

Clinical and Practicum Education in the Professions: The Student Voice *

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Undergraduate students in professional education programs typically rate their clinical or practicum experiences as the most important component of their entire pre-service preparation. This essay addresses the value of students' views regarding the effectiveness of practicum programs. We summarize the views of 546 post-practicum students from three professional disciplines (engineering, nursing, and teacher education), concerning what they considered to be the most positive and negative aspects of their respective practicum/clinical field-experiences.

Our data analysis revealed three positive themes across the disciplines: the supportive interrelationships that students experienced; their own professional achievements; and their personal contribution to the welfare of their clients/pupils. Three negative elements also emerged: individual personal/professional challenges; site-based interpersonal conflicts; and policy or procedural problems with the program. Implications are raised for practicum administrators regarding the contribution of the student voice to clinical program enhancement.

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Although the student voice is often downplayed by policy-makers and program administrators (Clift & Brady, 2005), we believed that post-practicum students could provide a valuable source of evidence concerning the effectiveness of practicum programs (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007b, in press). Moreover, Schrantz (1993) asserted that program administrators should respect not only students' personal observations about a program in which they are involved, but welcome their perspectives regarding the daily operation of the practicum.

Background to the Study

Prospective professional practitioners regularly report that the practicum/clinical experiences in their pre-service education were critical in preparing them for their first position in their respective professions (Carnegie, 2006; Goodlad, 1984). The importance of this practical component, together with a growing global shortage of professionals in a variety of fields, requires that professional education institutions evaluate the effectiveness of the practicum components of their programs (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; World Health Organization, 2006).

We concurred with Angelo (2004) who asserted that students are the only individuals who have direct, daily, and intimate involvement with all aspects of the teaching/learning situation. Our review of recent research on professional education (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2006, 2007a) has confirmed what earlier studies had found, and what students have consistently reported. This finding was that the practicum/clinical component is typically characterized by definite strengths (which logically should be maintained and promoted) and by chronic weaknesses (which should be ameliorated, but which appears to be a difficult goal to achieve).

Positive and Negative Features of the Practicum across Disciplines

Some of the most recent research regarding the ed-

ucation of professionals is being conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006) through its *Preparation for the Professions Program* for undergraduate education of clergy, engineers, lawyers, nurses, physicians, and teachers. With respect to the three disciplines addressed in the present essay, Silva and Sheppard (2001) identified innovative strategies in engineering undergraduate education – such as the expansion of hands-on learning curricula, student-centered learning, and cooperative education opportunities. In 2006, Sheppard further suggested that there needed to be a better connection between the academy and professionals in the field.

Regarding the nursing portion of Carnegie's Preparation for the Professions Program, Benner and Sutphen (2007) examined the integration of three apprenticeships in nursing pre-service education (e.g., strengthening novice nurses' intellectual capacities, improving skill-based clinical practice, and developing the ethical dimensions permeating professional responsibilities). The authors identified key characteristics of nursing teachers who have demonstrated excellence in helping their students to accomplish this integration process, such as: treating clinical students as collaborators in the nursing role, and engaging them in professional dialogue and exploration of their own thinking with respect to ethical issues related to actual cases.

The teacher-education practicum has also been consistently characterized by definite strengths and recurring weaknesses over the years. For instance, Lortie (1975), Neville, Sherman, and Cohen (2005) and Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston (2007) found that the quality of the teachers' pre-service education and their practicum experiences varied widely, and that many practicum students lacked skills in professional reflection and self-evaluation.

Methodology

In conducting our larger multi-disciplinary study on the future of the practicum/clinical component of professional pre-service education (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007b, in press), we found ourselves in

accord with Clift and Brady (2005), who maintained that the voice of prospective practitioners is seldom heard in educational reform research. We recognized that this student perspective *must* be considered by program administrators as they pursue innovative initiatives. In our view, to exclude students' ideas concerning the revision of practice-based experiences would amount to bypassing some critical information related to program enhancement.

As part of our SSHRC-sponsored study in 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, we administered a print survey (on-line or in a face-to-face, classroom setting) to post-practicum students from three professional faculties (engineering, nursing, and teacher education) at one Canadian university (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007c, in press). The students had recently completed their respective practicum or internship programs. The survey consisted of two questions: *What for you was the most positive aspect of your practicum or internship experience?* and *What for you was the most negative aspect of your practicum or internship experience?* The engineering and nursing students received an on-line version of the survey delivered through their respective internship/practicum offices, while the education students completed their surveys in post-practicum classroom settings. All ethical procedures required by the university were followed, and both the on-line and handwritten surveys assured student anonymity and confidentiality.

Sixty-three post-internship engineering students responded to the on-line survey and two follow-up e-mail reminders, for an overall return-rate of 52%. Thirty-three senior-year nursing students responded to the on-line survey and/or two email reminders, which yielded a total return-rate of 30%; and the return rate for the teacher education post-interns was 98% (n=450). We collated and categorized the students' written responses and identified emerging patterns and themes, using the constant comparison technique of analytic induction (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2005). During this analysis, we continuously examined and re-examined the survey data, noting distinctions for each discipline, observing similarities and differences within each discipline, and seeking regularities and/or common pat-

terns across disciplines (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005).

Positive and Negative Findings

Although the three disciplines had unique strengths and weaknesses, in this essay we highlight the preliminary findings that seemed common across the programs (a more detailed report of these results, together with illustrative student comments, is available elsewhere, Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2007a, 2007c). The most positive aspects identified by students reflected three key themes, one of which was students' satisfaction with being able to apply their academic theory in real-world settings. A second major benefit was the positive/supportive professional and personal inter-relationships that students enjoyed during their clinical experiences. A third important strength of the practicum that students reported was the personal growth they experienced in their professional competence and confidence.

Three key themes emerged regarding the negative facets of the practicum. The most prominent problem in all three disciplines was students' concern about not receiving adequate mentorship or supervision during clinical practice. A second negative aspect was related to students' own personal and professional challenges (e.g., experiencing time-management difficulties or financial problems). A third counterproductive feature that students identified was related to inappropriate or ineffective program policies/procedures/practices that they believed should be ameliorated by the university practicum organizers.

One sensible way to address these weaknesses would be to disseminate the findings of this and similar studies, so that interested practicum educators and administrators from several institutions could discuss these results and investigate innovative ways to ameliorate the deficiencies. Moreover, a logical venue for such interdisciplinary deliberations could be the annual conferences of such organizations as the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, as well as a variety of related publishing outlets that focus on cross-disciplinary collaboration and research related to pre-service professional preparation.

Implications

The research results described in this essay highlight the preliminary findings from our larger study on the future of the clinical/practicum phase of education for the professions (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, in press). One key implication for practicum-program leaders is that they need to prevent interpersonal difficulties between mentors and their protégés, so that communication barriers (real or perceived) do not hamper students' learning, and to adjust program policies/procedures so that inadequacies and inequities (real or perceived) are recognized and eliminated.

For example, university leaders could provide incentives to enhance the recruitment, reward, and retention of effective clinical supervisory-personnel. University collective-bargaining agreements might have to be modified in order to formally recognize faculty work in clinical/practicum situations; and graduate-school fee policies could be amended to provide free tuition and/or graduate credit for practicum supervisors who wish to pursue further education. Furthermore, practicum organizers could also provide supervisory personnel with formal training related to the mentoring/coaching process (Ralph, 2005). A third implication is that program administrators could make modest, incremental adjustments to their pre-service academic programs and coursework in order to provide learners with additional targeted clinical-experiences earlier in their professional training. Organizers would also have to ensure that these program-adjustments would incorporate principles of *deep* rather than *shallow learning* (Ramsden, 1992), *active learning* (Prince, 2004), and *experiential learning* (Kolb, 1984).

Fourth, program planners could collaborate with all stakeholder-organizations involved in the clinical/practicum program to help alleviate the financial stress reported by some nursing and teacher-education students. Possible solutions could be: (a) to provide practicum students with monthly stipends, honoraria, or bursaries to help defray their moving/travel/accommodation expenses typically associated with rural or remote practicum placements; (b) to provide practicum students with full or partial re-

muneration in exchange for the professional services they render to the clients/institutions they serve during the practicum, as was the case with Engineering internships; or (c) to remove, reduce, or subsidize the tuition fees that most students must pay for their field-based practicum.

In conclusion, we concur with Pearcey & Elliott (2004) who asserted: 'Student views are necessary...but more importantly these views need to be acted upon' (p. 387). We urge program leaders not to bypass students' observations and insights regarding practicum reform.

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