SUPERVISION IN WORK EXPERIENCE FOR LEARNING PROGRAMS

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Abstract
Few would dispute that supervision is an important element in work-study programs. However, the role supervision plays in learning and, specifically how it serves to bridge the theory-practice divide remain unexplored and under-theorised in the literature.

While exceptional academic supervisors and mentors go to great lengths to help students make the connection between work and study, university work-related programs tend to lack frameworks and support mechanisms bridging theory and practice. As a consequence, many academic supervisors are unwilling or unable to provide the facilitative learning students need before, during, and after their work experiences / placements.

More can and should be done to enable student learning if these programs are to ensure the best possible overall experience and learning of students on the job. The paper identifies opportunities to enhance the experience and learning before, during, and after the work placement. The major conclusion is that supervision is crucial to a positive work-study experience and effective learning for students. A model for assessing, developing, and supporting academic supervisors is provided; and a research agenda for supervision in work experience for learning programs is outlined.

Introduction
Supervision in work experience for learning programs has been identified as a significant factor in student learning. Coll and Eames (2000) concluded that the role of the placement coordinator is paramount in promoting greater participation in and satisfaction with work-based learning. There is general agreement in the literature on the essential role of university field educators and agency-based staff in preparing students for and supporting them through their placements (Emslie, 2010). There are other factors, certainly, and this paper will briefly discuss some of them. The authors also appreciate that student learning through such programs is a major topic on its own and deserves attention largely beyond scope of this current paper. It is important to note, however, that students learn on the job, learn differently, and learn different things in spite of program design or flaw. What and how they learn, and how they make use of what they learn can be diminished without the guidance of a competent and attentive learning supervisor.

We address a range of aspects and issues of relevance to supervisors and supervision in this paper. Individual aspects and issues merit exclusive and deep explication, and the authors hope that this brief survey will inspire further research and greater attention to supervision in scholarly
journals and texts. Accessible and explicit research in the supervision of work experience for learning programs is scant. A search of the *Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships* using the term "supervision" produced eight studies published since 1969. There were only three found in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* using the same search term. This is particularly important given that these are the two main journals in the field. Outside the specialisation, there are a dozen scientific journals that have published one or two articles on supervision over the years; and supervision has been more topical in certain professional disciplines such as teaching, nursing, and counselling. Finally, a related difficulty in searching the literature on supervision of work experience for learning programs is the nomenclature: supervisors go by many names, including placement coordinator, as Mosbacker’s (1989) article in the *Journal of Cooperative Education* attests.

So, while much can be drawn from tangential work on supervision, research that targets student learning in work experience for learning programs is minimal. The relationship between supervision and learning remains unexplored (Marrow and Tatum, 1994; exceptions identified include Carson and Carnwell, 2007; and Dewar and Walker, 1999). There exists little to no theory of supervision. We find almost no information on how supervisors are developed, rated, or rewarded (with Baker, Exum, and Tyler, 2002, an exception). Some interesting work has been done on developmental stage theories as applied to supervision (Le Maistre and Boudreau, 2006; Nye, 2007). Stock-Ward and Javorek (2003) provide a rare perspective on supervisor development. More common are studies linking supervisor behaviour or effectiveness to student satisfaction, exemplified by D'Abate, Youndt, and Wenzel, (2009) and Giddings, Vodde, and Cleveland (2003). The fact is more questions about supervisors and supervisions may be raised than have been answered. Some of these are enumerated in directions for further research (concluding section).

Anecdotally, we know that supervision in work experience for learning programs is a challenge (Rodger and Webb, 2008; Morse, 2006). It is often perfunctory and unrecognised. Supervisors can be poorly equipped to supervise and under-resourced to do so (Emslie, 2010). Supervision is labour-intensive and costly. Yet, we continue to believe supervision matters: we commit to and provide it. Unfortunately, commitment may be half-hearted and delivery mechanistic. Supervisors, themselves, are not to blame and no criticism is intended. The authors are both supervisors and live with these realities on a day-to-day basis. What is more at issue here is not the individual supervisor but the system within which he or she works, which can be more or less supportive (Peleg-Oren and Even-Zahav, 2004). What we need is to better understand the role of supervision and the skills and supports required to do the job consistently well (King, 2001; McDermott, 2008), then build and resource our programs accordingly. Perhaps if more were known publicly about the positive impact of and the crucial role of supervision on learning, more might be done to enhance supervisor capability and the capacity of supervision programs. We hope this paper promotes greater awareness and much needed dialogue.

**Clarifications and Positioning**

Our opening sentence introduces three main ideas: supervision as a prime factor, work experience for learning, and Industry Engaged Learning. The preceding section emphasises the role of supervision in student learning and points to a paradoxical dearth of literature on supervision. Here, we define and contextualise supervision.
Supervision. This paper concerns supervision of students in work experience for learning programs, further elaborated and distinguished below. The focus is on active supervision during placements—the designated time a student spends engaged in a job or activity for learning—by the academic supervisor. The supervisor may be involved in pre-placement preparatory activities with students, as well as post-placement tasks to help them consolidate their learnings and transition back to full-time study. Table 1 outlines 20 task-based competencies of the academic supervisor. These supervisors are sometimes referred to as learning guides or mentors. As explained further on, there are at least two supervisory roles with respect to the placement, the workplace and the academic. Ram (2008) provides a useful comparison between the two. Here, we are concerned primarily with academic supervision, but concede that there needs to be a healthy, mutually-productive relationship between the two. Remembering that placements are foremost about student learning and development, together, the workplace supervisor, the academic supervisor, and the student form a learning triad. A working definition of this type of supervision and the supervisory role is:

Supervision is the guidance and support students need while on placement to ensure the learning experience is optimised and that they have the overall most positive experience possible. In addition to serving the institution's duty of care responsibility for student safety and well-being while on placement, the supervisor fulfils various roles including teacher, counsellor, mediator, consultant, and diplomat. The supervisor must often work with managers and human resources staff in the host organisation to create effective learning environments for students. The academic supervisor is responsible for assessing student learning associated with the placement, and may collaborate with the workplace supervisor to balance assessment of work performance and learning. Further, the academic supervisor may have to work together with course convenors or other faculty members and workplace supervisors to ensure alignment between curriculum and workplace requirements. As facilitator of learning, the supervisor may need to continually assist students to make the connections between study and work, that is, to close the theory-practice gap.

Work experience for learning. We chose to use this general and inclusive expression rather than titles of particular programs or models such as Cooperative Education, Work Integrated Learning, Professional Practice, or the authors' own program, Industry Engaged Learning (see below). For our purposes, here, work experience for learning includes formal and less-formal programs, encompassing internships, practica, and volunteer and service learning experiences. What these different models and programs have in common is that students work as part of or as an adjunct to their formal study, preferably in an area closely related to their course of study or major.

The assumption underlying these programs is that working experience complements academic study. The intent of such programs is that they will bridge the theory-practice divide (Collier and McManus, 2005; Dumas, 2002): students undertaking them will graduate more employable and better equipped to “hit the ground running” than their counterparts who have completed academic units only. While there is no consensus on the optimum level and type, the academic institution must retain some connection to and influence over students while on work experience for learning placements. A key link between the academic institution and students' course of study while they are on placement is the academic supervisor.

1 While there may be important parallels, this paper does not specifically address research supervision. Research supervision has enjoyed considerable attention in the past decade. Readers might refer to Nulty, Kiley, and Myers (2009) or Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007).

2 We use the term work as shorthand, here, and prefer "active engagement" in industry and the community to denote student learning placements.
Industry Engaged Learning. Industry Engaged Learning (IEL) is academic learning that has a real-world work experience component. What distinguishes IEL from other professional practice programs is its dual-focus. There must be both strong practice and learning from practice components. By practice we mean work or "theory-applied." This is the real-world context in which a student brings to bear what he or she has learned in the classroom. This is important because, as Dumas (2002) observes, classroom learning is devoid of context. It is relatively insular, predictable, and artificial. There is usually one right answer and a set means of finding it.

In Industry Engaged Learning, students must actively engage in real work. Such work is often full of competing demands and contradictory messages. There may be multiple answers, none perfect; and students may have to invent their own paths to finding and implementing solutions. Students on IEL placements need to learn to navigate and learn from these circumstances. Engaging real problems and drawing lessons from their experiences is how students learn at, through, and with work. This is quite different than, say, learning for or about work (or even from work, retrospectively). For this reason, classroom-based experiential learning activities and case studies are excluded from the IEL classification. Placements can be in industry, the public sector, the community, or even at the academic institution. It is not the job or location of the work that is most important, but rather the degree of engagement, the quality of the learning, and the relationship between the work and the student’s study and career aspirations.

It is quite likely that academic supervisors who are also practitioners (practicing professionals), as with lawyers, teachers, and nurses, find helping students make the connection between theory and practice easier and more natural than might an administrative generalist. Again, it is not our intent to ridicule work experience for learning programs or any individual practitioner, but to highlight the importance of learning from practice and underscore that more can and should be done to close the gap. As Van Gyn, referenced by Doel (2009), states:

Students do not necessarily learn from experience, particularly if they do not think about it or do not take responsibility for it. If a placement is only a way to gain experience of industry, and a method of linking technical knowledge with real life application, then it is not being fully utilised (p. 172).

The authors have observed consistently over time that many students fail to recognise what they have learnt and its value, a finding supported by Morse (2006) who concluded that students have difficulty accessing and appreciating their learning. Most students speak of their work experience in glowing terms, and are particularly optimistic about their employment prospects as a result of their gained work experience. However, many fail to make the leap between theory and practice or ever learn to learn from practice. Boud and Costley (2007) noted that academic supervisors sometimes fail to help students bridge the theory-practice divide, and Morse (2006) observed that workplace supervisors are even less likely or able to do so.

Supervision—The Uncommon Denominator

Most formal work experience for learning programs incorporate some form of supervision, as do internships, practicums, and apprenticeships. Across and within these models supervision no doubt differs. Requirements and expectations may be as varied as the programs themselves and those who convene and administer them. However different supervisors, the supervisory task, and supervision programs might be, the authors maintain that there are similarities and, perhaps, universal principles in supervision. Our research agenda includes, for example, classifying and distinguishing, and comparing and contrasting supervision in various domains.
Consider Figure 1. We assume that there are at least a minimum number of universal principles with respect to supervision. Amongst these universals would be striking an effective balance between performance (doing the job) and development (maturing and learning; developing a professional identity). Citing O’Conner, Giddings et al (2003) observe: “…essential elements of good supervision include instruction, modelling, monitored practice, and feedback. Indeed quality of field instruction is considered to be critical in promoting learning and practicum satisfaction (Fortune and Abramson, 1993), and includes dimensions of trust, support, openness, and supervisor availability” (p. 194). Le Maistre and Pare (2004) emphasise that both the academic and the workplace supervisors have roles to play in the continuing development of the student.

Putting Supervision in its Place

Supervision and supervisors play a critical role in work experience for learning programs (Coll and Eames, 2000; Cooper et al, 2010). Given that most programs incorporate some type and level of supervision, this belief is apparently shared by many practitioners and program administrators. It seems odd, then, that supervision should receive little attention and is often treated cavalierly (Donkor et al, 2009; Emslie, 2010). A set of factors working against programs, and supervision in particular, is that they are labour-intensive and economically unsustainable or at least not extensible in current configurations. These downsides are amplified when programs, including supervision, are perceived as "nice to have" but non-essential adjuncts to the formal curriculum. Such programs are always under threat or will remain contained and under-resourced in times of cost-cutting. This considered, it appears crucial that supervision earns the respect it deserves and that supervisors "lift their game."

Collectively, we have made some progress in defining the role of supervision, identifying the activities of supervisors, and examining the relationship between supervision and learning (Cooper et al, 2010; Dewar and Walker, 1999; Itzhaky and Eliahou, 2001; Mosbacker, 1989; Ram, 2008). It has become clear that views on and expectations of supervisors and supervision differ widely, even within a fairly narrow model of work experience for learning.

It appears that duty of care and workplace performance management take centre stage, with learning taking a secondary role. This may, perhaps, be a consequence of the performative and profit drivers of some host organisations, coupled with the fact that workplace supervisors may possess few teaching and assessment skills. This deprived learning environment may be exacerbated if the academic institution does not place emphasis on student learning during placements. Academic supervision requires time, skills, and other resources—these may all be in limited supply. Facilitation of learning from work experience is not the exclusive purview or prerogative of the academic supervisor; however—though this role may come naturally to and be
expected of him or her. Supervisors at various levels across all types of organisations can and should support and encourage learning (Cooper, Orrell, and Bowden, 2010; Pack, 2009). Greater attention to structuring for and facilitating workplace learning might be fostered if the link to performance, productivity, and sustainability could be demonstrably made. This should be a call to action to academics whose job it is to research such phenomena.

**Supervision—Bringing it Home**

To this point, we have discussed in general terms the role of supervision and its importance with respect to work experience for learning programs. Supervision and its importance were explored in Apostolides and Looye (1997), Fell and Kuit (2003), McDermott (2008), and Schilling (1998), amongst others. We would be remiss to conclude this paper without providing readers clear guidelines on effective supervision, at least with respect to academic supervision in work experience for learning programs.

Table 1 (see next page) enumerates a set of tasks that embody this role. A range of implicit competencies underpin these tasks, and these would comprise part of the professional development regime for academic supervisors as well as provide qualifications for use in recruitment and selection. The list may serve as an evaluation tool for supervision programs and supervisory performance, as well as a guide for educating academic supervisors. As a cautionary note, the tasks may not be relevant for all work experience for learning programs.

As befitting our emphasis on learning from such experiences, the role description does not specifically address programmatic, administrative, and logistical issues and tasks related to placements, such as insurance, occupational health and safety, equity, pay and conditions, reporting, or the like. These issues are covered thoroughly in Cooper et al (2010). Finally, an academic supervisor must be sensitive to the needs and expectations of the workplace and the student working there. The supervisor cannot be too intrusive, and must strike a balance between too much and too little supervision. If one remembers that many of the tasks enumerated in Table 1 concern educating stakeholders and creating conditions for optimum student experiences and learning on the job, over time direct supervision will become less of a requirement, as detailed by Boud and Costley (2007), as well as Le Maistre and Boudreau (2006).

It is worth noting that this competency and task-based set of descriptors contrasts with the desired role of academic supervisors (Itzhaky and Eliahou, 2001; Jordan, 2006; Ladany, Walker, and Melincoff, 2001; Marrow and Tatum, 1994). Students, it seems, seek and evaluate supervisors on a set of personality and charisma dimensions, such as those appearing in Table 2.

| Inspiring, Motivational, and Enthusiastic | Open-minded |
| Approachable; Available | Patient |
| Non-threatening; safe; trusted and trusting | Supportive, Encouraging, Nurturing |
| | Credible; Knowledgeable; Relevant (in the industry / field) |

**Table 2.** Traits identified by students as desired for supervisors.

Concluding that supervision is one of the most important factors in work experience for learning programs, we are establishing an encompassing supervisor development program. In many institutions, as noted by Stock-Ward and Javorek (2003) and Deal and Clements (2006), these programs are lacking. Other scholars have asserted the importance of supervisory training and development. Boud and Costley (2007) remind us, for example, that the academic supervisor’s
role in work-based learning programs places a special demand on academics because it takes them out of their familiar teaching role. Deal and Clements (2006) observe,

Students of trained field instructors were significantly more satisfied than students of untrained field instructors in several areas … supporting their work at the agency, providing specific feedback on their work, using theoretical concepts when discussing clients or situations, and explaining the reasons why an intervention the student used did or did not work” (p. 301).

### Table 1. Competency-based tasks required of the competent work-learning supervisor.

**THE SUPERVISOR’S ROLE IN WORK EXPERIENCE FOR LEARNING PROGRAMS**

**Supervisor:**

1. Builds productive relationships with industry and community partners that will (amongst other things) result in opportunities for students to gain valuable work and life experience.

2. Identifies the kinds of work-learning experiences that will be best suited to students in particular units and majors / courses of study; develops potential opportunities into placements.

3. Assesses workplaces, specific jobs, and workplace supervisors as to their readiness to support student learning on the job, and takes action to make them the best possible.

4. Ensures students are prepared as well as possible for their working experience.

5. Works closely with workplace supervisors to create the best-possible student-job fit and learning conditions for each student.

6. Meets with student and workplace supervisor on a periodic basis to foster dialogue, mediate, address performance issues and opportunities, and optimise learning for all concerned.

7. Has on-going discussions with student about the nature of work and its relationship to the student’s major / course of study and career aspirations.

8. Has on-going discussions with student about performance on the job and what can be learned from both problems and successes.

9. Has on-going dialogue with students while they are on placement to ensure they are okay and keep the link between student on-the-job and the university (duty of care).

10. Uses effective reflective techniques and other useful strategies and assessments to help student learn from his or her experience.

11. Works with student to help him or her form professional identity—to know what it means to be a professional practitioner.

12. Identifies gaps between a unit of study, major, or curriculum and what students need to know and be able to do on the job, and works to close these gaps.

13. Works with faculty members to enhance unit design, assessment, and classroom activities to best capitalise on experience students gain on the job.

14. Educates workplace supervisors as to curriculum trends and research initiatives—what faculty and students are doing and how this might relate to the industry / workplace.

15. When teaching, contextualises material with respect to the world of work, promoting continual thinking about the relationship and relevance of study and work.

16. Participates in preparatory, through-going, and transition-back activities with other practitioners and students.

17. Educates stakeholders* as to the importance of learning from work and the relationships between workplace learning and academic study.

18. Conducts studies and publicises findings on aspects of work experience for learning programs.

19. Advocates for curriculum revision and program improvement based on understanding of best practice.

20. Actively participates in practice-relevant continuing education / professional development. Over time, attains mastery in the field of work experience for learning or closely related area.

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@ May bring current or returned students and workplace supervisors into the classroom to help students make connections between coursework and practice or run tours to suitable workplaces.

# These three phases refer to (1) learning for or about work (orientation); (2) learning at, with, and through work (on-going reflection and bridging theory to practice); and (3) learning from work (retrospective, consolidation, and applying practice back to theory).

* Students, faculty, practitioners, workplace supervisors, parents, HR professionals, etc.
Our supervisor development program builds on codification of the roles and responsibilities of supervisors of work experience for learning programs enumerated in Table 1. The course is summarised in the box insert at left.

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

This paper contributes to the corpus of knowledge on supervision in work experience for learning programs in terms of role and professional development. A clear and important link between supervision and learning is drawn about which the literature says next to nothing. While work has progressed on the role of the academic supervisor (Carson and Carnwell, 2007), there has been little attempt to classify or distinguish supervisory role or activity, or to suggest there may be competing, contrasting, or contradictory objectives or approaches. There is a paucity of detail on supervisory appraisal, development, or promotion.

In addition, the paper calls attention to the fact that supervisors and supervision are generally under-researched, a troubling finding given assumption of the importance of supervision (Carter, 2005; Davys and Beddoe, 2000; Marrow and Tatum, 1994; Peleg-Oren and Evan-Zahav, 2004). In particular, there exists no explicit or accessible theory of supervision. Theorising supervision should be a priority.

Leading to and in the course of writing this paper, numerous questions have been raised with respect to supervisors and supervision. Questions remaining that appear worth pursuing include:

- What mechanisms are in place to support supervision or might be required to enable consistently-effective supervision? What do supervisors need to do the job well?
- Are there significant differences in supervisory role in the respective models of work experience for learning (e.g., internships or Cooperative Education)? If so, why, and what are the implications for theory and practice?
- Are views on supervision and the supervisory process aligned or competing? What are the implications for theory and practice?
- How do supervisees’ needs and expectations of supervision change as they mature and develop skill, knowledge, and confidence? What are the impacts on supervisees of supervisors who cannot or will not adapt to changing supervisee needs and expectations?
- What impediments to effective academic supervision have been identified? What program impacts have been identified resulting from insufficient or poor supervision?
- What are the respective roles and responsibilities of academic and workplace supervisors? How do they interact to promote quality learning experiences for students on the job?
- What are the respective roles and responsibilities of unit convenors and academic supervisors, and what are the impacts and implications on student learning?
- How has supervision been shown to enhance learning? What research designs will prove most effective in establishing links between supervision and learning or that will inform an understanding of the process and relationship?
How can what one learns on the job make academic study more interesting and relevant? What is the process students [potentially] go through to transfer practice back to theory?

In lieu of capable facilitative supervision, what, if any, compensatory mechanisms or processes do students employ to learn from work and bridge the theory-practice divide?

Given our thesis, more fundamental questions might be, What is the relative contribution of supervision to student learning in work experience programs? Are there other factors that contribute more? Of interest to educators and purse-string holders alike, Where do we get the biggest bang for our buck? We do not even know the value of work-learning experience, though numerous positive outcomes such as greater student employability and greater wages upon hire immediately out of university have been documented (D’Abate, Youndt, and Wenzel, 2009). One specific project planned at the authors’ institution is "valuing Industry Engaged Learning," which, amongst other objectives, intends to determine tangible and intangible value and conduct a cost-benefit analysis of a range of separate work for experience learning models.

Academic supervision can provide the key mechanism that bridges theory and practice, helping students to make important linkages between study and work and vice versa. Cooper et al (2010) tell us that:

The supervisory relationship is of critical importance as it is in and through this relationship that learning occurs (p. 125).

It is through this purposeful activity that students develop an understanding of themselves and others, begin to form a professional identity and situate their learning in a specific workplace culture (p. 124).

Capable academic supervision can compensate for curricula that have not fully achieved integration of theory and practice. That said, supervision in work experience for learning programs is not a panacea and should not be seen as an exclusive learning strategy. In fact, we are likely to see more universities integrating, harmonising, and embedding programs. Discrete and fragmented educational strategies and initiatives are less efficient and potent than those that are unified in philosophy, purpose, and principle.

What students take away from work experience depends on many factors, including their own motivation and open-mindedness. Cooper et al (2010) explain,

When students move from the protected university environment to the rough and tumble of the practice world, they are expected to perform and undertake learning activities that they may not want to do or know how to do. The reality of learning in workplaces can be very confronting, creating personal, learning and relationship difficulties…’ (p. 159).

The best academic supervisor may have little impact on student learning if forces against learning are too great. A workplace drive for productivity at expense to learning is one countervailing force. Teaching academics who undervalue work learning may directly or indirectly undermine student motivation to learn from work or the potential to capitalise upon theory-practice relevance. What is said and done in the classroom influences how students perceive and engage with work, as do the kinds of assessments and assignments they are given. As suggested above, work experience for learning programs will always be more effective when the entire curriculum supports work learning and embeds it in teaching, administrative, and support activities.
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