



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

# The Student Experience

*Proceedings of the*

## **32<sup>nd</sup> HERDSA Annual Conference**

6-9 July 2009

Darwin, Australia

Clarke, D. & Burgess, C. (2009) Using practice-based education to improve the student experience, in *The Student Experience, Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference, Darwin, 6-9 July 2009: pp 73-80.*

Published 2009 by the  
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc  
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia  
[www.herdsa.org.au](http://www.herdsa.org.au)

ISSN: 0155 6223  
ISBN: 0 908557 78 7

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# Using practice-based education to improve the student experience

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Practice-based education (PBE) is an invaluable experience as it offers students an essential bridge between the conceptual tools gained in a university classroom and the realities that occur in the social and physical context of the workplace (Clifford, Macy, Albi, Bricker & Rahn, 2005). The rationale for PBE at Charles Sturt University (CSU) is to enhance the student experience and ensure 'work-ready' graduates. As a Teaching Fellow seconded to CSU's Education for Practice Institute (EFPI), this research used a document analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) of course profiles, subject outlines, assessment descriptions and field observation notes to identify guiding principles that inform the design of practice-based education in three purposively selected case studies. The case studies represented undergraduate courses that demonstrated quality practice, represented traditional and new approaches to implementing PBE, were on various CSU campuses, and were in different Schools and Faculties. The results of the research are significant as these guiding principles can be extrapolated to other CSU courses and tertiary institutions who offer their students PBE opportunities to enhance the student experience.

**Key words:** practice-based education, case study, guiding principles

## Practice-based education (PBE)

Charles Sturt University (CSU) prides itself on providing practical, employment-focused courses that ensure our students graduate with the attributes and workplace skills required to step confidently into new employment opportunities. More than 80 per cent of all undergraduate programs at CSU have a professional practice component, and more than 83 per cent of CSU's graduates find full-time employment within four months of completing their degree. (Goulter, 2008)

The effective management of practice-based education (PBE) within the corporate structures of universities is a complex and time-intensive process. While examining the range of PBE programs across CSU, it became apparent that there were differing requirements and standards expected of staff, students, external cooperating professionals and workplaces within these PBE programs. If student learning is enhanced through responsive and collaborative systems between all stakeholders, teaching programs need to be able to provide thoughtfully designed procedures to prepare and support students through their PBE experiences. CSU and its stakeholders, in particular employers and professional associations, need to ensure that there is an ongoing dialogue about graduate outcomes based on an acceptance of stakeholders' expectations and responsibilities. Graduate outcomes need to be

focused on the needs of the particular profession with tomorrow in mind and need to be regularly assessed and documented. As such a CSU Education for Practice Institute (EFPI) Teaching Fellowship project was designed to investigate “Guidelines to Enhance Practice-based education”. This fellowship research project was aimed at investigating a set of principles to guide the design of PBE at CSU. The authors define practice-based education (PBE) as any tours, field placement, field experience, industry placement, clinical placement, internship, simulated work environments, community-based learning or practicum program conducted as part of, or in association with, a CSU course or subject.

While the terms PBE and work integrated learning (WIL) are often interchanged, both concepts refer to directed or supported educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace. The National Commission for Cooperative Education, based in the United States of America, defined work-integrated learning as:

*“... a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career goals. It provides progressive experience in integrating theory and practice. It is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party.”*

(Groenewald, 2005, p.17)

PBE that is intentional, organised, recognised and accredited by a university can provide powerful learning experiences for students and staff. PBE is concerned with higher education learning experiences that seek to combine and integrate, to varying degrees, academic study, work, formal and informal learning and social interaction in institutional, work and perhaps virtual learning. The integration of learning in these different contexts is crucial to the achievement of the learning outcomes for a program and the development of the learner and their identities. Universities in Australia include work-integrated learning or PBE in their curriculums in a range of fields. These fields are diverse and include social work, nursing, allied health, teaching, psychology, business, criminology and environmental science. Courses can combine professional work experience with classroom studies in many forms to include: internships, study abroad, co-operative education, clinical rotations community service and student teaching.

PBE experiences built into programs help students gain the necessary skills to supplement their theoretical training. Research indicates that students find that most of their learning while on placement occurs in non-theoretical areas such as correction of misconceptions about workplace reality, new skills, time management, development of self-confidence and an increased awareness of career options (Cates & Jones, 1999). PBE experiences allow students to learn about career options, explore their abilities and determine their strengths and weaknesses. PBE also provides students with the opportunity to develop those skills that their industry identifies as critical for success; providing them with the opportunity to develop maturity and responsibility as they make the transition from the role of student to professional.

## **Method**

The research employed a qualitative research design by analysing a broad range of documents including course profiles, subject outlines, assessment descriptions and field observation notes to identify guiding principles that informed the design of PBE in three purposively selected

case studies. These cases were the i) Bachelor of Exercise Science; ii) Bachelor of Education (Health & Physical Education); and iii) the Associate Diploma of Policing. The case studies represented undergraduate courses that were known to the CSU PBE community of practice to demonstrate quality practice, represented a diversity of traditional and new approaches to implementing PBE, were on various CSU campuses, and in different Schools and Faculties. In addition, observations of simulated work environment tutorials were recorded as field notes in order to document PBE practices in the School of Policing Studies. These observations and documents were analysed using inter- and intra-textual analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) to identify guiding principles to assist the design of PBE opportunities in courses across CSU. As a result of this document analysis ten guiding principles were derived to facilitate the design of PBE at CSU.

In the following sections, each of these principles is described and illustrated with examples of their implementation using the three CSU case study courses. While the ten principles were evident in all courses, generally only one subject was drawn on to illustrate each principle.

## **1 Embedded conscious reflection**

Embedded conscious reflection is the first of the guiding principles. The author (Clarke) suggests that, for PBE experiences to ensure quality, reflection needs to be continuous in nature, timely, derived from a variety of sources, an invited requirement, assessable, and valued as a tool to assist in the improvement of future practice. These descriptors are evidenced in the Associate Diploma of Policing subject PPP111 Simulated Policing Acquiring Confidence, (SPAC) in the subject documentation and in practice. The subject objectives state: “students should be able to evaluate their practice and develop strategies for improving that practice”. This was witnessed during observations of SPAC tutorial experiences. Tutorials involve students participating in role plays simulating real-world policing scenarios. In small groups, students assume the roles of police, witnesses and victims of crime. Throughout two-hour role plays, students are invited to verbally reflect on their actions, and those of their peers, and modify their practice based on this feedback. Tutors provide constant feedback suggesting improvements to students’ responses to both the participants and the scenario content. At the completion of each tutorial, the tutor provides a verbal de-brief of the tutorial practice and students are required to complete an *Observation and Reflection* sheet guided by four focus questions: i) What did I do well? ii) What areas can I improve in? iii) What information from other subjects assisted me this week? and iv) What am I going to do to improve for future SPACs? As a further source of embedded continuous reflection, tutors complete an *Observation Checklist for SPAC Roleplays* that acts as a record of constructive feedback for students. This feedback is driven by five *key indicators*: i) communication, ii) level of inquiry, iii) keeping records, iv) operational safety, and v) knowledge, skills and attitudes.

## **2 Assessment valued as a reflective learning opportunity**

In describing this design principle the author (Clarke) draws on the notion of authentic assessment (Biggs, 1995). Each of the assessment tasks in the sequence of professional practice subjects in the Bachelor of Exercise Science (EHR117 and EHR320) constructively align their assessment tasks with the outcomes and learning pathway of the subject, and require students to reflect on elements of their personal and professional learning. The assessment tasks explicitly mirror the requirements of real-world tasks. In EHR117 Professional Practice 1, the initial assessment task is threefold, requiring students to: i)

prepare a job suitability analysis; ii) organise and conduct a networking interview with an exercise science professional; and iii) reflect on “their specific skills and abilities, clarify their work values, create a career vision, and identify clear and manageable goals relevant to their chosen field” (EHR117 Subject Outline, 2008, p. 7). Graded from high distinction to fail, these tasks provide the opportunity for students to assess their suitability for the profession and markers provide positive and supportive feedback that acknowledges students’ standards of achievement of subject outcomes.

### **3 Stakeholder understanding of authentic knowledge and skill integration**

The third principle refers to the importance of integrating knowledge and skills both within and between the curricula offered on-campus and during the PBE experience. The subjects supporting the PBE experience need to demonstrate clearly identifiable and authentic links with the PBE opportunity. As evidenced in the subject outline of EPT241 Professional Experience – Introduction to the Professions’: a subject in the BEd (Health & PE) it is stated that

*“there are explicit links in this subject with the other subjects in the semester, ensuring that pre-service teachers consider the specific issues related to adolescents in schools and discipline knowledge.”*

The subject objectives are further support of this integrated approach: students are required to:

- i) demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, and
- ii) recognise the complexity of the learning environment and its implications for teaching and learning.

This rhetoric is given life in the sequencing of subjects in the semester in which the PBE takes place. Professional Experience – Introduction to the Secondary Context is paralleled by two subjects: i) Constructions of adolescence and their educational implications, and ii) Young people’s health and wellbeing: Perspectives and pedagogies, in which the nature of young people’s lives, priorities, attitudes and values are explored and their educational implications made obvious. These subjects explicitly support the learning design of the Professional Experience subject: students’ first professional exposure to teaching young people.

In order for students to authentically integrate their knowledge and skills in the workplace, professional partners need to provide opportunities for students to integrate their discipline, practical, interpersonal and reflective knowledge and skills in responding to real world tasks.

As an assessment requirement of EPT241, during students’ twenty day professional experience in secondary schools, they are engaged in lesson observations, assist to prepare teaching resources, participate in staff meetings, tutor individual students and small groups, and use shadowing experiences to learn about the everyday practices of secondary schools. These tasks require them to apply their on-campus discipline knowledge and develop the interpersonal skills required when interacting with colleagues and secondary students.

#### **4 Real world problems and tasks provide opportunities for transferability of knowledge and skills to unfamiliar contexts**

Brown, Collins, Duguid (1989) argue that the acquisition of knowledge and learning of skills should occur under conditions that are authentic. Authenticity requires students to apply their knowledge to cope with real tasks or problems that naturally occur in the workplace. Therefore PBE opportunities need to assist students to respond to tasks which are relevant, contextual and involve the synthesis of knowledge and skills rather than merely the application of procedural and declarative knowledge (Biggs, 1995). In SPAC students are required to respond to an array of real world tasks such as handling telephone inquiries, using police radio, responding to counter inquiries, and juvenile matters. Rather than practising these skills in isolation, students assume policing roles in scenarios and respond to ‘incidents’ in a simulated village. Conditions in these scenarios are altered throughout the tutorial by the supervising policing staff, and students are prompted to adjust their responses to adapt to the conditions of the changing context.

#### **5 Socialisation into the occupational cultural community**

Socialisation into the community of practice is the fifth principle in PBE to enhance the student experience. Wenger (1998) suggested that for legitimate peripheral participants (LPPs) (i.e., those participants who commence on the fringe of the professions’ activities) to be professionally socialised they need exposure to the breadth of activities of the community’s practices as well as to the range of members of the community. PBE can introduce students to authentic practices through a cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). This cognitive apprenticeship provides students with opportunities to view and adopt the rules, rituals, talk and regimes of the profession. For example, in EPT214 Professional Experience – Introduction to the Secondary Context, the subject outline attachment states the subject “is designed to enhance the pre-service teacher’s insight into the complex nature of a secondary school setting through interaction with colleagues and students”. Opportunities for this development are reflected in the requirements of the 20 day observation and introductory teaching professional experience as students participate in “induction, orientation, familiarisation and consolidation” experiences that require them to shadow colleagues, team teach and document school organisational procedures such as duty rosters, attendance registers, and emergency and safety practices.

#### **6 Partnerships that promote a culture of learning**

This design principle encourages students and industry partners to become lifelong learners. For example, the design of the Bachelor of Education (Health & PE) professional experience subjects aim to “lay the foundation for continuing study, research, self-evaluation and increasing effectiveness within the context of changing educational and social conditions” (Professional Experience Handbook, BEd HPE, p. 8). This culture of learning, however, may not be limited to the student undertaking the PBE, as professional partners often benefit from the experience as staff heightens their awareness of their own role descriptions, approaches to tasks, and ways of viewing their practice and that of the agency or industry. Billett (2001, p. 4) suggests that “social situations – such as workplaces – are not just one-off sources of learning and knowing. Instead, they constitute environments in which knowing and learning are co-constructed through on-going and reciprocal processes”. In the School of Policing Studies, students are supported to take positive risks and engage in opportunities to re-imagine practices and policies in the workplace. For example, in SPAC, police facilitators

probe students to consider alternate solutions to role-play scenarios. Through experimentation with different tactical responses, students make informed decisions as to the best way to deal with an offender or offence. This focus on problem-solving, questioning and critical thinking assists in facilitating students' long-term career skills.

## 7 Meaningful symbiotic relationships

This principle is clearly evidenced in the subject outcomes of EHR320 Professional Practice 2 in the Bachelor of Exercise Science. The outcomes require “students to synthesise and apply their knowledge of problem-based learning to the design, implementation and evaluation of an action research project that has identifiable benefits for all stakeholders in the professional partnership”. The action research project, an assessment task, assists stakeholders to develop a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) that has authentic input by, and positive outcomes for, each of the stakeholders. The explicit roles and responsibilities of the partners are clearly documented in course handbooks and subject outlines, ensuring high quality standards and expectations of members of the professional partnership. As evidence of ongoing productive relationships between schools and the university, the Faculty of Education invites school personnel to collaboratively negotiate with students the nature of their role in the Bachelor of Education (Health & PE) subject EPT442 The Internship. School personnel and pre-service teachers in EPT442 attend a seminar to collectively discuss the specific expectations of the student and associated in-service teacher in the final PBE experience. The resulting collaboratively designed roles, responsibilities and objectives enhance the interrelationship between the university, the schools and the pre-service teachers.

## 8 Curricula developmentally scaffolded with explicit objectives and assessable outcomes

For students to demonstrate specific competencies identified for the acquisition of a qualification, their PBE experiences need to be developmentally scaffolded. Their PBE contexts are essentially *test sites* for future career skills that should be increasing in difficulty, responsibility, initiative, and depth of knowledge required. This sequential progression should be intentionally designed. The two professional practice subjects in the Bachelor of Exercise Science showcase this sequential progression of professional development. Table 1 represents two sequential objectives of these subjects.

Table 1: Professional practice objectives in the Bachelor of Exercise Science

EHR117 Professional Practice 1	EHR320 Professional Practice 2
Explore the notion of being a professional in an occupational cultural community	Participate as a developing professional in an occupational cultural community
Investigate the factors that influence professional identity	Develop a professional identity by participating in a broad array of occupational socialising experiences

These objectives frame the assessment tasks for each of the corresponding subjects. For example, as an introductory assessment task in EHR117 Professional Practice 1, students are required to prepare an electronic poster for a careers day that identifies the diverse nature of professions in the field of exercise science and articulate the knowledge, skill and attitudes

needed to be employed in specific professions within the field. In EHR320 Professional Practice 2, the assessment task requires students to prepare a professional portfolio that evaluates their design and implementation of an action-based research project undertaken during their fieldwork experience.

## **9 Infrastructure supportive of a sustained commitment to professional partnerships**

In defining this design principle, the author (Clarke) refers to university policy relating to resourcing of the PBE opportunity. This includes adequate funding and staffing of PBE to ensure that all stakeholders are sufficiently informed and prepared to undertake a collegial and negotiated partnership. In the Bachelor of Exercise Science, students participate in the PBE experience supervised solely by their associate employer. Strong communication links between the fieldwork placement staff at CSU and the professional industry partners aims to result in an efficient operative process. In EHR117 Professional Practice 1 students are required to establish personal and professional placement objectives, and negotiate these with their supervisor of their fieldwork placement. In establishing these objectives, the supervisor is required to assist the student to identify strategies to achieve these objectives. This information is documented in the subject outline and “Information for Professional Partners” flier. As a requirement of the partnership, industry stakeholders complete initial, mid session and final documentation that reports on the student’s suitability for the profession, skills developed, tasks undertaken and standard of achievement of negotiated objectives. Each of the stakeholders is aware of their contractual obligations of participation in the professional partnership.

## **10 Conditions conducive for change**

Conditions conducive for change is the final principle of PBE identified to improve the student experience:

*“Without the conscious reflection on how procedures are being carried out, how concepts are being formulated and understood, how organisational values impact on decision making, and how individual practice is affected by social ‘rules’, the learner will remain a novice, lacking the ability to transfer what is known and understood within one discipline or field into others” (Crebert, 1995, p. 4).*

Conditions which bring about change can include openness to evaluation of policy and practice through feedback from all stakeholders. At CSU, students are invited to complete an on-line evaluation for each subject that includes PBE. The results of these evaluations are used to refine and re-design organisational procedures of placements, placement policy, the learning design of subjects and assessments and provide evidence of the need for further infrastructure to positively enhance the field work experience for students and their professional partners. To bring about change, open lines of communication need to be established between all stakeholders, together with the maintenance of an on-going rapport and a willingness to listen and action partners’ ideas. As stated in the Professional Experience Handbook (Bachelor of Education, Health & PE):

“... the Faculty of Education sees it as an imperative that site-based teacher educators use established communication networks to maintain close contact with the staff at the university. We welcome, at any time, the comments and suggestions of our colleagues in the field.” (p. 2)

## Conclusion

These guiding principles have the potential to assist the design of programs that enhance the student experience in any tertiary course that offers PBE opportunities. The author (Clarke) proposes that participation in PBE is essential to ensure that graduates achieve the knowledge, skills and attributes required for practice in their profession, and to meet the minimum standards required for safe practice as graduates. While these guiding principles can be used to frame the design of PBE they cannot ensure the level of quality that results from a course's, subject's or program's implementation of PBE. The effectiveness of the outcomes of PBE is highly dependent on the planning for, and implementation and evaluation of, the PBE experience.

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