

CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION

SECTION 2: THE PRACTICUM IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The Business School perspective

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Recommended citation:

Chia, A. (2013). The Business School perspective. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 3(2), 61-63.

<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.33283>

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JNUSTA: *Does your school or do you focus on experiential/service learning in your curriculum? How do you ensure the right kind of outcomes that Professor Amy Tsui has alluded to and avoid what she calls lapses into “educational tourism”?*

Audrey: Service/experiential learning takes place at different levels. Students in our Executive MBA, in our other MBA programmes and in our undergraduate programmes all have the opportunity to work on a practicum/experiential component. Like in many other disciplines attempting to offer service/experiential learning, we also face several challenges:

1. Capabilities of students to take on the project to which they have been assigned or that they have chosen: Oftentimes, students have to acquire new skills (and I think that is part of the intention) in order to carry out the practicum. For example, they may have to hone their skills in conducting a focus group – something that they may have practiced only a little before. Another important skill is the management of the client organisation. Students realise very quickly that the client has different priorities. Clients may also have different time pressures and expect very clear and concise communication from students. Besides just task learning or skill enhancement, students gain insights from taking the perspective of the client. This perspective-taking is to me the most important aspect of the practicum. To the extent that students enter into a process of trying to understand why and how others think and feel, they would be better able to manage relationships with the client organisation and more generally, with others. [It has been suggested](#) that perspective-taking facilitates the learning of social skills and academic content.
2. Keeping enthusiasm from flagging – these practicums compete with other modules for attention and effort, and sometimes the deadlines are in the same period. We therefore need to take note of students’ enthusiasm, motivation and stress levels.
3. To address 1 and 2 above, feedback is sought from the client organisation, which has an input into the grade given. Oftentimes, students have to present their reports and engage in a Question & Answer session with the client organisation to actively explain and defend their analyses and recommendations; thus, providing an avenue for assessing both their capabilities and the amount of effort they put into the practicum.

Experiential learning does not necessarily take place in an exotic location. Our students can work with companies based in Singapore, though others do go to countries in the Middle East, USA, or Vietnam, etc. (UCLA-NUS EMBAAs, especially, tend to do their practicums in a third country – not Singapore and not the US – to broaden their exposure). While there is some pleasure in meeting new people and visiting new places, the work expectations are real – so students have to work hard and play hard, and these explicit outcomes and deliverables ensure that these exercises do not lapse into a form of “educational tourism”.