

# Curriculum and Pedagogic bases for integrating practice experiences within higher education

## Co-op seminars: Purposes and practices

The North American model of cooperative education (or co-op) is a well-established approach to make links between learning that occurs in workplace settings and in tertiary courses. The use of this model is widespread across North America. It has its origins early end the 20th century in Cincinnati in an engineering faculty where there was concern is that what students were learning in their courses was remote from what was needed to practice engineering (Smollins 1999). A key device still used extensively in co-op programs is the 'co-op seminar', which is often compulsory. This seminar was originally devised to occur at the end of the students' workplace placement to provide an opportunity for maximising the learning from those placements, to share them with other students and to make explicit links to the course in which the students were enrolled. The co-op seminars were aimed "to transform what might have been otherwise just experience of employment into rich educational experiences" (Grubb & Badway 1999).

### Purposes

In their review of co-op seminars at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, Grubb and Badway (1999) were advised of eight educational goals for these seminars. These were to:

1. gain meaning from the day-to-day occurrences of the internship;
2. broaden understanding of theoretical concepts as they apply to real-world situations;
3. gain insights into the relationship of the self to work and to the larger society;
4. understand personal values and strengthened awareness and appreciation of difference;
5. understand the steps required in the career decision-making for occupational mobility and lifelong learning
6. develop personal and professional skills and strategies necessary for success in the next stage of life;
7. enhance a broad array of skills for success in the workplace; and
8. encourage contributions to the community and become responsible citizens of a multicultural society.

As can be seen, some of these goals are about securing occupational specific outcomes, some about the world of work and others about broadly applicable learning, such as responsible citizenship. These goals can be directed towards different educational purposes: i) career exploration and decision-making; ii) workforce preparation; iii) preparation for specific occupations; and iv) preparation for specific workplace needs. Hence, these seminars can serve purposes which are very consistent with current expectations within Australian higher education for work-integrated learning (WIL). At LaGuardia students must attend a series of co-op seminars that raise general issues about work, occupations in general, and the competencies required on the job. These seminars were judged as being successful in linking 'school' and work-based learning, through providing activities that connected these two sites of learning (Grubb & Badway 1999).

### Practices

The seminars were principally intended for students to critically analyse and reflect upon their workplace experiences, which were seen as field laboratories, and strategies such as systematic observation, identifying critical incidents, interviews, and document reviews were used by students to gather data about these experiences. A variety of classroom activities are used in the co-op seminars – students working in teams to identify particular issues; use of case studies to evaluate experiences and responses; brainstorming questions; simulated production exercises; and the use of field assignments to reflect on particular kinds of experiences. These activities are used to appraise the application of theoretical concepts such as ... to actual practice; identify the ways that key practices (e.g. teamwork; physical clues; etc) were enacted.

Initially, these seminars were quite unstructured, but students complained about the lack of structure and not being able to perceive the benefits of these arrangements. They were often scheduled in the evening or on the weekend to avoid interfering with the working week.

### **Reference**

Grubb, W. N; Badway, N (1998), *Linking School-Based and Work-Based Learning: The Implications of LaGuardia's Co-op Seminars for School-to-Work Programs*, National Center for Research in Vocational Education (ED 418 230)  
Smollins, John-Pierre (1999), "[The Making of the History: Ninety Years of Northeastern Co-op](#)", *Northeastern University Magazine* 24 (5), May 1999,

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