

Tools of the Craft: The Value of Practicums in Arts and Music Management

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Abstract

Building experiential training activities into curriculums is one of many ways to prepare students for careers in the fast-paced music industry. These courses allow students to learn and practice various skill sets including communication, time management, and help them discover moving parts of a campaign. While meeting with the instructor in class for workshoping experiences, students also work with arts administrators off campus. This collaborative and integrative pedagogical training is critical to students' understanding of the field and in line with what employers increasingly look for in new graduates.

This paper explores the environment, tools, and tactics students engage with for high-impact learning practices in arts and music management. By way of studying *Arts Management Practicum*, a class offered at The Hartt School, the author displays how students apply concepts discussed in the classroom towards real-life scenarios, work effectively with professionals in the field, and the benefits of thrusting them into leadership positions.

Keywords: practicum, arts management pedagogy, experiential learning, professional networks, soft skills, teamwork, project management, workshoping

Introduction

Experiential learning has a storied place within the long history of educational theories. The essence, learning-by-doing, goes back to the times of ancient Greek philosophers, notably Aristotle. In modern times, experiential learning has come to incorporate technological tools, new approaches in higher education, and current practices that mimic those in

the field. However, at the core, its concern has always been effective, firsthand experiences and knowledge that applies to real-life matters.

In “Experience and Education,” published in 1938, American philosopher and educator John Dewey notes, “A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experiences by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth” (Dewey 1938, 35). In *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning*, scholars like Jennifer Moon hone in on the reflective element (Moon 2004). In fact, practicums are excellent tools in the experiential learning canon and bring together various elements for learning purposes, but above all it starts with *doing*.

Viewed from this lens, it can be argued that internships are similar to practicums since both focus on the doing part. Joe Bogdan of Columbia College Chicago observed in a comparative analysis that, “Internships take on the characteristics of a real job in the workplace setting, whereas practicums are simulated to emulate the work environment” (Bogdan 2018, 22). The particular focus on the environment is not incidental—the educator needs to build the practicum experience in multiple ways, in and out of the classroom, as well as on and off campus. “Simple participation in a prescribed set of learning experiences does not make something experiential,” observes Steve Chapman, Pam McPhee, and Bill Proudman (1995, 235-248). *Arts Management Practicum* encourages the student to go deeper in the action, documentation, analysis, and reflection parts at any given moment, whether they learn on their own or under supervision, usually both.

What is Practicum and Why is it Relevant?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, practicum is “a course of study . . . that involves the supervised practical application of previously studied theory.” In other words, it encapsulates three vital elements of *doing*: 1) it’s hands-on,

2) there is close supervision, and 3) it builds on technical knowledge already acquired.

Arts Management Practicum is a three-credit, 300-level core class undergraduates take in their junior year at the Hartt School's Music Industry program. Students apply knowledge to real-life models discussed in the classroom through their years of study. A prime example of experiential and applied learning, students work with a professional for-profit or non-profit arts organization for a sponsored campaign, performing a particular function in those programs.

In order to fulfill the course requirements, students are split into teams of three to five members and work on their projects for ten consecutive weeks. Class size is kept to ten students so as not to take away from the individual and group interactions, which are key to the success of learning. Even though the instructor decides on the organizations to work with, students choose one campaign from the shortlist that speaks to them. Once the groups and campaigns are determined, the instructor introduces the Project Director (PD) at the host organization to the students. Before campaigns start, the instructor clearly states the responsibilities and expectations of both parties, effectively replicating the relationship of how a professional consultant would work. Weekly group meetings take place in and outside of class time to advance the project. Meetings with the PD happen occasionally in the office, as well as over audio/video-conferencing.

Course learning objectives are as following:

1. To synthesize theories covered in class and illustrate how an arts organization functions,
2. To identify and solve various problems as a team and, in the process, benefit from personal mentoring by the instructor and the PD,
3. To cultivate personal relationships and build a professional network.

Course assessment includes class participation, a benchmark demonstration, a final in-class presentation, and an impact paper reflecting on the entire experience which students turn in on last day of class.

As seen in Figure 1, this course mimics the interrelated nature of conducting business and prepares students to alternate between different parties as they solve a problem. The integrative nature of this course means that students will put tangible skills to use while negotiating with various entities throughout the process. Because the *Arts Management Practicum* course precedes *The Internship* by one semester in the Music Industry program sequence, it can be seen as an early foray into project management where students work with professionals. Both classes complement each other by utilizing soft skills and reinforcing them through

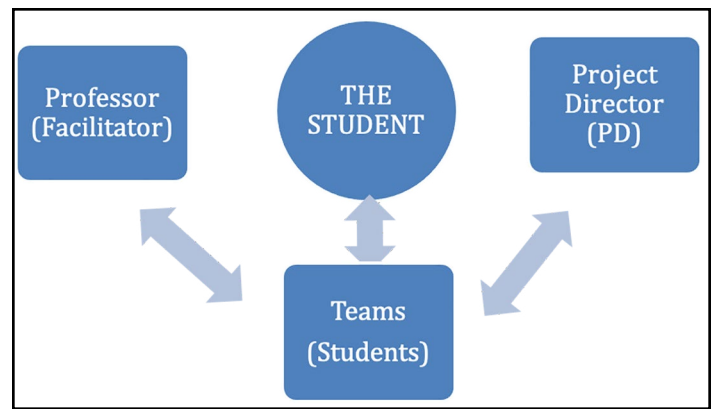


Figure 1. Student interacts with various key parties throughout the campaign.

repeated use. In fact, many believe these are no longer soft, but “essential skills” (Cranla 2019) and may include some or all of the following:

- Time management
- Communication and assertiveness
- Problem solving (out-of-the-box thinking)
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Networking and industry engagement
- Work ethic and etiquette (including follow-ups)
- Leadership and decision making
- Dealing with difficult circumstances
- Pivoting and managing uncertainty

From Pre- to Post-Campaign—A Timeline

Even though campaigns are comprised of ten weeks, the work itself starts four to six weeks prior to the beginning of the semester when the instructor identifies and interacts with the host organizations to fill them in on the exact requirements for these unique partnerships. By the time the semester starts, campaigns are already in place and are ready for teams to be assigned. At the end of the semester, students spend two weeks on a postmortem to reflect on the experience and find ways to integrate it into their resumes and portfolios.

During the pre-semester planning phase, the instructor educates the host organization on the unique nature of the practicum experience and their responsibility as part of the project. These interactions vary from email and phone communication to filling out forms and in-person meetings. The PD shares with the instructor details about the campaign such as project goals, resources, and access to contacts, budgets, and social media channels.

Students are not involved in picking the external organizations directly. Instead, the instructor screens and confirms those suitable for the course. This way, the instructor makes sure the learning experience is maximized. That said, students choose which campaign they want to work with from

a shortlist. At this stage, it's important to let the students choose so they feel a sense of ownership and that it is personally relevant. In fact, the first step in David A. Kolb's widely referenced Experiential Learning Model requires the learner to be actively involved in the experience, and engaging students early on goes a long way (Kolb 1983).

Throughout the ten-week campaign students write proposals, create action plans, put together timetables, develop and execute marketing plans, among many other tasks. Depending on the campaign, students might interact directly with artists, managers, production personnel, or other external contacts. During this time students are supervised by the professor through weekly in-class meetings. The weekly class meetings double as workshopping experiences and the instructor sits with each group extensively to hear what they worked on the previous week, what's coming up next week, and what challenges they are facing. For example, the last time this course was offered, students were in the middle of their campaigns when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and they had to learn to pivot fast to finish off their projects. Because any campaign is susceptible to communication breakdown, disruption, in some cases outright failure, students also practice how to manage uncertainty at times like this.

One of the most important elements of this course is to give immediate feedback to students for their work and efforts. This happens at the weekly workshopping sessions. At the five- and ten-week marks, students are assessed with benchmark and final presentations in-class which provide more critical feedback. At the end of the campaign the instructor solicits peer evaluations from students since they work in teams. A seminal cog in the wheel at this stage is the inclusion of the PD in the evaluation. While PDs are not grading students, they are encouraged to attend the final presentations and to give personal assessments of whether goals set forth were achieved and to comment if campaigns were successful overall. The process comes to a close with the submission of a physical or digital folder that includes all the worksheets students produced including action plans, marketing programs, press releases, proposals, contracts, visual designs, screenshots, photos, and video materials.

Over the past four years in this class, students have worked with many organizations, large and small. These include non-profit arts organizations, a performing arts center, a small community theater, an artist management company, and an independent music club located in downtown Hartford. They developed marketing campaigns, booked and curated shows, increased membership base, communicated with donors, produced a Broadway-themed cabaret event, coordinated open call auditions, researched venues, designed flyers, and a whole lot more.

Feedback from Students

There are many parts that make this course one of the favorite classes students take in their studies. Each year the course is offered, it has grown to encompass more ways to practice different skill sets. After having taught it for multiple years, the author has observed a number of things students value in this course as part of the learning experience. More specifically, students:

- Appreciate the hands-on opportunities the course offers to execute, lead, and project manage.
- Enjoy the supportive, intimate, and safe learning space in class and the weekly workshopping experiences to receive continuous feedback.
- See for themselves the relevance and vitality of working with local community organizations.
- Feel proud of the work they do, which gives them self-confidence and is extremely rewarding.
- Learn what it means to take responsibility, set realistic expectations, and discover how their input effects the general outcome.

Students also:

- Want to work with people who are enthusiastic and invested in student learning. Not all supervisors are attentive to student needs, and it falls on the instructor to make sure this is addressed with the Project Director early on.
- Deserve facilitators, who are helpful and caring. Unlike an internship, where there is generally only one, busy supervisor, practicum offers two supervisors, which gives extra confidence to the student.

Conclusion

When students are matched with a non-profit arts organization or local music club, they are introduced to how these companies operate internally and how they present themselves to the world externally. The project gives students crucial access to the workplace environment, its employees, and it lets them lift the proverbial curtain. It's a relatively short distance from where they stand at that point to being hired by a professional record label, a major agency, or a dance company full time since students already have had their hands dirty in development, marketing, communication, flyer design, and so many other areas. To quote John Dewey once more, "There is incumbent upon the educator the duty of instituting a much more intelligent, and consequently more difficult kind of planning. The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power" (Dewey 1938).

Educators are in a unique position to not only train stu-

dents, but also empower them with experiences, which will be essential to their careers and growth in life. Practicums are excellent tools of the craft, which every educator should consider using when teaching new skill sets to students.

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