

## **Reflections on twenty years of practicum, partnership & practice**

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Twenty years ago the development of a sports management program at Massey University was then the only one in New Zealand. Professional rugby was still a couple of years away. Kit McConnell, Head of the 2011 RWC and Tournament Director for the IRB, was a Masters student back then. He indicated “the academic staff were doing something new – and special. For me, there was a good balance between having enough structure and learning about the elements of the industry and having freedom within the curriculum to explore what interested me” (cited in Massey University, 2011, p. 15). This paper provides an auto-ethnography related to the author’s extensive involvement and self-reflection on leading the development of work based experiential education sport management and coaching related practicum programs at Massey University. Themes and phases of program development are outlined that informed WIL understanding, particularly in the sport context. The research is interpretive in nature and philosophy and employs a collective case study methodology across different educational contexts. The implications are for reflective practice, pedagogy development graduate attributes. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2013 14(3), 127-134)

Keywords: Reflective practice, Pedagogy development; Graduate attributes

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### INTRODUCTION

Despite the best intentions of academics to enhance graduates’ employability within classroom settings, Bates (2008) and Cranmer (2006) indicated that the limitations consistently produce mixed outcomes. It has been argued that work-integrated curricula (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008) and applied learning experiences (Schwartzman & Bouas-Henry, 2009) positively affect graduates in the transitional stage into employment (Cranmer, 2006) and as on-going professional development (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Massey University offers applied learning programs in real world community and industry contexts across business, education, science, humanities, health and creative arts degrees in related colleges. The aim of these courses is to embed applied learning opportunities increasingly across the curriculum, maintaining qualification relevance and opportunities for research partnerships and staff professional development. This paper provides critical self-reflection to relive the author’s journey (Martin, 2008) into pedagogical aspects of applied experiential learning in sport management (Foster & Dollar, 2010). Specifically, it outlines the phases of development that influenced the sport management practicum course design over the past two decades (1992-2012). This paper also gives examples of how these applied experiential learning approaches have assisted graduate employability.

#### *The Reflective Practitioner*

Auto-ethnographies, or narratives of self, are highly personalized accounts for the purposes of developing sociological understanding (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Martin, 2008; Sparkes, 2000). The current research presented in this paper, which draws upon the experiences of the author, was interpretive in nature and philosophy (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and employed a collective case study methodology (Bassey, 2003; Stake, 2008). It allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest and to explore meaning from a number of angles and across different sport management education contexts (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative research process involved participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 2005) of double semester undergraduate, postgraduate and distance based practicum courses. My analysis highlights aspects of learning as I developed as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) involved in coordinating practicum

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programs. A cyclical process of personal reflection on action is central to the process of experiential learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Kolb, 1984; McNiff & Whitehead, 2001).

#### *Background and Context*

All Black coach, JJ Stewart had visited Ireland in the 1970s and was impressed with their rugby coaching program. When he became a member of the Massey University Council in the 1980s he lobbied for a similar initiative in New Zealand. At the same time the changes from amateur to professional sport were happening in New Zealand, so any formal University initiative aimed to support the development of professionalism. There was a need for a sport coaching program, but also one that would train individuals to manage the various sports organizations, which at the time was unique in the New Zealand tertiary sector.

At the beginning of 1992 the first six papers in sport management and coaching were offered with most of the initial coaching teaching material coming from the American Coaching Effectiveness Program (ACEP), which later expanded into the American Sport Education Program (ASEP). There was a major within the Bachelor of Business Studies in sport management and coaching as well as undergraduate and post graduate diplomas. A practicum component was an integral part of the program.

A conscious effort was made to achieve close relationships with various national sporting codes, as well as rugby. High performance coaching programs were developed in partnership between Massey University and these sport organisations. New Zealand based teaching material was also published (Collins, 2000; Collins & Jackson, 2007; Leberman, Trenberth & Collins, 2006, 2012; Trenberth & Collins, 1994, 1999). As rugby went professional in 1996, the jointly awarded New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) and Massey University Certificate in Rugby Coaching provided a unique professional qualification at the time. The certificate consisted of the highest level NZRU rugby coaching practicum integrated with more theory based coaching papers. The coaching practicum required a season's critical reflection of training sessions, player and game analysis. In 1999 the Sport & Rugby Institute was built on the Palmerston North campus to provide a purpose built educational facility for rugby and other sporting codes. Team building programs were also developed in conjunction with the NZRU and Outward Bound (Chu, Leberman & Martin, 1998).

Within ten years the program had attracted in excess of 200 equivalent full time students, of whom more than 20% were postgraduate, and also had the first PhD enrolments. As sport related academic programs developed across the University, a management and coaching major in the Bachelor of Sport & Exercise was also added and a School of Sport and Exercise has subsequently been formed.

My interest in the development of applied experiential learning strategies in sport management is through a coordination and facilitation role of the practicum courses since 1994. In particular my research focus on communities of practice ranges from sport management; coaching and outdoor education to work integrated learning contexts.

#### METHOD

##### *Ethnographic Case Study*

This paper is based on an ethnographic case study involving participant observation (Sturman, 1997). My involvement as coordinator of a number of practicum courses means that I am an integral part of the research process and cannot easily be removed from it. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003) indicate that participant observation is central to every case study, with the researcher being part of the group or the activities that are observed (Yin, 2009). It also allows a holistic interpretation of the phenomena being studied (Cohen et al., 2003).

##### *Credibility, Transferability and Ethical Considerations*

The use of participant observation in this sport management case study allows me, as the researcher, to experience, observe, and be part of the applied experiential learning process. The descriptive account of the methods of course design and activities provide a greater insight and understanding of the sport

management practicum experience. My prolonged involvement aimed to increase the study's credibility. Being a participant observer of a number of practicum courses in a variety of contexts importantly gave me an increasingly greater perspective of the phenomena and variables involved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involvement also acknowledges my potential biases, but it should be noted that I have no vested [financial or otherwise] interest in positively reporting on the programs. Ethical considerations of interpretive/ethnographic research, such as issues of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, are situational and contextual (Mauther, Birch, Jessop & Miller, 2002), "sharpens the senses, and ultimately refines and enhances the quality of the endeavour" (Fetterman, 1989, p.146). The nature of interpretive and case study research seeks to form a unique interpretation of events rather than produce generalizations. Transferability, the interpretive equivalent to generalisability, is enhanced here by the provision of a 'thick' description (Merriam, 1998). As Tolich (2010) points out writing about self in isolation is a virtually impossible task. The description and themes presented below reflect the phases of course development and the tripartite partnership between the student, the workplace supervisor and me as the academic supervisor.

## RESULTS/ DISCUSSION

### *Whole Course Design*

Feedback from sport management graduates in the Bachelor of Business Studies between 1994 and 1999 indicated the value of the practicum, with the whole course of study being important to respondents, rather than the applied part as a stand-alone component.

It's like part of a coherent course of study and I think particularly, the introduction of the sport management planning paper [2nd year] has assisted with that because now you're not trying to cram everything into one paper in the third year, so it actually preps them and gives them some understanding of what they actually need to do ...how to manage a project, so they're going to get skills around financial planning, budgeting, running a project, risk management, writing press releases (academic supervisor, as cited in Martin et al., 2010).

However, it was the overall business context within which the major is situated (the six sport management major papers are 25% of the business degree), which proved most helpful to respondents in their employment positions (Martin & Leberman, 2005). The course assists students in understanding various aspects of business philosophy or theory (e.g. finance, marketing, economics), but also provides links to practical or real life sport contexts and situations.

Although the practicum was the most rewarding aspect of my study I felt that all sports papers were relevant as together they provide a comprehensive grounding in the sports management industry (graduate feedback, as cited in Martin & Leberman, 2005, p. 25).

A student from a 2004 course stated that "both the Sport Practicum, and Sport Facility and Event Management papers will be of vital importance to my job. I enjoyed both these papers and found them to be among the most valuable of my time at university."

### *Facilitating Critical Reflection*

The third year capstone and postgraduate practicum requires students to undertake 180 hours of project based work within a sport organization during a double semester period. The aims of the paper are for students to:

1. Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the role and responsibilities of effective sport managers or coaches.
2. Apply sport management or coaching principles to industry situations.
3. Apply knowledge of sport management or coaching skills and techniques, which benefit the host sports organisation/code.
4. Analyse their learning with respect to sport management or coaching theory and practice.

The use and development of critical reflection strategies throughout the program helps them learn how to think in different ways – potentially outside the square. They are primarily encouraged to develop skills by following Gibbs (1988) and Moon's (2000) stages of reflection involving analysis, evaluation and planning future action. The level of critical reflection is also impacted by prior experiences (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993). For undergraduate students, the practicum may provide more personal development opportunities (self-confidence and self-esteem) and an initial stepping-stone to employment. Whereas postgraduate and distance based students often value the opportunity to enhance their professional development through the reflective process (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Investigation of the facilitated reflective strategies utilized in the Sport Management Practicum at Massey University, and also the Sport and Recreation Cooperative at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand illustrated the value of critical reflection to students' personal learning, professional growth and increased self-confidence (Fleming & Martin, 2007).

Often they will go out and do their thing when they're out on placement and they come back into the class and we discuss what they experience and we reflect on it. So it's about giving them the theory, letting them go out there and have a go at it. Then when they come back they discuss it and that's where the most learning happens. 'Cos they don't have time to reflect when they're out in the work environment often, so on campus provides them with this opportunity (academic supervisor, as cited Martin et al, 2010, p. 34).

The research reviewed the processing of their 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' (Boud et al, 1993) over the period of their work placement through a document analysis of their reflective journals. Student feedback illustrated the skills learnt, the value of linking theory to practice, and the positive nature of their practicum experiences as professional preparation for careers in the sport industry (Fleming & Martin, 2007).

#### *Setting Great Expectations*

McGregor's X and Y theory (1960) relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1962) in how human behaviour and motivation in the workplace assists in maximizing output. In relation to Theory Y, as a supervisor I aim to create the most symbiotic relationship between the supervisors and student, which relates to aspects of self-actualization and self-esteem (Maslow, 1962). The importance of managing and communicating both students' and supervisor's expectations is emphasized in the induction process (Martin & Leberman, 2005). Students are encouraged to be increasingly proactive rather than reactive, demonstrating initiative and adding value to the organization; aiming to move beyond the student persona and doing just a good (grade C) or very good job (B), but towards producing an outstanding professional performance (A) that adds value to the organization, takes work away from the supervisor and exceeds expectations.

I really can't thank you enough... if you had not been there as 'a thorn in our backside' then I don't feel any of us would have had such successful practicums. (Practicum student feedback, 2006)

It is often through the support and advice of peers, supervisors and the development of industry networks, and the achievement of an A grade in the practicum paper, that provides the opportunity of immediate post practicum paid positions. Top students are often subsequently employed in their practicum organization or by previous graduates of the same program in other sport organizations.

I was interviewed by [the manager] and the team leader... both who were graduates with the same degree. It sure shows the impressiveness and status of the degree. (Graduate feedback, 2011)

#### *Focus on Personal & Professional Development*

My interest in applied experiential learning programs also led to changing an existing management development course, the Action Learning Management Practicum (ALMP), a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate program at Massey University from 2002 to 2004. It provided an outdoor experiential education for-

credit course where, as facilitators, we used a more holistic model of course design (Leberman & Martin, 2005). The initial 5-day course integrated a range of physical, social, creative and reflective activities.

It was an amazing experience. As I sit back and reflected on what was done and how we all achieved I am “gob smacked”... I am so satisfied. (ALMP student feedback, 2003)

The benefit of post course reflection (Leberman & Martin, 2004) was highlighted from data gathered from open ended questions about the course impacts and key factors in achieving these impacts sent to participants two weeks and again six months after the 5-day course. Reflection on the whole experience often draws parallels to organization and management theories. It provides a means for developing the whole person as advocated in the management education literature (Boyatzis & McLeod, 2001; Gray, 2007). These practicum experiences highlight that personal and professional development of managers often cannot be separated.

As I reflect on the whole course experiences and draw parallels to organizations and management theories it becomes clear that the personal and professional development of managers cannot be separated and that they are two sides of the same coin. (Leberman & Martin, 2005, p. 328)

#### *Integrating Theory & Practice*

Pedagogies that aim to integrate theory and practice, praxis (Bates, 2008), have been found to be implicitly or indirectly fostered by a variety of means (Coll, Eames, Paku, Lay, Ayling, Hodges... Martin, 2009). In the sport management context (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma & Coll, 2010), the principal means for fostering integration of on- and off campus learning is by assessment via, for example, reflective journals and assignments/reports post-placement (Hodges, 2011).

I kept a diary and reflective journal to express my thoughts and feelings and to reflect on activities, responsibilities and certain situations. These records helped in the varying coop assessment and presentations but also allowed me to track personal changes and improvements in the way I deal with situations. To reflect back on my work activities and the perceptions and attitudes I had towards them allowed me to read deeper into situations and experiences and identify areas of personal growth. (Student feedback, cited in Fleming & Martin, 2007, p. 118)

This integration mostly consists of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991), after the learning activities, and is primarily orientated towards personal growth for younger (aged 18-21) undergraduate students, and professional development for (older) distance based or postgraduate students.

#### *Developing Graduate Competencies*

Graduate feedback has indicated that to enhance employability in the sport and recreation industry, work integrated learning programs need to be designed so that students are provided with opportunities to facilitate the development of various competencies (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009).

The company isn't interested in the fact they've got a degree... that's [technical knowledge] kind of taken as a given... what they want to see is can the students' communicate... what sort of personality they have... can they work in teams. (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011, p. 11)

In this context, attributes that are highly valued include the ability and willingness to learn, enthusiastic participation (passion for sport), use of initiative/self-sufficiency, and personal organizational skills. Success in this industry relies on relationship building/ developing professional networks as well as teamwork and cooperation. Developing attributes such as strong oral and written communication skills, self-confidence, and customer relationship management highlight once again the importance of both personal and professional development throughout the practicum experience (Fleming et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Drawing upon the experiences of the author/researcher, this ethnographic case study has allowed the development of an in-depth description of practicum course design across different sport management education contexts. Being an integral part of the research process, has allowed the researcher to be engaged in the group and activities that were observed. Whilst this paper has provided a personalised account, issues of credibility, transferability and ethical considerations have been addressed.

The findings from my participant observation, research, and prolonged involvement with the practicum courses over the past two decades suggest that these applied experiential learning experiences enhance graduate attributes and provide a point of difference that employers' value. The bar has been set high in terms of expectations of students, academic and industry staff. These learning opportunities focus on professional development through enhanced business and industry knowledge, but also personal development of a range of soft skills competencies.

The examples provided have illustrated the importance of integrating a variety of critical reflection opportunities over time to enrich whole course curriculum and program design. A defining feature of these applied learning practicum experiences is praxis, which links scholarship, critical thinking, research, and theory with practice. It is hoped that these findings will be transferable to other contexts to support the ever-expanding field of experiential learning in sport management globally.

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