Value of the HIM Practicum Experience

Contents

Background ........................................................................................................................................... 1
Benefits to the Student ............................................................................................................................ 3
Benefits to the Host Site ........................................................................................................................ 5
Tools to Use During a Practicum Experience ...................................................................................... 6
Feedback and Student/Host Evaluation ................................................................................................. 7
A Valuable Learning Experience ........................................................................................................... 8
Works Cited ......................................................................................................................................... 9
Value of the HIM Practicum

Background

The practicum experience is an invaluable component of a Health Information Management (HIM) professional’s education. A practicum, by definition, is practical work experience within a specialized field. By applying theoretical knowledge with experiential learning, a practicum allows students to gain knowledge and experience which adds value to their educational program and a greater understanding of their chosen field.

The purpose of a practicum experience is to integrate a student's theoretical knowledge from the classroom with the opportunity to practice their learned skills. It is intended as an educational experience that will serve to produce well rounded graduates and HIM professionals. By adding the practical application of theoretical skills and knowledge, the HIM graduate enters the workforce with an introductory level of experience within the field and a point of reference for position duties, functions, and processes that pertain to their chosen workplace.

The practicum experience is best exemplified through the theories of experiential learning first popularized by David Kolb. Kolb identified that “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” (Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, 1984, pg 38). He theorized that learning was a process of continuously redefining ideas and knowledge through experience. He believed that there were no completely unknown experiences; you do not enter into an experience without having a preconceived notion of what is going to happen, rightly or wrongly. The process of learning involves first having an experience, taking your preconceived ideas of what that experience was supposed to have been and, through reflection, either reinforcing that preconceived notion as correct or altering it as you experienced something that you did not anticipate.

This process, Kolb broke down into four distinct modes; Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). (Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, 1984, pg 30). The Learner “must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE).” (Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, 1984, pg 30)
During a practicum experience, students should be aware of this experiential learning theory and acknowledge that this learning is a process. Learners should be conscious of this experience and confront obstacles and experiences with the knowledge that was transmitted to them during class work, “where pre-existing fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner”. (Kolb & Kolb, The Kolb Learning Style Inventory - Version 3.1 2005 Technical Specifications, 2005, pg 2) The practicum experience then takes this transmitted knowledge and through the process “draws out the students’ beliefs and ideas about a topic so they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas.” (Kolb & Kolb, The Kolb Learning Style Inventory - Version 3.1 2005 Technical Specifications, 2005, pg 2) This practicum experience is the point in an HIM student’s education where their ideas and knowledge can be applied, tested and fine-tuned.

**Benefits to the Student**

**Put theory into practice**
Putting theoretical knowledge gained while in the classroom to use in the workplace is a considerable benefit to participating in a practicum experience. Seeing how theoretical knowledge is applied in the work world allows students to transition from the school environment to the work environment while gaining confidence in their knowledge and experience in their field.
The difference between academic classes and a practicum experience is simple. While academic classes emphasize fact and theory, practicum experience challenges students to apply that knowledge and turn it towards the actual application of fact. (Baird, 1999, pg 11) Understanding how the theoretical knowledge that has been learned can be applied in the workplace is a valuable skill to be fostered.

Meet Industry Professionals
One of the most readily recognizable benefits to a practicum experience is the opportunity to meet people within the industry in which the student will soon be entering. A practicum experience gives students the opportunity to meet many different people, ask questions and gain knowledge from everyone they will meet throughout their experience. This is a chance to make new connections and network while also demonstrating their knowledge and work ethic to all of the people that they encounter.

This is also an opportunity to evaluate potential employers. At the same time that a practicum site is evaluating the students’ performance on the job, students can be evaluating different positions within an organization or comparing different organizations to one another. This is a student’s opportunity to test the waters, both in potential employers and potential positions.

Experience different environments/jobs/specializations
By participating in a practicum experience students will be exposed to a variety of environments. Hospitals, medical clinics, government agencies, research facilities, and a vast array of other health care environments can all use the skills and knowledge of an HIM professional.

Many of these environments may not provide a typical opportunity for an entry level position in Health Information Management. For example, an opportunity may arise to sit in on a Board of Directors meeting with the practicum supervisor, or perhaps the student will be shown the process of creating and establishing hospital policy, they may participate in the investigation of a privacy breach and the results of that investigation. These experiences, normally done by higher level managers and directors, give the student the opportunity to observe and possibly even participate while gaining a great deal of knowledge. In an entry level position, which is likely where the student will begin after graduation, these experiences will be invaluable and will give them an advantage on the competition both in the job application process and once they begin their career.

Learn, Ask Questions, and Refine Your Skills
This is a great opportunity for students to gain new skills and refine skills previously acquired. They will be receiving constructive feedback and benefit from identifying their strengths and weaknesses while being encouraged to ask questions and develop on the job. They will be in a new environment and exposed to different ideas and processes. These ideas and processes may be different than what the student learned in their classroom experience. It is important for the student to recognize that this is a learning experience as well and a great time to be exposed to alternative ways of doing the same thing.

As a student, remember that you don’t know everything. You are not expected to know everything and you are there to learn. This relieves some of the weight students can
place on themselves and encourages them to ask questions. (Baird, 1999, pg 12) As a student you are given free license to ask questions, often, and about all of the processes and problems you encounter. Valuable learning can take place when we admit we do not know something and ask a question.

At the same time, be confident in the knowledge you do have. Use this as an opportunity to think about the theories you have learned and how they could be directly applied to different situations. (Baird, 1999, pg 12) Test out these theories and ideas and apply them to real world situations. Think through the different obstacles you encounter by applying the facts and theories that you do know. This is your practicum experience to learn from; take advantage of everything it has to offer.

Benefits to the Host Site

Practicum students bring enthusiasm, optimism, and a new perspective to a facility. (Baird, 1999, pg 12) Along with helping the student to learn and fostering their development, there are also many benefits of accepting a practicum student for the host site.

Meet Up-And-Coming Professionals
One of the most noticeable examples of a benefit to the host site would be the opportunity to meet new HIM professionals. The host site is gaining the opportunity to assess this individual as a future employee. They can evaluate how the student fits within the current environment including how they work with current employees. They can also assess their work habits, attendance and punctuality, and their ability to ask relevant questions. This is an opportunity for the host site to potentially gain a valuable new member to their organization.

New Ideas and the Latest Knowledge
Practicum students have just finished or are still immersed in the latest theories and ideas from their class curriculum. They have the most up-to-date knowledge and it’s fresh in their minds. They should be eager to share and by giving them the opportunity to apply this knowledge in a workplace, the host site is both enhancing the students learning and gaining the benefit of their knowledge and new ideas for their organization.

Fresh perspective
A fresh set of eyes and ideas is always of benefit to an organization. By allowing a student to come into a facility and offer a fresh perspective that isn’t altered by a personal history working within the facility, the other employees, or obstacles that may have come up in previous situations, a student might be able to offer a new outlook and pose questions or ideas that would not have been brought forward otherwise. By bringing in an outside and independent observer in the form of a student, new ideas and solutions can be created and, with the guidance of the host supervisor, this fresh perspective can lead to achieving results.

Special Projects
Practicum students are eager to test out and apply the knowledge that they have learned in the classroom. The host site can use this as an opportunity to try out their own ideas and projects with the help of a student. There are always projects left unfinished or not yet begun because of lack of time, resources, or more pressing priorities within an
organization. The practicum student is a great additional resource to add to an organization. They can work hand in hand with the supervisor to accomplish tasks that might otherwise be set aside. An extra mind and set of hands can accomplish many things. By being given the responsibility of a specialized task or project the student will also be given a productive learning experience.

Tools to Use During a Practicum Experience

Journaling
Journaling is a valuable tool to use in a practicum setting. Along with experiential learning, there is the need to reflect on those experiences and determine how they apply and what opportunities they present for learning and growth. When writing a journal entry, the student should record their experiences, their external reactions and internal reflections on those experiences, and questions, ideas or "light bulb moments" that came about because of the reflections upon their experience. (Baird, 1999, pg 14) The journal entries can be used as a tool for motivation and self-supervision. (Baird, 1999, pg 15) Noting what was experienced, what and how the student learned from their experiences, and what they need to improve upon or learn more about can markedly enhance the practicum experience regardless of the practicum site or supervisor. Remember that this experience is a process of learning. By the student holding themselves accountable in a journal they are also recognizing and reflecting on situations that will lead to greater discovery and an overall better learning experience.

Major Project
During a practicum experience, the direction and guidance of a major project is encouraged to allow students to apply and extend their knowledge beyond the learned theory. By applying this gained knowledge to a new problem or project the students can effectually teach themselves a new theory or idea and bring that knowledge and experience with them to future jobs.

“A project can create:

- A product that can be either a component of another item or an end item in itself,
- A capability to perform a service (e.g., a business function that supports production or distribution), or
- A result such as an outcome or document (e.g., a research project that develops knowledge that can be used to determine whether a trend is present or a new process will benefit society).” (Project Management Institute, 2008, pg 5)

While every project can create a unique product, service, or result (Project Management Institute, 2008, pg 5) for the host site, it can also create an essential learning experience for the student.

A special project can define the purpose and objective of the practicum experience by illustrating the scope and ensures that both the practicum site and the student have a clear understanding of what is expected of each party and what is to be accomplished during their time working together.
As with any project, defining the scope of what is to be accomplished is important both for the student and the host site. Project Scope is “the work that needs to be accomplished to deliver a product, service, or result with the specified features and functions.” (Project Management Institute, 2008, pg 103) The product or result of the practicum needs to be defined and agreed upon during the initial stages of setting up a practicum experience. By defining the scope of the project and the practicum, expectations and deliverables of both parties are outlined. What is needed to achieve these deliverables is also decided, agreed upon, and provided. Once the scope of the practicum is defined, the expectations of both the student and the host site are clear.

The specialized project also allows the student to explore a new idea or theory that they previously have not had the opportunity to delve into during their academic studies. For example, a student who is interested in data integrity can explore this topic in more depth by choosing a specific set of data to collect, monitor, and/or analyze during their practicum. They can apply their theoretical knowledge in the collection of data, implementing rules and standards of practice to ensure comparable data. They can monitor a specific business process by collecting data and evaluating this data to extrapolate recommendations to improve the process. They can illustrate the importance of standardization in data collection and present solutions to ensure the integrity of the data being collected. As another example, a student interested in Information Privacy can conduct a Privacy Impact Assessment of a specific process within the organization. They can create process recommendations, investigate risk management opportunities, and standardize work processes in order to minimize privacy breaches. There are many prospective projects in which to focus a practicum experience. This ensures that the student is able to apply their knowledge to actual situations within the Health Information Management field while producing a tangible asset for the student to demonstrate their in-depth knowledge and understanding of a concept.

**Feedback and Student/Host Evaluation**

It is important for the practicum supervisor to set aside time with the student at the end of the practicum experience for an informative evaluation of the students’ performance. (Baird, 1999, pg 74) Feedback should also be provided throughout the practicum experience on a regular basis. Even if only on an informal basis, this ensures that both the student and the preceptor are getting the most out of the experience and their time together. Along with supporting the student by illustrating to them how much they have grown, it is also important to note the areas in which the student can continue to learn and improve.

Acknowledging achievements and successes is essential and serves to bolster the student’s confidence in their work and knowledge. Constructive criticism is also vital but sometimes difficult to both hear and to give to another person. (Baird, 1999, pg 163) It is important to realize that this is a learning experience and the student and host site should expect and welcome constructive criticism for the learning that it provides.

The student should also be asked to provide feedback to the host site. As the host site may wish to accept a practicum student in the future, any feedback on what was done well or how the experience could be improved upon should be readily accepted. Again,
constructive criticism should be encouraged as the student may have new ideas or processes that they were able to recognize, with a degree of separation from the host site, that otherwise may have been overlooked or left unconsidered. This practicum experience is a learning opportunity for both the student and the host site and it’s important to ensure that learning will continue even after the practicum experience concludes.

**A Valuable Learning Experience**

The practicum experience itself is career preparation that we, as HIM professionals, should seek to uphold. CHIMA has highlighted in the Code of Ethics the importance of the practicum experience and the support of new members. We, as professionals, are to “support and mentor students, peers, and colleagues to develop and strengthen the workforce and profession”. (*Canadian Health Information Management Association, 2008*) We should be proud to be so involved in the education and experiences of new students and new members to our organization and supportive of any opportunities we have to provide a learning experience.

As an essential element of all Health Information Management programs, the practicum experience is specifically included and detailed in the Learning Outcomes for Health Information Management Diploma/Degree Programs (LOHIM). At the completion of a practicum experience, CHIMA defines 12 learning outcomes that are expected to be accomplished. They largely involve participation, integration of theory and ethics, demonstration and application of knowledge; and result in a prepared and knowledgeable HIM professional. (*Canadian Health Information Management Association, 2010*) Learning content area 10 of the practicum section of the LOHIM covers the major project component. This project represents a culmination of the student’s learning experience and, while certainly not the end of their learning and education in the field, it serves to bring everything together and solidify the knowledge that the student has gained through their program. After the practicum experience, the student should be ready and prepared to join the class of professionals for which they have trained.
References


