



Information Sheet 1: The Concept of Field-Based Learning

Highly adaptable business leaders who can innovate and think entrepreneurially are needed to run successful businesses in today's complex global market. These leaders will be equipped to create sustainable businesses, which profitably address challenges faced by society and the environment. Management programs around the world are finding that students can effectively learn these skills by getting out of the classroom to engage in "field-based learning." Field-based learning involves students guided by faculty who work directly with organizations to solve real problems and offer feasible solutions.

Field-based learning provides benefits to all parties; academic institutions, students, and business practitioners. Academic leaders, as well as future and current managers, are well suited to share ideas and tackle real problems which can influence change. While field-based learning is only recently gaining popularity in business schools, the notion of learning through experience is as ancient as Confucius, who said around 450 BC, "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand."

The ability to pursue emerging opportunities and develop new businesses or markets depends upon the development of top managerial talent with skills and capabilities to manage innovation and entrepreneurship. While management education can play an important role in the development of such talent, many programs could improve on their ability to develop and nurture these skills within their students.

Management is a dynamic art that must be learned, practiced, and relearned as circumstances change. Teaching methods typically rely on static examples in textbooks and case studies and employ traditional educational methods such as lectures and testing. The learning experience can be improved by providing students with the opportunity to come into contact with and apply all of the skills taught in the classroom to practical management situations. This is where field-based learning can give students a competitive advantage.

While field-based coursework may be easy to understand and justify, it can be difficult to execute successfully. Field-based coursework is easier in theory than it is in practice! This publication is meant to be a guide that will enable cutting edge management educators, students, and firms interested in participating in field-based projects to fully benefit from all field-based learning has to offer.

Using lessons learned from more than a decade of experience with field-based learning, this manual guides the reader through the process. It explains how to properly set up projects, manage them, and ensure that their outcomes provide lasting benefits to everyone involved. The guide features companies, faculty, and student teams that have participated in field-based learning experiences. The guide was compiled by the World Resources Institute and was funded by the Alcoa Foundation.

What is Field Based Learning?

It is commonly referred to as action-based, experiential, or field-based learning. But what really is field based learning and how is it applicable to schools of management? Lenore Borzak contends that field-based learning involves, "a direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather



than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it.”¹ David A. Kolb, a professor of organizational behavior in the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, has made significant contributions to the current conception of field-based learning in management education. In 1984, Kolb defined *learning* as, “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”² By defining learning in this manner he placed emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning, not content or outcomes. Moreover, this definition implies that knowledge is a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted.

Kolb demonstrates that immediate and concrete experiences are the basis for observation and reflections. “These reflections are assimilated and distilled to abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences.” Learning can occur at any point but results primarily from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.

¹ Borzak, L. (Ed.) (1981). *Field study: A sourcebook for experiential learning*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

² Kolb, David A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1984, p. 38.