

# LEARNING METHODS FOR PRACTICE PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

**Eduard-Gabriel CEPTUREANU**

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania*  
*eduard.ceptureanu@man.ase.ro*

## **Abstract**

This article examines several learning methods useful in designing practice programs in higher education institutions (HEIs). These programs are becoming significantly more popular among all involved, as promoters or beneficiaries – universities, students and companies. Both students and academic staff recognize the value of practice as an essential part of preparing student community for labour market before graduation, while companies are also interested because they can, far less expensive, to recruit and select future employees.

**Keywords:** MANPRACT, Learning methods for practice, Advantages of practice programs

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Today, employers want HEI graduates capable to efficiently apply their academic knowledge and skills in actual business. If possible, they also must demonstrate past practical work experience (Reardon, Lenz, and Folsom, 1998). This is one of the reasons why students seek to gain experience and consider that involving in a practical learning experience such as practices or practice programs provide better opportunities for them both in getting a job as well as gaining the necessary practical skills hardly available otherwise (Cates-Mclver, 1998).

According to Reardon (Reardon, Lenz, and Folsom, 1998), previous working experience is being assessed by employers as being crucial when recruiting young graduates, while Perry and Goldberg argues that participation in practice programmes was proven as positively influencing graduates' ability to get accepted at interview (Perry and Goldberg, 1998).

Employment rate of recent graduates is an indicator about how appropriate is the educational system to labour market. It is estimated that each year more than 12 million people reach 16 years old, of which almost 90 percent will seek jobs. Supporting actions by universities to facilitate students' employment

has a medium and long term positive impact on students' motivation for study because it gives them an opportunity to give sense to their studies and to integrate more easily into labour market. In this context, practice experiences has a positive effect on future graduates' career choices and options.

Internship in companies enable students to test their interests, valid their knowledge, set up career goals, and identify those skills really important for employers (Chambliss, Rinde, and Miller, 1996). Students engaged in practice programs are more willing and able to get a job, usually faster and connected with their education. They are generally more satisfied with their work positions (Kysor and Pierce, 2000).

Participation in practice programs can improve students' general academic performance. Many times, at least in Romania, students have to choose between attending classes and focus on good grades or work, usually to support themselves. For them, this is an opportunity to combine them both.

Various studies discovered that successful practice programs provide an incentive to continue studies (Wang and Owens, 1995) while others showed that practice has a positive correlation with academic performance as long as thematic of practice program is related to educational and professional interests of students (Stern and Nakata, 1991).

## **2. LEARNING METHODS IN PRACTICE PROGRAMS**

Labour market actors were and are becoming increasingly interested in the actual outcomes of HEIs since graduates become their employees. As such, in their capacity to prepare competent future workers able to meet their recruiting demands. As business environment emphasize IT technologies and fast adaptation to globalization, employers look for graduates capable to solve problems, integrates in teams and are proactive.

HEIs are being increasingly called by local business communities to identify, include or facilitate access to a diversified set of job and practical training opportunities for students, on one hand, and simultaneously to be actively engage companies in the practical side of learning process (Oblinger and Verville, 1998).

Practice programs for students depends to a considerable extent to the learning methods used. Differences arise from their use, which takes into account specific conditions of work and practice.

Traditional learning methods are divide by objectives and educational content in three categories:

- focused on transferring knowledge;

- focused on developing abilities to apply knowledge and behaviour modelling;
- mixed, which combines knowledge transfer development to apply and/or modify behaviour of students.

According to our experience, the most appropriate one are active or mixed methods, considering pedagogical background changes produced in the last two decades (Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu, 2015).

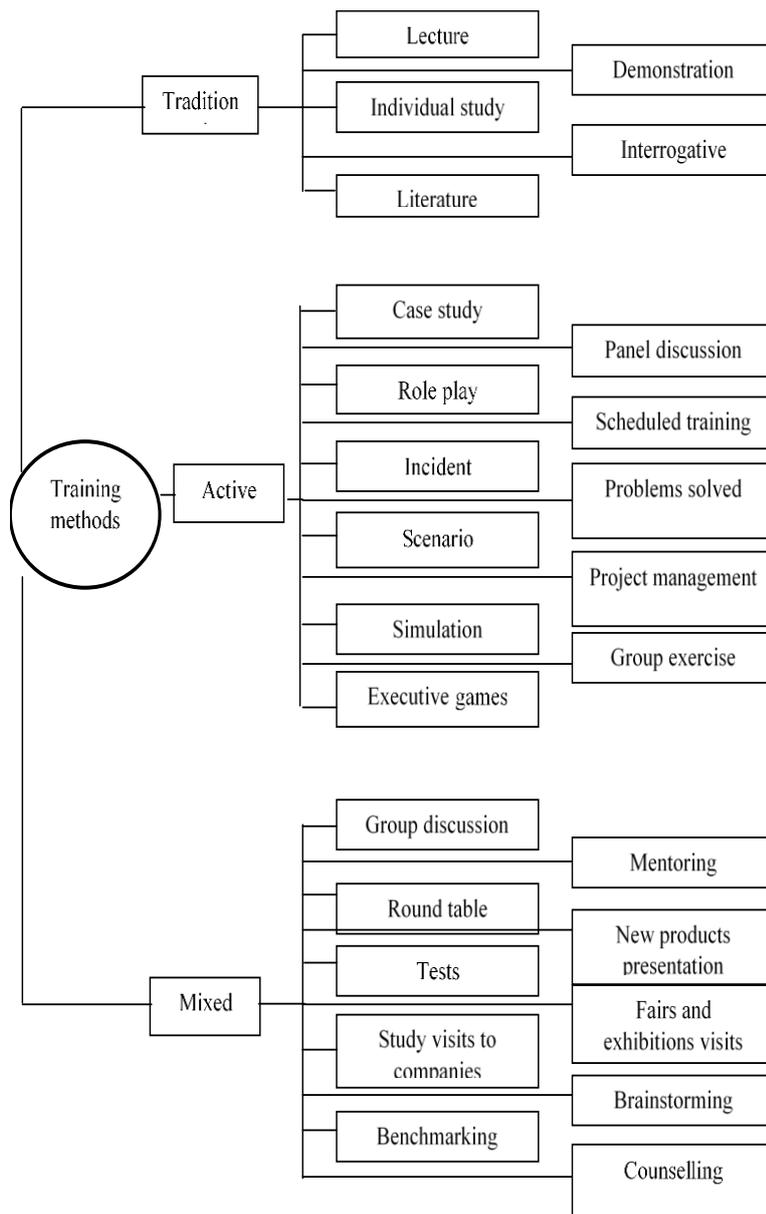
Using learning methods is closely linked to IT technologies in the process of training and development of capable employees. The great advances in recent decades in computers, telecommunications and data enables both universities and students to learn fast, to adapt to a continuous changing learning environment (Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu, 2015). Even though some practice programs do not emphasize IT technology, students can still use it back in the universities, usually by economic or managerial simulations.

Regardless of what is included in the content of practice programs, which methods are used and how they are grouped, two elements are essential:

- Practice program' designer and/or responsible to be informed about learning methods and fully aware of the advantages and limitations of each;
- To use these methods and technical means, educational context involved, determine the maximum contribution formative reflected in increased work efficiency and performance of student.

TABLE 1 CATEGORIES OF LEARNING METHODS

Traditional	Group	Based on technology
Lecture Case study The input of teacher Outside speakers Debate	Group exercise Brainstorming Networking Mutual learning techniques Consultation group Training outside the classroom Outdoor training	Simulation Long distance learning E-mail Video conferencing Notes and computer analysis
Action oriented	Benchmarking	Comprehensive
Projects Learning by doing Learning from reflection on action 360 feed-back	Sharing experiences Company visits	Reflection Participation in activities involving music, painting, poetry, art in general Conference a non-traditional guest speaker Imaginative thinking outside the workplace



**FIGURE 1 STUDENT LEARNING METHODS EMPLOYED IN PRACTICE PROGRAMS**

Other benefits of using appropriate learning methods in practice programs regards:

- Increased interaction of students with various individuals and companies, raising chances to have access to potential employer;
- Improved self-confidence for students, which can experience real life business related situations;
- Access to a variety of learning styles and new ways of learning and thinking, different from academic ones;

- Improved skills in group and interpersonal communication;
- Better adaptation to change, to customers, to colleagues, to business demands in general;
- Help a student to become a more motivated life-long learner;
- Improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills of students (Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu, 2012);
- Customized learning, giving it relevance and meaning;
- Providing networking and mentoring opportunities.

Learning methods should lead to permanent behavioral changes and measurable improvements in students' performance. In other words it is not enough just to participate in a practice program to be successful, you need to and put into practice the information received. The practice program should take into account the effective communication to help students to receive messages correctly. Items that are part of a practice plan can be grouped into three distinct categories as follows: factual, procedural and conceptual (Lacombe, 2005).

For an overview of the learning process we have highlighted some differences between academic learning and organizational learning (Vaught, 2008):

TABLE 2 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING FOCUS

Factor	Academic Learning	Organizational learning
<b>Trainer level of expertise</b>	Often only academic. Some colleagues, especially two years or pedagogical schools, ask Rainer and industrial experience, skills in interpersonal communication.	Skills and knowledge in the relevant field, regardless of their academic degree; In addition to interpersonal communication skills are critically important.
<b>Courses content</b>	Usually broad and theoretical. In some areas (computer) can exist and practical elements.	Concentrate and applied orientation. Includes mostly evidence and procedures rarely concepts.
<b>Level of study objectives</b>	The most common are the objectives of knowledge, skills occasionally objectives. Work performance objectives are only peripheral position.	Although training often includes knowledge and skill objectives, the main objective is related to job performance.
<b>Time management</b>	Usually occurs simultaneously for the entire group of students; quarterly or semi-organized system.	Typically is at short intervals; smaller groups; start programs as needed.
<b>Evaluation system</b>	Marks, for example, from 1 to 10	Usually not pass qualifications promoted; many programs are granted no notes or marks. Some seek only gaining dexterity.
<b>Usual style of presentation</b>	Lecture and inductive formulas, although starting to gain more widespread case studies and laboratory applications.	Often use the mailbox, even in a class format; training in the workplace is the most common approach to employee involvement practices.
<b>Participants reasons</b>	Getting a diploma, certificate or other document. Sometimes, for your own satisfaction, and career and employability.	Imposed by the employer in response to the needs of the organization. Enable job retention or promotion.
<b>Study unit</b>	Individual; collaboration in preparing the assessment work is often regarded that fraud. "Customer" is the individual student.	The study group is much more common. "Customer" is the organization.
<b>Training materials</b>	Comprehensive manuals and materials from external documentation.	Materials produced by the company and designed by a trainer. Rarely used books or textbooks.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Comprehensive practice programs can be decisive in shaping career choices of students (Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu 2010). They provide a range of opportunities for students to explore actual or new areas of interest, to experiment with business concepts learned during classes but not fully understood, to set up connections with possible employers, to have access to comprehensive sets of learning methods (Ceptureanu, and Nastase, 2005). In our opinion, all these elements must be integrated into HEIs career planning process for their graduates.

Practice programs provide a significant connection, a missing link between academic environment and labour market. For many students, practice is the first step in choosing their future career and it is instrumental in how they relate to labour market. While higher education systems are subject to criticism for the lack of relevance for business sector, it is crucial that students have access to companies and individualized supports promoting relevant learning (Getzel and Kregel, 1996).

Practical learning experiences for students provide them opportunities to use knowledge and skills acquired in a real business environment. For most of the students participating in practice programs, their first real working experience happened during practice stage. Hence, it determines them for actions determining what learning methods are most effective to successfully get hired (Nicolescu et al., 2010).

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