

# Using Journaling To Extract Greater Meaning From The Internship Experience


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## ABSTRACT

*Every year, over a million college students embark on an internship or cooperative experience. They do it to get experience, to explore their chosen field, as a "rite of passage", to make professional contacts, or to put a line on their resume to help them get a job upon graduation. No matter what the primary reason, most students could get a great deal from this experience. The internship can be a unique opportunity from which the student can learn about the nature of a particular job, career, organization or industry and most importantly, themselves. One way to successfully capture this experience and extract additional meaning from it, is by keeping a journal of the internship experience. Keeping a journal develops an active and reflective learning posture rather than merely a passive one and thus aids in grasping more of what the internship experience has to offer.*

*A three step process for journaling the internship is presented. Excerpts from a student's journal, the identification of student and faculty benefits from this exercise as well as suggestions and recommendations for faculty are also presented.*

## INTRODUCTION: THE INTERNSHIP

 Every year, over a million college students embark on an internship or coop experience. Some estimate that for certain professions 3 out of 4 graduates will have completed an internship as a part of their college experience, compared with 1 out of 36 in 1980 (Volpi, 1998; Coco, 2000). This trend reinforces the commonly held belief that student internships are an extremely important and pervasive part of the student's professional development and will only continue to increase both in frequency and importance in the future.

As mentioned earlier, students pursue an internship for a variety of reasons, but most do in one or another to increase their likelihood of getting a job upon graduation. A common refrain for most students is that they can not get a job without experience and they can not get experience without some form of job. The internship appears to resolve this tautology and provides the "key" to corporate America's door (Stein, 1996), it is usually the only career related experience that they will have upon graduation.

The high cost of college and the increased competitiveness in the job market creates the necessity to make the most of one's college education, including one's internship. Internships help to insure future employability and provide an enhancement of one's interpersonal and practical skills (Calloway & Beckstead, 1995; Porter & McKibbin, 1988), they also help to validate the student's choice of careers and help the student discover more about themselves. Internships have also been shown to lead to more job offers and a higher starting salary (Ramos, 1997). Internships can also complement a student's class-related work, by linking the classroom to the "real world". Most importantly, from the student's perspective, there is a high probability that it will lead directly or indirectly to a job.

Research has also shown that the internship/cooperative experience benefits the college or university as well as the employing organization. Schools benefit because the internship makes their students more competitive in the marketplace and they are better able to place their graduates for employment. In fact, some schools have achieved a reputation for their efforts in assisting students with such real-world experiences and their efforts have

also to an increase in the school's enrollment. The employing organization, on the other hand, has an opportunity to try out a potential employee before making a formal job offer to the individual (Coco, 2000; Brooks & Greene, 1998).

An internship is an unique opportunity and, more often than not, an extremely valuable to the student and others, but it has the potential to offer still more. Many students have found that by keeping a journal they can better capture the internship experience and extract meaning from it. Keeping a journal helps to develop a more active and reflective learning posture rather than merely a passive one and thus aids in grasping the various aspects of the internship experience. Without it, the student frequently can easily get caught up in what they are doing on a day-to-day basis and fail to successfully process the experience. Journaling helps to make things more concrete.

## **JOURNALING AND THE INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE**

Years ago, this author interviewed students that had recently completed an internship. During this interview, each student was asked what they had learned as a result of their experience, and whether or not it addressed the numerous questions that they had had prior to taking the internship. More often than not, they drew a blank and didn't know how to respond. It was clear that most students had lost touch with what they had originally hoped to learn about themselves, their career choice or a particular organization. Prior to their internships, these same students had had many questions about themselves, their career choice and what they wanted to do with their professional lives which they hoped to have answered through their internship. Their questions had gone unasked, let alone answered. Now, upon completion of their internship, their initial questions were a distant memory. As such, the journal surfaced as a possible vehicle through which students could get more meaning from their experience.

## **THE NATURE OF JOURNALING**

In the academic environment, the benefits of journaling have also been well documented. Journals have been used successfully in teaching math and science (Ross, 1998; Jurdak & Abu Zein, 1998), management (Laker, 1989), and teacher training (Wenzloff, 1994). Pennebaker (1997) has found that journaling has helped students improve in their classroom performance. In addition, Pennebaker found that individuals who were unemployed and maintained journals, more quickly acquired employment than those who had not. The journal has been used with cooperative education students to help them identify what they liked and disliked about their job experiences (Berry, 2001).

The journal facilitates the development of an active and reflective learning posture (Hughes, Kooy & Kanevsky, 1997) and can help the student reach a better understanding of their experiences and provides for a deeper level of comprehension (Barlow, 2001). The journal is a form of self-reflection and self-feedback, which provides the opportunity for further personal growth and development. It can also capture the moment and freeze it for subsequent analysis and review. In fact, people from a variety of walks of life have found that the journal is an excellent way to retain and organize one's thoughts and to better understand the meaning of their experiences.

Although there is a great deal that can be obtained from the internship there is still more that could be realized and the journaling exercise is one vehicle for doing so. Below is a three step process that this author has successfully used.

## **STEPS IN THIS EXERCISE**

There are three steps to this exercise. The first step involves a meeting between the faculty/internship coordinator and the student to identify what the student hopes to accomplish from their internship. This meeting is usually held before the student has selected or participated in her internship and is frequently used to help identify the type of internship that would best meet the student's needs. During this interview, the student identifies and records what he or she wants to learn as a result of their internship. In most instances students have several goals: Some want to validate their chosen career, others want to check out whether an industry or a particular company is a

good match for them, some want to network and make professional contacts, others are looking for work experience or to develop additional skills to enhance their resume. Almost all mention that they want to increase their chances of a good job upon graduation. Although there are other reasons, most seem to fit into these areas. The faculty/internship coordinator - student interview is designed to further clarify the student's goals, and more often than not, help to further refine already stated goals as well as identify additional goals that they want to achieve from their internship.

In conjunction with the faculty, the student identifies a series of questions that will help guide them in exploring what they want to learn or acquire from their internship. The student then summarizes this conversation, their questions, as well as their goals and objectives in a brief proposal that is completed before the student begins their internship. Initially, the student's goals for their internship tend to be very general, but through continued discussion and reflection they became more specific and usually pose at least some moderate level of challenge. Such goals help people focus the attention and energy necessary for their completion (Locke & Latham, 1990).

What the student wants to get out of the internship is operationalized through their journaling the questions that they will answer after each day of their internship. Responding to these questions helps to maintain the student's focus during the course of the internship, a focus that might otherwise be lost through their daily activities. These questions are significant in that they serve as the vehicle for the student to extract meaning from his experience and to assess whether or not he has achieved his desired goals and objectives.

Experience has shown that responding to these apriority questions does not seem to obscure the student's recording of other significant observations.

The second step involves answering these a priori questions routinely during their internship. The journal itself can be kept either in a notebook or on a computer. We have also encouraged our students to collect any additional work-related documentation or other supportive material and add it to their journal. Many students have found some form of folder extremely helpful in this respect. The student should record this information each day of their internship. Two such questions are: Am I still interested in this career? Why or why not? Who have I met today with whom it would be good to maintain a professional relationship? These and a few additional questions asked by students appear below:

- What did I learn today about myself?
- What did I learn today about this organization?
- Who did I meet today? Would it be good to maintain a professional relationship?
- Am I still interested in pursuing this field as a career? Why or why not?
- What did I learn today?
- What did I do today and did I enjoy it? Do I like working in this field?
- What skills or abilities would be beneficial to my success in this field?
- What ways exist for me to objectively evaluate my performance in this internship?
- What would be illustrations of my performance?

The third step is for the student to summarize their journal in order to share it with their faculty member or internship coordinator upon the completion of the internship. The specific content and format of this summary is agreed upon between the faculty/internship coordinator and the student prior to the internship. A general format for the finished project might comprise the following:

- The initial proposal created prior to the internship including their reasons for wanting an internship, the questions that the student wanted answered from their internship and the goals and objectives that they had hoped to achieve as a result of their internship.
- A summary of the journal entries, or the entries themselves, that address the questions raised by the student prior to their internship and any additional questions or issues that arose during the internship.
- Illustrations of their work, evaluations of their work performance, other pertinent work-related documentation and a list and description of professional contacts made during the internship.

- And finally, an overall summary of their experience. This last section might include the student's conclusions and an evaluation of the internship experience given their goals and objectives.

## **BENEFITS TO STUDENTS**

Through conversations with students and reviews of their journals, I have identified at least five benefits for the student in maintaining a journal during their internship. After each benefit is discussed, excerpts from one student's journal are presented for illustrative purposes. These excerpts reflect a great deal concerning the richness of the internship experience that can be captured through journaling. This student worked as an intern in the Human Resources Department of a large community hospital. One student's journal entries were used to enhance the understanding of one student's experience and to avoid confusion in reviewing several different patterns of thoughts and experiences which would result from combining the unique journals of several students. The following excerpts are presented as they appeared in her journal.

### **Benefit A**

One of the major benefits of journaling was that it helped the student to highlight what they had most wanted to get out of the internship and to see if their experience met their expectations. For many, it provided an opportunity to reflect upon their "fit" with a career that they had aspired to, or an organization for which they hoped to work. In many instances, such an awareness led to a deeper understanding of themselves and their career motivations. As mentioned previously, keeping a journal facilitates the development of a more active and reflective learning posture. In this way journaling can help the student reach a better understanding of their experiences and provide a deeper level of comprehension. The journal is a form of self-reflection and self-feedback which provides the opportunity for further growth and development.

*Do I want this to be my career? Yes and no. Yes because I like the variety of activities that go on in the department. No, because I don't like the record keeping aspect like what I am doing right now. I guess being exposed to this makes me want to strive even harder to be successful so I don't have to be stuck in a low level position where tedious tasks are common.*

*I liked today! I really felt that I belonged in the department and I wasn't just the intern. I had a lot of diversification in my work today. [She was working on a health fair for the hospital and really enjoyed the autonomy the HR staff had given her.] I really was enjoying my day. It's days like these that I love working in HR -- the variety, the accomplishments and the fun. When was my best day so far? Today!!!! Did I enjoy myself? Yes!!*

*Today I was involved in an interesting project of analyzing applications and setting up interviews. We have several openings in dietary and about 200 applicants. I slowly but surely shifted through the applications and set up interviews for 6 of them. I remember that in our selection class that it was emphasized that we should be aware of our biases and not let them influence our decisions, but it seems that I fell into the bias trap myself. And today I realized some of my biases. First I realized that I typically thought of this as a "female" job, and thus tended to favor these applicants more. Secondly, it seemed that I tended to be more positively disposed towards those individuals who had neater handwriting on their applications. At least I was fortunate enough to discover my errors while I still had time to correct them. But I can understand how others in the organization could overlook these biases and thus create a potential for problems to surface.*

### **Benefit B**

The journal acted as a record of the student's performance in their internship. They frequently reported what they did, the results of having done it and their superior's evaluation and comments. Some students included tangible results of their efforts. In this respect, this student helped to create and present a benefits fair for the organization's employees, enclosed a copy of the promotional brochure, which included a picture of her and her director. She also recorded the number of vendors that displayed their services and the number of employees who

attended the fair. She had suggested to her director the need to survey the employees who attended the fair and included the survey instrument she created as well a summary of the survey results.

*I was given the responsibility of doing a wage/hour survey [exhibits of what she had done was included in her journal]. For each job classification I was to record the min., max. and average pay, which would later be compiled into a survey comparing our rates with other area hospitals.*

*Another staff member was supposed to interview one of the candidates for the open dietary positions but she was called into a meeting at the last minute so she handed me the file and told me to take over. I was quite nervous but once we started my anxiety subsided. I was conducting a prescreening. Once she [the candidate] was finished with me she then went to the dietary department for another interview. I was by no means the final word on the hire/no hire decision, but my thoughts and comments were taken into consideration.*

*Overall: I enjoyed conducting the interview. I realize that I wasn't as thorough in my questioning but in due time I think I will be a little more at ease and able to do a better job. Is this something I enjoy enough to make a career of it? Yes.*

*Last Friday ...[The director] assigned me to work up an interviewing guide for the department heads. I think it is a good idea, since they interview so seldom they haven't been formally versed on the implications of the interview process, they really increase the potential for asking illegal or irrelevant questions. Once again, this project allows me to incorporate my education into my work. It was very helpful to pull out some of the old books and notebooks as a reference. [She included a copy of the interview guide in her journal.]*

### **Benefit C**

The journal provided the student with the opportunity to systematically analyze their internship experience. Such an analysis can greatly increase the relevance of the student's internship. This is especially true in that it gives the student an opportunity to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and experiences, both as they relate to their particular internship but also to doing "professional" work in general.

The journal also served as a physical record of the student's experience for future reference. The journal can help to capture the moment and "freeze it" for subsequent analysis and review. As stated earlier, although there is a great deal that can be obtained from an internship by itself there is still more that can be realized through journaling that experience.

*The hospital is experiencing a major layoff for the first time - so the outcome is unpredictable. But tomorrow, I will understand more because this is when the layoffs are implemented. This is exciting for me because I've never been involved in such an activity. But at the same time it is depressing. It makes me wonder if I could actually be the one to determine layoffs and not personally be affected by the emotion of the situation.*

*[The intern sat in on an interview at the hospital]. Initially, I observed her establish rapport with the applicant and then gradually move into a question and answer session. The structure was familiar to me from past experience and from what we learned in class .... I was quite excited that I could be an observer to this interview process.*

*I am really feeling good about this internship. I knew it would be educational for me but I really didn't expect the interpersonal contacts to be so strong in the department ... These personal contacts are so important. Since I have had this internship I realize how much I really do enjoy working with people in this fashion.*

*I have been doing some serious thinking about this internship and about my future career. I have really been torn. I know I do not want to work in a ... setting as it is too slow-paced for me. I want to work in a big company. I am afraid of being bored. Is this really challenging enough for me? I want the challenge, I want to learn and accomplish. I am so lucky to have this internship in that it helps me assess what I am looking for in a job and a career.*

*How do I like HR? I am still very much positively disposed towards it. I am not really sure if I would like to do it for the rest of my life in this type of surrounding [hospital]. I am afraid that it may not be challenging enough. But only time will be able to answer these pondering questions. I had a nice long talk with the director. She gave me some valuable insight to consider in my future endeavors. She asked me my likes and dislikes of the internship and she in turn evaluated my performance. I think I need variety in my work. This internship as I have said in the past is an invaluable experience. I am expanding my knowledge of Human Resources, but more importantly, I am discovering more about myself.*

#### **Benefit D**

The journal also provided an opportunity for the student to reflect upon what they had learned during the course of their internship.

*Unemployment Compensation - wow what an impact it has on an organization. I never realized such costs one faces until I was assigned to prepare a monthly cost analysis of U.C. contributions for the hospital. Did I learn anything new? Yes, not only about U.C. costs, but about some of my future plans also.*

*Yes, I learned about policies and how they are written and what the contents generally consist of.*

#### **Benefit E**

A fifth benefit, as one can see in following and in several of the previous excerpts is that, the student is frequently able to link her internship to the content of her classes.

*Today I did not actually go into work at the hospital. Rather, the director suggested that I spend some time doing some research on how to check references. She pointed out that she would like me to develop a policy on it. The previous policies I had worked on were essentially revisions and updates on existing policies. This topic however, had no policy and I looked forward to creating one. The research I did, entailed going to the library and utilizing the Fair Employee's Practice books. It also included digging - up some prior class notes and putting them to use. I was pleased with my work, I just hope she was as well. [She included a copy of the policy draft.]*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACULTY OR INTERNSHIP COORDINATOR**

First, it's important that the initial interviews with the student allow sufficient time to probe into the student's goals and objectives that they hope to achieve through their internship. Initially, most students will have only a limited number of goals for their internship. Such goals as to get a "line on a resume" or "get a job," are not uncommon. With assistance, most students will identify a number of additional goals and outcomes that they hope to achieve from their internship. As mentioned earlier, once these goals are clarified, questions that would be needed to assess the accomplishment of these goals and objectives are then created.

Second, it is very helpful for the student to identify a place and time to write entries into their journal. Developing such a routine is extremely beneficial. Some days they may write only a few sentences, on other days they may feel inclined to write pages in their journal. If the student wants to insure that the journal stay private, it is recommended that they don't take it to their internship site, but rather, write in their journal at home. A supervisor's knowledge of the student's journal has, at times, created a strong curiosity on their part concerning its contents.

Third, students have found it beneficial to have illustrations of the types of questions and potential components of the journal. In the past, I have given students a list of potential questions, a sample journal outline, etc. Illustrations of these various materials can be derived from this article.

Fourth, it is best to be as flexible as possible with your students. The purpose of the journal is to benefit them. Work with each student to make sure that the structure and questions developed for the journal best meets their needs.

Fifth, how or whether or not the journal is evaluated, depends upon the supervising faculty or internship director. The evaluation of the journal is by far the most difficult part of this exercise. A journal can represent a very personal experience. Although we have chosen not to evaluate the journal for a grade, some faculty or possibly an internship coordinator may wish to do so. In such a situation, I would suggest that the content of the journal not be graded, but rather whether or not the various steps of the exercise were successfully completed. I suggest that faculty make the evaluation process as objective as possible. Such an evaluation would focus more on the process of journaling rather than the qualitative nature of the writing itself. Faculty should keep the following things in mind when they evaluate each student's journal.

- The journal entry should address the questions raised by the student prior to their internship. The entries themselves should be more than a few nondescript sentences.
- The number of entries should be agreed upon prior to the internship. For some students, once a week might provide sufficient opportunity to capture the most from their internship. For others, a journal entry for each day they worked may be the most fruitful. Sometimes this decision is modified as the student completes her internship if there work schedules are changed.
- I typically view the journal as a pass or fail exercise. Faculty could also incorporate the journal as part of the overall evaluation of the internship.

Sixth, if the interns meet as a group at some point, one may want to consider having the students read parts of their journal to each other. Whether or not to read aloud or which entries to read would be up to each student. For some students, their entries might be too personal.

### **BENEFITS TO THE FACULTY**

Although the greatest benefits of journaling are clearly for the student, I have found several benefits for faculty. The following benefits are ones that I have found.

- The journals provide an opportunity to acquire feedback as to whether students have successfully retained and synthesized what they have learned in their courses into their internship. This feedback, although beneficial to the student, is also can be very beneficial to the faculty.
- The student journals also give faculty the opportunity of one source of feedback concerning the relevance of class content and or curriculum.
- Although still maintaining confidentiality, the journals can provide a wealth of illustrations and examples for use in various classes. It is extremely important that if material in one form or another is used from a student's journal permission is requested and confidentiality is respected.

### **A FEW SUGGESTIONS**

Some people seem to have an aversion to writing. For some it seems to take too much time, others feel that they can't write very well and their written thoughts will necessitate several revisions. Still others feel that writing breaks the flow of what is happening or has happened by making their thoughts tangible and thus subject to personal and external scrutiny. In all instances, the student should be reminded that the journal is an example of informal writing. Thus, the student should not be concerned with more formal writing expectations of grammar, spelling or punctuation, such editing usually only limits the free flow of thinking (Ross, 1998; Haney, 2001). The student's goal should be to record one's thoughts, feelings and actions to paper. It should be emphasized that the student is writing this for themselves the focus is on what is being said rather than on how it is said (Macrorie, 1984).

The reflective aspect of journaling frequently shows the student in what ways they were lacking or fell short of professional standards. Some were not happy to discover this. For most students, an internship is their first time in a professional work environment. Several students kept track of their reactions to their work in order to learn more about themselves. One student reflected on the challenge of getting up at 6:30 every day to be at work by 8:00. Being in by 8:00 clearly eliminated his regular Thursday night drinking with his friends. His internship also required

a greater level of participation and involvement than was typically required by his usual 10:00 class on Friday morning.

The journal is an opportunity for others to peer into the thoughts and feelings of another. Such an opportunity must also come with a great deal of respect for the person and her confidentiality. This is especially true for the supervising faculty. In terms of the intern's workplace supervisor, I have found it best for the intern not to tell this supervisor about their journal, but rather keep a log for their work supervisor which would contain the dates, tasks and activities that the student had performed. This log could then be given to or viewed by the supervisor when desired. Copies of the work that they had completed can also be included with this log.

## SUMMARY

No matter what the primary reason that motivates students to acquire an internship, most students view it as a means to subsequent employment. But the internship can lead to much more. We have found that students can get more out of their internship experience by keeping a journal. The journal helps the student become more sensitive or aware of various aspects of the internship experience. Journaling can help the student reach a better understanding of their experience and provide a deeper level of self-understanding. The journal can also capture the moment and freeze it for subsequent analysis and review. Without it, the student can easily get caught up in what they are doing on a day-to-day basis and fail to more completely process the experience. The student internship is clearly recognized as a valuable developmental experience for students and is often pivotal to their initial professional success. We have found that if the student keeps a journal during their internship, this experience becomes even more beneficial and enriching.

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## NOTES

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