Supervision Challenges Encountered During Kenyan University Students' Practicum Attachment

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Abstract

There is little published research that examines the supervision experience of field attachment supervisors in Kenya. In this study, we identify the challenges encountered by field supervisors during student field attachments with community organizations. Fifteen organizations that had hosted third year students from the Department of Community Resource Management and Extension (CRM&E) at Kenyatta University during their practicum attachment were sampled using purposive and convenience sampling. Data was collected using face-to-face key informant interviews with field supervisors (n=15). Data was analyzed using NVivo10 software for qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of key themes related to clarity of learning objectives for students and the supervision challenges encountered by field supervisors during practicum. Key findings indicate that the supervisors largely lacked a clear understanding of practicum expectations and the academic preparation of students in the Community Resource Management and Extension program. The main supervision challenge is largely on orienting students to community based field work so as to enable them link theory to practice. These results can be helpful for any academic program to improve the field attachment experience of university students and the community organizations hosting the students. A better understanding of the challenges that field supervisors' encounter is fundamental to the enhancement of the practicum experience of university students since the requisite and appropriate support can be provided to the host organizations. Subsequently, the students will be more likely to optimize the intended benefits of the practicum as a result of the host organizations enhancing the quality of field-based learning.

Keywords: practicum, supervision, experiential learning, community-based learning, learning methods, post-secondary education, higher education

1. Introduction

Higher education in Kenya has been undergoing rapid and dynamic change as efforts have been made to align higher education with national priorities stipulated in the development blueprint *Kenya Vision 2030* (Gov't of Kenya, 2008). Kenyan institutions of higher learning need to tailor their units to the national development agenda if Vision 2030 is to be achieved (Kadii, 2012). For example, it is recommended that universities provide mandatory community-based practicum[1] experiences to ensure graduates acquire necessary on-the-job training (Dorasamy & Pillay, 2010; Kadii, 2012). Practicum, which according to Furco's (1996) Experiential Learning Continuum places the greatest focus on student learning, is a critical component of higher education since it provides students with an experiential learning context which enables them to link theory to practice. This field-based learning experience is especially vital for students training to work in community settings. However, there is little research focus on these practicums, including the clarity of learning objectives of the experience by field supervisors and the supervision challenges these encountered.

This research is guided by the work of educational theorists focusing on experiential learning. Constructivist theorists such as Dewey, Bruner, and Kolb first proposed a cyclical model for experiential education in which the learner reconstructs and reflects on each experience (Bigge & Shermis, 1999; Dewey, 1896; Kolb, 1984). Various scholars (Boud & Miller, 1996; Moon, 2004) elaborated on the work of earlier theorists as they considered how deeper reflection, intention to learn and feedback were interrelated with experiential learning. By incorporating these principles, it was believed that the process of experiential learning

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[1] Community-based practicums to refer to experience that students gain as part of their university coursework through field placements to gain practical experience.

would result in "changes in judgment, feeling or skills" for the individual (Chickering, 1977 as cited in Moon 2005).

The value of community-based learning for university undergraduate students is well-documented in research conducted in the North American context (Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Kuh, 2008; Peters, Sattler, & Kelland, 2014; Zlotkowski, 2001). In general, benefits can be grouped into four broad categories – educational, social, civic, and vocational/ professional (Adeogun, Oyebade, & Osifila, 2009; Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Cantor, 1995; Ferguson & Smith, 2011; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Steinke & Buresh, 2002; Sweitzer & King, 2009; Tiessen & Herron, 2012). Research examining community-based learning in the African context is much less abundant. One group of South African researchers identified that unless university students are provided with opportunities to test out ideas in practice settings, it is unlikely that they will feel confident or competent enough to integrate them into their practice after graduation (Ferguson & Smith, 2011). Other researchers have argued for compulsory community-based learning to promote socially responsible citizenship (Dorasamy & Pillay, 2010). In their study, which explored the position of service learning and its impact on partnerships at five African universities, Naidoo and Devnarain (2009) concluded there was need for the formalization of existing policies and institutional arrangements in order to facilitate meaningful community partnerships. SIMILAR FINDINGS WERE DESCRIBED IN A REPORT ON POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY (HENNING, 1998). BENDER (2008) EXAMINED how collaborative partnerships and community engagement practices interact in post-secondary institutions. KOLB AND KOLB (2005) EMPHASIZE THAT holistic programs of institutional development that encompass curriculum, student and faculty development are needed (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Information sharing with site supervisors is an important process in developing community partnerships (Knight, 1996).

Field supervisors are essential in contributing to the learning experience for students during practicum, but very little is known about the knowledge these supervisors have of the expectations of the practicum experience, their understanding of the academic preparation of the students they supervise, the challenges that these individuals face in supervising university students, and what academic programs can do in order to provide enhanced support for field supervisors. In this article, we contribute to the current knowledge on community-based practicums by analyzing interview data collected from field supervisors on these issues.

2. Methods

Undergraduate Community Resource Management and Extension (CRM&E) students at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, complete a mandatory eight week community-based practicum. Each student is supervised by a field supervisor who oversees the student's work in the community organization. Invitations to participate in this study were shared with organizations that had partnered with the department to host CRM&E students for practicums in previous years. Only organizations that hosted third-year CRM&E practicum students during May-August, 2013, were sampled using purposive maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). The organizations were based in a variety of urban and rural locations. One field supervisor in each of the 15 organizations participated in a face-to-face interview with a member of the research team. The interview included questions about field supervisors' understanding of the department's expectations for student learning activities during practicum, how they can be informed about the objectives of a field attachment, knowledge about the academic preparation of students in the CRM&E program and challenges associated with the supervision role. Prior to the interviews being conducted, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Boards at both Kenyatta University and the University of Prince Edward Island.

Qualitative data from the interviews with field supervisors was analyzed using thematic analysis. We used Braun and Clark's (2006) inductive six-step thematic analysis process to analyze the interview transcripts. This included the steps of becoming familiar with the data, identifying initial themes, compiling a list of themes and sub-themes, organizing the themes and sub-themes into a coding tree, naming and defining each theme, and providing a narrative description of the content of each sub-theme and illustrating them by selecting representative quotes. NVivo10 software program was used to aid in organizing qualitative data. Since multiple researchers were involved in coding data, we used appropriate procedures to ensure a high level of inter-rater reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This included developing and defining the themes that emerged from the data. Then, two researchers independently coded the data and then worked together to come to a consensus on the codes assigned to the data.

3. Results

Field supervisors were asked if they felt they had a clear knowledge and understanding of the expectations for the field attachment. Results of the in-depth interviews indicate that nine out of the fifteen field supervisors interviewed indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of the learning objectives for students. One of the field supervisors observed that *".....When I started supervising them (students) I was like maybe I should have met their lecturer before I start supervising them."* (Field Supervisor A)

Field Supervisors gained knowledge about the learning objectives from a variety of sources. Supervisors who reported to have a clear knowledge of expectations reported that they obtained this information mainly from the students. This was highlighted by one of the supervisors interviewed:

...when the student comes, the first thing we do is we ask the student, now you have come, what are your expectations and what do you have for the organization……..So when the student comes, the first thing we do is we ask her or him, "What would you like to know? What are his/her expectations when they are here…" (Field Supervisor F)

In addition, one of the supervisors who reported to have had clear understanding of expectations attributed this to his experience in the field of community work as follows:

"To me because I have been in the issue of NGOs for long….Sometimes now maybe six years I think I understand what is required when somebody comes for internship…because this is a process which is expected to build this student. To understand the practical part of what she has been learning in class." (Field Supervisor N)

Most field supervisors interviewed asserted that they knew nothing or very little about the academic preparation of students in the CRM&E program and hence tended to rely on their own understanding of the program. One supervisor said "I don't know much about the academic preparation…… I just know from my understanding I know that they have gone through the issues of community." (Field Supervisor N)

Field supervisors identified several challenging aspects of supervising the CRM&E attachés'. The main supervision challenge reported was largely on orienting students to community-based field work due to students having little practical knowledge. This meant that students found linking theory to practice was not easy. This was highlighted by one of the field supervisors who declared "Is how to relate that course to community development in totality." (Field Supervisor O) While another observed, "….So I think the challenge is on more so the student …learning the practical part very fast." (Field Supervisor N)

Another challenge highlighted by the field supervisors was that of difficulty in orienting students to community-based field work and incorporating a student's ideas into a program which has set objectives. This was underscored by a field supervisor who stated that:

"Basically, the challenges of supervision come during the initial stages because first of all they (students) are new, it is the first time they get in to this practical thing and before they internalize the project, that is where I get a lot of challenges because first when they come through together with them the project, the proposal and after that give them specific task and roles and then the first 2 to 3 weeks, they get a lot of difficulties" (Field Supervisor H)

Other challenges reported by the supervisors included inadequate resources within the organization to facilitate the attachés' ideas. This was pointed out by one of the field supervisors who indicated that students may want to participate in activities but resources do not allow for this:

".....sometimes we are very specific to our program depending on the funding we've received, but now you find that an intern may be working on a given task, but they feel willing to introduce A B C D which is not in the budget and it is not part of our mandate, so that one becomes a challenge..." (Field Supervisor H)

In some cases, adequate resources may not have been allocated due to the organization not knowing in advance that a student would be completing a practicum with the organization. Consequently students do not have access to resources to pursue activities that were not planned and budgeted for in advance.

The challenges might be on their (student) side because what normally happens is that before they come on board we have already done our budgeting, proposals and what have you so the challenge maybe in something that they encounter is maybe that money to facilitate them (students) in movements. (Field Supervisor I)

It is notable however, that no significant challenges were reported with regard to students' competence, knowledge or professionalism as affirmed by one field supervisor "….I have never had any challenge with them (students) in terms of knowledge maybe just a little bit of guidance here and there……. I have never had any challenge with them in terms of conduct." (Field Supervisor I)

Field supervisors were asked if they received assistance or support from colleagues within their organization or Kenyatta University Faculty to counter the challenges experienced. Results from the study demonstrate that to tackle the challenges faced, field supervisors accessed support from within their organizations by consulting colleagues. In addition, they commented on the cooperative attitude of the students. This was confirmed by one of the field supervisors who noted"…. because they (students) are cooperative, again they are mature; they are adults we are not dealing with children yeah, they are adults…... From my colleagues, yeah, even as an organization actually we work as a team." (Field Supervisor C)

In order improve students' preparation for practicum, field supervisors were invited to share their suggestions, especially in relation to how CRM&E students, faculty and staff could better inform them about the objectives of the field attachment. Key findings indicate that the supervisors suggested communication of

objectives directly by the department to the host organization prior to commencement of practicum as a way of enhancing the practicum experience for the students, the host organization and the CRM&E department. The preferred modes of communication were through e-mail or written communication detailing a list of learning objectives for the students or use of brochures.

4. Discussion

The theoretical framework used in this study focused on the benefits of experiential learning and reflective practice (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004), with a specific focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning in relation to community-based learning, practicums and high-impact educational practices for family related academic programs (Clawson, & Couse, 1998; Gonyea and Scott Kozak, 2014; Karasik, & Berke, 2001; Koepke & Barnett, 2014; Knowles, 2005; Kuh, 2008; Newman, in press; Tinsley McGill, 2012; VanLeeuwen, in press; Weeks & VanLeeuwen, 2006). The results of this study provide important knowledge on an understudied and important aspect of training for university students in an African context. The role of the Field Supervisor in community-based organizations is clearly a crucial one in achieving a successful practicum for both the student, the organization and in developing successful community partnerships (Knight, 1996). Our research can contribute to enhanced relationships with community partner organizations as a result of more effective communication of expectations between students and field supervisors in partner organizations. Field Supervisors should be provided with adequate information about the learning objectives of the students, and our research indicates host organizations believe that it is the responsibility of the academic department to provide this information to Field Supervisors.

It is clear that there needs to be additional communication with Field Supervisors about the academic preparation of students before the student begins the practicum as most knew nothing or very little about the student's academic background. This lack of communication could result in inadequate expectations (too great or too few) for student learning and performance during their practicum which could have a serious impact on the learning experience. We recommend that faculty provide detailed information to Field Supervisors about the particular units completed by students and the specific skills, abilities, and learning goal of individual students before the practicum begins. Depending on the number of students in the academic program, this may require faculty to institute a system for students to provide details about their academic preparation, interests, abilities, and skills that can be shared with Field Supervisors before the outset of the practicum.

It is clear that limited financial resources of the community-based organizations, and the students, result in practicum experiences that require little or no additional financial resources. In some cases, this may limit the student learning experience. One possible solution may be for community-based organizations to have increased advanced notice that a student will be placed with them. This may allow the organizations to budget resources required needed by students long before the student begins the practicum. However, it is recognized that it may not always be possible to know student interest in completing a practicum with a particular community-based organization with a great deal of advance warning. Alternately, in preparation for the practicum experience, faculty can help students identify learning objectives that do not require additional resources provided by the host organization.

Our results of this preliminary study can be applied to other academic departments that provide field placement opportunities for students, or are planning on developing these opportunities for students. It is recommended that universities in Kenya provide community-based practicum experiences to ensure graduates acquire necessary on-the-job training (Dorasamy & Pillay, 2010; Kadii, 2012). It is important to note that focus should be placed on student learning in a practicum, a key element which distinguishes practicums from volunteering (Furco, 1996). There may be need to provide Field Supervisors with information about this continuum in order to ensure that student learning remains the primary focus in practicums. Our results are particularly applicable to those disciplines that focus on training students to work with diverse populations and communities in various contexts, and especially those academic programs that train students to work with people who are vulnerable in some way. We encourage faculty in other academic programs to use the results of our study to implement successful practicum opportunities for students.

We identified several topics for further research based on our results. Additional research on the supervision of students along with almost any aspect of community-based practicum experiences is warranted due to limited research conducted with an African context. Assessment of student learning is a significant challenge. As noted by Ferns and Moore (2012), these learning experiences are inherently variable, and generally not replicable. Consequently, research which can be used to guide best practices for both field supervisors and faculty would be beneficial. Additional research focusing on providing practicum opportunities for students in other disciplines would be useful. Investigating how to provide additional financial and other resources to support the activities of students within community-based organizations is another important area of research which seems to be particularly relevant to the Kenyan/African context. The impact of post-colonial institutional practices on the administration of practicum placements is another area that warrants further

exploration. The constructs of prominent post-colonial theorists (e.g. Childs & Williams,1997; Memmi, 2006; Smith,1999; Subedia & Daza, 2008; Thiong'o, 1986) and other contemporary African scholars set within the context of cultural attitudes toward community-based learning of Kenyan or other African university students may contribute valuable ideas to incorporate the best of indigenous knowledge. Further study is also suggested to ensure the evolution of effective institutional practices by the university, adequate preparation for both students, field supervisor and faculty members charged with the responsibility of assessing student practicums, as well as timely communication of necessary information to field supervisors in host organizations. Additional research on these issues could foster the development of more meaningful and constructive partnerships between practicum host organizations and universities.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study can be helpful for faculty in any academic program that is endeavoring to improve the field attachment experience of university students and the experience of the community organizations hosting the students. Our results highlight the important role of the Field Supervisor to the learning experience of the students and the importance of adequate communication, resources, and support provided to them in fulfilling their role. Faculty can use these preliminary findings to ensure that appropriate preparation and support are in place for Field Supervisors to ensure that students' involvement in this form of community–based experiential learning results in positive, relevant and constructive practicum experiences.

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