

Fieldwork

Description Fieldwork is simply ‘learning by doing’. It comprises different extensive hands-on activities that provide students with lots of opportunities to learn in the field. In short, students do a real job on their own in the real world. The field may be a factory for engineering students or a clinic for health science students or a restaurant for catering students or a foreign country for language students.

Example 1 *Shipboard Field Experience*

Students are sent to the wharf and then a cargo ship to learn daily logistic operations. The officers working on the wharf and the crews of the ship give demonstrations with explanations while students mainly act as observers. Later, students are assigned to work in different parts of the wharf and the ship alongside the crews to operate the machines and carry out daily duties assigned by the field supervisors.

Throughout the whole programme, students need to take notes and write a diary to reflect upon their observations and experience. At the end, a debriefing session is conducted for students to share experience.

Example 2 *Fieldwork in Marine Studies*

Students, in groups, work on one ‘real world’ job: ‘Power station outfall’ in which they are asked to conduct surveys of the Tamar Estuary to assess the potential damage of the discharge of thermal effluent into the Tamar by a power station planned by a power company, for which background data are available. Students have to take a great deal of trouble to organise themselves for this a complex multifaceted task. (Gibbs, 1992)

- How Active?**
- In fieldwork, students keep thinking deeply about their actions and plan for the next actions. For example, students in a host family need to take cultural difference into account when they react and respond to the foreigners in the host family.
 - Fieldwork is composed of different interactive tasks that interlock tightly with one another. These can be interactions with people such as communication, reflection or reporting; and interactions with the environment including site investigation and data collection and data analysis.
 - Fieldwork brings students out of the classroom to apply textbook knowledge in the real situations. In Example 1, students gain experience through observing how real practitioners handle daily problems and later practise on their own. In Example 2, students have to devise their own action plan to solve real problems. Teamwork is also built up as they work together as a group.

How Related to Real Life? Fieldwork, by nature, puts students through experience of working in the real work place. However, the extent to which the experience resembles how a professional functions in the job depends on the design of the fieldwork task itself. Example 1 provides opportunities for skills development in the actual work place. It will benefit students by allowing them to experience the full range of technical realities which are difficult to replicate in laboratories on campus. However, the learning experience is limited to skills training. On the other hand, Example 2 puts students through problems that professionals

tackle in the real world. It provides students with opportunities to visualise the actual environment and to integrate and apply professional knowledge into this real and complex situation.

What Learning Outcomes?

- Different designs of fieldwork facilitate different levels of thinking and different kinds of cognitive skills. If it is designed to be 'working on-site under the supervision of real practitioners' as illustrated in Example 1, students learn the procedural skills required in the field and apply textbook knowledge into real practice. In Example 2, students devise a scheme to solve complex problems in the real world through the process of critical analysis and evaluation of the data collected by themselves in the field.
- Besides strengthening students' academic and procedural knowledge, fieldwork is also a good vehicle for developing a whole range of generic skills such as teamwork, communication, professional attitudes and ethics, etc., when they work alongside the real professionals in the field.