

Using Breeze for Communication and Assessment of Internships: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

An important component of internships is the connection between students, universities and employers. “High-quality internships . . . encourage contact between faculty and students as well as develop cooperation among students,” (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002, 67). This “good practice” must exist to ensure good performance assessment (Implementing and assessing internships 2002). Students in an internship program were given web cameras and access to the software Breeze to use for a video journal. Focus groups were conducted to determine the students’ opinions of using this type of assessment. Students overwhelmingly preferred this type of assessment and saw the benefits of using the technology beyond the internship.

Introduction

College internships are quickly becoming a “curriculum staple” for many career pathways in higher education. This is evidenced by the fact that the use of internships in higher education has increased from 1 of 36 students completing internships in 1980 to 3 of 4 students completing internships in 2000 (Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004).

An important component of internships is the connection among students, universities and employers. “High-quality internships . . . encourage contact between faculty and students as well as develop cooperation among students,” (Implementing and Assessing Internships, 2002, 67). This “good practice” must exist to ensure good performance assessment (Implementing and assessing internships 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to ascertain if using technology, specifically Breeze (Adobe Connect Professional) is an appropriate tool for use in communicating and assessing the internship experience. Hopefully, this study will identify another tool that can be used to enhance the internship experience for the intern, site supervisor, and internship supervisor.

The goal of this research is to improve connection between interns and internship coordinators. The use of Breeze as communication tool that allows those involved in internships to stay “in touch” and “on top” of situations at the internship sites. Too often students are disconnected from the academic resources and people they rely on to bridge the academic knowledge with application. The internship should be seen as an important part of the coursework, not just the job for the summer/semester (DeNeui, Couture, Fisher, Goodman, Houts, Stuhl, & Witman, n.d.).

Literature Review

Internships

As stated previously, internships are the bridge between academics and the real world as well provide students with practical experience. A sociological analysis of internship programs found internships that function effectively become that important link between formal education and

practice, (Quinn, 2003). Students feel that an internship is the best way to learn the reality of work. The internship experiences seem to enhance both academics and the students' entry into the world of work by improving time management, communication skills, self-discipline, initiative, and overall self concept, (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999). An internship also provides validation that the student has chosen the appropriate career choice by giving the student a realistic expectation of the field as well as a check for good fit between the student and the career, (Callanan, & Benzing, 2004). It should be noted that research shows that internship students and non-internship students start college with the same potential; however, upon graduation the internship students have a significantly higher GPA than their non internship counterparts, (Knouse, Tanner & Harris, 1999).

Companies with internships also benefit. One report states that some companies hire as many as 70% of their interns for full time employment. This trend of hiring can save a company about half of the hiring costs, (Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004). A good internship program is a way of evaluating a potential employee before committing to hire, (Wilson, 2005). Internship programs are a way to ensure that students have industry experience which is what most companies are looking for, (Moon, 2004). Grantham, Patton, York, & Winick (1998) stated that an employer has the opportunity to:

- Infuse new ideas and concepts directly from higher education institutions,
- Recruit and observe new talent,
- Train prospective employees at lower cost, and
- Improve the quality of undergraduate preparation in the field through the provision of regular mentoring and feedback regarding student intern performance, (as cited by Bulger, 2006).

Internships and Assessment

To ensure that all of the stakeholders continue to benefit from internships, internships must be well developed which includes a comprehensive assessment plan. A good assessment plan allows for students to be reflective in their experiences and to make them more active participants in the assessment process, (Implementing and assessing internships, 2002).

Sorenson (1992) stated that the assessment process also should be "...longitudinal, contextual, and collaborative" (as cited by *Implementing and assessing internships*, 2002 p. 75).

Assessment is the key to ensure continued integrity in the internship. The internship requires formal objectives or outcomes along with a well developed guide of activities and communications that evaluate the student experience. Without objectives/outcomes and assessment activities, credibility and integrity of an internship can be compromised, (Young & Baker, 2004).

Internships, Assessment and Technology

Technology can be used to assess and engage students and to facilitate the connection between higher education institutions and internship sites. Technology allows for assessment both by asynchronous and synchronous tools.

Asynchronous Tools. Asynchronous tools allow the internship coordinator to communicate without regard to specific time. Email in the past has been the most used tool for assessment and communication with interns, (Miller & Hargrove, 2005). However, other tools provide more ability to communicate to individuals and to groups to assess participants. The use of electronic forums and discussions as well as email gave interns the ability to communicate with their peers in the field, (Mayer, 2002). In a study done by Mayer (2002), results showed that students appreciated the opportunity to read what other interns were experiencing. Many found answers to questions through the peer communications, which provided a rich formative assessment tool for both the internship site coordinator and the internship coordinator. The peer discussion forums also allowed the internship coordinator to "lurk" to see items that may need to be addressed to the group as a whole.

Another asynchronous tool used in internship assessment is the ejournal. Ejournals are typically embedded in course management systems. Crutsinger and Tas (2005) used ejournals through WebCT to assess ethical decision making of their interns. Their students were required to keep a detailed account of their work experiences. Students were to discuss their experiences, their contribution and specifically, "critical incidents that had an impact on their work," (p.68). This

allowed Crutsinger and Tas to identify ethical issues that might arise during the day to day experiences and address the issue with that student as well with other students if needed.

Synchronous Tools. Tools such as videoconferencing are becoming popular for internships as the cost and availability has made the technology more affordable. In a study by Panos (2005), 81% of the students using videoconferencing tools reported an “immediate and dramatic drop in their sense of isolation compared with no reported loss of sense of isolation by the group that did not use videoconferencing. The faculty supervisors described the benefit of using videoconferencing increasing “emotional bandwidth”, (Panos, 2005, p. 839). Emotional bandwidth is described as the amount of information that is communicated that includes emotional understanding, contact and support (Panos, 2005).

As with the asynchronous tools, synchronous tools can also be used with groups. Seeing and talking to others in the group is an added benefit. This tool can also allow the intern, the internship coordinator, and the site supervisor to discuss issues with both video and audio in real time. This allows for a more multidimensional assessment with all of the stakeholders “at the table”, (Coursol, 2004).

Research Using Technology during Internships

Some research exists regarding using technology in internships. Two studies, one using asynchronous tools and one using synchronous shed some light on using technology in internships. Meyer (2002) studied teacher education students who were in their teaching practicum in Australia. As many of her students were in isolated areas, Meyers used electronic discussion boards to connect her students with her and other students. The purpose of using the technology in this research is to connect the interns to each other. They were required to email their internship coordinator about every three weeks to “check in”. Students were also required to post at least five messages on the bulletin board within the practicum time period.

The results of the research showed that students indicated that the function they most appreciated with the technology was the ability to be engaged with other pre-service teachers and to their university supervisors. The connection with other students made them realize that they were all

going through similar situations. The posting created a support system for students who were going through rough times.

The ability to connect continually with their internship coordinator was also very important. Coordinators were able to discuss with the students issues with more immediacy regarding certain situations. Also, coordinators were able to read through the postings to see if certain trends were developing and to address them within the whole group, (Meyer, 2002).

Research done by Panos (2005) found that in the past, students placed internationally felt very isolated. This sense of isolation continued to exist even though supervisors continued to contact them either through mail or email. Research found that 79% of the interns felt that even this contact was inadequate. When video conferencing was introduced to the experimental group, 81% of the interns reported a significant drop in a sense of isolation. The idea of seeing someone was the common component. Faculty too felt a better sense of connection with students. Obviously the benefits of online education include an anywhere, anytime environment, variety of courses, advanced information, and possibly financial benefits.

Theoretical Bases

Three theories exist to explain the interaction and reaction within internships experiences using technology. Social presence theory is considered a sub-area of communications theory (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Social presence theory was introduced as an online learning theory because of its combination of concepts of social presence and teaching presence (Anagnostopolulos, Basmadjian, & McCrory, 2005). Short, Williams, and Christ (1976) defined social presence as “the degree of salience of another person in an interaction and the consequent salience of an interpersonal relationship,” (as cited by Anagnostopolulos, Basmadjian, & McCrory, 2005, p. 1700).

A study completed by Guanawardena and Zittle (1997) involved computer-mediated conferencing and resulted in findings that identified social presence as both a factor of the medium and the participants/communicators (as cited by Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 70). As noted by Greenlaw and DeLoach (2003) students participating in online discussions recognized that the single view of the instructor expands to all who participate in the online discussion and

the learning process, therefore, changes. Arbaugh and Duray (2002) further indicated as students reduce their reliance on the instructor, collaboration increases and the social distance reduces in the e-environment.

Combining social presence with teacher immediacy addresses the number of personal contacts needed between learner and instructor. Teacher immediacy is defined as “a measure of the psychological distance that a communicator puts between themselves and the object” (Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 70). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) noted e-students and e-instructors involved in asynchronous communication develop their own immediacy ‘rules’ that create their own ‘social presence’ (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

The social informatics theory is the third theory supporting research in technology and the internship experience. Social informatics is defined as “the trans-disciplinary study of the design, deployment and uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) that account for their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts including organizations and society” (Sawyer, 2005, p. 1). This theory focuses on what is seen as ‘normal communications’ in an online environment. Social informatics addresses the norms, rules, and practices of people along with the necessary computer hardware and software (Sawyer, 2005). It is important to note that ICTs are interpreted and used differently by various people. It should also be noted that the view and use of ICTs is seen as both a benefit and detriment to social actions and social relationships. Technology may be viewed as a limiting factor to communication, yet it may be embraced as a way to increase communication (Kling, Rosenbaum, & Sawyer, 2005).

These theories support this research which also incorporated focus groups as a basis for investigating interaction, reaction, and social relationships in an internships and the online environment. Anderson and Kanuka (2003) state “an effective way of getting the answers to questions that are not yet well defined and the topic is not yet well understood is through the use of focus groups” (p. 102). Focus groups can be used to explore a topic and broaden the base of knowledge or narrow the focus of a research project to develop research questions. Whatever the purpose, it is important to have a diverse group of participants so that “a sense of the diversity of experiences and perceptions” (Anderson & Kanuka, p. 109) is obtained.

Methodology

This study was supported by a Promising Scholar Grant provided by Indiana State University to faculty for researching areas of experiential learning. A group of students were identified within the college of business at Indiana State University to participate. The students were part of a group of scholars and were required to have an internship as a part of their scholarship requirements. Students were placed all over the country.

Students met with the researcher before leaving for their internship. At the meeting, the researcher gave each student a web camera, an internship manual, and a Breeze account. As each student was provided a laptop computer as a part of their scholarship, they were requested to bring their laptop computer so software could be loaded and the web cameras could be activated and demonstrated on the student's own computer.

The researcher demonstrated the use of Breeze to each student and led the student through login procedures of Breeze to insure that the student's Breeze account was activated properly and the student understood how to log into Breeze and utilize the Breeze tools needed to complete internship assignments. Students were provided written instructions on the use of Breeze in the internship manual.

Breeze is a communication software package used in distance education. With a web camera, speakers, and microphone, a person can meet with others in real-time by accessing a URL. "Using [Breeze] for a training session, for example, an instructor can speak to a class scattered across multiple geographic locations, direct them to fill in answers to a quiz through their desktop browsers, and illustrate the students' level of understanding by showing scores or other forms of feedback assessment," (Babcock, 2005). Breeze can provide a connection to give students and coordinators better communication between each other and a vehicle to provide meaningful assessment and evaluation.

The students were required to keep a video journal of their internship experiences. They were required to "shoot" at least one video a week through Breeze. Breeze has the capability to record

anything that is performed in a Breeze pod. The students were provided questions they were to address each week of their internship. They were encouraged to discuss anything regarding their experiences that was worth noting in addition to the required questions. As each recorded session is published to a URL, the researcher and the student's internship supervisor had the ability to review these recordings and evaluate the student's experiences.

When the students returned to campus, they were to participate in a focus group to ascertain their views of using Breeze as a communication and assessment tool. Students who completed the study were allowed to keep their web camera for their participation.

The researcher reviewed all of the videos shot by the interns and collected anecdotal information from the videos. Reviewing the clips provided insight into the internship experience.

A focus group was scheduled by the researcher. A third party was employed to facilitate the focus group. The focus group facilitator met with the researcher to develop a list of questions for the focus group. The researcher was not present at the focus group to allow the interns to speak freely of their experience. The facilitator recorded the session for his benefit in providing a report to the researcher. The tape was not given to the researcher. Questions asked during the focus group were:

1. What was the greatest challenge you faced using Breeze?
2. Did you feel comfortable in recording yourself?
3. Did the questions allow you to reflect on your experiences during your internship?
4. Was doing a recording each week appropriate for your internship?
5. Do you think you could have talked your supervisor to participate in a Breeze session?
6. Do you see this method as the best method for communicating your internship experiences? Why or why not?
7. How could this process be improved?

It must be noted that faculty were offered the same option as the students regarding using Breeze for internships. Faculty members were given a web camera and training in Breeze to participate.

There were limitations of the study. One limitation was the fact that although the researcher provided questions for the students to answer, there were no grades tied to completion of the project, participation was voluntary. Another limitation was the unknown technology factor. Many students did not know what type of connection they would have available to them.

Findings

From the 18 students that began the internship experiment, only 12 completed the study and only eight participated in the focus group. The information gathered from the recordings and the focus group, as well as anecdotal comments comprise the results of the study.

The students produced on average eight video journals for the project. As the students recorded their weekly sessions for their video journals, patterns of usage were observed. As the students became more familiar with Breeze, the more “adventurous” they became with using the technology. Several found a way to incorporate the Internet into the journal as they explained in the journal about the internship site. Students found ways to add written comments using the chat function of the software while other students experimented with the use of their cameras.

An anecdotal note regarding their reaction to using the video journals was the way they referred to the video journal as “The Real World---ISU”. This is in reference to the MTV reality show, Real World that would ask members of the group to go in a “closet” with a camera and discuss situations happening regarding the participants. ISU students were emulating what they had seen on MTV and thought this was “cool”.

The focus group provided the best feedback regarding the use of Breeze during their internships. When asked what the greatest challenge the students encountered, one was that there was no documentation provided for the use of Breeze although they were provided with a manual on Breeze usage. They would have liked a “cheat sheet” to allow for quick check on commands.

The other challenge was inconsistency of Internet connection. Many found this to be very frustrating.

The students felt comfortable recording themselves. Actually, they much preferred recording their journal than writing the report. Some expressed frustration regarding the requirement for both video journal and a written report. This was stressful. The students wanted their internship coordinator to watch them and to give them prompt feedback regarding the recordings. Several stated that they would have liked to have had a weekly chat with their internship coordinator using Breeze.

Students felt the questions did not always fit what was happening during their internship experience. They felt that a weekly summary with a weekly chat with the internship coordinator would have worked best. Overall, the students “loved” using the technology.

Students felt that the site supervisors should become a part of the Breeze community. Many of the students would have liked to have had a three way discussion with them, the internship coordinator, and the site supervisor. They felt that ISU should “teach” the internship site personnel how to use it to better connect ISU with the workplace.

Students felt that this was the best method for reporting their internship experiences. They would like to see their internship coordinator take the use of Breeze more seriously for their internship grade and as a way of communicating. The interns also suggested that time should be scheduled for all of the interns to meet on Breeze and share experiences. They felt some isolation at their internships. The interns did make a note that the power of Breeze would not be realized without interaction.

Students did think there should be some improvements regarding the use of Breeze during internships. Students felt there should be consistency in the use of Breeze. All students should have to use Breeze during the internship if the technology at the site allows them. It was important to the students to hear what other students were experiencing at other sites. Students also felt that faculty should understand how much they appreciated using the technology and

wanted to “strongly encourage” faculty to take the use of Breeze in internships seriously. The interns wanted a chance to meet with faculty to share their views of the use of Breeze and its advantages for internships.

It should be noted that many of these students returned to the college campus, explained the use of Breeze to their professors, and implemented the use of the technology in other courses. One professor has since written a grant to provide a course with web cameras to use Breeze to communicate with businesses and students.

Although several faculty members received cameras and participated in the Breeze training, they did not use the technology in communicating with their students. This was a source of frustration for students as they felt that their workload was increased by having to record journals and write the report required for most internships.

Discussion and Conclusions

Breeze, or any videoconferencing tool, can be an important part of communication and assessment. The function of bridging academics and real world experience can be facilitated by using Breeze. Breeze provides a useful way to provide quick assessment feedback to students and possibly to the internship supervisor. It can be a way for internship coordinator to listen to the recordings and evaluate both the verbal and the nonverbal actions of the intern to ascertain what feedback to give and how immediate the feedback should be given.

Students also feel that this is an important tool in the internship process. They felt that this tool could combat the feeling of isolation that tends to plague all internship programs no matter the discipline. Students felt the technology gave them the tether back to their school and to the internship coordinator. The problem was that the tether was not always appreciated at the internship coordinator end.

One issue with the study was the lack of participation with faculty. The traditional model of internship with students providing periodic written reports is seen by many as a “nonproblem”

that does not need to be fixed. A commitment needs to be made toward internships that allows faculty who want to work with interns to be rewarded for creative, innovative internship experiences that would include technology such as Breeze. The students are asking for it.

The other issue for using technology in internships is working with individuals within the internship site. It is imperative to explain the use of technology within the internship experience. The fear of document sharing, corporate spying, and privacy violation is a very real concern. With many students in colleges of businesses working in accounting, finance, insurance, and technology, information they work with is sensitive. Trust is imperative among all participants of the internship. Some type of document that insures that the students, faculty, and supervisors understand their roles and the importance of adhering to the strict code of ethics must be established within a internship program that utilizes technology such as Breeze.

Areas for Further Research

This research was very exploratory in nature and needs to be expanded to more formal quantitative and/or qualitative studies. One approach would create a social experiment, based on the Stanley and Campbell model, that would allow random students to use the Breeze technology and other students use other traditional assessments. This would allow a comparison of the two methods of assessment.

Another study would be interviewing internship coordinators and internship site supervisors regarding their opinions of using technology such as Breeze as a method of communication and evaluation. Based on this research, students are comfortable with the thought of using this type of technology for communication and evaluation. The other stakeholders of internship programs must be convinced that this type of assessment is of better value or “value-added” for all participants. This information would allow internship programs to develop and/or revise their own programs that would take advantage of this technology to bridge the academic and real world gap.

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