

Designing an Agribusiness Internship Academic Experience Course



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Abstract

Agribusiness industry internships are important for preparation of agribusiness degree undergraduate students. A judiciously designed academic experience course highlights experiences from the internship while integrating classroom theories and methods. Kolb's "Experiential Learning Cycle" is used to integrate practical and reflective objectives into the course assignments. Each student completes various assignments, including a written report and electronic presentation to analyze an issue or opportunity related to the internship. Student evaluations over the life of the course consistently indicate that issue analysis, written reports, and oral presentations provide the greatest benefits of the course and prepare students for the next step in their careers.

Introduction

One important role of an agribusiness education program is to prepare students to enter a complex and dynamic industry armed with tools for decision making (Boehlje et al., 1995; Harrison and Kennedy, 1996). While traditional coursework provides the management, finance, marketing and other tools relevant to an agribusiness career, a business internship provides an opportunity for students to apply those tools in "real life" situations. As stated by Gardner (1964, p. 12), "The world is an incomparable classroom, and life is a memorable teacher for those who aren't afraid of her." Gardner's statement embraces the understanding that real learning is achieved by having students as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information (Sweitzer and King, 2004). Educators continue to explore the benefits of experiential education and internships throughout agriculture, health sciences, and other disciplines (Sterns et al., 2005; Chrisman and Ruland, 2001; Condo and Martin, 2002; Gibala and Stuhldreher, 2001; Gold, 2002; Zimmerman, 1996; Clark and Scanlon, 1993). So, during the 1990s, like many other universities, North Dakota State University (NDSU) designed a new agribusiness degree program requiring the completion of an agribusiness industry internship. The internship is followed by AGEC 491, Senior

Agribusiness Seminar, where the students merge their internship experience with classroom theories and methods.

While Litzenberg and Dunne (1996) suggest that internships provide positive benefits not only to students but also to industry and faculty, the academic coursework objectives focus on learning and growth from students' experiences. Following the example set by Clark (2003) and the University of Idaho College of Business and Economics, the academic course following an internship should focus on fulfilling practical and reflective learning objectives for the students. Learning is accomplished during the experience and strengthened by infusion of theory, evaluation, and feedback after the experience (Bilimoria, 1998). Following that belief, a key requirement of the NDSU agribusiness degree is an agribusiness industry internship experience, followed with an academic course to capitalize on the student's internship experience. This course incorporates student learning goals of (1) strengthening agribusiness industry analysis skills, (2) improving written and oral communication skills, (3) enhancing team problem-solving and interaction skills, and (4) developing career-search strategies.

Course Design Method

Kolb's (1984) "Experiential Learning Cycle" (see Figure 1) offers a model to follow when designing a course to capitalize on the student's learning experience. The internship experience and follow-up academic course are examples of Kolb's belief that all learning is a process of relearning. Learning is continually updated through experience. Kolb includes four modes in his learning cycle. The first mode in Kolb's learning cycle is concrete experience. Students must be able to immerse themselves in the new experience. For optimal learning, the concrete experience phase should happen without preconceived notions or biases.

The learning cycle's second phase is reflective observation. Being able to reflect on the concrete experience brings critical learning elements or observations to the student's mind. Some students find journaling a helpful tool to reflect on lessons learned during their internships.

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²I am grateful for the advice of Cheryl Wachenheim, Associate Professor, North Dakota State University.

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Abstract conceptualization is the third mode of the learning cycle. Drawing on theories learned in previous courses, students are able to process their observations. Further reading and gathering knowledge from books or other sources helps to ground experiences in solid theory. While the internship provides a concrete experience, researching theoretical concepts is a way to gain information of a more abstract nature. As students undertake the process of abstract conceptualization they pull together classroom learning and concrete industry experiences, reinforcing concepts from introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses.

The final phase is active experimentation. Problem solving and decision making are born from the experiences, observations, and theories now put into action by active experimentation. Students actively come to their own conclusions, and the process of relearning proceeds with educated experimentation and analysis. While this may be a final phase of the learning cycle, learning does not stop. The relearning process begins again when the decisions made through active experimentation are then tested through a new concrete experience.

Course design of AGECE 491, Senior Agribusiness Seminar, follows Kolb's (1984) learning process and Clark's (2003) belief that practical and reflective academic assignments enhance the educational value of an internship. Assignments continue to evolve since course inception in Fall 2001. The assignments capitalize on the relearning process as students put tools and theories into action while working to

process. Undoubtedly a definite learning process occurs when a student searches for and finds an internship, but the internship proposal begins the professional phase of the experience. Students are forced to move from passive learners to active organizers of their internship experience. The proposal requires company contact information and expected student duties and responsibilities. Students acknowledge that they are required to further analyze a company issue or opportunity after the internship experience. Many students use this proposal as a catalyst for discussion with their industry supervisors, leading to interesting projects during their internships and reducing the occurrence of disorganized, un-focused work time.

Throughout the industry internship, experiential learning occurs. The concrete experience phase (actual internship experience) is the time for students to interact with supervisors, co-workers, and customers. During this phase students may choose to journal about their experiences to help recall issues and opportunities available for discussion and analysis. Industry contacts are not required to submit student evaluation forms, but many companies provide verbal comments and feedback about the overall experience. No written assignments are due during this phase, but registration for two credits of pass/fail Agribusiness Industry Field Experience is required.

Reflective Observation

The first written assignment after the internship begins the reflective observation phase. Students write a professional business memo providing an overview of their internship, what surprised them the most, and what they learned from the experience. Many students share deep reflections on changing career goals and observations about workplace interactions. To increase student interaction and provide presentation opportunities, the second phase of this assignment requires students introduce themselves, briefly explain their internships and name one thing that surprised them about their experiences. While most students in the department already know each other, this exercise provides an opportunity for new transfer students to form a comfortable working relationship with their peers and gets everyone talking.

The second written assignment focuses on personal reflection. While still part of the reflective observation phase, this assignment requires consideration of their personal strengths and weaknesses. Students reflect on their dominant transferable skills (skills which may be transferred to a career situation). After ranking their skill set, they write a concise sentence for each of their transferable skills. Then they write "war stories" providing examples of how they successfully used these skills. Many times the examples come directly from their recent agribusiness internships. Not only does this

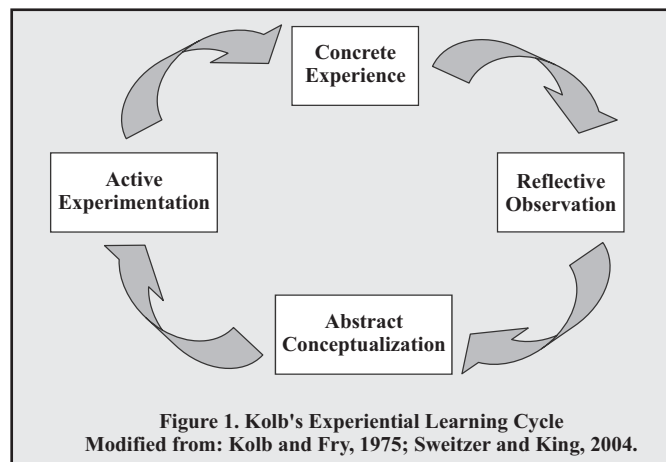


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle
Modified from: Kolb and Fry, 1975; Sweitzer and King, 2004.

understand issues and opportunities gleaned from recent industry experiences.

Concrete Experience

While the concrete experience phase is primarily the internship itself, the first assignment precedes the internship. An internship proposal is required of each student and approved by the department internship coordinator. The proposal not only ensures that the internship satisfies experiential requirements but also begins the concrete experience

assignment provide reflective observation, but it also prepares students for career searches and interviewing experiences.

Abstract Conceptualization

The course then moves to multiple exercises in issue or opportunity identification stemming from internship experiences. Group and personal activities focus on brainstorming about internship experiences that could lead to problem-solving or opportunity analysis. Reflective observation occurs as students explain issues they noticed during their internships. Students also begin the abstract conceptualization phase as they fit an actual opportunity or issue into a researchable topic. Students assist others in recalling theories and methods previously learned and how each method could be implemented. As many industry positions require teamwork, this section of the course has students practice their constructive teamwork skills. Through teamwork they help identify interesting analysis projects for each student.

A detailed outline is required as part of the abstract conceptualization phase. This assignment organizes the issue and related theories and methods for analysis. Students must use information from previous coursework or new information they will acquire to plan how their analysis will proceed. Each student schedules a meeting with the instructor at this point to verbalize analysis plans and receive feedback and suggestions.

Active Experimentation

After receiving feedback, the students proceed to project analysis as part of the active experimentation phase. As possible outcomes or remedies are analyzed, students are led to form decisions based on theoretical applications. The written report is a concise review of the issue, analysis method and theoretical construct, results, and recommendation. Students must not only analyze an issue but also explain the results and defend their recommendation.

Students analyze issues and recommend plans of action. For example, one student worked for a landscaping and greenhouse company over the summer. Urban development was encroaching on the firm's greenhouses and plantings. The firm was under pressure to relocate. So, the student completed an analysis of selling the current property and relocating. Another student worked for an accounting firm. The firm was deciding whether to open a new location in a neighboring city. The student completed a competitive analysis for the firm about entering a new market.

As one of the overall objectives of the course is to improve oral communication skills, the students must create and present an electronic presentation (using PowerPoint® or similar presentation software). While each student presents material, all other

students are required to ask questions and critique each presentation. Even though the students are not required to put their project recommendations into action, they must explain and defend the recommendation and action plan. This phase is not an actual concrete experience in implementation, but the students gain experience in defending a recommendation based on their analysis.

Conclusion

Students are better prepared to enter the dynamic agribusiness industry workforce after experiencing an internship and completing an academic course designed to enhance the internship learning experience. Discussions with employers indicate that including analysis projects helps student interns focus their work and develops useful information for the companies. Several local companies have begun focusing student internships around project proposals developed from this course. Through planning the internship and completing assignments, students have progressed through Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. Numerous instructors during the students' college careers have provided introductions to theories and methods. The agribusiness internship and academic course provide opportunities for re-learning the material and grounding those abstract concepts into concrete experiences. An opportunity to enhance their career search skills, along with integrating professional-style verbal and written assignments creates a better prepared agribusiness student. Student evaluations over the life of the course consistently indicate that issue analysis, written reports, and oral presentations provide the greatest benefits of the course and prepare students for the next step in their careers.

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