

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A WORK EXPOSURE  
COMPONENT OF A COLLEGE PROGRAM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF A WORK EXPOSURE  
COMPONENT OF A COLLEGE PROGRAM**

by

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**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate  
Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education.**

**Faculty of Education  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
March 1999**



## **Abstract**

**This study determined whether the four-week work exposure component of the two-year Business Administration (Accounting) diploma program at the College of the North Atlantic was meaningful to its students. Data was collected through observation during two feedback sessions, individual interviews and written work term reports.**

**Seven randomly selected students from the Business Administration (Accounting) program identified psychosocial development and the application of in class learning as crucial to making the experience meaningful. Students indicated, however, that the experience was too short for learning to occur. As well, the timing of the work term at the end of the program meant it was not an integral part of their program and resulted in ineffective reflective learning exercises. As a result, the researcher concluded that the experiential learning process was not complete. Based on this research, it is recommended that the College review the experiential learning component of its programs in the context of policies and procedures, work term structure and necessary support services to ensure that the experiential learning process is complete.**



## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook campus for giving me permission and support to study a college program with respect to work exposure. A sincere thank you to the study participants and the supervising instructor, Mr. Roy Hutchings , for their participation. I would also like to extend an appreciation to Dr. Rosanna Tite, a Memorial University professor, who helped me construct the thesis proposal and to Dr. Dennis Sharpe, my thesis supervisor, for his advice and patience in producing this study. Finally, a sincere thank you to my husband Todd for his continuous moral support, encouragement and patience.



## Table of Contents

	Page
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
 <b>Chapter I Introduction.....</b>	 <b>1</b>
<b>Purpose of the Research.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Statement of a Problem .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Research Questions.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Limitations .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Definition of Key Terms .....</b>	<b>7</b>
 <b>Chapter 2 Literature Review .....</b>	 <b>9</b>
<b>Co-operative Education .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Experiential Learning.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Reflective Learning.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Student Development.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Student Learning .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Work Term Objectives .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Student Perceptions .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>23</b>
 <b>Chapter 3 Study Methodology .....</b>	 <b>26</b>
<b>Data Collection.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Selection and Sampling.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Role of the Researcher.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Ethical Issues.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Data Collection Strategy.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Analysis .....</b>	<b>32</b>
 <b>Chapter 4 Results and Analysis .....</b>	 <b>35</b>
<b>Feedback Sessions .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Interviews .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Question #1 .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Job titles .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Related experience .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Question #2 .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Student expectations .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Question #3 .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Question #4 .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Question #5 .....</b>	<b>44</b>



## Table of Contents

Question #6 .....	44
Work term meaning.....	44
Question #7 .....	45
Additional Data .....	46
Work term structure.....	46
Work term length .....	46
Timing of the work term.....	47
Work term tuition fees.....	49
Experiential Learning Concepts .....	49
Experiential learning .....	49
Reflective learning .....	49
Student development .....	50
Work Term Reports .....	52
Analysis .....	53
Research Question #1 .....	54
Research Question #2 .....	53
Research Question #3 .....	55
Research Question #4 .....	56
Research Question #5 .....	57
Summary .....	58
Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations .....	59
Recommendations.....	62
College Work Exposure Policy and Objectives.....	63
Psychosocial development .....	63
Experiential learning .....	64
Work Term Preparation .....	66
Evaluation.....	68
Work Term Structure .....	68
Partnerships.....	70
Summary .....	72
Summary of Recommendations.....	73
Appendix 1 .....	80
Appendix 2 .....	82
Appendix 3 .....	84
Appendix 4 .....	87
Appendix 5 .....	91



## **List of Tables**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table #1 Student and Work Term Data .....</b>	<b>36</b>



## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Learning is the primary goal of work term placement opportunities within diploma programs of Newfoundland's College system (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995). This concept supports Kolb's (1984) definition of learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Often referred to as experiential or work-based learning, many have stated that it is a powerful motivator because it is positive, meaningful and real (Kendall, Duley, Little, Permaul & Rubin, 1986). Chickering (1977) stated:

It is safe to say that by far the greatest use of direct experience to date has been in practica, internships, on-the-job training components of professional or vocational education programs, and in the few cooperative and work-study programs currently under way (p. 19).

Work-based learning allows students to learn how academic subjects relate to the world of work. Gray and Herr (1998) state that "as compared to traditional school-based learning, work-based learning is not abstract and removed from practical problems but uses the latter to help students learn to apply basic academic skills in problem solving" (p. 202). They also identified additional benefits of work-based or experiential learning including recognition of teamwork, acquiring specific task competencies, and defining realistic work expectations. Structured work experiences also provide students with opportunities to test their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits within a real work context.



An area of concern for the education system, business, industry, and government is the transition from school to work. Studies such as the federal government's Inventing our Future: An Action Plan for Canada's Prosperity (1992) and the provincial government's Education and Labour Market Training: Prerequisites to Economic Development in Newfoundland and Labrador (1990) have identified lack of preparedness of traditional education graduates as one of the major factors resulting in school to work transition difficulties. Such difficulties include periods of unemployment, job changes and lack of skills and knowledge. Exposure to various facets of the labour market before graduation can help students bridge the gap between school and work by creating more awareness of, and becoming better prepared for, the world of work.

Work exposure, or on-the-job training as it is often referred to, is intended to provide students with practical, hands-on exposure in real world work situations resulting in experiential learning. This mode of education delivery is evident in many programs offered by the College of the North Atlantic (CNA). It occurs through field camps, laboratory experimentation, co-operative education, technical projects, work exposure work terms and practical exercises in various College programs. Although program delivery using experiential learning is widely accepted by the College, little research has focussed on the meaning of these experiences for its participants.

In the case of CNA the three partners involved in the work exposure program include the College, the work term sponsor, and the student. Woolf (1981) defined an employer as one who "provides a job that pays wages or a salary" (p. 370). Since, in most cases, participating industry partners do not provide wages, they will be defined as work term sponsors throughout this report. Each work term partner has a role in the



experiential learning process and, in a successful partnership each will benefit from the experience. The College is responsible for arranging, administering and evaluating the work placement. The student is expected to be productive during the work term while gaining valuable work experience. The sponsor is required to provide the student with productive work opportunities related to the program of study and to evaluate the student's work performance. The benefits of such an arrangement, however, vary for all three partners. The student for example, has an opportunity to apply theory to real world situations, gain work experience, and make valuable contacts with potential graduate employers. The sponsor gains a productive worker for a short period of time, has an opportunity to contribute to the educational process, and also has a chance to recruit a new employee. The College benefits from the link with industry by obtaining current information regarding work force training requirements and new technology. The College may also produce better graduates because students have had an opportunity to apply their academic learning in the work world as a practitioner.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine, from the perspective of the student, the four-week work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) diploma program offered by the College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook campus (formerly Westviking College). More specifically, the objective was to determine whether the experience was meaningful to the student participants.

### **Statement of a Problem**

The concept of experiential learning is supported throughout the literature as being fundamental to meaningful learning (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Little is known



however, about the extent to which the experience holds meaning for the student. If students do not find the work exposure experience meaningful, a problem exists. The absence of a meaningful experience is also an institutional problem because the objectives related to work exposure are not met.

If a problem exists, then the question of whether the process is worthwhile must be asked. If the work exposure is not meaningful for the student, the time and effort associated with the work exposure could possibly be used for more in-classroom instruction or for the students to graduate earlier and concentrate on finding full-time employment. As well, the College invests time and effort in the process by administering and evaluating placements. If the work exposure process is not meaningful for its student participants the College could utilize its resources elsewhere or revise the work exposure program to ensure objectives are met.

Appendix 1 provides policies and procedures outlining the objectives of work exposure components of College programs. These objectives state that the placement “must be designed to maximize the learning benefits for students” (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995, p. 67). These objectives address various concepts related to experiential learning including concrete experience, observation, reflection, and conceptualization. The work term policies and procedures adopted at the Corner Brook campus appear to aim for effective learning through the experiential learning process.

It was anticipated that results of the study might determine student expectations and goals of the work exposure process and whether these expectations and goals were met. It could show that new skills, knowledge and attitudes were not necessarily



acquired, but that student development occurred during the work term, and the experience was meaningful for the student as they perceived it. Carney Strange (1994) suggested that “students differ in how they construct and interpret their experiences, and such differences offer important guides for structuring the educational process” (p. 402). In response to any of the study conclusions, the College of the North Atlantic should take measures to ensure that both the college and student expectations are realistic and attainable. As well, the College can assess the extent to which work exposure objectives are being met and if experiential learning occurs, and to adjust the process if necessary.

### **Research Questions**

In an attempt to determine whether the work term component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program is meaningful to students, five related research questions were proposed. Answers to these questions helped to identify student constructs of a meaningful work term experience, including issues surrounding learning and development. The questions were:

- 1.) How do students describe their development as a result of work exposure experience?
- 2.) From the perspective of the student, does experiential learning occur as a result of the work exposure component of the program?
- 3.) Does work exposure in the Business Administration (Accounting) program meet the College’s objective of maximizing student learning?
- 4.) From the perspective of the student, is the four-week work exposure component of the two-year Business Administration (Accounting) program meaningful?



- 5.) What is the impact of gender, age, previous work experience and/or prior education on a student's work exposure experience?

### **Limitations**

College work exposure programs vary from two, four or six week placements depending upon the program. Most occur near end of the last semester of study. For the purpose of this research, it was decided to focus on one program of study with a four-week work exposure component. A four-week placement is the median time frame of the College work exposure terms, therefore extrapolation regarding other work exposure programs may be possible. Time and resources did not permit a thorough study of every College program containing a work exposure session. Studying a single program did however limit conclusions about the effectiveness of the work exposure requirements for other College programs that vary in course content, objectives and work opportunities. The Corner Brook campus of the College was chosen because it is the place of employment for the researcher resulting in ease of access to information and resources. Because of the qualitative exploratory nature of the research, and the intensity and length of time involved in gathering data through individual interviews, a small sample size of seven students was used for the study.

The work experience may have been, but was not, affected by extenuating circumstances such as sickness. Such variables were not foreseeable or controllable but would have been noted if they had occurred. An additional limitation was the nature of individuals agreeing to participate in the study. Agreeing to participate may be characteristic of enthusiastic and motivated individuals. These types of people generally make good employees possibly affecting the outcome of a work experience in a positive



way. These uncontrolled characteristics of study participants may not reflect work exposure experiences of the less motivated and enthusiastic members of the population.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

A number of key terms are used throughout the study. For reference purposes, definitions of these terms are as follows:

1. Work term sponsors are companies, government offices or non-profit organizations who provide work exposure experience for College students.
2. Work-based learning is learning that occurs while in a real work setting.
3. Work-based learning programs is formal, structured and organized use of a work place for student learning.
4. Work place supervisor is the immediate supervisor of a work term student.
5. Supervising instructor is the instructor responsible for organizing and monitoring work term activity.
6. Experiential learning according to Kolb (1984) is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”.
7. Reflective learning is an integral component of experiential learning whereby an individual responds to a lived experience and cognitively explores the experience in such a way as to create and clarify meaning in terms of self (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993).
8. Student development is personal, non-academic development including psychological, physiological and social domains. It is often referred to as psychosocial development.



9. **Meaningful work experience is the meaning associated with the work exposure experience as defined by the student participants.**
10. **Employability is “the relative capacity of an individual to achieve meaningful employment, given the interaction between personal characteristics and the labour market” (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1994, p. 1).**



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

There is extensive research and literature related to experiential learning, student development and reflective learning such as those proposed by Kolb (1984) and Chickering (1969). Their theories have been applied in this study and help support the concepts and practices of work experiences as a part of a post-secondary program. There are however, limited amounts of information or research on post-secondary work exposure programs in the Canadian context. In particular, very few journal articles have specifically dealt with student perspectives of work experience programs. There are many articles and studies of co-operative education, a closely related form of experiential learning. Most published research has been conducted in the United States, where work exposure, or on-the-job training, applies to full-time employees of an organization.

The earliest form of work-based learning can be traced back to the 'sandwich' courses in England in the 1800's. A sandwich program was meant to be a rigorous integration of academic learning and industrial training to produce a 'complete' person (Chaing, 1988). This system continues to be highly regarded as a system that enhances understanding of concepts by linking theory and practice, as well as easing the transition from the academic world of education to the working world of business and industry. This mode of education first appeared in the United States in the early 1990's and into Canada in the early 1950's in the form of co-operative education. Japan and Germany have effectively linked their learning and labour market system through strong commitments and involvement of employers in the education system (Economic Council



of Canada, 1992). There is however very limited literature related to short on-the-job placements within post-secondary programs.

### **Co-operative Education**

One of the most successful modes of experiential learning is co-operative education. The Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE), the national organization for post-secondary co-operative education in Canada, defines co-operative education as “the process of education which formally integrates a student’s academic studies with work experience in co-operative employer organizations” (Canadian Association for Co-operative Education, 1979, p. 2). The usual plan is for the student to alternate periods of experience, usually four months in length, in appropriate study fields and to participate in various reflective learning exercises to recognize learning and development. CAFCE has set national standards and principles that guide co-op education. Co-operative education students for example, are must be engaged in productive work rather than just observing and receive remuneration for the work they perform. As well, students are expected to be supervised and evaluated by the sponsor, and the educational institution. Co-operative education is also present in the high school system whereby students, usually for one half-day a week throughout a school year, are exposed to the world of work at sponsoring organizations. These high school students, do not usually receive remuneration however, but are monitored and evaluated.

Similar to post-secondary co-operative education, students in the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program are expected to be productive while on work term. They are supervised and evaluated by the sponsoring organization, as well as monitored and evaluated by the College. Work exposure



students are also required to participate in reflective exercises to identify learning during the experience. There are also differences in the programs including program structure and delivery. The work exposure experience for example, does not alternate with academic semesters because it occurs at the end of the program. In addition, students are not paid for the work performed and the work term is for four weeks, not an entire semester as with post-secondary co-operative education.

Even though structured differently, co-operative education and work exposure share the common objective of providing students with an opportunity to benefit from experiential learning. By acquiring practical experience and increasing their network of opportunities during a work term, students can become more employable. As well, exposure to the world of work before graduation assists in preparing the students to be productive in work environments. Students can also develop other important 'life' skills such as interpersonal, problem solving, and decision making abilities during a work term experience. According to the Canadian Conference Board of Canada, these qualities are essential to be employable in the Canadian work force (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 3). Bloom (1994), represented the Conference Board of Canada, stated that these skills, qualities, competencies, attitudes and behaviours can be developed and fostered through work-based learning.

Even though there are many forms of work-based learning, no one standard definition or model exists and they are often not well documented nor systematically monitored (Bragg & Griggs, 1997). This may be true because many colleges tend to see themselves as responsible for classroom learning not learning while on the job (Alder, 1997). According to Heinemann et al. (1992) despite the differences in program structure



and operations, it is accepted that work experience programs enrich the learning process and share similar learning objectives.

### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning involves immersing the learner into an experience, commonly associated with the workplace, and then encouraging that person to reflect on the experience to recognize what was learned. John Dewey (as cited in Saltmarsh, 1992) believed that the workplace in conjunction with the classroom, serves as an arena in which significant learning takes place. Lewis and Williams (1994) state that: "No longer supplemental to the acquisition of content, experiential approaches are considered fundamental to meaningful learning" (p.5). They claim that experiential learning in higher education can be categorized into three distinct applications including field-based learning, prior learning assessment, and experiential applications for personal development and classroom-based learning. Field-based learning includes practicum assignments and internships to help students prepare for medical, psychology, education and social work careers. Another form of field-based learning is co-operative education whereby students alternate full-time study semesters with full-time work term semesters. Service learning involving students in volunteer community service has also been identified as field-based learning. Prior Learning Assessment recognizes that learning can take place in informal settings and credit can be given for past experiences. Experiential applications for personal development and classroom based learning requires that the student become active in their learning and not just listen. Activities could include role-playing, socio-drama, value clarification, simulations, 'in-box exercises,



games and case studies. Experiential applications allow for students to experience and react to real life scenarios and receive feedback in a safe environment.

One of the most renowned persons associated with the concept of linking theory and practice is David Kolb. Kolb (1984) proposed a four-stage experiential learning model including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He stated that “learning, and therefore knowing, requires both a grasp or figurative representation of experience and some transformation of that representation” (p. 42). He believed that the simple perception of experience or transformation alone is not sufficient for learning to occur. Based on this, work exposure participants should be “open to experiences on the job, have the ability to stand back from the experience to observe and reflect, to articulate what was learned, and use this to make decisions, solve problems, and take action” (Chickering, 1977, p. 18). According to Kolb (1984), the experience may be termed an effective learning experience if this process occurs.

Chickering (1977) stated that “The learning cycle of concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation and application holds promise for improving the substance and quality of higher education” (p. 10). This statement reflects Chickering’s belief that students do benefit from the experiential learning process at higher educational levels. College program work exposure objectives support Chickering’s belief and aim for students to recognize learning while being supervised in a workplace setting. Presumably, if experiential learning occurs as a result of the placement, the student would be able to reflect on the experience, recognize its significance and apply new learning in future situations.



### **Reflective Learning**

According to Defalco (1995) “any educational program must be rooted in a clear, coherent understanding of learning” (p.57). Reflective learning is an integral component of Kolb’s model of experiential learning. Boyd and Fales, as cited in Boud, Cohen & Walker (1993), described reflective learning as a process whereby an individual responds to a lived experience and cognitively reviews and explores the experience in such a way as to create and clarify meaning in terms of self. Boud et al. further claim that reflection plays an integral role in drawing meaning from experience. It involves the learner in a process of re-capturing, noticing and re-evaluating the experience to turn it into learning. According to Boud and Walker (1993) reflection is comprised of three factors which include: (a) a return to the experience whereby the learner recalls the experience in a descriptive way; (b) attention to feelings associated with the experience; and (c) a re-evaluation of the experience whereby the learner links it with past experiences (association), integrates it with existing learning (integration), tests it (validation), and makes it their own (appropriation).

This model views reflective learning as occurring both during and after the experience. Baker (1996) stated that this process leads to “increased self-awareness, increased sensitivity to the environment, and a change in conceptual perspective” (p. 19). He also maintains that improved critical thinking, self-actualization, and new knowledge is also associated with reflective learning.

The College of the North Atlantic objectives and practice of the work exposure component refers to reflective learning both during and after the experience. During the process students obtain concrete experience while on the job and are required to reflect



on the experience through journal writing, group feedback sessions, discussions with the supervising instructor and a final report. The reflective feedback sessions occurred on two separate occasions during the work term, half way through and near the end. These sessions, along with the other reflective practices, gave students opportunities to identify and articulate what they were learning. All of this is a part of the reflective process

### **Student Development**

Although post-secondary education has been usually associated with cognitive learning, many graduates have claimed that more significant learning occurs outside the classroom (Jordan-Cox, 1987). Commonly referred to as psychosocial development, this personal, non-academic development includes psychological, physiological, and social domains. Psychosocial development involves the accomplishment of a series of “developmental tasks” (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). To resolve these tasks, a person must respond to a challenge. For example, a student moving away from home for the first time faces the challenge of becoming more independent. Later this student may realize that people are not completely independent but have mutual relationships that are interdependent. From this experience, the student may resolve developmental issues related to problem solving, interpersonal relationships, and self-direction. An appropriate response to such challenges results in psychosocial development for the individual. Some of the non-academic learning that occurs during a work exposure experience may be categorized as psychosocial development. Developmental issues such as increased self-awareness, self-actualization, increased sensitivity, and critical thinking have been linked to experiential learning (Baker, 1996). Meaningful learning, as defined by Creth (1986), also includes developmental issues such as acquiring new skills, knowledge,



confidence, good judgement, and a positive attitude. Presumably these developmental issues may be addressed in a work exposure opportunity.

Psychosocial development tends to be age-graded, whereby individuals at different stages in their lives may be seen as struggling with different developmental stages. Depending on the stage, or which developmental issues are relevant, individuals may differ on what they expect and want from a work exposure opportunity. If they resolve a psychosocial issue as a result of the work exposure, the experience may be perceived as more meaningful.

Incorporating emotional, social and intellectual aspects of development, Chickering (1969) defined seven vectors of development throughout the college experience. The first vector involves developing competence intellectually, physically, manually and interpersonally. The second is managing emotions and appropriately expressing and controlling them. The third vector is moving through autonomy toward interdependence including self-direction, problem solving ability, persistence, and mobility. The fourth vector is developing mature interpersonal relationships including acceptance and appreciation of differences and the capacity for healthy and lasting relationships. The fifth is establishing identity including comfort with body, appearance, gender, sexual orientation, social and cultural heritage, roles, and lifestyle. Self-acceptance, self-esteem and personal integrity and integration. The sixth vector involves developing purpose including clear vocational goals and making meaningful commitments. The final vector is developing integrity by moving from rigid, moralistic thinking to more humanized, personal value system that acknowledges and respects the beliefs of others.



Developmental issues identified by Chickering such as self-awareness, self-actualization, increased sensitivity, and critical thinking have also been linked to reflective learning. It may be theorized that many of the developmental tasks could be addressed or affected by a work exposure experience. For example, a student could develop increased competencies and confidence while on the job thus resolving or revisiting the first of Chickering's developmental tasks. Work situations for example could also involve other developmental issues such as managing emotions, becoming more independent, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and gaining a clearer conception of one's role and lifestyle. Another example of applying work exposure to Chickering's theory involves exposure to the world of work, thereby bringing realistic meaning to a student's field of studies. This increased knowledge and awareness could help the student develop clearer vocational goals as defined in Chickering's sixth vector of development. In the context of Chickering's developmental theory, the goals and expectations of the work exposure experience may differ for each individual depending on their stage of development. A student struggling with self-esteem may gain confidence from a work opportunity that results in positive recognition by clients or the sponsor. Another individual may have resolved the issue of self-esteem but is struggling with what to do with a diploma. This individual may learn about career related options and opportunities during the placement helping to define vocational goals. Work exposure experiences may not only address learning skills and the gaining of new knowledge, but may also add to the personal and social development of an individual. Williams (1991) concluded that "the effects of participation in field education programs on personal development is strong and positive" (p. 31).



### **Student Learning**

The work exposure objectives of College of the North Atlantic programs, including the program studied in this research, aim to maximize student learning. A review of relevant literature supports this goal and the belief that work or field experiences enrich the learning process. Research shows that a significant number of students accrue some positive benefits from participating in experiential education programs (Fletcher, 1991). It is also accepted that experience in itself does not ensure that learning will occur and that work experiences based on this belief are not effective and are highly susceptible to exploitation (Defalco, 1995). This can happen when employers access students for free labour or as an avenue to complete menial tasks thus not contributing to the learning process for the student. Fletcher (1991) writes:

The challenge facing practitioners today is to enhance the effectiveness of our programs, to ensure that outcomes accrue to students in an intentional rather than an arbitrary fashion, to ensure that our particular program features our stated goals, and that our students are achieving the maximum benefit from their experiential placement (p. 52).

Heinemann and Defalco (1990) concluded that this challenge is not being met as “many times too little thought has been given to establishing goals and objectives, developing learning strategies and evaluating outcomes for such programs. Too often work integrated learning programs are developed and implemented in the absence of an explicit educational philosophy” (p. 38). Lewis and Williams (1994) acknowledged this view by stating that the potential for meaningful learning can be positively influenced by experiential learning but is often negatively affected by unclear learning goals and lack of



outcomes assessed by educators. They further stated that experiential learning is often not integral to course goals and is not evaluated. As a result, student learning including incidental learning and development is not recognized or valued.

### **Work Term Objectives**

As cited in Heinemann, Defalco and Smelkinson (1992), Wilson and Heinemann (1991) found that most work experience programs have similar learning objectives. These include academic, career and personal growth objectives. Academic objectives involve relating theory to practice, and strengthening and developing cognitive skills such as problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis. Career objectives include determining and reality testing career options, job acquisition and career planning skills, and understanding the world of work. Personal growth objectives include self-confidence, self understanding, communications skills, personal and ethical values, social interaction skills and a sense of professionalism. All three of these objectives are interrelated.

According to Heinemann et al. (1992) these objectives are more likely achieved from a multifaceted, interdisciplinary perspective to gain a true understanding of how the world works. Using these objectives, they proposed a “work experience enriched model” based on Dewey’s Instrumentalism Theory that people are life-long learners. Dewey (as cited in Heinemann et al, 1992) argued that “when students can see a relationship among knowledge, cognitive skills, survival and success, there will be motivation to learn” (p. 19). Experiential learning provides the setting for students to better see this relationship because it is closer to the real world than the classroom. Work-based learning is not guided to the same extent as instructor guided classroom learning. According to



Heinemann et al., (1992) to continue learning outside the classroom, individuals must become self-directed learners. This must include setting their own learning objectives based on their interests and needs. Wilson and Heinemann (1991) showed that developing self-directed learning skills can be the single most important educational outcome from a work exposure experience. This is a skill that will be used a lifetime.

Heinemann et al. (1992) proposed a number of principles that need to be incorporated into work experience enriched education. These principles include: (a) integrating of theory and application; (b) providing an interdisciplinary perspective (c) developing and reinforcing higher order cognitive skills; (d) creating an environment in which students develop the capacity to function as reflective learners; (e) aiding students to become self-directed learners; and (f) achieving the academic, career and personal growth objectives defined by the program. Baily (1998), in support of a structured work experience program, stated that "programs that merely place young people on-the-job to gain work experience are not effective. Much more is required than exposing the students to the work place" (p. 7).

The work experience enriched model consists of four elements: an applicable knowledge base, student inquiry while on the work term, analysis and reflection, and testing conclusions (Wilson & Heinemann, 1991). Knowledge would be acquired through academic studies, and inquiry would occur by working with people in new settings. Analysis and reflection of student observations during the work term gives the learning meaning. Testing conclusions can be achieved by participating in critical and reflective exercises such as writing reports, group discussions or presentations.

According to Heinemann et al. (1992) the work experience enriched model requires



guidance from instructors and a commitment from the College. Kendall (1991) identified a number of essential elements of a work experience based program required to ensure significant learning. These elements include: (a) preparing students for the experience; (b) monitoring and supporting both their learning and performance; and (c) helping them with debriefing, assimilation and analysis of their learning after the experience.

### **Student Perceptions**

There were very few studies of work exposure programs that focussed on student perceptions. One similar study was conducted for the B.Sc. (Technology) degree program at the University of Waikato in New Zealand (Coll, Eames & Halsey, 1997). The purpose of this study was to make sure that the two work term placement components of the program, one three month term and a nine month term, satisfied the needs of the students. Study results indicated that students felt that the placements, especially the shorter terms, were not challenging enough and too repetitive. As well, they indicated that they needed more background information before beginning the work term to help set reasonable learning objectives early in the experience. Most felt however that the placements put their studies into perspective and helped them clarify their choice of career. Even though the survey showed that most students were satisfied with their placements, the university decided to respond to student concerns in an effort to improve the experience. As a result, students are now fully briefed about the organization and the type of work term responsibilities before their work term starts. As well, all students are interviewed before confirmation of placement and work term objectives discussed in group and individual meetings prior to the terms. Other improvements include a follow-up visit conducted within the first two weeks of the placement to ensure expectations



were met and a Supervisors Guide for Faculty was created to help articulate faculty responsibilities including assessment guidelines. As well, student evaluations are conducted and submitted to the program chair. Overall, the university listened to the students, and as a result, the program improved and has been deemed very successful (Coll et al.,1997).

In another study by Burnard (1991) the concept of experiential learning as perceived by nursing tutors and students was explored. The first stage of this two-stage research involved in-depth interviews with 12 nursing tutors and 12 student nurses. Data analysis resulted in the emergence of four themes including definitions, methods, advantages and disadvantages of experiential learning. Burnard found that most respondents defined experiential learning as doing, reflecting and learning. Other definitions included practical not theory-based learning and affective learning. Methods of experiential learning included role playing, reflective activities and small group exercises. The first stage of Burnard's study also revealed advantages of experiential learning as perceived by the participants. Advantages included the development of interpersonal skills, drawing on personal experiences, increased self-awareness, reflective learning and enjoyable experiences. Experiential learning as threatening, uncomfortable and unreal to the learner were identified as disadvantages of experiential learning. Based on these findings, Burnard conducted a survey using a questionnaire to collect additional data from the study population. This second stage of the study consisted of 397 respondents providing further details related to the perception of experiential learning by its participants. The information collected through the survey confirmed that experiential learning is perceived as active rather than passive and learning is achieved by doing. The



research also indicates that experiential learning is associated with personal learning making a difference to the individuals personal stock of knowledge. Burnard's study showed that experiential learning involves reflection whereby students are not only doing but also reflect on what he or she is doing in order to learn. Data from Burnard's study revealed information on what experiential learning was like for its participants. Work exposure experiences for example were perceived as doing, reflecting and modifying personal experiences. They were described as fun but potentially embarrassing indicating a concern with self-concept. When questioned about the outcome of experiential learning, respondents identified an increase in self-awareness and the development of interpersonal skills. Burnard's study provides a detailed view of how experiential learning is perceived by its participants and can be used as a reference to identify significant components of the process.

Thayer (1996) concurred that it is important to prepare structured experiences by assessing the needs of the learning group to ensure success. He believed that the first step in this process is to clarify facilitator and participant expectations. He articulated that students must be actively involved in the experience and given ample opportunities to talk about feelings and perceptions of the experience.

### **Summary**

Overall, the literature supports Kolb's (1984) claim that "learning methods that combine work and study, theory and practice provide a more familiar and therefore more productive arena for learning" (p. 5). The success of various forms of work-based learning including co-operative education and apprenticeship is reflective of this theory.



An integral component of the experiential process is reflective learning whereby experiences are reviewed and learning identified. Reflective learning is the mechanism whereby critical thinking, self-actualization and new knowledge are acquired through experience. To ensure that maximum learning occurs during an experience, reflective learning must be planned, structured and followed through.

In addition to learning, students can also accomplish psychosocial development during an experience. This non-academic development is personal and individualized depending on the developmental tasks encountered by an individual. Issues such as self-awareness, critical thinking, career decisions, independence, problem solving abilities, and interpersonal relationships have been linked to experiential learning.

Research has shown that the experiential learning process requires structure and commitment from everyone involved to maximize its benefits. In general, literature accepts the belief that “people do not necessarily learn from experience; it depends on the meaning they attribute to their experience and on their capacity to reflect and review it” (Mulligan & Griffin, 1992, p. 44). To ensure effective experiential learning, work-based programs must have clearly defined objectives including academic, career and personal objectives. These must be addressed through effective policies and procedures. The adoption of the “work experience enriched model” proposed by Heinemann et al. (1992) can be basis for an effective program. This model supports the concept that students will have more motivation to learn if they can see a relationship between knowledge, cognitive skills, survival and success. Recognition of this relationship can be fostered through the four elements of the work experience enriched model. These elements



include a knowledge base, student inquiry, analysis and reflection, and testing conclusions.

Based on the literature, it may be speculated that student perceptions of their work experience may be dependent on the work exposure program itself. Experiential learning programs should consider the roles of its participants and the process that students will encounter to learn and grow from the experience.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Study Methodology**

This study used qualitative means to determine whether the work exposure component of a college diploma program was deemed meaningful by the students involved. Based on a recommendation by the Assistant District Administrator (ADA) responsible for the Corner Brook campus Business Studies and Applied Arts programs, it was decided to study the Business Administration (Accounting) Diploma program for the purpose of this research. The rationale for this recommendation was based on mixed comments from instructors and students regarding the effectiveness of the work exposure component over the past few years. A letter of permission to conduct research using this program was obtained from the District Administrator of the Corner Brook campus of the College of the North Atlantic (see Appendix 5). This two-year program contains a four-week work exposure component at the end of the last semester of studies (see Appendix 2). The work exposure session is referred to as "OJ1200 Work Exposure" in the College calendar. The description states that "students gain an appreciation of the real world environment in a business or industry directly related to the area of training. This four-week period will be required in addition to academic content covered, thus requiring the students to attend intercession" (CNA Calendar, 1997/98, p. 97). College policy regarding work exposure objectives apply to this program.

A "meaningful experience" is a relative term and may represent something different for each individual. For the purpose of this study, the term meaningful was defined by the student participants through a number of data collection strategies.



### **Data Collection**

There were two primary data sources: observation of feedback sessions and student interviewing. The first data source involved the researcher as a participant-as-observer during two reflective learning sessions. The first of these sessions occurred about half way through the four-week work exposure period, and the other near the end of the experience. The students were required to return to the campus for these exercises and share their experiences and thoughts with fellow classmates and instructors through group discussions and presentations. The researcher recorded comments from the students during these sessions to ascertain what they learned while on the work term, and whether the experience was deemed meaningful. All seven students selected for the study attended the feedback sessions.

The second primary data source involved key informant interviews conducted by the researcher with seven of the students after the conclusion of the work exposure experience. These interviews were conducted with individual students to further focus on whether the work experience was meaningful from their perspective. The data were then triangulated with work term reports submitted by each student and open-ended interviews with the supervising instructor.

According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993) “qualitative researchers analyze data throughout the study rather than relegating analysis to a period following data collection” (p. 238). In keeping with qualitative research approaches, data analysis for this study began with the first data collection exercise and continued throughout the course of the research. Ongoing analysis involved constant review and revisiting of the data throughout the course of the study, rather than after data had been collected. Analysis



required continuous data organization, identification of emerging categories, labeling, searching for patterns, creation of typologies to classify the categories into themes, testing emerging hypotheses, exploring explanations for patterns, supporting the most logical explanation, and writing the report. This inductive approach was aimed at examining the phenomena of work exposure from the perspective of the student and to explore ways of describing and explaining student perspectives.

### **Selection and Sampling**

Selection of a study sample was restricted to participants in the 1998 work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program at the Corner Brook campus of the College of the North Atlantic. Access to these participants was made possible through discussions and an agreement with the Associate District Administrator responsible for the program. Using a systematic random sampling technique, seven students from a population of approximately 20 eligible student participants were selected. Individuals were systematically selected by choosing every second name on an alphabetical listing provided by the program coordinator.

The supervising instructor explained the purpose of the research to the entire class before giving the researcher permission to conduct the study. The researcher also spoke to the class before the work term began, providing information related to the purpose of the research, study methodology and analysis. It was explained how participants were selected and who the individuals were. They were told that names and characteristics would not be used, assuring confidentiality. The researcher also explained that participation was voluntary and students could withdraw from the study at any time. Students were also told that if a participant withdrew at any point, attempts using the



above selection process would be used to find a replacement. Individuals selected were asked to stay after the presentation to review and sign consent forms (see Appendix 3). Copies of the form were provided to the students. All seven initially selected students agreed to participate and no replacements were required.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was to collect and analyze the data, not one of instruction or supervision. The researcher did not have any connection with the students outside the conduct of this study.

The researcher was a participant-as-observer during the work term feedback sessions. While observing the researcher attempted to record field notes as much as possible without making students nervous and possibly affecting their behaviour. Session activities involved the instructor and the students while the researcher observed with minimal participation. At the beginning of the sessions participants were informed of the presence of the researcher, reminded of the purpose of the study, and assured of confidentiality. After the second feedback session, the researcher scheduled single session interviews with participants, which were held one week after the work experience. The researcher had an observer-as-participant role during the interviews, entering the life of the participants briefly and focussing primarily on the question-and-response format of the interview.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues were addressed by an overt research design. Participants were informed of the research purpose and advised that participation was voluntary. Participation was confirmed and consent received before the first reflective feedback



session. It was felt that participant knowledge of the study purpose did not affect participant behaviour or study results. This conclusion was based on research design including a minimal role of the researcher, open-ended questions, anonymity and confidentiality allowing for participant freedom and natural behaviour. Each participant was asked to sign a letter of consent agreeing to participate in the study and giving the researcher permission to use their comments regarding the work experience for the purpose of the study.

Confidentiality issues were addressed by not identifying the participants by name or characteristics in the study. There appeared to be no risk to the participants as the study did not impose threats, harm, injury, or losses to anyone involved. Participants agreed that the researcher would have ownership of the data collected and consented to the College using the study to improve work exposure offerings.

### **Data Collection Strategy**

The data collection strategy involved the researcher as a participant-as-observer during the two reflective feedback sessions held during the work term. During these group sessions, students were required, through informal presentations and group discussions, to reflect on their work experience and share the information with fellow students and instructors. The researcher recorded field notes with minimal interaction with the group.

Post work term interviews further examined the student's perception of the work experience and whether it was meaningful from their perspective. The interviews were conducted a week following the placement allowing participants a chance to conclude all necessary requirements of the term and to reflect on the experience. At the same time the



short break helped to ensure that the experience was still fresh in participant memories and not drastically affected by other work experiences.

Participants were interviewed individually using standardized open-ended interviews as identified in Patton's categorization of interviews as cited in LeCompte and Preissle (1993). The questions were the same for all participants and were open-ended to allow for descriptive responses. Patton's typologies are based on the theory that data obtained is dependent upon the questions used to solicit the answers. Attempts to get participants to define the term meaningful required questions that elicited answers related to emotions, experiences, perception, and knowledge. Patton's typologies reflect these themes including questions related to: (a) experience and behaviour that elicit what respondents do or have done; (b) how respondents think about their behaviours and experiences; (c) how they emotionally react or feel about their experiences and opinions; (d) what respondents know about their worlds; (e) respondents descriptions of what and how they see, hear, taste, and smell; and (f) background and demographic information. (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

The interview questions focussed on these issues to gain an understanding of what and how the participants viewed the work exposure experience. Based on this typology, the researcher designed questions to find out about participant experiences and behaviour, opinions and values, feelings about their experiences and opinions, knowledge, descriptions, and demographics (see Appendix 4). Careful consideration was taken to avoid leading questions to ensure that answers were not reflective of what the participant thought was the right answer. Student demographics regarding age, gender, previous related work experience, and type of work placement was collected at the end of the



interview. As well, sponsor information such as type and size of business was collected at this time. This information was analyzed to determine if it was significant or linked to how meaningful the experience was for the participant.

Collecting demographic data at the end of the interview supports Patton's idea of establishing a rapport with the participants throughout the interview process before posing personal type questions. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes in duration. Seven questions related to the work exposure experience were answered by participants during this time. All interviews were conducted in the same college office keeping the environment consistent to prevent possible environmental influences that may have affected the interview. Interviews were conducted with only the participant and researcher present. The interviews were taped and later transcribed by the researcher and after permission from the study participants was received. Tapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office only accessible to the researcher. Transcriptions of interview data was recorded and incorporated with the other data. All data was entered into a word processing package as it was received. This resulted in an initial organizational pattern of individual participant comments and interviews.

### **Analysis**

Data gathered from observation during the reflective sessions were thoroughly reviewed enabling the researcher to become familiar with the content. This exercise provided an opportunity for the researcher to organize, edit and manage data using a word processor. A narrative summary was completed to help capture themes and relationships related to participants experiences during the work term. This knowledge



gave the researcher a better sense of student perspectives throughout the experience and not only at the end of the work term.

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed and read and reread to help the researcher become familiar with the content. The data was also inputted into a word processing package for editing, organizing and management purposes. Emerging categories from the set of data were identified and labeled. The two sets of data were connected using major categories identified and described in the summary section of this report. The researcher looked for categories that were internally consistent or had internal convergence as well as, external divergence or were distinct from each other. This was important to ensure that the categories were related as well as, had characteristics that deemed them unique, making it possible for analysis within the context of the study. Notations and thoughts regarding the data were recorded on cue cards and later categorized to show relationships in the context of the data set. Data collected from general discussions with instructors, evaluations and journals were categorized and incorporated into the scheme.

The categories produced were integrated into analysis-constructed typologies as a part of a classification scheme to help the researcher analyze the data. Classification decisions could have been influenced by the researcher's subject view of what might be perceived as meaningful. It was important for the researcher to be aware of any personal subjectivity and to be willing to articulate this in the analysis when appropriate.

A search for emerging hypotheses from the categories and testing them within the data was the next phase of analysis. Alternative explanations for the existence of patterns



were explored and described. The researcher attempted to demonstrate the most logical explanation to support the pattern of data created.

The final step involved writing the research report. Data was presented from the perspective of the student and is the foundation for the report. Analysis of the data focussed on whether work placements in the Business Administration (Accounting) program were meaningful from the perspective of the student participants.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results and Analysis**

Summary of the data includes information collected from the three sources including the two feedback sessions, individual interviews with the students and student work term reports. Data gathered from each source was similar although most details were obtained through the interviews. An analysis of the data collected and the themes identified provided the researcher with a basis to answer four of the five research questions. The results were then used to address research question #4 of whether the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program was meaningful from the perspective of the student. Based on the results and analysis and supported by the literature, recommendations to revise the work exposure component of the program are presented.

The following table represents a brief profile of each of the seven study participants. Students were identified numerically based on the sequence of presentations during the first feedback session. The sequence was determined by where the students chose to sit and was therefore considered random.



Table 1

**Student and Work Term Data**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Previous Experience</b>	<b>Prior Education</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Placement</b>
1	Female	24	4 years	3 years University	No job title	Car Dealership
2	Female	20	Non	Non	General Office Worker	Fast Food Restaurant
3	Female	23	Non	2 years University	No job title	Retail Store
4	Female	24	Non	Non	No job title	Accounting Firm
5	Female	20	Non	1 year University	No job title	Accounting Firm
6	Male	19	Non	Non	Customer Service Representative	Credit Union
7	Male	31	16 years	Non	Accounting Technician	Accounting Firm

The sample consisted of seven students who participated in the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program at the Corner Brook campus of the College of the North Atlantic in May 1998. There were five females and two males ranging in age from 19 to 31. Two of the seven students, one male and one female, had previous work experience of 16 years and four years respectively. Three participants had some prior post-secondary education whereas the remaining four did not. With respect to the work term, three students had job titles whereas four did not. As well, three students had work terms with accounting firms, one with a car dealership, one at a



retail store, another at a credit union and one at a fast food restaurant. The following analysis considers the data and interrelationships among the data that may have affected the work exposure experience.

Analysis involved the identification and organization of the information collected into broad themes. Themes identified included work term structure, experiential learning, student development, and work term meaning. Within each of these categories sub-themes emerged, in some cases appearing in more than one category. Sub-themes included job titles, age, related experience, length and timing of the work term, student expectations, and learning. This structure provided a mechanism to identify linkages among the groups, thus forming the 'big picture'.

### **Feedback Sessions**

During each of the two feedback sessions, each student was given an opportunity to present job activity, what they were learning, how they felt and if there were any problems. On average, individuals spoke for four to five minutes with regular discussions among the group. The atmosphere was very informal and the instructor prompted and asked questions throughout the sessions. The first feedback session occurred mid-way through the four-week work term. During this session, three of the seven students stated that they were involved in accounting related duties. The remaining four indicated that they were mostly involved in reception and filing. This ratio changed in the second feedback session held at the end of the term whereby five of the seven stated that they were involved in accounting related work. When prompted about what they were learning, the majority of students, four in the first session and six in the second, commented that the work experience gave them an opportunity to apply what they had



learned in the classroom. Student #2 however, felt that the work term did not provide any program related experience. Student # 7 stated that the work term confirmed a career choice in the accounting field. Six of the seven students, excluding student #2, indicated that they enjoyed the experience and most spoke about meeting and working with people as a positive outcome of the work term. Student #2 indicated that the experience was enjoyable, although indicated working with nice people as a positive experience. During the first session three students were concerned that they were not going to get accounting related experience. During the second session, only student #2 had a problem with this.

The feedback sessions, especially the last session, resulted in discussions about how to improve the work term. Issues included length and timing of the work term, work term tuition fees, classroom activities that could better prepare students for the experience, and monitoring. The group seemed to agree that the work term should be longer which would provide greater opportunity to become involved in accounting related activities. However, they also conceded that such a change might also be financially difficult for most students. A discussion about the timing of the work term revealed that students felt that a work term at the end of the program was not an integral part of their studies. Finishing their program while on a work placement meant they did not have a chance to return to the classroom to use what they had learned on the job and to share their experience with classmates. Students commented that having finished the academic portion of their program, completing a work term with no evaluation or learning structure seemed to be a waste of time and money. However, they questioned at what stage in their program they would have had another opportunity to learn enough to



be eventually productive on the job. Overall, students indicated that they enjoyed the experience, but questioned its value.

### **Interviews**

Data collected through individual interviews is presented in context of each interview question. These questions elicited answers related to the various research questions in an effort to determine if the work exposure experience was meaningful to the students.

#### **Question # 1**

What was your job title and description while on your work placement?

This question was asked in an effort to determine, from the perspective of the student, what types of activities they were involved in during the work term. Data obtained by this question provided a context in which the remaining questions were asked.

**Job titles.** Students #1, #3, #4 and #5 did not have job titles associated with their positions. Three of these, #1, #4 and #5 also indicated that they did not know what to expect on the work term or that their expectations did not match the experience. Student #2 had a job title, General Office Worker, but was extremely disappointed in the placement because there was no accounting related work experience involved. The job title was general and was not reflective of an accounting related position. Student #3 even though did not have a job title, did conduct thorough research about the placement and as a result knew what to expect and was not disappointed. Students #6 and #7 who did have specific job titles, Customer Services Representative and Accounting Technician respectively, indicated that they knew what was expected of them and both



were very satisfied with their experience. Both students also indicated that they were productive throughout the entire work term.

**Related experience.** Five of the seven students stated that they got some degree of accounting experience. Three of these five students, #3, #4 and #7, indicated that they “did a range of accounting tasks”. The other two students, #1 and #5, said that their exposure to accounting assignments was limited to a few jobs and as a result they did not get the full accounting experience. Student # 6 indicated that more financial related work was required than accounting work, which is what was desired and expected. Student # 2 did not get any accounting experience even though was told by the supervisor that there would be accounting related work during the work term. This student was mainly involved in serving customers and planning a special promotional event.

## **Question # 2**

What were your expectations of the placement? Did the placement meet your expectations? If not, why?

This question was asked to gain information regarding what participants knew about the work environment related to their field of study and to determine if these perceptions were accurate. The question attempted to elicit information about what the students expected and what they actually experienced during the work term, and whether this affected the meaning of the work placement.

**Student expectations.** Three students, #3, #6 and #7, indicated that the experience met their expectations primarily because they researched the company before the work term began. Student #6 for example, had clear expectations of the work placement because of conversations with a friend who works with the company. This



person provided the student with information about the position and the company before work term started. Student #3 spoke to students who had completed their work terms with the same sponsor in an effort to obtain information about the company and past student experiences. This student also met and had a detailed conversation with the supervisor before the placement began. Student #7 also researched the work term sponsor by talking with past students and the instructor.

The remaining students indicated that their expectations were not met or did not know what to expect. Student #4 was pleasantly surprised that the work term was more than what was expected. This was evident in this student's statement: "I expected to be doing more general office work like filing, but I only did a little bit of this; the rest of my work was accounting related". All the students were asked by the supervising instructor to talk to the sponsor before the work term however, some did not follow this advice and as a result did not know what to expect. Student #2 did talk to the work term supervisor before the work term started, however believed that the sponsor was not totally honest with her. This student stated: "He said I would be involved in accounting activities and that there was a strong possibility of a full-time position with the company after the work term, but this was never discussed after I started work". Even though the expectations of gaining accounting related work experience and a full-time job afterwards were not met and the student was quite disappointed, student #2 indicated an enjoyable experience because of the "nice" people in the place of work. This student did not recommend the placement for future work terms because there was no accounting related experience. Student #5 said the experience was meaningful but it could have been better. This student talked to past work term students who were placed in similar work settings,



however, the experience did not reflect what these students had said. Student #5 expected to be exposed to various accounting related experiences but these were limited. This student worked with a company that had not taken a work term student before therefore was not sure of the student's capabilities and did not utilize the student abilities to the fullest potential. Student #1 indicated not knowing what to expect and had not made any attempts to find out before the placement. This student indicated being surprised about the skills obtained during school and the ability to apply them therefore, found the placement okay.

### **Question # 3**

What did you learn from the experience? Is there anything that you would have liked to learn and did not?

Interview question #3 directly addressed the concept of learning. In an attempt to answer this question students were asked what they had learned from the experience, as well, if there was anything they would liked to have learned and did not. Comments from the students indicated that they applied what they had learned in school but did not necessarily learn new things.

When asked what they learned during the work term, students tended to focus on developmental issues such as gaining confidence and confirmation of their career choice. All of the students, except student #2, also related the experience to their academics and indicated that applying what they had learned in school was predominantly the outcome of the work term. Student #3 reflected this by saying, "It brought everything together. Things made better sense. It helped all the pieces fit together and showed how things related to one another". Student #4 said, "I learned that what we were doing in school is



more important than I realized. Applying accounting in the real world is different than in school and it helped me understand more”.

When asked what else they would liked to have learned, students spoke about doing more accounting related work. Three of the students, #1, #5 and #7, indicated a desire to apply various accounting related skills and knowledge, not just a repetition of the same task. They mentioned that this idea could be achieved by doing a box job which involves looking at a company, from an accounting perspective, from start to finish. Students #1 and #7 also felt that a box job should be a part of the program curriculum because they learned various portions of accounting work while in school but never really get a chance to apply it together. Student #2 wanted accounting experience but because there was no accounting work felt that nothing was learnt during the work term.

#### **Question # 4**

What do you feel about the work exposure experience?

Answers to this question related to student's personal feelings about the students experience. Six of the seven participants expressed positive feelings about the work term. Only student # 2 spoke of being angry and disappointed. This student commented leaving the situation was an option however had been led to believe that there may have been a possibility of work after graduation. Three students talked about increased confidence and the benefits associated with future job searches. These comments included experience to help build resumes and contacts in the industry. All six students reported feeling good about the ability to apply what they had learned in school and how the experience put everything into perspective. Two of the students stated that the work term confirmed their choice of a career in the accounting field.



### **Question # 5**

How would you describe your experience?

This question provided data related to all five research questions. In answering this question, students focussed mainly on feelings related to the work place. All seven students mentioned meeting and working with people as a positive experience. Three students spoke about a sense of pride in having their own office and responsibilities. One student commented that the work term energized him and connected him to the industry physically and emotionally. Five of the students also repeated the statement that it gave them an opportunity to apply what they learned in school. Four of these students expanded on this by saying that the work term confirmed that the last two years in school were not a waste of time. Again, student # 2 commented that it was not a good experience because the absence of accounting related work.

### **Question # 6**

Would you define your experience as meaningful? If so, how? If not, how?

This question related directly to research question #4 and also provided insight into the remaining research questions.

**Work term meaning.** All of the students, with the exception of student #2, felt that the work term was meaningful for a number of different reasons. Student #2 indicated that the experience was not meaningful at all. According to this student, expectations were not met, there was no experience related to accounting and as a result, no meaningful learning occurred. Five students suggested that the experience was meaningful because they gained confidence. Six students also mentioned that the experience was meaningful because they applied what they learned in school. Statements



to support this include, “It brought everything I learned over the past two years into perspective” and “I know now why we did some of the things we did in school”. Student #7 said that the work term clarified personal vocational goals. This student’s comments included that “the work term reinforced why I went to College”.

Students #1, #5 and #6 referred to the experience as advantageous for future job searches. Comments to support this include, “It gave me a different perspective and I feel more comfortable with future interviews” and “It gives me the edge for the job search” and “It will help me get a job and now I have an accounting related reference for my resume”.

According to the supervising instructor, five of the seven students acquired employment after the conclusion of the work term and as a direct result of their work term placement. However, only student #6 indicated that the work term was meaningful because employment was secured as a result of the placement.

### **Question # 7**

What is your age? Where is your hometown? What town did you complete your placement? Did you have related work experience prior to the work exposure experience? Do you have additional education training to the Business Administration program? If so, what and how long? What was the type and size of business where the placement occurred?

These questions related to demographics including prior experience and education, place of residence, type and size of business, and age. This type of information may have affected the experience. Two of the seven participants, who were also the older of the group at ages 24 and 31, had previous work experience. The ages of



the remaining five students were 19, 20, 20, 23 and 24 of which nobody had previous work experience. Three students had attended university from one to three years before entering the Business Administration (Accounting) program. Sponsoring organizations were all small businesses with less than 50 full-time employees including three accounting firms, a car dealership, a retail store, a fast food restaurant and a credit union. This data was analyzed to determine if demographic information and sponsor characteristics affected the work experience.

### **Additional Data**

Additional issues identified by the students included work term structure and timing, job titles, work term preparation and tuition fees.

**Work term structure.** Discussions concerning the structure of the work term, including the length and the timing of the work term, occurred in both feedback sessions and during individual interviews. This posed the question of whether the structure of the work term affected the student's experience. As a result, it was decided to ask the students during their interviews about the length and timing of the work term.

**Work term length.** The work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program occurs for four weeks the end of the program. All seven students thought the work term was too short but, without pay for additional weeks, it would be difficult to participate financially. This was reflected in statements such as, "if the work term were extended I would have had more opportunity to do more accounting work because four weeks was only long enough to gain the sponsor's trust and to get to know the job. I think that after a student becomes productive, probably after four weeks, the work term should be for another two weeks but for pay". Other related



quotes include: “I think it’s too short but working anymore than four weeks without pay is unrealistic” and “A few more weeks and I would have been doing some real accounting work because I was just getting into it and it was over. Maybe another two weeks with a bonus at the end from the employer.” It seems that a longer work term without pay would result in financial difficulty for all students however, everyone questioned whether four weeks was long enough for effective learning to occur.

**Timing of the work term.** There are two aspects related to the timing of the work term: the time of year and the timing of the work term in relation to the program. The work term starts the first week of May and ends the last week of May. Students #4 and #5 worked with accounting firms and identified a problem with the start date of the work term. They indicated that the first week of the term was a waste of time because it is the end of tax season, an extremely busy time of the year for accounting firms. The students stated that as a result the sponsors did not have any time to spend with them and they felt like they were in the way. It was obvious that these companies did not have the time to have anything planned, resulting in assignment of menial tasks in the first week of the placement. Students #1 and #3 also indicated that the first week did not involve any program related work but they were required to perform unrelated, menial tasks such as filing and answering the phones. Putting this into perspective, one week was equivalent to one quarter of the work term experience, which is a significant portion to have wasted. Students #6 and #7 indicated that they were involved in program related work from the beginning of the work term. These individuals also indicated in another question that they were well aware of sponsor’s expectations early in the work term. They also said



that their sponsors were familiar with the program, having taken students in the past and had a work plan in place before they started.

The work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program occurs at the end of the two-year program. All seven students felt that the work term at the end of the program is the most ideal situation. Having completed two years of academics, students feel they have adequate knowledge and skills to apply in the workplace. All agreed that a work term after the first year would not be beneficial because they would not have the necessary skills and knowledge to apply themselves and would only be capable of very menial tasks. Students #1 and #7 mentioned the concept of co-operative education with full semester, alternating work terms, and a longer program, to possibly make out of class work experiences more meaningful. This arrangement would give the student plenty of time to learn during sixteen-week work terms, as well as, a chance to reflect on learning upon return to the classroom. This arrangement would mean extensive program re-structuring.

The data collected in this study appear to support the view that having a work term at the end of the program results in a direct link with industry at the time of graduation. According to the supervising instructor, a number of graduating students in the Business Administration (Accounting) program have secured employment as a direct result of the work term placement. Six of the seven interviewed are working, five with their work term sponsors. It is an excellent opportunity for sponsors to screen and train potential employees with no obligations. Because the student is not required to go back to school, sponsors can hire them without a break in service and, the student is not away from the sponsor to be forgotten. From the perspective of six of the seven students



however, gaining employment was not what made the work term meaningful. Only one student indicated that the experience was meaningful because employment was obtained.

**Work term tuition fees.** In addition to the length and timing of the work term, students #2, #3, #5 and #7 voiced concern about having to pay \$180.00 tuition for a work term. Student #7 commented that having to pay to work for free does not make sense. The four students wanted to know why they were required to pay and would liked to have had something to show for their money. Four of the six students who said the work term was meaningful said it was also very expensive. They did not see why a work term would cost \$180.00 and wondered what they had actually received for that money.

### **Experiential Learning Concepts**

Student interviews provided information and insight on the concepts of experiential learning, reflective learning and student development.

**Experiential learning.** The concept of experiential learning was addressed by all of the interview questions and was important in answering the five research questions. A number of sub-themes associated with experiential learning emerged including reflective learning, related experience, student expectations and learning. All seven students indicated that they did not acquire new knowledge as a result of the work exposure experience. The acquisition of new knowledge is the foundation of experiential learning as defined by Kolb (1984). Instead of new knowledge students indicated that they applied existing knowledge. Based on this observation, it can be speculated that experiential learning did not occur or that learning was not recognized.

**Reflective learning.** Reflective learning is an integral component of experiential learning and therefore can be linked with five of the research questions. Reflective



exercises included feedback sessions and work term reports. When asked about these reflective practices, all seven students thought they were a good idea. They indicated that the feedback sessions did not result in identifying what they were learning on the job but were an opportunity to see what other students were doing. The students indicated that the sessions were a chance to compare and get ideas about what they would like to be doing or how well they were doing. In actual fact, even though the students stated that the sessions did not translate into identifiable learning, their comments provided indication that some learning had occurred.

**Student development.** Student answers to this question tended towards issues related to the building of confidence and confirming a career choice. These varied depending on the age and experience of the student. Individual students often referred to more than one developmental issue however usually identified one as predominant in making the experience meaningful.

The older, more experienced students, #1 and #7, focussed primarily on confirmation of career choices. The younger, less experienced students, #2, #3, #4 #5, and #6, indicated that the experience helped them gain more confidence. Student #5 stated that future next work situations would not be as intimidating because of increased self-confidence. Increased confidence is also evident in the statement from student #3, "First when I started the job I felt stupid and I was really nervous. I felt like I should know everything but I didn't. Then after a few weeks I started to catch on and was able to apply what I learned in school. I realized that even though I didn't know everything, I could learn and that was okay even when you are on the job".



Six of the seven students talked about how the work term strengthened their belief that the last two years in school were not a waste of time. Student #2 stated however that the work term was a waste of time and that nothing was gained from it in terms of self-development or experience. Students #1, #3, #4 and #6 mentioned interacting with co-workers and how it was good to experience a feeling of belonging and having something to offer. This was evident in this statement from student #3 "Even though I didn't get a job from it, I worked with real nice people and it's nice to know that you can apply your knowledge". Student #4 commented that "It's nice to feel like you are contributing to a company and that what you know is relevant and worthwhile".

In relation to Chickering's Student Development Theory (Chickering, 1969), students identified a number of psychosocial development issues. Developmental issues such as gaining confidence, confirming career goals and developing interpersonal relationships with co-workers were discussed by all of the students. Even the student who was extremely disappointed and talked about frustration and anger at being misled and cheated of a good experience, may have experienced Chickering's second vector. This vector deals with managing and appropriately expressing emotions. Four students talked about the positive experience of meeting and working with people and making new friends. These issues are present in Chickering's fourth vector of developing interpersonal relationships. Students #1, #3, #4, #5, #6 and #7 indicated that the work term gave them the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom which reaffirmed their career choice. Student #7 stated that: "It reinforced why I went to College". This developmental issue is found in Chickering's sixth vector of developing



purpose including clear vocational goals. Students' reference to issues related to psychosocial development is reflective of its importance for a meaningful experience.

### **Work Term Reports**

Students were required to submit a written report describing their experience to the supervising instructor. There were no guidelines or standards provided for these reports and this resulted in various report formats, length and content. Three of the reports were two to three pages in length and provided information similar to that presented during the feedback sessions. They described what they were doing and how they felt. Two other students wrote their work term reports using formal report writing format including a letter of transmittal, table of contents and details about job activity, problems that were encountered, interaction with others that were experienced, and thoughts on what they had gained from the experience. Another report was in the form of a daily log of duties that were performed although this was presented without thoughts or insights about the experience. Another report presented was a weekly account of duties performed and thoughts on how the student progressed and applied classroom knowledge. Student #2 indicated in the written work term report that even though the work term tasks were not related to accounting, the experience was enjoyable because of the people at work and has deemed the work term as learning experience although not related to accounting. There appears to be no relation between age, previous work or education experience, work term expectations, or work setting on the type of written report submitted. The reports tended to be a record of duties with limited insight into learning and growth as a result of the experience. The reports confirmed that the experiences occurred and that perhaps was an avenue for some reflective learning. For



the purpose of this study, the reports were supplementary to the information received during the feedback sessions and interviews.

### **Analysis**

Based on the data collected, and discussed earlier in this chapter, the researcher was able to identify themes in an effort to answer the research questions to determine if the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program was meaningful from the perspective of the student. Detailed analysis involved extensive review of all data. The following describe results of the analysis in the context of the research questions.

#### **Research Question # 1**

**How do students describe their development as a result of the work experience?**

This research question was designed to address how students described their psychosocial development as a result of the experience. The data collected refers to a number of developmental issues including self-awareness, confidence and good judgement. These issues have been identified as components of psychosocial development (Creth, 1986; Baker, 1996).

Students in this study identified developmental issues such as gaining confidence and confirmation of career choice as meaningful to the experience. Factors affecting student's developmental tasks included age and previous work and education experience. When asked what they learned from the experience most students referred to these issues as important. It appears that by giving students an opportunity to apply classroom learning in the real world, they can realistically resolve developmental issues. Students



talked about the fact that in the classroom they can only theorize about how they will feel when they actually apply their knowledge and skills. Six students identified developmental issues as critical to a meaningful experience.

### **Research Question # 2**

**From the perspective of the student, does experiential learning occur as a result of the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program?**

All of the students interviewed indicated that they had not acquired any new knowledge as a result of the work experience. Based on Kolb's (1984) model, no new learning indicates that experiential learning did not occur as a result of the work exposure experience. In an analysis of the four stages of Kolb's model, with reference to student comments, it can be speculated that students did part-take in some components of the experiential process. Most students, for example, experienced the first stage, identified as action or doing, by actually working in an accounting role. As well, all seven students participated in reflective exercises for the purpose of identifying and evaluating learning as defined in the second stage of the experiential model. It is unsure, however, whether these exercises failed to foster the recognition of new learning or, whether new learning had not occurred. Even though these exercises are requirements of the work term they are not specifically addressed in the course curriculum, nor were they evaluated or recorded. Lack of formal structure and importance of reflective learning may have resulted in ineffective exercises. None of the students gave evidence of experiencing the last two stages of Kolb's model including the understanding general principles and applying new knowledge in different circumstances.



It appeared that the timing of the work term also affected the reflective process. Students were not given the opportunity to apply or evaluate work term learning in the context of their program because they do not return to the College after the work term. A work term at the end of the program also required additional efforts to conduct reflective sessions during the term because students had left the campus area and were not required to return. Based on the information provided by the students, it appeared that the experiential learning was not complete because they did not recognize new learning. This may be attributed to ineffective reflective learning related to an informal, loosely structured work term.

### **Research Question # 3**

**Does work exposure in the Business Administration (Accounting) program meet the College's objective of maximizing student learning?**

All seven students indicated that they did not learn anything new during their work placement. With the exception of student # 2, every student did state that they applied what they learned in school. It can be speculated that the students learned more than they actually recognized. If they were not guided through the process of experiential learning and asked to evaluate learning, they may not have recognized that learning had occurred. Marshall and Mill (1992) suggested that inadequate learning by the student occurs when there is a failure to recognize valuable learning opportunities.

Learning to the students seemed to mean developmental issues such as gaining confidence and confirmation of career choices. Also, the students who developed realistic work term expectations tended to get more from their experience. They knew what to expect and could set learning objectives that were obtainable. This was



especially true for the two students whose job titles reflected actual accounting related work. In addition, many students indicated that the term was not long enough to allow for much learning. Overall, the students felt that the first two weeks was an orientation period and the last two weeks focussed on applying existing knowledge. These students suggested that additional weeks would have resulted in more learning however, would have meant financial difficulties for most students. If experiential learning is the goal of the College work exposure objectives the data shows that this process was incomplete.

#### **Research Question # 4**

**From the perspective of the student, is the four-week work exposure component of the two-year Business Administration (Accounting) program meaningful?**

This research question directly addressed the purpose of the study. Its answer is intertwined with the other four research questions and is contingent on how the students defined the term meaningful. The term “meaningful” was defined by each of the students differently and usually held more than one meaning. Six of the seven students found the experience meaningful because it gave more meaning to what they studied in school as well as, it led to psychosocial development. The only participant, student # 2, articulated that the experience was not meaningful. This student had expected to be performing program related tasks however, did not become involved in any accounting while on the placement. It appears that the sponsor viewed the work term role differently and did not offer an opportunity for experience the world of work from an accounting perspective. The remaining students talked about the acquisition of confidence and a confirmation of career choice as meaningful. These variables were affected by the student’s age and



previous work experience and education. As well, the opportunity to gain practical experience and to make industry contacts was deemed meaningful. Analysis of the data also revealed that students who had realistic and attainable work term expectations found the experience more satisfying and meaningful. They were able to set goals and work towards them during their placement and were able to identify if they reached these goals. Students beginning the work term without a clear understanding of the work situation were unable to set realistic expectations and were often disappointed.

Defining the experience as meaningful was not linear but is affected by a number of variables. Variables include the level of psychosocial development, work term preparation, the sponsor, defined roles and expectations, and reflective exercises. Overall, it seems that the students who were prepared for the experience could better reflect and identify learning. These students did find the experience more meaningful.

### **Research Question # 5**

**What is the impact of gender, age, previous experience and/or prior education on a student's work exposure experience?**

Details regarding gender, age, previous work experience and prior education was recorded and analyzed to determine if these variables affected study results. There was no indication that gender affected student experiences however, it was determined that age and previous work experience and education did affect the experience. Analysis of the data revealed that these variables were closely linked to developmental issues. Developmental issues were different for each individual and some students visited more than one of Chickering's developmental tasks. Age seemed to be a factor in determining which developmental task was visited and resolved by each individual. The older two



students for example, had previous work experience and in addition, the younger of these two had three years university prior to enrolling in the program. This may have meant that they had already resolved Chickering's developmental task related to confidence. In relation to developmental issues they focussed on confirmation of their career choice which is reflective of the change in their career path. The younger students did not have a significant amount of prior work experience or post-secondary education. These students, except student # 2, talked about gaining confidence and building a resume for future employment opportunities. The specific developmental tasks visited seem to be dependent on the individual and past experiences. Developmental issues were identified as significant in making the experience meaningful. It could therefore be concluded that age and/or previous work experience affected the meaning associated with the experience.

### **Summary**

Overall, data analysis revealed that a meaningful work exposure experience is contingent on a number of factors. These factors may be student, college or work related. This observation suggests that to ensure meaningful experiences, each work situation must be developed individually based on participant needs and expectations. This would require a College work term policy and guidelines that would guide the process yet be flexible enough to allow for self-directed learning in different work situations. It was also evident that the College of the North Atlantic needs to address a number of aspects of this type of experience. These are discussed in the next chapter of this report.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this research was to determine whether the four-week work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program at the College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook campus, was meaningful from the student's perspective. The study involved students from the 1997/98 class who completed a work exposure term during May 1998. Data was collected by the researcher, as a participant-as-observer, during two reflective feedback sessions during the work term. As well as, through individual interviews with seven randomly selected participants and written student work term reports. A literature review revealed that the concept of experiential learning is positive, meaningful and real. The idea of psychosocial development was also explored as a variable in work placement meaning. Related to this were issues such as age, previous work and education experience. In an effort to answer the question of whether the work placement was meaningful, four additional research questions were proposed and answered. These questions dealt with the above mentioned variables, as well as, student expectations and College objectives related to work exposure that may have affected the experience. During the research it was evident that the structure of the work term including timing and length of the work placement also affected the experience. These variables were also analyzed in the context of the research questions.

It was speculated that if the experience did not hold meaning for the student, a problem existed. If there is no meaning to the experience for the student, then the question of whether the process is worthwhile must be asked. Based on the analysis of



data collected, this study concluded that students did find the work term exposure component meaningful.

The definition of meaningful was different for each individual however there were common themes. All students, except one, articulated that applying what they learned in school gave meaning to the experience. As well, the concept of psychosocial developmental was evident and deemed meaningful for most participants. The specific developmental issues depended on the person and variables such as age and previous work and educational experience. The older, more experienced students for example expressed that positive confirmation of their career choice was an important result of the work term. The younger, less experienced students found the experience more meaningful because they gained confidence. This observation is reflective of Chickering's developmental model and the theory that individuals resolve developmental tasks at different life stages. The College should be sensitive to the various life stages of students especially as the student population becomes varied in age and experience. Reference to developmental issues is an indication that student's perception of what they find meaningful, in relation to the work term is developmental not curriculum related.

There was also a strong relationship evident between work term satisfaction and well defined student expectations. It can be concluded that students who effectively prepared for the work placement, including becoming knowledgeable about the sponsor and the position, were able to set realistic and attainable expectations. This knowledge helped guide the experience and as a result, the student was more satisfied. As well, it is speculated that a more knowledgeable sponsor would also result in a more satisfying work placement for both the student and the sponsor. In this situation the sponsor could



ensure that student expectations are realistic and correlate with the company's philosophy on work terms. Based on this the sponsor could then assign relevant tasks that meet the student's expectations. Only one student indicated that her expectations of the experience were not the same as her sponsor's and as a result she was unsatisfied with the experience.

The structure of the work term also appeared to affect the meaning of the experience. All seven students articulated that four weeks was not enough time to learn anything new and to apply existing knowledge at any depth. As well, the work term at the end of the program did not provide an opportunity to reflect on or to recognize what they had actually gained from the experience. It seemed that most students felt that the work term was an add-on with little structure or meaning in the context of the program of studies. In addition, the work term carried no formal evaluation or weight with regards to student transcripts raising the issue of importance of the experience. Students also questioned the fee for an experience that does not appear to fit in their program curriculum. The perception of minimal College commitment to the work exposure component of a program did result in the students questioning its value and importance.

Literature supports the concept that experiential learning is fundamental to meaningful learning. This study also concluded that experiential learning was not complete because students indicated that they did not acquire any new learning as a result of the experience. Students did proceed through the first two steps of experiential learning including action and reflection. It is theorized however that the lack of work term structure and timing of the term limited the reflective learning process. It is speculated that new learning in fact had occurred, however, students were not guided



through the reflective learning process effectively. Even though this study has concluded that experiential learning was not complete, most students deemed the experience meaningful. If experiential learning did not occur, the question becomes what did the students experience on the work term. Based on results of this research, it is speculated that the student's experience was part of the information assimilation process.

Information assimilation is similar to experiential learning however, the learning process is reverse (Keeton, 1976). Information assimilation starts with receiving information and then assimilating and organizing the information to understand the general principles of the new knowledge. The third step involves inferring an application of the knowledge and the final step is action. The work term may be viewed as step four of the information assimilation process whereby students apply what they have learned during their academic program. This study concludes that the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program is a combination of the first two steps of the experiential learning process and learning assimilation. Keeton (1976) theorized that "academic learning can be made considerably more effective by the appropriate mix of experiential learning and information assimilation" (p. 58). In support of this, he also stated that "if knowledge cannot be applied then learning is incomplete" (p. 56). Even though this combination is deemed ideal, the experiential learning component was not complete therefore, more efforts are required to maximize the learning process.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations to address concerns related to the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program relate to various issues including College policy and objectives, work term structure, work term preparation and



evaluation, and partnerships. Recommendations for further research are also included in this section.

### **College Work Exposure Policy and Objectives**

College policy on work exposure briefly states that students must complete a work site exposure to fulfill graduation requirements. This policy is guided by a number of objectives that are general in nature. In the context of this research, it is recommended that the policy and objectives be further developed and revised to better address psychosocial development issues and experiential learning deemed important for meaningful work exposure experiences. In particular, the College should develop and support experiential learning opportunities for students that foster the concept of self-directed learning. Supporting student driven learning contracts can help students identify developmental issues important to them and relevant to their developmental tasks. As well, a structured work term with opportunities for effective reflective learning and application of the new knowledge will help complete the experience.

**Psychosocial development.** The issue of student development is referred to in the College work exposure objectives. One of the objectives states that work exposure opportunities result in students “. . . experiencing interpersonal and social interaction in the work place” (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995). Other developmental issues identified by the students however, are not well defined in the College objectives including gaining confidence and confirming career goals. This research has shown that from a student’s perspective, these development issues are essential for a meaningful work exposure experience. Based on this observation, College work term policies and objectives should be more specific to



reflect developmental issues as well as curriculum issues. Obviously, work terms offer more than just applying academic knowledge and skills on the job, it is an opportunity to address and foster developmental issues as defined by Chickering's Student Developmental Theory.

**Experiential learning.** This study has determined that experiential learning was not successfully achieved during the work exposure term. Based on this observation, College work exposure objectives that refer to maximizing the learning benefits for students were not met. The College should put mechanisms in place to ensure that learning objectives are achieved. These mechanisms require specific policy and objectives to guide the learning process. A part of the process is reflective learning. Research indicates that the reflective learning is beneficial to the student and is crucial to the experiential learning process. It ensures that students revisit the experience to identify learning and as a result, are able to apply it in future circumstances. College work exposure objectives also state that work terms must alternate allowing students an opportunity to return to class to reflect on the experience (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995). Although stated in the objectives, the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) Diploma program does not alternate with academic terms. As a result, reflective learning was minimal and experiential learning was not achieved. The College should ensure that policy and objectives are delivered to benefit the student's learning experience. More specifically, it is recommended that experiential learning activities become integral components of College programs.



The research also concluded that learning assimilation did occur. The College work exposure objectives refers to this learning process as “the opportunity for students to assimilate and positively reinforce the knowledge and skills development occurring during the in-school program” (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995, p. 68). According to the literature, a combination of experiential learning and learning assimilation is the best combination for learning success. If experiential learning was complete, this combination would be achieved and learning maximized for the student. More specifically, it is recommended that experiential learning activities become integral components of college programs from point of entry to post graduation. It is recommended that an integral approach to experiential learning from the beginning of a program until graduation would guide students through the four stages of Kolb’s model. A comprehensive work exposure program would involve work term preparation of the student from the beginning of the program, continuous support, monitoring, evaluation and post work term follow-up. This would be accomplished through a tri-party learning contract system including the student, the sponsor and the College. The College should make efforts to ensure that sponsors are informed of program objectives and student abilities to help set realistic expectations for all partners. As well, it is recommended that the College identify criteria for an acceptable experiential learning situation and the requirements to achieve success and credit for the placement. Criteria would include the ability of the student to set and meet acceptable learning objectives. As well, to articulate what was learned and to demonstrate how this new knowledge can be applied. It is this process that reflects the



existence of experiential learning. It is important that this philosophy be adopted and supported from all levels within the system.

### **Work Term Preparation**

This study demonstrates that students require more preparation before they enter the work force. Preparation will lead to more efficiency and effectiveness of the work term training. As well, having placement commitments earlier, with defined objectives and expectations from all parties involved, would help minimize some of the confusion experienced by the students especially during the first few weeks of work. These measures can help reduce induction time and focus the sponsor and the student even before the work term starts. Productive utilization of the entire four weeks of the placement may possibly alleviate feelings that the work term should be extended a few more weeks. Four productive weeks may result in enough time for experiential learning to occur, but a minimum longer period should be considered.

To achieve work exposure objectives, the College should ensure that students are prepared and are provided with information to develop achievable objectives while on the work term. Recognizing learning opportunities can be better achieved through the use of a student-driven learning agreement that involves all three work term partners. This 'contract' must include agreed upon expectations, criteria, learning outcomes, assessments and credit for learning achieved (Marshall & Mill, 1992, p. 212). The College should put in place effective reflective exercises starting with a learning agreement that defines mutually agreed upon goals and expectations of the placement. This agreement can be revisited throughout the term to ensure that goals are being met and that students become self-directed learners. Students should keep a daily log of



activities that would not only include what they are doing but what they are feeling and what they are learning on a daily basis. Having to revisit their day by writing things down will help with the identification of learning and reflect a progression from start to finish. Reflective practices must also include an on-site visit from the supervising instructor to confirm appropriate workplace activities and learning. Evidence of inadequate and misinformation also confirms the necessity of regular monitoring by the College to ensure that placements are meeting expectations and that learning exists. The reflective feedback sessions were good mediums to share learning with fellow classmates and instructors, as well, gave the students an idea of what other students were doing during the work term. Most students agreed however, that they did not gain insight into what they were learning on the work term from these sessions. These sessions must be structured to encourage students to answer questions related to learning. Students must know before commencing the work term, the purpose of these sessions and what is expected of them. Another concern involves the written reports which were submitted in various formats and provided different amounts and types of information. The work term report should include a brief summary of the daily log as well as, the students thoughts and feelings of the placement, what they got from the work term, how it linked to their studies, and recommendations of how the placement or program can be improved. The work term report should be submitted as a professional paper, following proper report format, to encourage the document to be taken seriously. Consistency and defined expectations for work term placements will help put in place a more effective and efficient evaluation scheme.



### **Evaluation**

Evaluation is one form of feedback from which a student can learn and has been identified by the work experience enhanced model proposed by Heinemann et al. (1992). It is therefore recommended that evaluation (formative and summative) processes be adopted to guarantee student recognition of learning. Evaluation of the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program is conducted through informal discussions among the supervising instructor and the work term supervisor. This information is never formally recorded or provided to the student. Evaluation is important to determine how the student performed as well as, students could learn from an evaluation including positive reinforcement and criticism. As well, if there was an evaluation associated with the work term, students may place more value on these exercises. In addition, College transcripts should indicate completion or give credit for the work exposure component. These practices are essential for performance feedback and a tool useful in identifying strengths and areas requiring improvement. Evaluations are learning tools that would give the students another perspective on their performance and what their work term meant.

### **Work Term Structure**

The College should design the work term structure and activities to guide the students through the experiential learning process. A more structured program would mean that learning would not occur by chance but be planned and guided. The situation experienced by a student whereby the sponsor did not assign any program related work resulted in minimal learning and no meaning for the student. Efforts to avoid such occurrences must be maximized. This situation demonstrates Dafalco's (1995) comment



that work experiences based on the belief that experience in itself will lead to learning are ineffective and are susceptible to exploitation.

The timing of the work term at the end of the program seemed to pose a problem for structured, formal reflective exercises especially for out of town students. College work term objectives clearly state that “periods of work exposure must be scheduled during a student’s program so as to allow for follow up. For example, the student must have the opportunity to return to the program following the work exposure” (Westviking College of Applied Arts, Technology and Continuing Education, 1995, p. 68). Having the work term at the end of the program does not support this policy. It does not provide the students with an opportunity to reflect and apply new knowledge and principles gained on the job. Some students outside the immediate area did not even return for the feedback sessions. The College should promote the work term policy of maximizing student learning by encouraging that the experiential learning process is structured and complete. Reflective learning exercises should remain an integral part of the work term experience to ensure that learning occurs. In a work term situation this process should be facilitated by an Instructor dedicated to the goal ensure of maximizing learning.

Based on this, it is recommended that the work term be moved to the beginning of the fourth academic semester. Moving the work term between academic semesters reflects College work term policies and the concept of experiential learning. This structure would mean that students would not follow the tri-semester in the same sequence as other programs, but would still graduate the same time as they presently do. After completion of three academic semesters, the students would have learned enough to apply themselves productively on the job. As well, if the students are going to view the



work term as a learning exercise it should be an integral part of the program, not just an add-on to the end. College practices not reflecting a commitment to the work exposure mode of education may lead to questions of how it fits in to the program and its learning value. Returning to school after an experience gives students an opportunity to recognize and share their learning. The fact that only one student, out of the six that obtained work, indicated that the work term was meaningful because employment was secured as a result of the experience, confirmed that obtaining a job is not what makes the work term meaningful. Based on this observation, getting employment because the work term is located at the end of the program is not an argument to maintain this structure

It is recommended that if the work term is extended beyond four weeks, addressing student concerns over finances may become necessary. Although sponsors may value the work of a work term student more if there was a dollar figure attached, convincing sponsors to pay for work term students after years of no pay may prove difficult, but may result in a longer, more valued work term. This approach would require a significant marketing strategy at a provincial level. If work terms remain unpaid it would not be wise, from the students financial perspective, to extend its length.

### **Partnerships**

If the College is to maintain longevity of quality placement support from industry sponsors, it must ensure that these participants are satisfied. From a student perspective, College accountability and client-centered services must exist for work term activities. This research indicated that realistic expectations and objectives were a part of a successful work term experience. The College should aim to ensure that sponsors are



aware of program content, student potential and the various roles of the stakeholders involved in the work term.

Clear expectations of instructors, sponsor's and students are also essential for a positive structured learning experience (Thayer, 1996). This can only be achieved by involving all participants in the experience rather than just to talk about it. Even though students were asked by the instructor to contact the sponsor before the work term, expectations were not defined by and agreed upon by all three partners. It appeared that well directed research and adequate information for everyone involved results in realistic expectations and improved job satisfaction. This can be accomplished by communication among the partners including an effective education and awareness strategy. In addition, a learning agreement prior to the work term to articulate and agree on similar work term objectives and to guide the learning process is necessary. This agreement should include what is to be done on the job, what's expected to be learned and how it will be learned. Expectations would also include soft skills and developmental issues such as increased confidence, better communication skills and an ability to work with others. All three parties should be involved in producing individual work term agreements which should be revisited a number of times over the course of the placement to ensure objectives are being met and if not, measures taken to revise the contract or change the experience. One suggestion is an agreement from the sponsor that students would be involved in productive work not merely observing or completing menial or unrelated tasks. Issues related to development and learning have been identified as essential ingredients of a successful placement. To ensure that development and learning occur and is recognized,



reflective learning must exist. This can only be achieved through solid work term practices with ample opportunities for the students to complete the learning process.

In an effort to reach this goal, it is recommended that the College adopt the 'work experience enriched education model' proposed by Heinemann et al (1992) as a basis for a successful work experience program. This model identifies three major objectives of a work exposure experience including personal, academic and career objectives. These objectives refer to curriculum, personal and developmental issues identified as important for a meaningful experience. In an effort to successfully meet these objectives it is further recommended that the College incorporate Kendall's (1991) essential elements for significant learning through experience. These elements include preparing the students, monitoring and supporting them throughout the experience, and helping them with debriefing, assimilation and analysis of their learning. As a result, work term practices should consist of effective learning exercises that promote reflective learning including learning contracts, regular on-site monitoring, structured feedback sessions, evaluation and possibly a change in the timing of the work term allowing more time on-campus before and after the work term.

### **Summary**

Overall, this research has shown that the work term exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) Diploma program at the Corner Brook campus proved to be meaningful to the students surveyed. It was meaningful from a developmental perspective, and as an opportunity to apply classroom learning. However, the research provided indication that a need to revise aspects of the program may be needed. Instead of work terms that rely on learning occurring just because it is



experience, the College should take measures to ensure that the learning process is complete. Work term satisfaction seems to hinge on realistic expectations, participant commitment and work term practices that guide these processes. If the work terms are not meaningful, then the College has to question its value to the students, the sponsors and the College.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

In summary, recommendations for the College, including faculty and staff involved in the delivery of experiential learning components of programs, are:

1. The development and implementation of work exposure policies and procedures to ensure that experiential learning becomes an integral component of College programs.
2. The work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program to occur after the third academic semester.
3. The provision of adequate information and support to sponsoring organizations.
4. Preparation of students for the work experience from point of entry to post-graduation including career, personal and employment counselling enabling students to identify realistic work term expectations.
5. A structured monitoring and evaluation structure including credit for work exposure experiences on student transcripts.
6. At least a minimum four-week, but ideally six week work term with continuous support and follow-up.
7. A mutually agreed upon learning contract between all three work term participants outlining learning objectives and work term activities.



8. Formal reflective learning exercises giving the students opportunities to articulate and apply learning.
9. An opportunity for students to experience and recognize psychosocial development.
10. An opportunity for students to become self-directed learners.

It is recommended that further research be conducted including:

1. Studies from a broader student population. This would offer additional information for experiential learning practices in other College programs and campuses.
2. Perspectives from sponsoring organizations and College personnel. The research questions would then expand to include all three partners in the experiential learning process.
3. A replicated type of study on the same program after some changes to see whether recommendations can indeed be realized.

Further research would provide a firm foundation for the College to review and if necessary, revise its work exposure policies and practices to ensure that its benefits are maximized for all participants. As supported by literature and through this study, experiential learning has proven to be a valuable mode of education and should be utilized by the instructors in the College of the North Atlantic system to enhance the quality of their programs and services offered to students and sponsoring organizations.





**COLLEGE  
OF THE  
NORTH  
ATLANTIC**

Corner Brook Campus  
141 O'Connell Drive  
P.O. Box 822  
Corner Brook, Newfoundland  
Canada A2H 6H6

April 8, 1998

Ms. Elizabeth Chaulk  
c/o Corner Brook Campus  
College of the North Atlantic  
P.O. Box 822  
Corner Brook, NF  
A2H 6H6

Dear Libby:

**Re: Permission to Pursue Thesis Study**

Permission is hereby granted to you to pursue a study concerning the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program at the Corner Brook Campus. I have copied your request with attachment to Glenn Dicks, Scott Shears and Roy Hutchings with whom you have had previous discussions. We wish you much success in your continued educational pursuits, and look forward to the results of your study.

Yours sincerely,

Marilyn Luscombe  
District Administrator

mb

cc: Glenn Dicks, ADA  
Scott Shears, Instructor  
Roy Hutchings, Instructor



April 02, 1998

Marilyn Luscombe  
District Administrator  
College of the North Atlantic  
Corner Brook Campus

Dear Marilyn:

As you are aware, I am in the process of submitting my thesis proposal as a requirement for my Education Administration Masters program at Memorial University.

I am requesting permission from appropriate College officials to pursue a study concerning the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program at the Corner Brook campus. I have discussed my intentions and have received verbal support from the ADA (Glen Dicks) and the instructors (Scott Shears and Roy Hutchings) responsible for the program.

The proposed research question is "From the perspective of the students, is the work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) program meaningful?". Data collection will include myself as a participant-as-observer during two reflective feedback sessions held throughout the upcoming work exposure term in May 1998. Data will also be collected by open-ended, structured interviews to be conducted by myself with participating students. These interviews will take place after the work exposure experience. The study sample will include seven students who will be required to sign a letter of consent before becoming involved. I will not identify the participants by name or characteristics in an effort to protect confidentiality.

I hope I have provided sufficient information. If not, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your anticipated support. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Chaulk



## Appendix 5



- d.) Did you have related work experience prior to the work exposure experience? If so, in what capacity and for how long? *Reason: Previous work experience may affect a students expectations and knowledge of the work place.*
- e.) Do you have additional education training to the Business Administration program? If so, what and how long ago? *Reason: Additional training may affect the experience. More training for example may result in more complex job duties or further psychosocial development before the work placement.*
- f.) Type and size of business where the placement occurred? *Reason: The type and size of business may affect what duties and responsibilities assigned, interpersonal relationships, and work environment, which may affect the experience.*

Patton suggests acquiring demographic data near the end of the interview when a rapport has been established with the respondent.



- 3b.) Is there anything that you would have liked to learn and did not?

*Reasons: Attempts to elicit a response related to what the respondents think about their world and how they react.*

*This question will address research questions #1, #2, #3 and #4 regarding the perception of a meaningful experience, maximizing student learning, and experiential learning in the context of the work exposure experience.*

- 4.) What do you feel about the work exposure experience?

*Reasons: The question will elicit answers related to how the participants feel about their experience and their opinions.*

*These answers will relate to research questions #1, #4 and #5 that deal with personal feelings about the experience.*

- 5.) How would you describe your experience?

*Reasons: Based on Patton's typologies, this question will elicit participants to describe what and how they view the placement through the five senses.*

*This question will provide data related to the five research questions.*

- 6.) Would you define your experience as meaningful? If so, how? If not, why?

*Reasons: To get a response regarding what the participants define as meaningful and whether they found the work exposure opportunity meaningful.*

*This question relates directly to research question #4 however, will provide insight for the remaining four research questions.*

- 7.) Demographic Information:

*Reason: This information may affect how a participant views the experience. The factors identified in this section could relate to all five of the research questions.*

- a.) Age: Reason: Individuals may require and expect different experiences depending on what stage of life they are at.
- b.) Home Town: Reason: Students may have worked outside their home communities which may affect their experience.
- c.) What town did you complete your placement? Reason: To compliment the previous question.



## Post Work Term Interviews

**Date:**

**Location:**

**Interviewee:**

**Interviewer:**

*Reason(s) for asking the question in relation to the research purpose based on Patton's typology is provided after each question.*

Explanation of the purpose of the interview will be provided. Will confirm with the participant the agreement to conduct a second interview following the work exposure placement. Participants will be assured that names and businesses will not be identified.

- 1.) What was your job title and description while on work exposure placement?

*Reason: To determine what the student did while on work term. It is hoped to discover what types of activities they were involved in and what skills and knowledge was required. Based on Patton's typology this question is related to the student's experience.*

- 2.) What were your expectations of the placement? Did the placement meet your expectations? If not, why?

*Reason: To gain information regarding what participants knew about the work environment related to their field of studies. To determine if these perceptions were accurate and if not, what was different. The question will attempt to elicit what they expected and actually experienced.*

*Interview questions = 1 and = 2 relate to answers sought for research questions = 1, = 2, = 3 and = 4.*

- 3.) What did you learn from the experience?

*Reason: To discover if learning occurred and is recognized by the student. This reflective oriented question will focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to technical, social and work ethics. It will attempt to gain an insight on learning around developmental issues such as interpersonal relationships, self-actualization, self-awareness, attitudes, and self-esteem. Patton's typologies address these types of answers as how respondents think about their experience and behaviour.*

*Information gathered from this question will help answer research questions = 1, = 2 and = 3 of whether the experience maximized student learning, if experiential learning and student development occurred.*



## Appendix 4



Graduate Programmes and Research, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland. My thesis supervisor, Dr. Dennis Sharpe, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, can be contacted at (709) 737-7549.

I would appreciate it if you would return this agreement to me before the beginning of the first reflective session scheduled for May 08, 1998. Thank you.

Sincerely,

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agree to participate in a study undertaken by Elizabeth Chaulk. The purpose of this study is to determine if I found the four-week work exposure component of my program of studies, Business Administration (Accounting), meaningful. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time. All information is strictly confidential and no individual will be identified.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



### Letter of Consent

Dear Student:

I am the Coordinator of Co-operative Education at the College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook. I am presently completing my Masters program in Educational Administration (Post-Secondary) at Memorial University of Newfoundland and will be conducting research at the College for the thesis requirement of my program. My study will focus on the four-week work exposure component of the Business Administration (Accounting) diploma program offered by the College of the North Atlantic, Corner Brook campus. This qualitative study will explore and evaluate, from the perspective of the student, whether the work exposure experience is meaningful. I am requesting your participation in the study and permission to use data collected to determine whether your work exposure experience was meaningful for you.

Data collection will involve me as a participant-observer during the two reflective group sessions held during the work term. These sessions are designed to give work term students an opportunity to share their experiences and thoughts with fellow classmates and the supervising instructor, Mr. Roy Hutchings, through group discussions and presentations. I will attempt to record, through handwriting, as much as possible during these exercises. Upon completion of the work term you will also be interviewed on an individual basis about your experience and what it meant to you. The interview questions will be open-ended and the same questions will be asked to each of the participants. You may refrain from answering any question(s) you prefer to omit. The interviews will be taped and later transcribed by myself. I will also be reviewing employer and instructor evaluation documents and work term journals. Mr. Hutchings will remove the names of the students and employers from these documents before they are given to me. I will be the only person with access to the reflective session notes, work term documents and to the interview tapes. Upon completion of the study all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office. You may request that tape recordings be erased at any time.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. I am interested in whether the work exposure program is meaningful from the students' perspective not in an individual's work performance. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw yourself from the study at any time. This study has approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. I have obtained written permission from the District Administrator of the Corner Brook campus of the College, Ms. Marilyn Luscombe, to conduct this study. The results of my research will be made available to you upon request and will not be released to anyone unless written permission from you is obtained.

If you are in agreement to participate in this study please sign below and return one copy to your supervising instructor and keep another copy for your records. If you have any concerns or require additional information please feel free to contact me at (709) 637-8575 or at [echaulk@northatlantic.nf.ca](mailto:echaulk@northatlantic.nf.ca). If you at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact Dr. Linda Phillips, Associate Dean,



### Appendix 3



## ***BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (ACCOUNTING DIPLOMA)***

This program, leading to a Diploma in Business Administration (Accounting), is designed to achieve standards of skill and competency required in the field of general financial accounting and to create an awareness of the need to cope with greater accounting responsibilities. Management requires personnel with skills to interpret complex accounting information and to produce comprehensive accounting reports. This program will address this area of competency.

### **Semester 1**

AC1240	Financial Accounting I
CM1100	Communications
DM1100	Document Production Fundamentals
MA1400	Mathematics of Finance I
MR1100	Marketing I
MR1210	Customer Service
CP1230	Operating Systems

### **Semester 2**

CM2100	Correspondence
CP2310	Electronic Spreadsheet Applications
HN1200	Human Resources Management

#### **Two of the Following:**

AC2240	Financial Accounting II
EP1100	Entrepreneurial Awareness
MA2400	Mathematics of Finance II
MR2100	Marketing II

### **Semester 3**

AC2220	Intermediate Financial Accounting I
AC2230	Computerized Accounting for Small Business
AC2250	Managerial Accounting I
AC2320	Business Finance
CM2200	Oral Communications
MA1600	Statistics for Business I

### **Semester 4**

AC1350	Income Tax
AC3220	Intermediate Financial Accounting II
AC3230	Computerized Accounting II
AC3250	Managerial Accounting II
CM2300	Report Writing
EC1100	Microeconomics
OJ1200	Work Exposure      4 Weeks

(College of the North Atlantic Calendar 1997 - 98 pp.69-70)



## Appendix 2



## **Handbook of Instructional/Student Development Policies, Procedures and Regulations**

### **8.6 Work Exposure**

#### **8.6.1 Policy**

It is the policy of the College that students enrolled in all Vocational Certificate programs be required to complete a period of at least two (2) weeks of work site exposure, in order to qualify for the vocational education certificate.

#### **8.6.2 Work Exposure Objectives**

The work exposure period or its equivalent must provide the following opportunities:

- A. The opportunity for students to experience a workplace environment by completing assigned work with a cooperating employer(s) in their chosen field or occupation.
- B. The opportunity for students to make contacts with potential employers in their chosen field or occupation.
- C. The opportunity for students to assimilate and positively reinforce the knowledge and skills development occurring during the in-school program.
- D. The opportunity for students to work with colleagues in the same field or occupation thereby experiencing interpersonal and social interaction in the workplace.
- E. The opportunity for students to be supervised in a workplace setting, to have an evaluation of their work conducted; and the further opportunity to have this experience reviewed and discussed with their instructors and fellow students upon return to the classroom.

All work exposure assignment must be designed to maximize the learning benefits for students. Where feasible students will be responsible for setting up the arrangements with co-operating employers. Periods of work exposure must be scheduled during a student's program so as to allow for follow-up i.e. the student must have the opportunity to return to the program following the work exposure.



## Appendix 1



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