

Conference Paper

Practicum for adult educators: Learning beyond course requirements

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the effectiveness of the practicum in preparing adult educators for professional practice. It focuses on the practicum experiences of learners on the Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) programme, a national qualification under the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) framework. Findings from the study conducted on 31 practicum learners and two practicum supervisors are presented. It is observed that the practicum is still relevant though these adult educators had limited workplace affordances. While learners indicated strong agreement that they have applied what they learnt from the course into the practicum and believe that practicum can be fairly assessed, there were mixed reactions to the usefulness of practicum in meeting course objectives and the support provided by the workplace. Learners see the practicum supervisors as a critical friend contributing subject matter expertise and the workplace as facilitating the availability of “workplace artifacts”. The workplace environment demonstrated limited expansive features that were mainly driven by business needs. It is concluded that the form of practicum would need to take on a reflective nature to continually challenge adult educators’ professional practice.

Introduction

In the Training and Adult Education (TAE) sector in Singapore, practicum has just been introduced as part of a learning strategy in the Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) programme, a national qualification under the Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ). Unlike the practicum structures in typical teacher education programmes with a single employer and centralised teacher preparation institutions, the TAE sector is made up of diverse employers and practitioners. There are three main stakeholders in the practicum namely, the practicum learners, the training provider (which includes the practicum supervisors) and the practicum host organisations.

As the practicum is a new feature in the programme, the key question is whether the practicum is an effective learning strategy in preparing adult educators for their professional work. This will be discussed by addressing issues that include the form and shape of practicum, the possible interactions between learners, practicum supervisors and host organisations in the practicum, the roles and responsibilities of the three parties involved. Having established an understanding on the notion of practicum, the conceptual framework argues that the individual learners are the key in determining the

success of the practicum. Concepts related to practicum models, workplace learning, the expansive learning framework; are presented and discussed.

Understanding the Notion of Practicum

Practicum is a term that established professions like medicine, nursing and teaching, can identify with. It is typically associated with the notion of a series of work activities performed for the purposes of learning to perform a job. The structure and form of the activities related to practicum in these professions can be envisaged with references to practices of professional bodies or industry associations. In the case of teaching, the teacher is required to complete a certain number of practice hours in the classroom under the observation of a more senior teacher. In the case of nursing, the novice nurse is required to complete a fixed set of tasks under observation before completion of the nursing course.

The practicum, embedded within the formal learning structure, seems to provide an element of non-formal or informal learning. It is non-formal as it is “intentional from the learner’s point of view” in the definition of key outcomes of the practicum in consultation with the practicum supervisor and the host organisation. On the other hand, it is also informal learning in that it is a form of “experiential learning” which leads to “non-intentional” learning occurrences. For example, the practicum learner in facilitating a classroom discussion in the pursuit of classroom management skills might end up learning about courseware design principles through the encounters with the learners relating to the gaps between courseware design and learner profile. This would serve as a form of “unintentional learning”. It might be useful to agree that “non-formal learning and informal learning essentially disemboogues in a rearrangement of the learning field” (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006, p.457). Applying to the example, the “learning field” defined was facilitation in the classroom setting, which defines itself as a form of non-formal learning. The informal learning aspect is the courseware design principles acquired which came across as “accidental learning”. With the notion that the practicum constitutes a series of planned activities that serves as a form of informal or non-formal learning within a formal learning structure of the programme, the potential of the practicum should be explored in ways of how it complements the structure of the skills acquisition and professional development of adult educators.

Tuschling and Engemann (2006, p.455) quoted from the Commission of the European Union (2000) that “informal contexts offer a vast reservoir of learning possibilities and could be an important source of innovations in the field of teaching and learning methods”. In the discussion regarding the importance of recognising informal learning, Hager (1998) acknowledged the challenges in recognising informal learning acquired from workplaces as there are “skills components” such as “the underpinning knowledge and understanding acquired in the practice of tailoring, much of it tacit”, “will not readily match up against the content of the [Diploma] course”. While he highlighted the problem that “informal workplace learning is not strictly equivalent to any course content” which challenges recognition of prior learning, this also means that the classroom training method is limiting in providing holistic acquisition of skills and competencies as “this know how can only be gained, apparently, from actual workplace experience”. This explains why practicum outcomes are less understood since it is usually less codifiable in contrast to formal learning.

The environment in the practicum serves as an important context in facilitating learning as “the experiences and support provided by workplaces are often the primary or only sources of individuals’ initial learning of their vocational practice as well as its further and ongoing development throughout their working lives” (Billett, 2002, p.28). Billett (2002) explained that the presence of the “workplace artifacts”, according to Scribner (1984) and Suchman (1997), “provide access to the knowledge required for performance, as do other forms of visual clues and cues provided by observing co-workers”. He also mentioned the work of Vygotsky (1978) which informed that “interpsychological processes.... are essential to individuals’ development of vocational knowledge as these interactions provide access to knowledge that has social genesis”. It can be inferred that workplace learning brings another dimension of learning in the form of engagement and handing of workplace tools and the interactions with co-workers who provide guidance on how the work should be done.

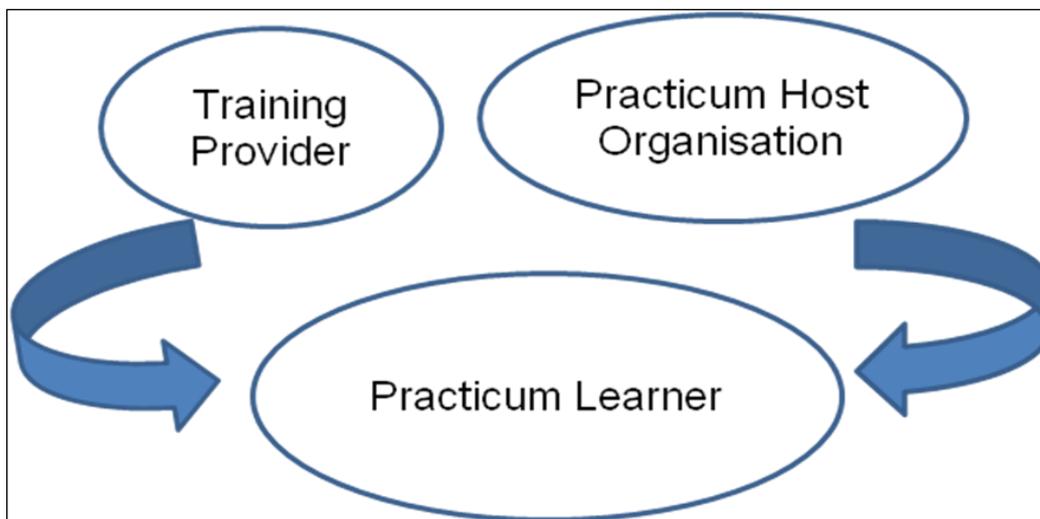
Practicum is typically a part of the curriculum in the attainment of certain skills and competencies. It is an especially common feature in curriculum for teacher education. In the literature review conducted by Toohey, Ryan, & Hughes (1996a, p.357) on the purpose of the practicum, the authors cited Daresh (1990) in explaining that practicum enables students to:

- apply knowledge and skills in a practical setting;
- progressively develop competencies through participation in a range of practical experiences;
- test their commitment to a career;

- gain insight into professional practice; and
- evaluate progress and identify areas where further personal and professional development is needed.

The Approach Towards Studying the Practicum

In order to achieve a more meaningful analysis of the findings, a model is proposed below based on the stakeholders involved in the practicum.



The core subject of analysis in this study will be the practicum learners. The analysis of the practicum will be conducted using Billett’s theory of workplace learning and Fuller and Unwin’s theory of expansive-restrictive continuum. The intention of the study is to understand the effectiveness of the practicum in preparing adult educators for professional work through studying the experiences of the practicum learners. The practicum forms part of the curriculum of the DACE programme, and it should be highlighted that the intention of the study is not to examine the DACE curriculum.

The training provider would be the first point of contact in the provision of knowledge to these individuals. At the practicum stage, the practicum supervisors appointed by the training provider would play a key role in determining the perceptions of the individuals in terms of the nature and quality of support provided in the course of the practicum. After going through the courseware in the classroom environment provided by the training provider, these learners might choose a host organisation that they are currently associated with through current employment terms, or might choose an organisation that they intend to work with upon completion of the course.

The study involving practicum learners was conducted in two phases. A survey questionnaire was administered to the learners in a quantitative manner in rating the usefulness of the practicum in achieving course objectives and the adequacy of support provided for practicum. The second phase of the study on practicum learners will involve a smaller group to provide an understanding of the practicum experience. The intention of this phase of study is to identify specific traits or experiences related to the support provided by the practicum supervisor and the host organisation for analysis. The reason for having a two-stage process is to obtain a general sensing from practicum learners in the first stage of the survey questionnaire and to formulate a general trend towards to the perception of practicum.

To increase the validity of the information provided by the learners on their practicum experience, the practicum supervisors of the learners will be interviewed to provide a perspective on the intended outcomes of practicum. Two practicum supervisors was selected to provide an understanding and contrast of the practicum experience they encounter with their learners as well as the support provided to them.

Initial Findings on Practicum Learners' Perceptions of the Practicum

A summary of the various data sources and groups involved are illustrated below:

Subject(s)	Methodology	Sample size	Respondents
Practicum learners	Survey questionnaire	45	31 (68.9%)
	Interview questionnaire	12	8 (66.7%)
Practicum supervisors	Interview questionnaire	2	2 (100%)

Based on the first phase of the survey administered on the 45 practicum learners (who belong to the pilot batch of DACE participants) through email sent out by the programme coordinator, there were 31 responses, indicating that the response rate was 68.9%. Out of these 31 responses, 17 (or 54.8%) indicated that they have completed the practicum while 14 (or 45.2%) of them indicated that they have commenced but not yet completed the practicum. The responses of the 31 practicum learners to the various statements are indicated in the table below:

Survey Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I have applied what I learned in the course into the practicum.	15 (48.4%)	15 (48.4%)	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
2. I was given appropriate guidance during the course of the practicum.	9 (29.0%)	19 (61.3%)	2 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.2%)
3. The practicum environment enabled me to apply what I learned in the course.	9 (29.0%)	15 (48.4%)	5 (16.1%)	2 (6.5%)	0 (0%)
4. The practicum was useful in meeting the course objectives of the DACE programme.	9 (29.0%)	15 (48.4%)	5 (16.1%)	2 (6.5%)	0 (0%)
5. I believe my practicum outcome(s) can be fairly assessed.	6 (19.4%)	22 (71%)	2 (6.5%)	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)

While the overall results seem generally positive with at least 75% of the responses in every statement being rated either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”, the individual responses to the various statements were varied. The initial findings from the survey statements administered on the practicum learners indicate that adequate support was provided for the practicum learners, with 90.3% of the respondents indicating “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” to the statement that they were given appropriate guidance. The details of what ways and forms of support that should be provided would be further presented in the interview questions. The findings also indicate that practicum outcomes can be effectively measured and assessed given that 90.4% of the

respondents agree to this statement. In terms of the preliminary findings on the training provider's curriculum, 77.4% of the respondents indicated agreement to the statement that the practicum was useful in meeting the course objectives of the programme. This is considered a weak response in comparison to the responses from the other statements. A significant group of respondents (16.1%) did not express a stand regarding this statement. It can be seen that views regarding the alignment of practicum and course outcomes were mixed. Regarding the practicum host organisation, the respondents indicated similar reaction to the statement on alignment of practicum and host outcomes, where 77.4% of the respondents indicated agreement to the statement that the practicum environment enabled application of what was learnt in the course. Likewise, a group of respondents (16.1%) were hesitant to make a stand regarding the support from the practicum environment.

Practicum Learners as Key in Determining Practicum Outcomes

In the conceptual framework for analysing the practicum findings, it is argued that individuals are the key agents in determining the outcomes of practicum in terms of how much is being learnt as a result of what is being provided by the training provider and practicum host organisation. Individuals as an agency consist of many variations in terms of qualification backgrounds, prior experiences, mindsets, attitudes and expectations, which affect the extent of participation.

While individuals play a key role in determining the outcome of the practicum experience, the existence of the host organisations and the practicum supervisors should not be neglected. The notion of "workplace affordances" refers to the extent to which "participation in work activities, direct guidance (eg. interactions with coworkers), and indirect guidance (eg. observing and listening in the workplace)" (Billett, 2002, p.35) is being accessed by the learners. One of the respondents to the first phase of the survey questionnaire cited the following feedback on the practicum when prompted to comment on the overall practicum experience:

"[The host organisation's] expectations and requirements may not match accurately the goals of the practicum. [The host organisation] is available only for participants who are sponsored by their employers (which can be the [the host organisation]) Individuals like myself face challenges to engage organisations to participate as a host."

It was also noted that those practicum learners who had a better relationship with the host organisation felt greater support in the process. One such account is illustrated in the following:

“The [host organisation] is my current workplace so the environment was not an issue as they were supportive of what I was doing. The content was customised to suit both the learning requirements and the [host organisation’s] interest. This made the project win-win for me and I am grateful. Technically, a vendor may be required to do the programme that I created and it would have cost quite a bit. Since I created the programme in house, it has cost savings and a programme that they can call their own. That I believe is the main reason that I received complete support and autonomy to create and develop the programme.”

In an attempt to understand how the practicum experience shapes individuals’ perceptions and beliefs, an interview question was posed to the learners to cite particular positive or negative encounters in the practicum that formed a lasting impression. Respondents generally reported positive encounters in that they valued practicum supervisors who provided constructive feedback, “provide clarity and positive affirmation”. On the negative side, respondents cited the challenge of sourcing for a practicum host organisation. It can be seen that the practicum learners generally valued the practicum component. However, there were no accounts related to significant mindset shifts or on the changes in approaches to doing certain tasks. It is speculated that the practicum duration and exposure might not have been significant enough to induce such changes, though learners generally valued the experience.

Fuller and Unwin (2004, p.133) refer to the “access to a (unique) range of learning opportunities” of every individual as the “learning territory”, which is shaped by “personal backgrounds, prior educational experiences, and aspirations”. In the context of the practicum, the experiences encountered by the practicum learners are derived as an outcome of the “learning territories”. In the study of the Modern Apprenticeship conducted by Fuller and Unwin (2003) where the experiences of three apprentices placed in three different organisations were studied, it was observed that “the scope, speed and purpose of their apprenticeship trajectories varied from company to company and this variation seemed particularly germane to the quality of learning experienced by apprentices, and to be illustrative of the expansive-restrictive continuum [the authors] have invoked”. The authors argue that “features listed as expansive will create a stronger and richer learning environment than that comprising features associated with the restrictive end of the continuum”.

The findings from the study conducted on the practicum learners indicated a limited display of expansive features. However, it can be seen that the learners value the autonomy provided to them by the workplace environment

in enabling them to apply what they have learnt in the programme. In response to the ways in which the workplace environment provided support for the learners, examples that were cited included:

“The host organisation was not too participative in terms of interaction. They provided just sufficient data for the task but nothing more.”

“[The host organisation] allowed me to conduct the training programme as I have designed it with minimal boundaries”

The presence of the practicum supervisor adds another dimension to the practicum model. An account provided by one of the practicum learners seems to provide insights on the complementary roles played by the practicum supervisor and the host organisation.

“Workplace supervisor provided the official support while my practicum supervisor helped out in linking what I am doing to the theories of learning. While I am quite conversant to use and apply what I learnt, I was not able to tie it directly to the adult learning theory. My practicum supervisor helped out in identifying what I planned to do to the theories.”

Despite the attempts and efforts made to stretch the learning territories of these practicum learners, the individual plays an important role in making the best out of the provision. This has been echoed by the practicum supervisors in sharing their experience with the practicum learners.

“Some of them [the practicum learners] are very motivated, they will get in touch with you automatically. However, there are some that avoid you, and you got to keep chasing and ask them for updates.”

In terms of the activities conducted to facilitate application of learning from the course, the practicum supervisors and learners have not cited any particular instances of structured activities initiated by the host organisation. While it is noted that individuals face multiple complexities in the course of the practicum, the workplace environment, in terms of the host organisation generally demonstrated limited expansive features. The practicum supervisors were the key contributors in the expansive feature of workplace learning. Nonetheless, this conclusion is drawn from the accounts by practicum learners and supervisors and lacks the perspectives of the host organisations, which may offer alternative views of the workplace provision granted to the individuals contributing to expansive features.

Practicum Beyond Course Requirements

It can be seen that the practicum concept is not new, having seen similar models in the Modern Apprenticeship and other forms of workplace learning. All parties involved in the practicum need to work together to make the practicum meaningful. It is noted that due to the nature of the TAE sector, the individuals are typically viewed as peripheral to the workplace due to the nature of their employment terms. As such, they are subjected to limited workplace affordances. The extent to which the workplace exhibited expansive features is dependent predominantly on whether the learning opportunities are resulted from commercial and business needs. Learners valued the autonomy granted and the trust placed in them as adult learners who are able to take charge of their own learning progress. Regarding the question on whether the practicum experience has shaped individual perceptions and beliefs, there is limited evidence to suggest any forms of attitudinal shifts. It is speculated that the duration of the practicum (of about 30 hours) was too short to induce any form of mindset changes, unlike in teacher education courses where the practicum typically spans across months and years.

In summary, the conceptual framework for the analysis of practicum argues that the learner is the key in making sense of the interactions between the training provider and the practicum host organisation. This has been demonstrated in the mixed responses from the survey statements in the effectiveness of the practicum curriculum and the host organisations. The findings also reinforce that there is practically no relationship or common line of sight between the training provider, which is focused on the learning of the individuals, and the practicum host organisations, which are generally focused on business and commercial needs. Nonetheless, the practicum is still relevant as a learning strategy. Fuller and Unwin (2003, p.424) argued that “apprenticeship is still a relevant vehicle through which to form a bridge between education and the workplace, to develop skills and knowledge, and to enable people and organisations to realise each other’s potential.” The findings from the practicum learners, who are the key agents in the practicum in the pursuit of learning, have provided a clear indication of the relevancy of practicum in the positive ratings shown through the survey questionnaire.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations in this study in concluding how individuals’ practicum trajectories were being shaped by their own backgrounds and professional experience as such information related to demographics were not obtained at the point of the study. In addition, the conclusions were drawn based on verbal accounts provided by the practicum supervisors and the practicum learners. The findings would have been more reliable if actual observations were conducted in relation to the interactions

between the practicum learners, the practicum supervisors and the host organisations.

Upon reflection of the study, it is noted that there has been challenges in establishing causal relationships of incidents and encounters among the three stakeholders, ie, the learner, supervisor and workplace environment. The conclusions drawn mainly establish strong correlations among all three stakeholders in the collective effort of the entire practicum experience. The practicum model takes the form of an “articulated practicum” negotiated between three parties and hence, there is a shared responsibility to ensure the success of the practicum. This model of “articulated practicum” consists of an element of reflection which encourages learners to engage in inquiry. It is observed that the practicum carried out in the DACE programme seems to demonstrate limited evidence of reflection undertaken by learners. Interestingly, when practicum learners were prompted to comment on areas of improvement to the practicum, respondents attribute this to the individuals’ abilities to engage in reflection such as:

“I believe it depends on the case and how much reflection you get out of it after the practicum. This really depends on the individual.”

While there can be many lessons drawn from this study, the key issue is the application of the skills back to the adult educators’ professional practice. It is useful to reiterate the work of teaching described by Schulz (2008, p.149):

Teaching is not a series of routine, habitual, technical acts to be learned, perfected and repeated year after year. Rather, teaching is a complex and multifaceted intellectual, creative, decision-making activity. Therefore, teacher educators need to prepare teachers not as followers, drawn along, but as leaders, as professionals who are thoughtful, reflective, inquiring, self-directed, and active participants in goal setting and decision making.

Hence, while it is agreed that practicum is relevant as a learning strategy in the course curriculum, it is also obvious that learning do not stop at the completion of the course. There is much potential for adult educators to engage in inquiry through reflection, beyond the acquisition of skills and knowledge, throughout their professional careers in the noble work of grooming diverse individuals.

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