From placement to project: making experiential learning a shared responsibility

Work placements and applied projects offer valuable experience. Research into online reflection highlights how business schools can support the conversations that help students make sense of what they learn.

What if students are gaining valuable experience on placements and projects, but have few chances to help each other make sense of what they encounter?

Business schools invest considerable effort in connecting learning with practice. The educational value of those experiences also depends on what students notice, question and take forward. That makes reflection a matter of programme design, with implications for assessment, staff workload and the quality of students' engagement with organisations.

A shared space for learning from experience

My research explored how a virtual learning environment (VLE) discussion forum could support reflection among undergraduate students undertaking work placements in sport-related organisations.

Students contributed voluntarily to weekly discussions about their experiences, including teamwork, communication and professional development. Their posts were not assessed but could inform their final reflective report.

Nearly 90% of participants contributed. They valued recording experiences as they happened and returning to them later. This helped them recall challenges, recognise progress and prepare their assessment.

The study focused on placements, but the questions it raises also matter for applied projects, live briefs and other forms of experiential learning: how do students connect practice with academic ideas, and learn from the perspectives of their peers?

Participation tells only part of the story

Most reflection in the forum remained individual, with students describing and evaluating their own experiences. Responses to peers often involved agreement or acknowledgement, with limited evidence of deeper questioning.

A follow-up focus group revealed learning that the posts did not capture. Reading others' accounts helped students understand what to reflect on and prompted conversations among friends.

This matters when evaluating digital engagement. Counts of visits and contributions give an incomplete picture of learning. We also need to ask how students use what they read, and whether it changes their understanding or subsequent actions.

Facilitation is a design decision

Students wanted tutors to take a more active role in guiding discussion. Time pressures and uncertainty about the relevance of other students' placements also affected participation.

For programme leaders, the implication is clear: meaningful discussion needs structure and staff capacity. This applies whether students are reflecting on a placement, a consultancy task or a project with an external organisation. Allocating that responsibility requires explicit decisions about module design and workload.

In the placement study, the forum also offered insight into students' duties and experiences. In other experiential settings, regular reflection could similarly help staff identify where students need guidance, while supporting conversations about the quality of their learning opportunities.

What this means in practice

- **Connect reflection to purpose:** explain how it supports assessment, professional development and students' ability to articulate their skills.
- **Design for dialogue:** ask students to compare experiences, explore alternative responses and consider how a peer's insight might influence their own work.
- **Allocate time for facilitation:** recognise tutor involvement in workload planning and review the learning value with students and, where relevant, external partners.

A call to action

Business schools should review one placement or applied project module and ask where students can discuss their experiences. Pilot a structured forum, involve relevant colleagues and evaluate the quality of learning alongside participation.

The study examined placements, but its central question reaches further: how can we help students learn with and from one another while they apply their knowledge in practice? Let's test approaches across placements and projects, and share what helps those conversations lead to deeper learning.