participate in five electronic discussion groups available through the course website. The student interns are divided into small groups based on their specific start date and remain in those groups for the duration of the internship experience. In addition to the primary purpose of this assignment, the discussion board participation helps to increase student familiarity with technologies like listserv mailing lists and chat rooms that "can

assist the professional in connecting with individuals who have similar interests" (Graves, 2000, p. 55). The university internship coordinator provides the discussion topics but otherwise assumes an observational role in each group. The topics generally focus on the transitional issues or challenges that students typically encounter during internship placements.

Performance Assessments

As an outcome measure of student learning, both the internship supervisor and student intern are provided with opportunities to contribute written feedback regarding the internship experience. This type of 360 degree feedback is critical because it provides information regarding (a) student intern performance, (b) demonstrated areas of learning, (c) recommended curricular improvements, (d) potentially dangerous situations inherent to the internship placement, and (e) quality of supervision or mentorship afforded at the placement (Abar, 1994; Campbell & Kovar, 1994; Foster & Moorman, 2001). The internship supervisor completes a written mid-semester and final assessment using a form provided by the university internship coordinator that focuses on the employability skills common to virtually every placement (e.g., professionalism, self-confidence, ability to learn, written and verbal communication).

Course Evaluation

Following several experimental semesters, the web-enhanced internship course was delivered to 23 exercise science students completing semester-long internships at a variety of commercial, corporate, community, and clinical health fitness settings. During the final weeks of the semester, the students were invited to complete an electronic questionnaire specifically related to the online component of the internship experience. The questionnaire instructions stated that participation in this course evaluation was optional and would not impact course grading or standing in any manner. Furthermore, student responses would be anonymous and the primary purpose of data collection related to course revision and refinement. A total of 18 students decided to complete the questionnaire for a response rate of 78.26%. All of the respondents were seniors who reported some measure of experience with web-based course design. There were 13 students who completed 1-2 web-based courses prior to the start of the internship and 5 students who previously completed 3-5 web-based courses. In terms of current Total Grade Point Average (GPA), the respondents were distributed as follows: (a) 4 students reported a 3.50-4.00 GPA; (b) 10 students reported a 3.00-3.49 GPA; and (c) 4 students reported a 2.50 -2.99 GPA.

Closed-Ended Questions

The questionnaire included 20 closed-ended questions. The students were asked to evaluate the instructional design component of the course and their own learning using a five-point Likert scale with response categories ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Agree (3) to Strongly Agree (5). The results indicate that the majority of students valued the online component of the course and considered it to be a well-designed educational experience (see Table 1). With a few exceptions, students generally appeared to have little difficulty using the employed instructional technology and reported reasonably high levels of engagement. Perhaps more significantly, the students were in almost uniform agreement regarding their progress toward the primary course learning outcomes of integration, self-reflection, and transition (see Table 2).

Open-Ended Questions

The electronic questionnaire also included three open-ended questions in which the students were asked to describe the positives, limitations, and suggested improvements associated with the online component of the course.

Positive aspects of course design. A total of 16 students responded to the question pertaining to the positive characteristics of the course. The student responses related to the following three aspects of the teaching-learning environment: (a) opportunities for self-reflection; (b) communication with peers; and (c) logistical considerations. More specifically, two students commented that the online course requirements prompted them to think more reflectively about their internship experience. Several other students described the important role that the electronic discussion groups played in helping them to maintain closer contact with their peers. As expected the students appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas, information, and stories with their peers who were dealing with similar transitional challenges. A number of students pointed out that it was very helpful to have some insight into what their peers were thinking and experiencing during their own internship placements. The remaining student responses dealt with the logistical benefits associated with the use of web-based technology including asynchronous participation, self-paced progress, use of electronic drop-boxes or e-mails for assignment submission, ease of navigation through course website, and immediacy of feedback regarding course grading.

Limitations of course design. A total of 16 students also responded to the open-ended question pertaining to the course design limitations. These statements were arranged into the following general response categories: (a) restricted access to the required technology, (b) limited interaction with the course instructor, and (c) assignment specific concerns. Four students indicated that limited Internet access at the internship sites made it difficult to complete course assignments in a timely fashion. This is a bit surprising in that the employed internship contracts specify the need for student interns to have ready access to a computer work station. Potential solutions to this challenge include (a) the screening of prospective internship sites with respect to technological resources, (b) the leasing of university laptops to student interns as needed, and (c) the identification of alternative locations where the web-based course materials could be accessed prior to the start of the internship (e.g., public libraries, local colleges or universities).

Several students expressed concern with what they regarded as limited access to the course instructor. These student responses raised a number of issues including the relatively impersonal nature of the involved communication, the lack of immediate feedback or answers from the course instructor with respect to student questions, the difficulties associated with assessing student learning in an online course, and the inability to discuss problems directly with the course instructor. Several relatively minor modifications to the course design could help to alleviate the majority of these student concerns: (a) use the chat room or electronic pager available through the course management system to allow for real-time interaction; (b) maintain regular office hours for telephone calls from student interns; (c) incorporate occasional telephone conferences involving student interns at both local and remote locations; and (d) provide students with adequate training in the use of various web-based communication tools prior to the start of the internship in order to maximize their effectiveness.

Assignment specific feedback was limited. One student commented that it was difficult to respond to a number of the self-reflective journal entries given the nature of his or her internship responsibilities and that components of the web-enhanced course seem to be "busy work." Another student expressed concern with a lack of clarity regarding the individual learning plan and portfolio requirement. Both of these responses highlight the importance of a pre-internship orientation session that adequately addresses these types of potential misunderstandings prior to the student intern's departure from campus. The internship orientation could address such transitional topics as safety in a new city, ice breaker activities with classmates, overview of the basic principles of active learning and experiential education, and introduction to the

course website and related course requirements (Ryan & Cassidy, 1996).

Suggested improvements for course design. A total of 13 students responded to the open-ended question that asked for suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of the online component of this course. Eight of those respondents reiterated their approval of the employed **instructional** format and offered no specific suggestions for improvement. The remaining student comments were highly varied and related to several different issues including the need for timely student participation within discussion groups, increased clarity regarding the individual learning plan and internship portfolio, extended orientation to the web-based instructional environment, and greater student access to submitted materials or assignments. These suggestions may stem in part from some of the students' lack of familiarity with the employed instructional technology. It would probably be advantageous to supplement earlier courses in the major with a web-enhanced component in order to minimize any discomfort or confusion associated with the D2L teaching-learning environment. The students could then practice using discussion boards, accessing files/grades, and managing information electronically prior to the start of their internship.

Future Directions

While the previously described process of course design, implementation, and evaluation is limited in scope, the continued use of information and communication technologies offers great promise in establishing professional learning communities that enhance student engagement, connectedness, and self-reflectivity during culminating field placements and internships in a wide range of academic disciplines (Mayer, 2002). The proposed model for web-enhanced internship supervision is not without its limitations, however, and several modifications to course design have been considered in the areas of faculty participation, enhanced educational support for site supervisors, and an extended senior year experience.

Faculty Participation

While the use of electronic discussion groups enables students to maintain closer contact with peers, the dialogue could be further broadened and enriched by incorporating additional faculty members in the discussions. Mayer (2002), for example, detailed the effective use of a bulletin board environment with multiple discussion areas where students, university advisers, and content area experts interacted during a student teaching placement. This teaching-learning environment may be ideal for demonstrating collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving. This type of arrangement would also provide students with easy access to faculty members who could review, re-teach, or respond to discipline-specific questions in a variety of content areas including anatomy, physiology, exercise physiology, biomechanics, human development, exercise prescription, special populations and so forth. Internships represent a logical point in the curriculum to infuse interdisciplinary collaboration because they often represent the final opportunity to influence student knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Furthermore, the types of problems or situations students encounter during the experiential learning requirement generally cut across several disciplinary perspectives.

Educational Support for Site Supervisors

Another area of concern relates to the extent of communication between the university internship coordinator and site supervisor at the partnering organization or facility. Communication is often limited to intermittent telephone calls, occasional facility visits when logistically feasible, and a written internship agreement that serves as a "significant tool in framing the nature of the relationship, defining terms, stating conditions, and communicating the expectations of the parties relative to the internship experience" (Miller,

Anderson & Ayres, 2002, Introduction section, ¶3). This level of communication has proven adequate in situations where facilities have well-organized internship programs and clearly defined expectations for student interns. On a number of occasions, however, less experienced site supervisors have struggled providing student interns with adequate direction and mentorship throughout the placement. Ideally, available financial resources would permit on-campus training for all academic program affiliates. In this continuing education setting, university faculty could respond to any uncertainties related to philosophical orientation, curricular organization, student backgrounds, and internship course requirements. This type of regular interaction between scholars and professionals in the field would also prove extremely beneficial when making decisions in the areas of curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation.

Unfortunately, many academic departments lack the resources to deliver their own curriculum effectively let alone provide outreach services for internship site supervisors. Web-based instructional systems represent an attractive alternative to on-campus training though. It is conceivable, that faculty members could work in concert with instructional technology personnel to design a web-based tutorial for internship site supervisors. In addition to addressing the administrative concerns described in the previous paragraph, the web-based tutorial could be used to disseminate information about experiential learning theory, sample performance assessment tools, examples of special projects for student interns, and supplementary websites and/or resources. Furthermore, electronic discussion forums or chat rooms could be established to enable the internship site supervisors to network with each other. This opportunity for online interaction would theoretically enable the various site supervisors to exchange ideas and information regarding the internship process. A web-based educational module of this nature could be offered for academic credit or continuing education for one or more of the various professional organizations who maintain an interest in the quality of undergraduate preparation.

Extended Senior Year Experience

There is also merit in requiring students to complete internships during the summer or fall of the senior year so that students return to campus for the second phase of an extended capstone experience prior to graduation. This curricular restructuring would encourage students to reflect more thoroughly on what they learned about themselves and the profession during the preceding internship placement. Additionally, the senior seminar could address key transitional issues with special emphasis placed "upon integrating academic experiences into post-graduate plans of employment and life beyond college" (Walls, 2002, p. 118). A variety of transitional issues could be discussed in seminar format including graduate school options, job search and selection, negotiating a job offer, involvement in professional organizations, becoming an active alumnus, personal financial management, and so forth. From an active learning perspective, the students would engage in learning activities related to their continued professional growth including developing a cover letter, resume, self-marketing plan, employment portfolio, job interview and negotiation strategy, and continuing education goals (Walls, 2002).

The senior seminar also provides an ideal forum for synthesizing the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities learned across the undergraduate curriculum as students prepare to sit for various exit exams or national certifications. To this end, content area experts could be called upon as guest presenters to assist students in navigating the certification process. As with the proposed participation of content area experts in periodic online discussions during internships, the senior seminar affords academic programs an opportunity to facilitate interdisciplinary communication and collaboration at minimal administrative cost and effort. In an exercise science seminar, for

example, a round-table session involving exercise physiology, biomechanics, and human development specialists could field general questions and/or guide students through a complex case study regarding exercise prescription for a client with an assortment of special considerations. In athletic coaching education, a similar discussion group including a team physician, athletic trainer, physical therapist, strength coach, sport psychologist, and athletic coach could address their different roles, responsibilities, and unique concerns associated with the rehabilitation of an injured athlete. See Figure 1 for a sample conceptual model that illustrates the learning outcomes and activities associated with a proposed extended senior year experience within an undergraduate exercise science program.

Summary

In conclusion, an internship represents an important culminating educational experience for students preparing for a broad range of careers. Accordingly, faculty members should invest as much effort preparing the internship experience as they do more traditional lecture and lab courses. This paper was intended to provide an example of a web-enhanced protocol for internship supervision that could be implemented in part or in its entirety across a broad range of academic disciplines and programs. While it is highly unlikely that the instructional strategies presented here will meet the unique needs of every academic program, it is hoped that they represent a starting point for reconsidering the place of the internship within the curriculum and the potentially significant role that informational technology can play in facilitating a student's successful transition to post-college life.

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Author Note

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Table 1.

Questionnaire Response Frequency and Percentage for Items Related to the Course Instructional Design

Questionnaire item	n	Strongly disagree		Agree		Strongly agree
The instructor made creative use of technology in helping me learn.	18	2 11.11	0 0.00	5 27.78	8 44.44	3 16.67
The technological resources needed to complete assignments were available for me at my internship site.	18	0 0.00	3 16.67	5 27.78	3 16.67	7 38.89
Technical help was available when I needed it.	18	0 0.00	2 11.11	8 44.44	5 27.78	3 16.67
I found it easy to remain motivated to complete the course requirements.	18	2 11.11	4 22.22	6 33.33	3 16.67	3 16.67
I participated in this course at least as much as I would for other courses taught in the classroom	18	2 11.11	3 16.67	4 22.22	2 11.11	7 38.89
My contributions to the class were treated with respect.	18	2 11.11	1 5.56	3 16.67	2 11.11	10 55.56
I felt that I was part of a learning community.	18	1 5.56	3 16.67	4 22.22	5 27.78	5 27.78
The instructor's grading policies were fair and consistent.	18	2 11.11	0 0.00	3 16.67	3 16.67	10 55.56
I would recommend that other students in the major take this course.	18	2 11.11	0 0.00	4 22.22	3 16.67	9 50.00
I would take another on-line course in the future.	18	3 16.67	2 11.11	4 22.22	0 0.00	9 50.00

Table 2.

Questionnaire Response Frequency and Percentage for Items Related to Student Learning

Questionnaire item	n	Strongly disagree		Agree		Strongly agree
I understood the objectives of this course as explained by the course instructor in the syllabus and handouts	18	1 5.56	1 5.56	4 22.22	4 22.22	8 44.44
I was as successful in this course as I am in courses taught in the classroom	18	2 11.11	1 5.56	3 16.67	2 11.11	10 55.56
The technology interfered with my learning.	18	9 50.00	6 33.33	0 0.00	0 0.00	3 16.67
After taking this class, I am more comfortable using technology.	18	2 11.11	3 16.67	2 11.11	2 11.11	9 50.00
The preparation of an individual learning plan at the start of the internship enhanced my learning experience.	18	2 11.11	3 16.67	4 22.22	6 33.33	3 16.67
The self-reflective journal assignments helped me find meaning regarding my internship experience.	18	0 0.00	3 16.67	6 33.33	7 38.89	2 11.11
The opportunity to regularly interact with my classmates and instructor through the course website was important.	18	0 0.00	6 33.33	5 27.78	3 16.67	4 22.22
This course helped me to conceptually integrate what I have learned during my undergraduate education.	18	1 5.56	1 5.56	7 38.89	3 16.67	6 33.33
This course provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own learning and the meaning of my college experience.	18	2 11.11	1 5.56	5 27.78	4 22.22	6 33.33
This course contributed to my personal and professional readiness for transition to post-college life.	18	2 11.11	1 5.56	4 22.22	1 5.56	10 55.56

Figure 1. Conceptual model for an integrated senior year experience and associated learning activities.