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INTEGRATING VIRTUAL AND REAL WORLDS: USING AN ONLINE PRACTICUM TO CREATE HANDS-ON LEARNING CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES

Abstract:

This poster presents the findings from implementing an online practicum capstone for the Master of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies (MSIS) degree at Texas State University, San Marcos, TX, USA. This field-based experience assists students as they transition into new jobs in the workplace.

Students come from all walks of life with a variety of learning styles. In order to address the changing demographic in graduate schools across the United States and beyond, we must re-examine the ways in which students transform coursework into real-world experience. In order to address the changing demographic in graduate schools, we must re-examine the ways in which students transform coursework into real-world experience. In the poster presentation, we will illustrate how the MSIS online practicum program creates a learning environment where students can transform their coursework into meaningful experiences relevant to their success in the program and beyond in the workplace. Suggestions for implementation and future research will also be provided.

The target audience of this session is anyone with an interest in creating an online practicum program for students, including faculty, program planners, administrators, and faculty developers. The poster discussion will include methods and strategies from the field of adult education in conjunction with best-practices for creating unique learning experiences through online supported practicum programs. These programs can be utilized in order to meet the social, emotional, and academic learning needs of graduate learners.

We expect conference participants to stop by and preview our poster presentation and engage with us in meaningful discussion about our online-based practicum program. The display will contain the following information and talking points divided into these categories:

1. The need for an online-based practicum program
2. Supportive literature
3. Our process used for implementing the online-based practicum program
4. Evidence of effectiveness
5. Next steps in expanding the online-based practicum program that also supports recruiting of new students to the program

We plan to hold several individual and small-group discussions as well as leave the poster on display.

Keywords:

online learning, adult students, capstone project, experiential learning, Kolb

JEL Classification: I23, I29

Integrating Virtual and Real Worlds: Using an Online Practicum to Create Hands-on Learning Capstone Experiences

At large state universities, adult-serving programs fulfill a unique niche for working adults who require flexible and responsive programs (Coulter & Mandell, 2013) but crave the “big state university” brand. Likewise, such programs may assist a group of “new” traditionally aged students, who are attracted to the adult-friendly style of program delivery, such as facilitative learning techniques, online learning, flexible scheduling, and interactive formats. In the Department of Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies at Texas State University, the Master of Arts/Science in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS/MSIS) program attracts a combination of adult and traditionally aged students from academic, military, governmental, private sector, and other backgrounds (Springer, 2010). The individualized degree plans, coupled with the offerings online and in San Marcos, Round Rock, and Live Oak (San Antonio), Texas, position the program to serve students in these metropolitan and surrounding rural areas.

The MAIS/MSIS program includes a cornerstone module (9 credit hours in introductory, human relations, and communications coursework), an academic module (21 credit hours from various departments), and a capstone module (9 credit hours) that includes a professional paper or practicum. During their plans of study, students must complete courses in a minimum of four areas (as determined by prefix) in three colleges. This interdisciplinary approach is ideal for students who have interests in classes or problems that span more than one academic discipline to create individualized and unique learning experiences (Newswander & Borrego, 2009) often based in addressing real-life issues (Brainard 2002; Gibbons, 1998). Developing and maintaining individualized programs is no easy matter; the participation of faculty from disparate backgrounds is required to implement an effective, interdisciplinary curriculum (Stone, Ballard, & Harbor, 2009).

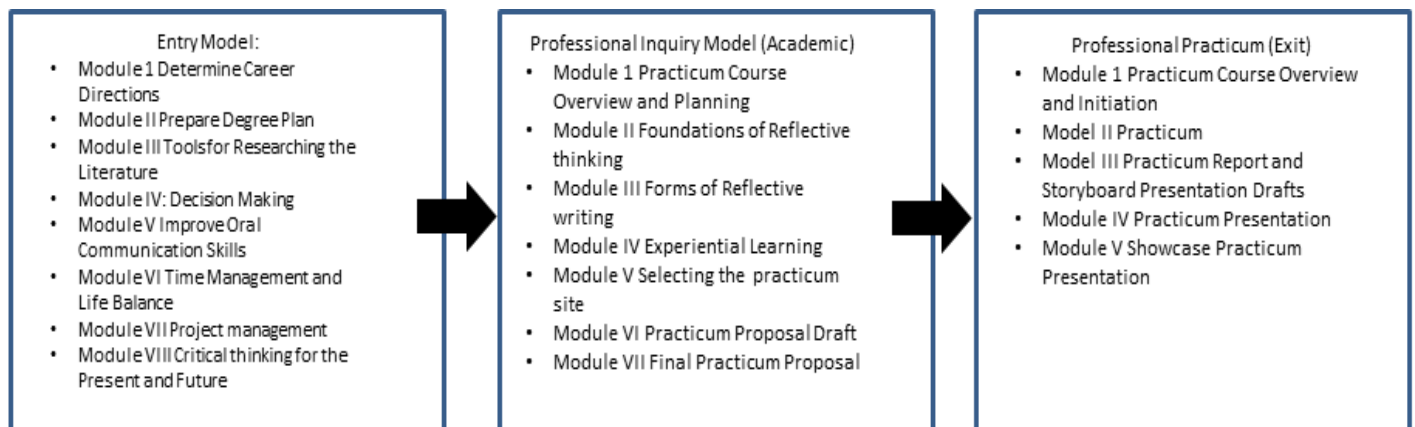
Building on previous research, Manathunga, Lant, and Mellick (2006) proposed that interdisciplinary education occurs in four dimensions. These include relational (e.g. mediated, transformative, and situated learning experiences), intercultural (e.g. intercultural knowledge and skill development to transition from disciplinary to interdisciplinary), critical (e.g. a higher level of critical thinking is achieved through interaction with various disciplinary perspectives) and epistemological (e.g. the students' epistemological development is enhanced through the ability to compare and contrast disciplinary norms, biases, and limits) (Bradbeer, 1999; Ivanitskaya et al., 2002; Jones et al., 1999; Klein, 2001; Lattuca, 2002). These dimensions might occur in several sites of learning such as online or face-to-face classes, as well as through experiential learning.

An inherent strength of the MAIS/MSIS program is that it lays out a plan of study collaboratively where the learners, in consultation with the faculty, select the courses and the capstone project or professional paper. By participating in the decision-making process, learners develop critical thinking, organizational, management, and leadership skills (Cornelius, Gordon, & Ackland, 2011), as well as making connections between previous and new knowledge (Weatherley, Bonn, Kerr, & Morrison, 2003). Students are also practicing reflection (Schön, 1987), which is one of the major stages in Kolb's (1984) four stage experiential learning process.

In the MAIS/MSIS program, the practicum experience begins with the class, *Overview of Interdisciplinary Research*, which focuses on introducing students to

graduate-level research and interdisciplinary studies. The next course in the sequence, *Reflective and Experiential Learning Techniques*, assists students with planning and completing a practicum in their chosen profession. In this online course, students learn the tools of inquiry and write a proposal to implement a practicum. The modules include a course overview and planning, instruction in the foundations of reflective thinking, introduction to reflective writing, overview of experiential learning theory, instructions for selecting a practicum site, direction in writing and finalizing a practicum proposal, and a presentation of the site and project.

In the following course, *Professional Practicum*, students implement the field-based practicum and utilize tools of inquiry to record their practicum experiences. Much of the course includes continued written reflections, including a final report. Modules in this course include a course overview and unit about initiating the course practicum, weekly reflections on the practicum experience, creation of a storyboard and practicum report, and a unit on presenting and disseminating applied and new learning resulting from the practicum. The diagram below provides more details for these courses at the module level.



Utilizing a hand-on profession practicum in an online course sequence integrates students' learning across virtual and "real" worlds as they transition between learning in an online classroom environment and a hand-on practicum one. The curriculum, now in its second iteration, has received positive feedback from students and practicum supervisors alike and shows promise for future success. Data gathered from subsequent cohorts will assist us in further refining and improving this approach.

The MAIS/MSIS program and practicum sequence enables students begin with theory (introductory and research classes), gain content knowledge (academic module), and apply the knowledge in a practical setting (*Reflective and Experiential Learning Techniques* and *Professional Practicum*). The MAIS/MSIS program allows students to select subjects which they are motivated to learn, bridge "book" and "real world" learning, learn from practical experiences, build on their extensive personal experiences, as well as take responsibility for their actions and become more independent, self-directed learners (Knowles, 1974; Lindeman, 1926; Ott, 2011). Through these interdisciplinary, best-practice approaches, students have opportunities for relational, intercultural, critical, and epistemological development.

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