Seeing Cooperative Education: A Study of the Lived Experiences of Cooperative Education Students as Seen and Understood by Co-op Students and Myself

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Title of Research Study

Seeing Cooperative Education: A Study of the Lived Experiences of Cooperative Education Students as Seen and Understood by Co-op Students and Myself

Abstract

Each year, students enrolled in the University of Ottawa Cooperative Education Programs live the experience of preparing for work terms. In this period of pre-employment, traditionally not regarded as meaningful to co-op experience, students are asking themselves important questions like, “What do I have to do to get a job” and “What do I want to be?” As a co-op practitioner I am privy to some of these experiences but I wonder what is not fully seen and understood, and so through photography and story I seek the humanness of students’ experiences of preparing for work and what emerges along their journey.
Seeing Cooperative Education

I am interested in the lived experiences of students in the University of Ottawa Cooperative Education Programs (co-op) and in particular the experiences of these students as seen and understood prior to their first co-op work term. My interest is unusual given that the discourse in co-op is typically focused on experiences *during* work terms and the benefits that result. But in my view, learning from experiences in co-op begins as soon as students start the mandatory pre-employment training, and probably well before when students are deciding to apply for admission. In other words, I believe that experiences of cooperative education are a breathing continuity and that the experiences of pre-employment are rich with meaning. Let me tell you about an experience I had that may connect you with me, with co-op students, and this journey.

*The Monarch*

*Some years ago I worked with a student that I nicknamed The Monarch. She came to my office one day with a dilemma. She had a co-op job lined up. It wasn’t what she wanted to do but it was a sure thing. If she accepted it she could relax and focus on her studies. Her father was urging her to sign the contract and be done with it. It was a good paying job with a large and respectable company.*

*But she wanted something else, something more cutting edge and exciting. She wanted her co-op work term to challenge her mind. She thought she had a chance with a better job,*
something closer to her ideal, but the interview had not yet been called. She asked me, “Should I take the sure thing or hold for a maybe?”

“Are you like your Dad? Do you value the sure thing?”

“No. I’m a risk-taker and a go-getter,” she said.

I pressed on, “Could you sleep at night even if the better job never materializes? Would you kick yourself if you ended up with neither?”

She asserted, “I would sleep soundly. I would know that I had made the right decision and I would live by my choice.”

The young woman left my office having decided to pass on the sure thing and wait for the job she really wanted. In the end however, I learned that The Monarch changed her mind. She took the guaranteed job with the respectable employer.

What happened? Did her father pressure her or did she lose her self-assuredness without help from anyone? Did she grow fearful? Tired? Empty? Old? Did she sacrifice the risk-taker she claimed to be or had she not yet become one, like a butterfly struggling against the walls of her chrysalis? Or maybe it was something else?

(Narrative has been modified to protect the identity of the student).
Experiencing Co-op Pre-employment

The anecdote of The Monarch is one experience among many that students might live as they seek employment and wait for their co-op work term. Aloud, and I suspect quietly to their selves, students feel the heavy pressure of the question, “What do I want to be when I grow up?” The time for an answer, spoken with clarity and conviction is upon them. In pre-employment students’ energy, most often optimistic and refreshing is sometimes uncertain, unpredictable, and suspended (Cameron, 2002), miraculous and mundane, like waiting for spring to arrive. Perhaps students are seeing themselves and becoming alert to their Self, awakening to their humanness (Fujita, 2005, p. 132). Perhaps their stories, rich with experience, need to be seen and recognized as meaningful to cooperative education.

A Story of Co-op

Classically, the storytellers of cooperative education begin at a time over 100 years ago with Herman Schneider. Regarded as a forefather, he established the first co-op program at the University of Cincinnati in 1906 as a reaction to the gaps he saw in civil engineering students’ learning (Groenewald, 2004; Grosjean, 2003; Sovilla & Varty, 2004; UCincinnati, 2008, 2009). By adding work terms throughout their undergraduate education he believed that students would have a greater opportunity to learn the skills not easily conveyed in the classroom setting (Grosjean, 2003). Schneider’s beliefs may have been encouraged by John Dewey (1916) who promoted the value of removing the artificial separation between vocation and academia (Linn, 2004; Prentice, 2001; Van Gyn & Grove-White, 2004).

However, despite the efforts of these co-op leaders, the artificial separation between work and study persists. As with other schools that offer cooperative education (Coll & Eames, 2007), at the University of Ottawa academic credits are awarded for completed work terms but not for
the preparatory training. The learning prior to work terms is not counted. It’s non-time. As they say, “It isn’t the real world.” Instead, the calibrated world time of work terms is what is publicly verifiable and recognized (Heidegger, 1962; Sokolowski, 2000). If work can be clocked then it matters as experience. Otherwise, it’s an unnameable pre-event.

The pull of this sort of thinking, where time in co-op is counted according to work terms, is felt with how co-op researchers have regarded the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Lave and Wenger (2007) describe learning as tied to practice and advance that legitimate learning is situated. Researchers have found it helpful to use situated learning theory to understand learning in co-op because each work term offers a situation where learning can occur through practical and hands on experience (Billett, 2007; Coll & Eames, 2007; Eames, 2003; Fleming & Eames, 2005; Howard & England-Kennedy, 2001; Raelin, Glick, McLaughlin, Porter, & Stellar, 2008).

Work terms do indeed provide opportunities for practical and hands-on experience but these opportunities are also present during study terms. There isn’t a sharp divide at the point where study ends and work begins. Instead, co-op students experience a blurry transition as they go through the co-op placement process prior to employment. They are learning even before they start their work term, doing the practical and theoretical work of becoming.

Students, not yet on-the-job, are on the periphery of legitimate participation (Lave & Wenger, 2007). As they participate in their study term they write resumes, interpret job descriptions and company web sites, apply to jobs, and interview with employers that have selected them over others. They learn what it means to be a scientist, a writer, or an engineer. Situated in the placement process they try out the language, postures, and attire of their profession. They are asking themselves, “Am I a scientist?” “Do I really want to be a writer?”
“Can I be an engineer?” And they are answering as best they can, learning as they go, who they are, what they want to be, and if they’ll be accepted. They are selected and they are passed over. They are successful and they are not.

Thus, finding their conviction may not always be apparent. Like the story of The Monarch, students may wonder about their choices. They may feel the need to divide themselves in order to achieve the reward of successful placement – give up one thing to get something else. Since division is impossible and artificial, they may be asking, “What parts of me must I hide in order that I might emerge as a professional in my field?” “Can I truly be myself and do the job?” “What do I really want?” When wondering about all these things, I suspect that there exists a tugging, a tension that is “animate and alive” (Abram, 1996, p. 199). These tensions are worthy of our notice.

Other Stories of Co-op

I began my exploration of co-op, of the experiences prior to work terms, with the anecdote you have read and the photographs you have seen. Stories can light our way and enable us to “see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself” (van Manen, 1997, p. 130). Meanwhile, images can bridge “the gap between the limitations of language and experience” (Hodges, Keeley, & Grier, 2001, p. 390). Stories and images like those that I have shared can “nudge our awareness until we pay attention” (Ely, 2007, p. 584) to the meaning of experience as something that is permeating and saturating our senses in the nows.

And what might this be? The Monarch, her dilemma, her choices, and her silences are just a beginning. In fact, they are my reflections and where I began this journey. And so, to understand student’s experiences of co-op pre-employment it is the students that must be asked.
*Images Helping Us Tell Stories*

Harper (2002) explains that when a researcher takes photographs there is the opportunity to reframe mundane experiences to make them visible to the participant. As with my picture of The Monarch, I am the researcher/photographer moving in to see and show the threads of a classic dress shirt. It is a simple picture but because it is close-up and omits the face, it creates possibilities for discussion.

Like the anecdote of The Monarch, it is *my* exploration of a young woman and her choices in professional attire that construct the truths and falsehoods of her image (Goldstein, 2007). If shown to The Monarch, the image might enable her personal experiences to be visible to her in new ways. She might open up about something that was hidden. Or, she might deem it unique or beautiful but distant from her lived experiences (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Perhaps her reaction would be a little bit of both. Either way, I’d certainly like to ask her.

The grainy picture of the road is a snap shot from my digital camera phone. With it I’m attempting to be like The Monarch, a study participate/photographer that is comfortable with the “terrain” of digital imaging (Riley & Manias, 2004, p. 399). It is a picture taken as a student might with the goal of sharing personal experiences with me, the researcher/photographer.

This is sometimes called autophotography (Riley & Manias, 2004). It is image-making where participant/photographers visually represent their lived experiences because it offers a means to capture their symbolic world (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Riley & Manias, 2004). In the case of the digital camera shot, the image is of the snowy road that co-op students trudge along as they make their way to and from interviews and consequently, to and from career possibilities. It is The Monarch’s exploration of her own experiences of the co-op placement process and the story she wants to have known.
The image of the road and the image of the person in white are quite different. One is rough and direct while the other is crisp and abstract. One is styled as though taken by the researcher/photographer and the other is styled as though taken by the student/photographer. And yet, both offer a way to the phenomenon and into the phenomenon (van Manen, 2005). Each picture, guided by the photography protocol (Appendix B), explores the objects, people, places, events, or personal aspects of co-op experiences (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). And, they both capture what is typical, important, or valued (Price, 2002), ill fitting or upsetting with the co-op experience. Both help create understanding of what is unseen and both help the stories of co-op pre-employment to unfold.

Seeing Co-operative Education

This study began with my anecdotes and photographs and an invitation to co-op students to share their stories and pictures of pre-employment. In 2010, six University of Ottawa students newly enrolled in the Cooperative Education Programs, expressed interest in participation. They wanted to explore their thoughts, feelings, and seeing in the time prior to their first co-op work term and to share these with me.

In this bounded time (Stake, 1995) the students brought their experiences into view through photography (Appendix B) and two in-depth one-on-one qualitative interviews (Appendix C and D). Meanwhile, my exploration emerged alongside with my photography, journaling, writing and re-writing (van Manen, 1997).

During the one-one-one interviews we overlapped. The students shared their pictures and stories with me and I shared mine with them. As we sat together I encouraged our interrelating and the interpreting of our images for each other (Ball, 2006; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006;
Goldstein, 2007; Harper, 1994). Our meetings were a discussion and often a reframing of understanding. We talked, listened, and laughed.

And what have these six students shared? What meaning do they want to unveil? Throughout, analysis has been an on-going activity, beginning with my anecdotes and photographs and continuing throughout the research project with my journaling and students’ sharing of story and image. As such, analysis continues inductively as I write. And in the quiet left by the departing participants, I reflect at what has been shown, what has been described, and what has emerged – the words and their etymology, idiomatic phrases and their deeper meanings, experiential stories (van Manen, 1997) and images.

With the autophotography, in-depth qualitative interviews as well as my reflective journaling and image making, the phenomenon emerges in various ways (Thomas, 2006) and tumbles with themes and outliers. As I write, I learn that the lived experiences of the time prior to students’ first work terms, as seen and understood by co-op students and me is “richer and more complex than anything we could have anticipated” (Shank, 2002, p. 187).

My experiences of cooperative education bump with students’. But, rather than putting something on top of something else, understanding and expressing meaning seem to surface and resurface as a “back and forthing” (Bach, 2007, p. 287) and expand. As I reflect, I attempt to respectfully listen and watch for multiplicity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and accordingly enrich the study by challenging our understanding of the phenomenon (Rogers, 2007).

My hope is to allow the phenomenon of co-op pre-employment to become apparent from the words and photographs that have been shared with me and to offer these to the co-op community as narratives and selected photographs of students’ lived experiences. Design decisions emerge in “light of growing understanding” (Josselson, 2007, p. 557) but likely the
narratives will be composites of students’ stories and perhaps exemplars like the anecdote of The Monarch that I have told. Floating, expanding, and interrupting these narratives will be the photographs taken by students and I. The images may be those that suggest a theme important to students’ lived experiences as well as those that although unique, open understanding in new ways. As information our photographs may make statements, as art they may “create space where the experience can be vicariously lived” (de Mello, 2007, p. 207).

As a travel this journey, I write, reflect, and work reflexively and allow space for meaning to make itself known (Shank, 2002). I enjoy the experience and revel in narration as a living (de Mello, 2007; Rogers, 2007). I swim in a shadowy sea of yellow, magenta, and cyan. And truth be told, I have been doing this all along without false divisions keeping me from counting when it all began and when it will end.
## Appendix A: Researcher schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher participation</td>
<td>Write journal reflections and anecdotes</td>
<td>Jan 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use photography protocol and take pictures</td>
<td>Continuous throughout the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit student participants</td>
<td>Send recruitment email</td>
<td>Jan 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send recruitment email reminder</td>
<td>Jan 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct group information meetings with students</td>
<td>Explain the project in a group setting</td>
<td>Group Session A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain and secure informed consent</td>
<td>Jan 14, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain photography protocol and supporting materials</td>
<td>Group Session B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan 15, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher and students take pictures using protocol</td>
<td>Send reminder email I</td>
<td>Feb 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send reminder email II: Submitting photos and scheduling first interview</td>
<td>Feb 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather images and schedule individual interviews with students</td>
<td>Gather disposable cameras or digital images; provide new disposable cameras to the students that require them; answer questions; schedule first interview</td>
<td>Late Feb 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop/save photographs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct first individual interviews with students</td>
<td>Conduct first interview protocol</td>
<td>Late Feb 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take photograph of student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare data</td>
<td>Transcribe student’s first interviews</td>
<td>Mar 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send transcriptions to students for review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make changes as required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher and students take pictures using protocol</td>
<td>Send reminder email I</td>
<td>Apr 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send reminder email II: submitting photos and scheduling second interview</td>
<td>Mar 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct individual meetings with students</td>
<td>Gather digital images; answer questions; schedule second interview</td>
<td>Apr – May 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Save photographs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct second</td>
<td>Conduct second interview protocol</td>
<td>Apr – May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual interviews with students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare data</td>
<td>Transcribe student’s second interviews</td>
<td>Jun – Aug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send transcriptions to students for review</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make changes as required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze images</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write Participant Profiles</td>
<td>Analyze data</td>
<td>Sep 20 10 –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write and rewrite</td>
<td>Jan 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send profiles to committee for review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing up</td>
<td>Analyze data</td>
<td>Jan 2011 –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write and rewrite</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Submit to committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make changes as required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defend dissertation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Student and researcher photography protocol

Title of the study: Seeing cooperative education
Principle investigator: Jeela Jones, PhD Candidate
Research supervisor: Dr. Ruth Kane
University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education
Contact details for questions or problems: Jeela Jones (613) 562-5741 ext. 6884 jjone014@uOttawa.ca

The purpose of this research project is to understand the experiences of co-op students prior to their first work term. I am interested in images of what’s typical, important, valued, and ill fitting or upsetting to co-op students.

Some topics that you might consider include objects, people, places, events, and personal aspects of your experience. Please consider the following:

Topic 1: Objects and people
Photograph objects or people that are typical, important, valued, or ill fitting/upsetting with regards to your co-op experience.

Topic 2: Places, ceremonies, and events
Photograph places, ceremonies, or events that are typical, important, valued, or ill fitting/upsetting with regards to your co-op experience.

Topic 3: Personal
Photograph aspects of yourself, friends, or family that are typical, important, valued, or ill fitting/upsetting with regards to your co-op experience.

Have fun!
Appendix C: Student interview protocol I

Title of the study: Seeing cooperative education
Participant name:
Participant chosen pseudonym:
Participant’s program of study:

(Briefly review the project. Briefly review the informed consent form.)

Part 1

Main question: Tell me about the pictures you took.

Additional probing questions:

1. What images are significant to your cooperative education experiences? Please explain.

2. What do these images say about you?

3. What do these images say about cooperative education?

4. Are there images you didn’t get but wish you had? Please explain.

5. What might you photograph now that we have had this discussion?

Part 2

Photograph of the participant.

1. Tell me about what you’re wearing.

2. What do these clothes say about you?

3. If you could have the perfect outfit for cooperative education what would it be and why?

(Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and images).
Appendix D: Student interview protocol II

Title of the study: Seeing cooperative education  
Participant name:  
Participant chosen pseudonym:  
Participant’s program of study:  

(Briefly review the project. Briefly review the informed consent form.)

Part 1

Main question: Tell me about the pictures you took.

Additional probing questions:

1. What images are significant to your cooperative education experiences? Please explain.
2. What do these images say about you?
3. What do these images say about cooperative education?
4. Are there images you didn’t get but wish you had? Please explain.
5. Are these images connected in any ways with your first set of pictures?

Part 2

Photograph of the participant.

1. What are you thoughts when you see the picture I took of you?

Part 3

Photographs taken by the researcher.

1. What are your thoughts when looking at my images of co-op?

(Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and images).
References


Grosjean, G. (2003). Alternating education and training: Students' conceptions of learning in co-op In H. Schuetze & Sweet (Eds.), *Integrating school and workplace learning in Canada:*


