

## Practicum in English: Training toward Sustained Enhancement of Academic and Professional Skills

*Tahany Abdulaziz Albaiz*

*(Faculty of Education, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia)*

**Abstract:** While in-service training is directed to those who already secured their lives with a job, there are groups of blossoms who are only one little step away from getting a job and need to boost their cognitive preparation with experiences and need a challenging transition from classroom to work environment. For this concept, a practicum should be launched. Practicums have been in existence for a number of years all over the world in many state-of-the-art universities. The practicum is usually designed to provide students with a venue to perform activities involving practical applications of many related fields and gain confidence to perpetuate their personal and professional growth. This action-based research has based its component on a proposed program that has conceptualized its framework around “Sustainable Development” as it focuses on the development of skills which connects existing skills with future career demands. This training-based program aims at helping the targeted audience (senior students who are required to complete their field training credits in English) to: (1) integrate the instructional component of their academic knowledge with actual in-field practices, (2) live the practicum experience in classroom environments which resemble, as closely as possible, the settings where they might be intended to teach, (3) Professionally develop through workshops and work-related responsibilities, (4) develop a realistic awareness of the structure of particular institutional settings and leadership styles; and (5) reflect what they’ve learned and appreciate teamwork. The program has been piloted and evaluated by trainees in the discussion part of this paper.

**Key words:** professional, growth, practicum, training, EFL, sustainable, development, reflection, evaluation

### 1. Introduction

To hold the first thread of practicum, it all started as a period of pre-service training in teacher preparation programs. Teacher expertise is the single most important factor in determining student achievement and fully trained teachers are far more effective with students than those who are not prepared (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1997). There is no doubt that teachers play a significant role to the success of any ongoing educational reform (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1998) and resources for positive societal change. Well prepared and well qualified teachers are not only agents of positive societal change but also have a multiplying effect while executing his/her regular duties. Correspondingly, UNESCO-IBE (2004) explained that teachers can guide learners in an ever-expanding universe of knowledge, helping them to learn how to access information and

---

Tahany Abdulaziz Albaiz, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Jeddah; research areas/interests: teaching English as a foreign language. E-mail: [talbeiz@uj.edu.sa](mailto:talbeiz@uj.edu.sa).

communicate effectively. Although, the purpose of teacher education is to produce effective practicing teachers (George et al., 2000) the question of how trainees can best be prepared to become effective classroom practitioners and successful career holders as well has been on the mind of this research where trainees are not only held responsible of practicing good teaching performance, but to live the practicum experience at all levels starting from classroom activities till practicing other office skills and common duties. In other words, it is a two-fold program that targets improving teaching performance and common career skills as well.

## **2. Conceptual Background**

To improve education and training, it is important to listen to those who are affected by them, which in this article is done by examining the practicum from perspectives of the trainees. In the practicum, the various zones of the trainees' opinions and thoughts have to be combined, constituting the reason for improving field practice.

### **2.1 Why Do Senior Students Need the Practicum?**

The main objective of the practicum is to provide trainees with authentic hands-on experience. This is needed to develop their varied skills and to start collecting experiences to enrich their professional wisdom. It is not enough to read about the jobs and their required skills and roles or to observe others working in their offices and perform their assigned responsibilities, something students have read for years throughout their university studies. They have to practice themselves because practical knowledge and wisdom are held by the individual and cannot easily be transmitted from person to person. Students who are ready to graduate need the "knowing how" and by connecting the theories with practice.

In relevance to teacher preparation programs, it is worth noting Dewey's (1904) two models of practice experiences: the apprentice model and the laboratory model, which can be interpreted as complementary. In the first model, the mentor constitutes a model to imitate, and teaching becomes more like training. Therefore, it is crucial to have excellent teachers as mentors. In the second model, student teachers are guided through observation, interpretation and classroom analyses aimed at fostering growth and the capacity to develop personal professional wisdom. In this model, students need a variety of experiences and mentors who are able to conduct dialogues that promote reflection.

An important role of the practicum is to provide a supported entry to the profession. The factor with the strongest impact on retention seems to be the quality of the first teaching experiences (Rots et al., 2007) and what student teachers experience in their practicum creates their view of the profession (Korthagen et al., 2006). It is therefore essential that student teachers are offered quality practice placements.

In order to learn from field experience it is necessary to look back at it and reconstruct it through interaction between the individual, objects and other persons (Dewey, 1938). In this way, the experience can prepare the individual for the future. Systematic reflection in dialogues with peers, mentors and supervisors prepares trainees for the real and complex work life and provides future employees with tools for developing confidence to act professionally in unique situations. Brunstad (2007) regards the ability to learn from one's own and others experiences as a mean of developing phronesis (practical wisdom). Biesta (2007) points to the non-causal nature of educational interaction that makes it impossible to prepare future teachers fully for all the challenges they will meet during their careers. They need tools for further professional development and an awareness of personal beliefs as points of departure for judgments and prioritizing.

### 3. Methodology and Analysis

#### 3.1 Practicum Context

The program was officially launched in its organized framework in 2011, however, the evaluation of the program started in 2014 in the English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. The trainees (senior students) already had completed their three years university degree and represent the European Languages Department at the university. All senior students are required to complete a 90-hour field experience during their 7th or 8th level. Based on the NCAAA field experience specification form, The purpose of this training is to give the chance for graduating students to practice the knowledge gained during their course of study within a professional setting offering activities related to their field of specialization. Field experience can take the form of work experience: In this role, students actually perform some of the tasks required in the occupation under the guidance of the worker. This provides a realistic picture of what the occupation entails and provides firsthand experience of the knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform in the occupation.

Students are assessed by the field supervisor and by the instructors of the course who visit them, at least four times during the semester, in their work place. They are also required to write a report on their field experience in which they evaluate the work and their performance. Learning outcomes include specific knowledge to be acquired, cognitive and interpersonal skills.

One point worth mentioning here is that selecting the practicum destination is subject to the approval of the student's department. In this paper, the practicum provided by the ELI is one of those destinations. During this practicum, each trainee is required to complete 90 hours of training which involve a set of tasks among which is teaching an EFL class. Trainees have mentors at the training premise. The practicum has a set of aims of which the mentors, students are informed. During the training period, the trainees are visited twice by university-based supervisors who originally come from the trainees' academic department.

#### 3.2 Content

Trainees throughout the practicum are required to perform certain, yet flexible, tasks and responsibilities throughout the ELI' administrative and academic units and divisions. Tasks are classified into two categories, administrative and academic as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 A List of Suggested Practicum Activities**

Administrative Tasks	
Professional development Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attend workshops organized by this unit, workshop topics include, but not limited to, EFL teaching skills, leadership and communication skills, office skills, basic IT training, common work skills).</li> <li>- Trainees participate in organizing workshops and provide field support.</li> <li>- Get acquainted with professional development policies and designing PD plans.</li> </ul>
ELI Chief Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get acquainted with official policies and correspondences.</li> <li>- Review some archives and fill out some official forms.</li> <li>- Design statistics as required.</li> </ul>
Personnel Affairs Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get acquainted with official policies and correspondences.</li> <li>- Translate documents where necessary.</li> <li>- Fill out some official forms pertaining to recruited human resources and organize files periodically.</li> <li>- Participate in digitalizing personnel files.</li> </ul>
IT Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arrange laptops according to their serial numbers.</li> <li>- Digitalize all related files.</li> <li>- Get some practice on computer software and anti-virus programs.</li> <li>- Provide on-site support of auditory devices before, during and after final exams.</li> </ul>

Recruitment Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organize files of candidates and hired instructors.</li> <li>- Classify and review all candidates based on their acceptance or rejection.</li> <li>- Attend real interview session and create a list of possible interview questions relevant to the required qualifications</li> </ul>
Students Services Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide on-site support for all activities and events pertaining to students throughout the units divisions and committees.</li> <li>- Participate in encouraging students to cooperate and participate in all activities.</li> </ul>
Academic Affairs Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participate in organizing and arranging the units' files and archive.</li> <li>- Get acquainted with teaching schedules and practice designing teaching loads in an official template.</li> <li>- Provide a remarkable support to the testing committee throughout the management and supervision of the institution's mid and final exams.</li> <li>- Observe real EFL classes and act as teacher assistants.</li> <li>- Prepare a class observation report.</li> </ul>
Graduate Studies Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get acquainted with all policies and regulations on local and international scholarships and lists of approved universities.</li> <li>- Participate in arranging the units' files and documentations.</li> <li>- Review some educational research and prepare a report on a selected EFL research.</li> <li>- Attend some research seminars organized by the unit.</li> </ul>
<b>Academic Tasks</b>	
Professional Development Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trainees are required to design and present an EFL lesson in a real classroom through the English course delivered to the foundation year students. Lesson delivery time ranges between 50-90 minutes of the class time.</li> <li>- Lessons are observed by an assessor from the PD unit based on classroom policies in the institute.</li> <li>- Trainees are required to compile a comprehensive portfolio which includes documentation of all accomplished tasks.</li> </ul>

### **3.3 Duration**

Ten weeks per semester (two days per week/4 hours and 30 minutes per day).

### **3.4 Assessment of Training Outcomes**

Assessment of trained students adopts formative and summative approaches. Formative assessment includes portfolios, instructional seminars, workshops, direct office and classroom observations, classroom teaching and other significant work-related practices. Summative assessment takes the form of a numeric value (40 points) as requested by the original academic department of trained students.

### **3.5 Evaluation of the Proposed Program**

Feedback derived from questionnaires received from trainees were collected through online practicum evaluation forms. Learning more about how the targeted audience value field experience is seen as a first step towards a deeper understanding of how the practicum is perceived. The trainees wrote their online responses during the last week of the practicum when the practice experience was still fresh in their minds. Results are analyzed below.

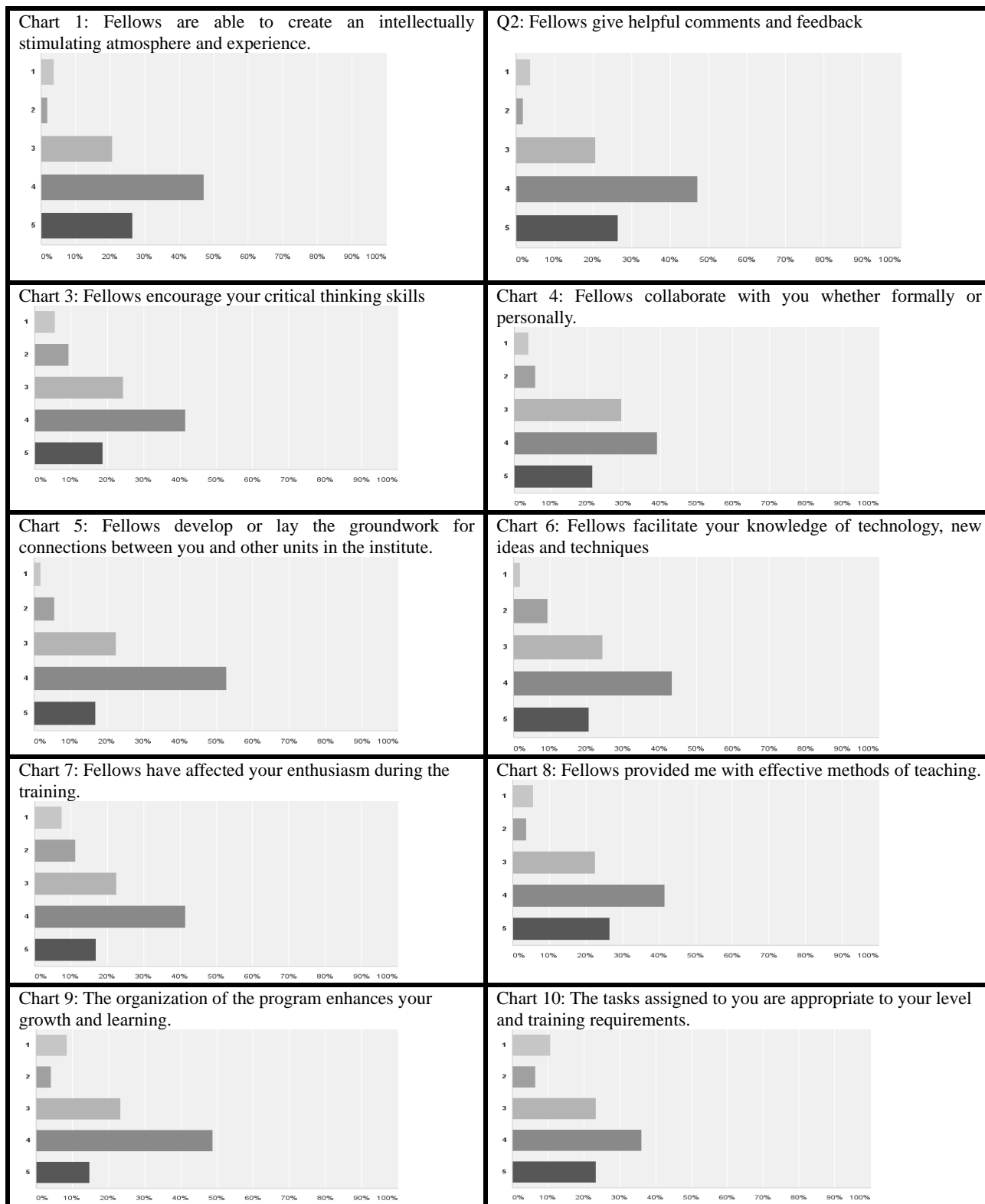
### **3.6 Statistical Results**

The online practicum evaluation form is a questionnaire that includes two categories: trainees' opinions toward fellows at the ELI (Admin, Program coordinator, instructors) constructed in 8 questions and Trainees' opinions toward the organization and content of the program constructed in 12 questions, then an open-ended question for general feedback and comments which aims at eliciting the respondents' personal opinions without any explicit or implicit bias rooted in the researchers' formation of more structured questions. A scale of (5) has been adopted to identify the degree of agreement or disagreement as follows:

Not at all (1)   Slightly (2)   Somewhat (3)   Very much (4)   Extremely (5)

Table 2 includes all charts that are self explanatory per question:

**Table 2 Statistical Results**





#### 4. Discussion of Results

In what follows, the findings are presented for each of the questionnaire items and collectively for some. When the trainees were asked to describe their opinion on the ability of fellows to create an intellectually

stimulating atmosphere and experience, almost half of them stated that fellows are very much able to create an intellectually stimulating atmosphere and experience and give helpful comments and feedback throughout the practicum. In terms of critical thinking skills, 32 out of the 53 trainees perceive fellows as very much and sometimes extremely encourage their critical thinking skills through some of the activities they perform.

While feedback and support at all levels are extremely important for the intellectual and professional growth, according to 39.22% of responses in chart 4, it seems that fellows are very much collaborating whether formally or at a personal level. This kind of collaboration leads to trainees to build a connection with all other units in the practicum premise as shown in chart 5.

With the professional development events organized in the institute, two thirds of trainees think that fellows have encouraged them to seek knowledge on technology and effective teaching techniques. Accordingly, their enthusiasm has been positively raised as indicated in charts 6, 7 and 8.

When the trainees were asked to describe their opinion on the organization of the practicum, most of them (40/53) stated that the way the practicum is organized extremely or very much enhanced their growth and learning whereas 11 trainees think that The tasks assigned to them are reasonable appropriate to their level and training requirements. Same number of trainees has an extreme opinion toward the suitability of those tasks to their levels. Around the same concept of level, 28 of the trainees have a strong opinion toward the appropriate level of difficulty and easiness of assignments. As the ELI strives for high standards, the administration has tried very hard to supply the institute with all facilities need for the growth and development at all levels and such claim is easily seen in the 28 of the trainees who very much appreciate the accessibility of facilities and other learning resources. However, 27.66 of responses indicate a moderate attitude towards the accessibility of the learning resources tools. Charts 16 and 17 present a summary of the above discussion.

As seen in charts 12 and 20, 52.08% of trainees describe their positive opinion on the program's ability to enhance the ELI's visibility and reputation and this emphasize the value of getting an opportunity to try out something new and unique in a highly appreciated training location. By default, if the practicum cares about the reputation, it will mean the practicum program is very much delivered effectively and efficiently.

An equal number of students have slightly different opinions on the ability of the program to meet their expectations. 15 students think that the practicum very much met their expectations while the other 15 think that the practicum somewhat met their expectations as seen in chart 18. A large percentage of responses seemed to agree that the practicum very much increased their confidence and allowed them to acquire practical skills as indicated in charts 13 and 19 and such results emphasize the importance of a good practicum which primarily targets practical skills for real work contexts.

Within the trainees open feedback, the following quotes illustrate the students' views on the value of their personal and language growth:

“I think this program is helpful and increasing the trainees' skills and confidence”;

“The ELI is good place to develop the language and a chance to meet native speaker”;

“I enjoy being a teacher for 30 minutes. It's an unforgettable experience”;

“I suggest we teach more than one lesson”

One of the issues that have emerged with the trainees' feedback is the lack of practicum awareness. The majority of trainees come to the training venue carrying I the minds that they will go through a teacher preparation program and most tasks are directed to building their teaching skills. The following quote by one of the trainee indicates the lack of knowledge on the practicum that they have selected. This lack might be caused due to the

misinformation that has been given to trainees via their academic department, or to the lack of orientation and preparation sessions prior to their leave to the field experience. The practicum neither focuses solely on teaching nor perpetuating trainees' majors:

"Concerning the duties and tasks assigned to us, our job and training tasks were not clear to us. We were told that our one task is to improve our teaching abilities, and that's why I chose this program";

"The tasks were given to us wasn't related to our major."

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

(1) Reflecting back to the quotes of one of the trainees above, it seems that senior students want their practicum to be integrated with their campus program (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). In a situation where students try to combine theory and practice (knowing that, why and how), they might find it confusing to meet conflicting expectations from their knowledge and experience in their department and knowledge and experience in the practicum, which could be interpreted as a conflict between practical and theoretical knowledge. Graham (2006) claims that the quality of communication and shared understanding of goals among all parties involved seem to be the main criteria for a successful practicum experience. As such, academic departments of senior students should organize orientation and training awareness sessions where they deliver formative presentation on the concepts of practicums in different sectors which do not necessarily perpetuate or copy cat what has been learned in college, moreover, they should make the field experience description form easily accessible to students where they can be knowledgeable of what a practicum might require.

(2) Mentoring in the world of education and training has been of a great importance. It is important that practicum mentors/coordinators are competent and collaborative. They should demonstrate good professional practices and able to articulate training concepts during the practicum. This will provide help create an intellectually stimulating atmosphere for trainees and encourage their critical thinking and reflection skills.

## References

- Biesta G. (2007). "Why 'what works' won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research", *Educational Theory*, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 1–22.
- Brunstad P. O. (2007). "Faglig klokskap – mer enn kunnskap og ferdigheter", *Pacem*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 59–70.
- Darling-Hammond L. and Berry B. (1998). "Investing in teaching: The dividend is student achievement", *Education Week*, p. 48, available online at: [http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/bb\\_cv.pdf](http://www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/bb_cv.pdf).
- Dewey J. (1904). "The relation of theory to practice in education", in: C. A. McMurray (Ed.), *The Third NSSE Yearbook*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey J. (1938). *Experience and Education*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- George J., Worrell P., Rampersad J. and Rampaul B. (2000). *Becoming A Primary School Teacher in Trinidad and Tobago*, Part 2: "Teaching practice experience of Trainees: Discussion paper 21", Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project, Centre for International Education: University of Sussex Institute of Education.
- Korthagen F., Loughran J. and Russel T. (2006). "Developing fundamental principles for teacher education programs and practices", *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol. 22, pp. 1020–1041.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1997). "What matters most: Teaching for America's future", *Reading Today*, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 3.
- Rots I., Aelterman A., Vlerick P. and Vermeulen K. (2007). "Teacher education, graduates' teaching commitment and entrance into the teaching profession", *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Vol. 23, pp. 543–556.
- UNESCO-IBE (2004). "Quality education for all young people: Reflections", in: *47th International Conference on Education of UNESCO GENEVA*.