OPTIMIZATION OF STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL PRACTICUM AND eINTERNSHIP

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Abstract

Too many times, education is saturated with artificial concepts that are very different from the practical experience we are all required to have in our professional lives. Entrepreneurial education doesn't make a difference in this regard. Although a lot of students want to have a business and to be self-employed, the concepts which are taught in Universities don't usually meet all their needs, in the case of professional practicum, especially learning from role models, from persons who have succeeded in their life. In this article we will present several optimization possibilies for entrepreneurial education, in working with students from specializations other that economy and business administration, inclusing instruments for the micromanagement of learning. eInternship represents a challenge for both students and supervisors because it involves activities which have a more practical and emotional value. We see internship not as an opposed concept to university's entrepreneurial education but complementary. Internship tries to supplement the knowledge with a more practical dimension, adapted to the individual learning profile and to learning preferences.

We can define eInternship as a relationship that is established between a more senior individual (internship supervisor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using electronic communications, that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, whilst also assisting in the development of the internship supervisor (Johnson & Ridley 2004).

eInternship supervisors should have the following qualities and roles:

- aptitudes and competences admired / desired by the interns;
- to uncover professional "little secrets" and to share moral values;
- professional recognition and high status;
- to be in the position / job (in our case to have a business) in which the intern wants to be;
- to identify and uncover qualities in interns, that they were not aware of;
- to make constructive critiques;

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The main advantages this method is that it puts people in a European contexts of collaboration using a virtual learning environment (VLEs) thus opening new ways for transnational collaboration in learning and creating a business.

VLEs are a perfect solution for eInternship because they're offering flexibility (time, space, work) and possibilities of transnational cooperation in times when people are using post-pc devices and Internet for everyday tasks. However, using high tech in internship isn't a guarantee for success, it's only a premise; the value of the projects depends in a lot of ways by the abilities of the people to make use of the internship potential.

We can identify three main internship styles:

- ***Directive*** – in which the supervisor have a very important role in giving directions, guiding the students with authority;
- ***Collaborative*** – the objectives and knowledge are constructed as the supervisor and intern are colleagues or partners in a business for example;
- ***Casual*** – the supervisors and interns meet in several occasions and discuss specific problems; the people involved do not focus so much on building a relationship but on deciding how to reach specific objectives.

There are many advantages for eInternshi over traditional internship, according to Beach & Brockbank (*apud* Johnson & Ridley 2004): Face-to-face interactions may be distracted by visual clues, and issues related to setting, context, and atmosphere may hamper communication. E-mail and text based messaging are leaner communication channels that allow for more direct information transfer – thereby minimizing contextual issues.

Other advantages are related to:

- Using a variety of multimedia learning tools: video, audio, text
- Enhancing communication and collaboration tools using Web 2.0 technologies etc.
- Flexibility in terms of time, space, work and offer
- The possibility of matching supervisors and interns from different states and cultural areas.
- Reducing financial costs and time invested in the activities
- Reaching to students and eInternship supervisors from remote areas (or those who have other access difficulties), finding a place where to organize the courses, organizing the courses, infrastructure etc.
- Higher access for people of all ages, race, sex, religion, vocation, interests etc.

There are also several disadvantages of internship in comparison with eInternship, like:

- The possibility of lacking immediate feedback (as in nonverbal face-to-face internship), especially audiovisual.

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- The communication sometimes has an impersonal character (in comparison with the more lively and direct face-to-face meetings).
- Some eInternship supervisors and interns don't have the necessary competences to use the hardware and software (or other applications used in Web 2.0)

Internship occurs very often in our lives even if we're not always aware of this phenomenon. "Internship supervisors" could be persons from the family (mother, father, older brother, other relatives) a teacher, a friend or even artists or personalities respected and admired by us. A relationship between internship supervisors and interns should be personal, not formal (as in many educational institutions). Internship must be flexible, spontaneous, natural, saturated with practical wisdom and with personal discovery. The partners should enjoy of being part in this kind of educational experience and set very clear objectives and expectations from each other. Doing otherwise would push the relationship in the sphere of friendship which although may be a component of internship it can't be reduced to it. The internship approach depends largely on the personality of both internship supervisor and intern and their agreement on how the process will develop. It is especially important in the first steps of internship to share realistic expectances and requirements and to agree on them. Boyer highlight the following dimensions of an internship program (Boyer 2003):



Figure 1 - Outcomes of internship process (Boyer 2003)

1. eInternship learning management instruments

Both internship supervisors and interns must use learning micromanagement tools. We must plan the instruction carefully, at macro-didactical level and at micro-didactical level. Each meeting will be scheduled in advance and the issues and challenges in eInternship could be addressed using the following algorithm (Stone 2004; Johnson & Ridley 2004):

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Issue	Internship supervisor	Intern
Create a business plan **Find information about automotive industry**		

Another tool proposed by Stone is the action plan for eInternship (example):

What to do	How to do it
Invest time and effort in setting the climate for learning.	Discuss with your intern how he or she believes you can maximize time together. Determine learning needs and agree on goals.
Be sensitive to the day-to-day needs of your intern.	Ask questions in order to fully understand your intern's workload, and ensure that your protégé will have sufficient time to complete each development assignment you provide.

Stone suggested using a questionnaire in order to cope with how the internship supervisors fare in cross-cultural communication (example):

Skill question	What have you done?	How am I doing?
Have I used reflective listening to clarify and confirm what I have heard?		
Have I checked that my protégé understands my remarks?		
Am I suspending judgment until I have clarified communication?		
Overall, am I providing and receiving feedback?		

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2. eInternship Meeting Methodology

The internship meeting has the following structure from an educational micromanagement point of view:

1. Meeting preparations (setting goals, find resources, planning the internship sequence)
2. Using an eMethodology Learning Management tools
3. Meeting feedback, optimizing the results.

The major objective of our program is to develop the skills needed to start a business. In this respect the interns must acquire the competences to transform their action plan (business plan) into reality. However this requires that the protégés must use self-directed learning techniques. One way of doing that is to set clear objectives, methods of reaching the goals and ways to evaluate the results. The learning methodology is very near, in this case to an action-research project.

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