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## Individual and Social Factors Influencing Sports Science Internship Students' Practice-Based Learning: A Phenomenological Study

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## Individual and Social Factors Influencing Sports Science Internship Students' Practice-Based Learning: A Phenomenological Study

### Abstract

The results of this study will help form guidelines for developing students' capacities for learning in authentic workplace settings to better prepare them to be effective and efficient in their chosen careers. This phenomenological study examined factors influencing practice-based learning and how participants learned from their practice. Six fourth-year students majoring in sports science who had recently returned from their internships took part in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts to characterize the participants' shared experiences, which yielded the following seven themes of factors influencing their practice-based learning: (a) clear career goals and identification of an appropriate internship facility; (b) self-efficacy; (c) reflective practice; (d) good workplace relationships; (e) organizational leaders as agents transferring knowledge; (f) knowledge-sharing behavior; and (g) impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Internship students also learned to identify their weaknesses in this study, communication skills, group fitness instructor skills, and a professional exercise instructor image.

### Keywords

higher education, human resource development, internship program, practice-based learning, sports science, Thailand, workplace learning

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### Acknowledgements

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. I would like to express my thanks to all my participants and the staff who assisted me in identifying the participants.

# **Individual and Social Factors Influencing Sports Science Internship Students' Practice-Based Learning: A Phenomenological Study**

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The results of this study will help form guidelines for developing students' capacities for learning in authentic workplace settings to better prepare them to be effective and efficient in their chosen careers. This phenomenological study examined factors influencing practice-based learning and how participants learned from their practice. Six fourth-year students majoring in sports science who had recently returned from their internships took part in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts to characterize the participants' shared experiences, which yielded the following seven themes of factors influencing their practice-based learning: (a) clear career goals and identification of an appropriate internship facility; (b) self-efficacy; (c) reflective practice; (d) good workplace relationships; (e) organizational leaders as agents transferring knowledge; (f) knowledge-sharing behavior; and (g) impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Internship students also learned to identify their weaknesses in this study, communication skills, group fitness instructor skills, and a professional exercise instructor image.

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Stakeholders in higher education – especially the government, employers, and the economy – expect universities to produce graduates who can immediately and effectively practice their careers. This expectation and tertiary education's responsibility for developing human resources' positive skills and attitudes (Basit et al., 2015) are driving universities and colleges to integrate practice-based experience into undergraduate curriculums. Such integration assists higher educational institutions to realize that academic knowledge and skills alone are insufficient in preparing efficient practitioners who have selected their careers (Billett, 2015). Therefore, higher education has increasingly adopted practice-based learning to improve workforce quality.

To maximize experience in practice settings, students should be well prepared. Universities need to possess knowledge about factors that influence workplace learning and understand how students learn from their experiences in order to organize suitable learning activities that will enable students to perform effectively in their jobs. Results from this research can assist colleges and universities in organizing suitable learning activities to maximize internship students' learning in authentic settings. In addition, findings from this research will help universities strengthen sports science curriculums to meet the labor market requirements.

## Review of Literature

### Background

At K University in Bangkok, Thailand, the Bachelor of Sports Science program proposes to educate well-rounded graduates with innovative ideas and practical ability in sports science. The program outlines the following five professions that can be undertaken after graduation: sports and health scientist, personal exercise trainer, sports performance analyst, sports trainer, and supervisor and organizer of sports and exercise centers. The Professional Experiences course provides opportunities for students to gain authentic experiences in their chosen professions. In addition, the course offers students the chance to understand whether the chosen occupation matches their expectations (Billett, 2008; Binder et al., 2015). This course comes at the end of the academic program, and students earn six academic credits. Fourth-year sports science student-interns spend 12–16 weeks at organizations approved by the faculty.

### Practice-Based Learning

Practice-based learning integrates knowledge from the university with experiences from the workplace (Cannan, 2008). In fact, both settings contribute to students' learning. Students learn conceptual bases, theories, and procedures related to specific occupations in the academic setting, while the workplace setting provides authentic experiences (Billett, 2008). As strengths of practice-based learning, Billett (2008) and Burford et al. (2020) proposed access to authentic work activities and opportunities to practice, observe, listen, and work along with more experienced staff.

This study's central concept includes Illeris's (2005, 2011, as cited in Zhao & Ko, 2018) workplace learning model, along with Bandura's social cognitive learning (SCL) theory (1977). Although many scholars (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Garavan et al., 2002) have defined "workplace learning" differently, their definitions do have some common characteristics. Workplace learning is a learning process based on work practice, caused by cooperation, and influenced by the social environment, at both the organizational and social levels.

### Illeris's Workplace Learning Model

Illeris's (2005, 2011, as cited in Zhao & Ko, 2018) workplace learning model consists of two levels: individual and social. The individual level includes three dimensions: content, incentive, and interaction. In turn, the content dimension includes knowledge, skills, understanding of content, and attitudes toward learning. The incentive dimension involves learners' feelings, emotions, and motivation for the learning process. The interaction dimension covers communication and cooperation in the learning process (Zhao & Ko, 2018).

The social level is comprised of two dimensions: the technical-organizational learning environment and social-cultural learning environment. The technical-organizational environment indicates the work an organization assigns employees; that is, the work content, work placement, and social interaction. The social-cultural learning environment includes the organization's social group and process, which are influenced by the society's fixed traditions, norms, and values (Zhao & Ko, 2018). Besides that, Illeris's (2004) model also mentions work identity; that is, the experience of oneself as a working individual and as part of a working fellowship. Work identity emerges when an individual actively engages in work activities (Zhao & Ko, 2018). Bandura's (1977) SCL posits that human behavior, cognition, and other personal factors, along with the environment, are mutually influential. Therefore, SCL

emphasizes individual and environmental factors that support Illeris's workplace learning model. Furthermore, SCL concentrates on two concepts: self-efficacy and learning through modeling, both relevant to this study.

### **Factors Influencing Practice-based Learning**

At the individual level, major factors influencing practice-based learning are clear career goals, self-efficacy, and reflective practice. First, as university curriculums include practice-based experiences to prepare students for their occupations (Billett, 2015), internship students must have explicit career goals. Self-determination theory studies the long-term goals that guide people's activities, are sources of motivation, and are associated with effective performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thai undergraduate students with career aspirations placed a high value on the future direction of their career, their performance in accordance with employer requirements, and the continual development of their competence (Kunchai et al., 2021). Such goals fall into two sets: intrinsic aspirations and extrinsic ones (Kasser & Ryan, 1996, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2008). Intrinsic aspirations include life goals and personal development, whereas extrinsic aspirations include goals such as wealth, fame, and attractiveness (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The integration of both types of goals is associated with effective performance of students (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Second, self-efficacy can be defined as people's judgments of their own ability to learn or perform a certain action at indicated levels (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). As a source of motivation, beliefs about self-efficacy affect students' choices and assist them in setting personal goals and deciding how much effort they must exert to increase their achievement (Bandura, 1994). In this case, students who have self-efficacy actively seek opportunities to learn at work (Eraut et al., 2004). According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy can be developed from mastery experience, social models, social persuasion, and reduction of stress. Reflective practice's main objective is to create learning before, during, and/or after the experience (Amulya, 2011) as experiential learning of new knowledge or learning about oneself (Finlay, 2008). Practitioners reflectively evaluate their actions in real-life situations and then consider those actions to create new knowledge (Finlay, 2008). Furthermore, Schön (1983, as cited in Finlay, 2008) identified two types of reflection: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. In reflection-on-action, professionals evaluate past practice to improve future practice, while reflection-in-action implies thinking while doing (Finlay, 2008). Critical reflection does not come naturally. The program design needs to inspire students with good reflective practice to enable them to become thoughtful students (Nguyen, 2021).

Factors influencing practice-based learning at the social level are organizational management, knowledge-sharing behavior, relationships, and seniority systems. Several studies have proposed management that promotes learning as an essential support factor for practice-based learning (Ahmadi, 2017; Sambrook, 2005). A United States study of 25 consultants (Chao, 2005) estimated that 55.5% of professional development came from job experience, 28% from work relationships, and 16.5% from formal training. Therefore, work allocation and structuring are significant to new staff's learning because it affects challenges of work and determines whether interns have opportunities to work alongside more experienced staff (Eraut, 2004). Eraut's finding confirmed Bandura's (1977) "learning through modeling;" that is, most people learn by watching others and imitating their actions. Knowledge-sharing behavior is an action of individuals willing to share their experiences, knowledge, competences, values, information, and expertise with others (Castaneda, 2015). Motivational factors associated with organizational knowledge sharing are availability, value, and satisfaction in helping one's colleagues (Ngoc Le & Tuamsuk, 2021). In addition,

knowledge sharing contributes to high commitment, job satisfaction, increased productivity and profitability, and better working behaviors (Razak, 2016). Hence, relationships with colleagues are an important factor affecting practice-based learning (Eraut, 2004; Chobphon, 2011). Besides, having good relationships and close friends at work increases job satisfaction and dedication to the organization and reduces the intention to change jobs (Morrison, 2005).

In Thailand, the seniority system is promoted as a principal way of life because Thais believe it promotes politeness, harmony, and sincerity (Prasartkarnkar, 2018). Wiriyaipinit (2016) described the Thai seniority system's characteristics as based on superior age, position ranking, experience, nobility, educational level, knowledge/ability, economic status, patronage, power, and years of organizational service. In the Thai tradition, younger people benefit from the seniority system when they greet their seniors or start a conversation because polite conversation can persuade seniors to open their minds and cause other workplace staff to perceive the younger ones as charming, easily engaged, and open to a relationship (Prasartkarnkar, 2018).

### **What Interns Acquire Through Practice-Based Learning**

As for what interns learn, several studies (Burford et al., 2020; Eraut, 2004; Sandor, 2014) have confirmed that new employees acquire a range of required skills through practice-based learning. Task skills include abilities to handle the job (Sandor, 2014), and learning task skills enables students to practice the job efficiently – a significant purpose of internship. Communication with a wide range of people is another important task that helps interns and new employees learn in their workplaces (Eraut, 2004). Burford et al. (2020) emphasized the significance of workplace communication, stating that communicating well greatly concerned their study's participants. Open communication, especially between senior and new employees, leads to good relationships and helps create an advantageous organizational environment (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). Additionally, academic knowledge and skills, especially knowing what one might need to know for a job, are significant aspects of workplace learning (Eraut, 2004). Sandor (2014) added that study participants learned professional norms; that is, appropriate methods to act on the job, including how to dress and how to speak to peers and supervisors (Sandor, 2014). Finally, interns and employees can evaluate their own potential via their daily work activities. Hence, people learn self-evaluation in their workplaces (Eraut, 2004).

### **Studies of Work-Based Learning in Various Professions**

Experiences in workplace environments among people in various professions have been investigated in many studies worldwide. This work has centered on people in different occupations and internship students majoring in several fields, coupled with their workplace learning experiences.

Eraut (2007) studied the workplace experience of the first three years of employment among newly qualified nurses, graduate engineers, and chartered accountants in training in the UK. He determined that learning and contextual factors affect the workplace learning of these young professionals. Learning factors consist of the relationship between confidence, accomplishment of challenging work, and support by colleagues. Contextual factors consist of the allocation and structuring of work, relationships, and feedback and support. Similar to Eraut's study results, findings related to informal learning in workplaces and skill enhancement of 40 trainers of Skill University in India (Sharma & Raghuvanshi, 2020) deduced concepts indicating methods that help trainers improve participation in coworker's jobs and interaction with other staff members and students. Sadeghi (2020) explored the use of workplace learning

patterns of 1,753 employees at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and concluded that most participants learned from self-learning.

Studies from Thailand (Khampirat, 2021), Belgium (Goller et al., 2020), and the US (Zehr & Korte, 2020) have studied engineering internship students' workplace learning experiences from different aspects. Khampirat (2021) studied the benefits of work-based learning by investigating 1,316 internship undergraduate engineering students from eleven higher educational institutes in Thailand. The results revealed that work-integrated learning in workplaces assisted these students in building engineering skills, self-efficacy, and lifelong learning skills. Goller et al. (2020) investigated how job demands, job control, and social support impacted the learning of 112 engineering students in Belgium who had completed their long-term internships. The result revealed that job demands and social support were relevant and significant drivers of students' learning. Zehr and Korte (2020) intended to determine what 24 undergraduate engineering internship students from a US public university learned from their work; they concluded that students learned about the manner in which their company operates and tactics to work with others.

Two studies, one from Norway (Bondevik et al., 2015) and the other from Australia (Sturman et al., 2017), examined work-based learning of students studying in the field of health education. The first study (Bondevik et al., 2015) observed 24 Norwegian healthcare students at the University of Bergen and Bergen University College who participated in interprofessional learning in a primary care center. It was determined that working in an interprofessional setting offered them a broader perspective. They learned how to build and maintain relationships among team members and how to work as a team. The second is the study (Sturman et al., 2017) conducted on final-year University of Queensland medical students working in diverse hospital settings. The authors found that the students learned to manage long days, administrative and clinical tasks, and time pressures, identify priorities, deal with criticism, communicate precisely, understand team roles, and negotiate conflict.

Two studies investigated workplace learning experiences of internship students in different majors. Burford et al. (2020) studied vocational internship students from three universities in Australia, namely, the University of Canberra, the University of Wollongong, and Flinders University; the students had recently completed their internships. The study aimed to understand what is learned in the workplaces. Over the course of their work, students acquired knowledge on the organizational culture, people in the organization, and professional identity. They also understood themselves better, had more confidence and patience, and were better able to deal with conflicts. Learning strategies that they applied were observation and working with more experienced people. Khampirat et al. (2019) surveyed 584 co-op students in Thailand and determined that work-integrated learning enabled them to acquire confidence and build work skills.

After analyzing studies of various professions and internship students who learned in different majors, no work-based learning experiences of people or internship students in the field of sports science were found. In Thailand, few studies covered learning experience in workplaces among people in different professions, and most of them applied a quantitative method. Therefore, this study addresses a research gap in Thailand with respect to work-based learning experiences of sports science internship students that applies a qualitative approach.

## **Researcher Context**

As a university lecturer, educator, and researcher, I believe that practice-based learning can help graduates become immediately effective in their workforce. I have had opportunities to gather feedback about internship programs from students and internship supervisors. I also visited participating organizations and gathered feedback from administrators. However, I

believe that some internships are sufficiently effective. For instance, as one supervisor commented on internship students,

Some students are not well prepared for work. They do not know how to treat and talk to customers. The way they dress are not acceptable to the company dress code. They are still not proficient in using working equipment. They show no enthusiasm for learning the job.

## **Methodology**

### **Phenomenology**

Although there has been a great deal of research on internship students' experiences in different fields in Western countries, limited work has been done on this subject in Thailand. My literature review indicates that this topic has not yet been addressed with sports science internship students in Thailand. According to Morse (1991, as cited in Creswell, 2009), qualitative methods are suitable for topics that have never been addressed with a certain group of people. In addition, the main purpose of my study is to understand how six sports science internship students interpret their experiences about factors influencing their work-based learning and what they learned from their experiences while working in authentic workplaces. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a qualitative design is required for research that tries to comprehend participants' experiences.

This study focuses on describing what six sports science internship students have in common as they experience working in authentic situations. In addition, essences or core meanings mutually understood through participants' internship experiences, which the study aimed to understand, are factors influencing their work-based learning and their experiences. In my opinion, a phenomenological approach fits well with the requirements of my research, as a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and it also seeks to understand about the core meanings that the participants mutually understood through phenomenon commonly experienced (Patton, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Participants and Recruitment**

For a phenomenological study, it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied, and thus, criterion sampling works well with this type of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In criterion sampling, the researchers first decide what attributes of sample are crucial to their study and then find people that meet the criteria; in this case, (1) fourth-year sports science majors (2) who have recently returned from their internships (3) and are over 20 years old. According to Yin (2003), the number of subjects reflects the certainty researchers desire from their results. The study participants were recruited by the same criteria, of course, and presumed to have similar qualities. In a homogeneous sample, Kuzel (1999, as cited in Sim et al., 2018) recommends five to eight participants. Snowball or chain sampling was used; this strategy consists of identifying cases of interest from individuals who know what cases are information-rich (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first participant who met the criteria above was identified with the assistance of the staff working at the faculty of sports science. As I interviewed the first participant, I asked him to refer me to a friend who met the criteria. I repeated this strategy until I interviewed six participants. Thus, I made contact with six participants: three females and three males. Their average age was 22. Four of them had completed their internships at fitness centers, one at a professional football club, and one at the

anti-doping agency. All internship locations were in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. The average number of staff employed in these establishments was 45.

### **Human Subject Protection**

Researchers who collect data from other people (Punch, 2005 as cited in Creswell, 2009) have an ethical obligation to their study participants (Berg & Lune, 2012). Three principles guiding ethical research are respect for people, concern for welfare, and justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To protect participants' rights, I, as a researcher of this study, had my research plan reviewed by the Chulalongkorn University Ethics Committee prior to conducting the study (Creswell, 2009). The approval process of this committee relates to established principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After I obtained each potential participant's name, I called them to explain the research's aims and procedures. I also informed them that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any point in time. I explained that I did not hold any power over them (Merriam, 1998). If they agreed to participate, I emailed them a consent form. After they signed the consent form and reverted, I made an appointment with each participant for an interview via the Zoom application. To respect their privacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018) neither the researcher nor the participants used the Zoom video function during interviews. I treated all participants fairly (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I spent an hour on average interviewing each participant, and I paid each the same rate. To protect their welfare, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant. I asked their permission to record interview conversations. I will keep the interview data in a locked cabinet in my office for five years (APA, 2010, cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). At the end of that period, all data will be destroyed.

### **Data Collection**

This study used a semi-structured interview approach to gather data. In a phenomenological study, the interview is the main method of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, this study is focused on past events that are impossible to observe (Merriam, 1998). Although focus groups were another data collection method available, I did not choose it. Focus groups are suitable for examining different perspectives between participants (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999), but this was not the aim of my study. After careful consideration, I chose interviewing as the primary mode of data collection as it is the best way to acquire information I require (Merriam, 1998). I adopted a semi-structured interview because as an interviewer, I was able to prepare a list of questions to explore in advance. However, it was unnecessary to use exact words or a fixed order for prepared questions. This format allowed me to respond to the given situation I faced.

To check the accuracy of results, I used two validation strategies: triangulation and participants' feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I established themes based on converging several perspectives from participants, which, according to Creswell (2009), can be used to triangulate and add validity to the study. To obtain participants' feedback, I asked the six participating students to examine the study's preliminary analyses, including the extracted themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

In the first analytical step, interview conversation audio files were transcribed into Word documents. In the second step, I read through these texts multiple times to become familiar with their content and took notes. Third, I identified segments that were responsive to my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by breaking textual data in my data set into

short, paragraph-length units. This segment is a unit of data, which is a potential answer to my research questions: “What are the factors influencing practice-based learning of sports science internship students,” and “What they learned.” The unit should reveal information relevant to the study and must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then assigned codes that match the text segments as in the example below.

**Example of Code Assignments to Match the Text Segment**

Text segment breaking from interview data	Open code
I believe in my ability to treat injured athletes through sports massage. I helped many university athletes injured during football matches. At first, football players did not trust my ability, but I was not discouraged. When I had the opportunity to massage players, I did my best, and the players appreciated my ability.	Belief in her sport massage ability

I moved to the next set of transcripts and treated them in a similar manner as I did with the first (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I reviewed the codes and their related segments. I then organized and grouped coded data with similar ideas and concepts into categories. In the final step, I compared and connected all categories in various ways and then progressed toward thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2016).

**Example of Developing a Theme**

Open code	Categories	Theme
- Opportunity to work alongside experienced staff - Opportunity to observe more experienced staff - Opportunity to learn from others	- How managers assign jobs to internship students	<b>Organizational Leaders Transferring Knowledge</b>
- Attending class in a formal classroom	- Systematically transferring knowledge to students as formal training	

Finally, I emailed the emerging themes and their descriptions to the participants, and all replied that they concurred with these themes.

**Results and Discussion**

The primary aim of this research was to study the experiences of six sports science internship students regarding factors that influenced their work-based learning and what they had learned. From the data analysis emerged seven themes of factors influencing practice-based learning and one theme of what internship students learned. The seven themes are as follows: (1) clear career goals and appropriate internship facility; (2) self-efficacy; (3) reflective practice; (4) good workplace relationships; (5) organizational leaders as knowledge transferring agents; (6) knowledge-sharing behavior; (7) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Internship students learned (1) to identify their weaknesses, including (1.1) communication skills, (1.2) group fitness instructor skills, and (1.3) image of a professional exercise instructor.

### **Theme 1: Clear Career Goals and an Appropriate Internship Facility**

Internship students' career goals are the specific employment objectives that they have established for themselves. Career goals are long-term goals that are used to guide individuals' activities. Such goals are sources of motivation and are associated with effective performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2008). People who have career goals are more active in participating in work activities that increase the quality and quantity of work-based learning. A study of 590 undergraduates at three community colleges in rural Thailand determined that students with career aspirations assigned a high value to the future directions of their career, their performance in accordance with employer requirements, and the continual development of their competence (Kunchai et al., 2021).

Pre-graduation on-the-job training offers students a valuable opportunity to explore the career they are interested in pursuing after graduation. At K University in Bangkok, professional experience courses allow students to perform their internship in one of the five major occupations suggested in the curriculum. Therefore, students should decide on their future career paths before doing an internship. Internship itself provides students opportunities to learn the capacities required for competence in a specific job, and development of these capacities will help students transition smoothly into their chosen occupations (Billett, 2015). Researching information about an organization's learning activities will help them intern where their goals can be met.

All participants had clear career goals that stimulated them to actively participate in work activities, which, in turn, helped them learn. Bell stated, "I tried hard to prove my ability, but COVID came, and I had to stop my internship. If I had more time, I would have had a chance to gain a position there."

Three other participants had their own career goals, or intrinsic aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2008), while extrinsic aspirations were defined as information that they acquired from prior internship students about possibilities to gain positions in the institution following their internships (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The integration of the two kinds of aspirations made them more active and allowed them to learn more from their work (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2008).

For example, Ayla, who has a clear future career path, stated,

When I was a third- and fourth-year student, I had opportunity to learn various subjects in the field of sports science. Therefore, I prefer to be a personal exercise trainer.

She also obtained information about the establishment at which she chose to train: "The organization manages classes for internship students." She asserted,

The head office organizes special exams for a group of internship students who train in every affiliated branch for admission as employees. I also took the exam and am waiting for the result.

She added,

After practicing for a month, I had to stop because of COVID. When the situation became better, the university offered internship students the freedom to choose whether to go back to the establishment and continue practicing their internships or to submit reports to their supervisors. My friend and I were the only 2 out of 10 internship students who came back and continued practicing.

## Theme 2: Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is participants' judgments of their ability to learn or perform a certain action in a particular situation (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). In Thailand, Khampirat (2021) deduced that work-based learning assisted engineering internship students to build self-efficacy. All participants were fourth-year students, and therefore, had completed all course subjects and participated in sport activities. Some performed well in some subject areas, and some were recognized as successful athletes, good trainers, and good sport massage therapists. Therefore, they had self-efficacy that developed from their mastery and experience (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, and behave, and they affect the choices people make, possibly enhancing their success (Bandura, 1994). Employees with self-efficacy actively seek opportunities to learn at work (Eraut et al., 2004). Bell, Christ, Dan, and First experienced development of self-efficacy through mastery of experiences and the social model (Bandura, 1994), and all of them seek opportunities to learn at work. Bell stated,

I believe in my ability to treat injured athletes through sports massage. I helped many university athletes injured in football matches. At first, football players did not trust my ability, but I was not discouraged. When I had the opportunity to massage players, I did my best, and the players appreciated my ability.

Bell sought opportunities to learn and confirm her sport massage ability.

Christ recognized that he was good at exercise training skills. Christ stated, "The manager wanted a new exercise class and I offered to create it. I combined my exercise training skills with other knowledge to initiate 'a body movement exercise.' I presented it to the manager, and he agreed to use my idea in an exercise training class." Christ had self-efficacy, and thus, he learned to integrate different types of knowledge from his university study to create a new style of exercise.

Dan believed that he was good at exercise training. He reported, "I earned good grades in the subject, and I always served as a faculty representative training students from other institutions. If I gain group fitness instructor skills, I will be a perfect personal fitness trainer." Dan actively sought opportunities to learn group fitness instructor skills.

First asserted, "I observed that my internship predecessor successfully obtained a position at my internship establishment. I believed I could do so as well." First studied the establishment's requirements and successfully obtained a position there.

## Theme 3: Reflective Practice

In this study, reflective practice refers to the manner in which participants think about what they did to decide what they should do differently next time. Reflective practice means experiential learning to gain new knowledge about practice (Finlay, 2008), and its main objective is to create learning before, during, or after the experience (Amulya, 2011). The study regarding reflection practice of Thai practice teachers (Nguyen, 2021) found that a critical reflection does not come naturally. The program needs to inspire students with good practice of reflection, which helped them become thoughtful students.

According to the semi-structured interviews, participants usually applied reflection-on-action; that is, practitioners thought thoroughly about prior events and then readjusted their thinking to use the experience effectively in the future (Finlay, 2008). Reflection on work experience offers valuable opportunities for learning. For instance, Bell stated,

I could not explain to an injured player which part of his muscle was injured. I thought on this experience, I realized that I could not explain because I could not remember the English names of each muscle part. I reviewed the knowledge I learned in the university and tried to memorize the muscular system's vocabulary, so I could describe the injured muscle next time.

Bell reflected on her inefficiency and decided to apply academic knowledge learned at the university to improve her performance next time. She related academic knowledge with workplace practice.

In another example, Dan stated,

After learning how to talk to customers from the trainer, I tried to apply this learning with his customers, but they did not enjoy talking to me. I thought thoroughly about the incident, adjusted how I talked, and the next time, his customers enjoyed conversing with me.

This incident revealed that Dan utilized his previously existing communication skills to turn his dull conversations into interesting ones.

First stated,

I teased a senior trainer. He looked a little confused. After I looked through the incident, I thought what I did was inappropriate and disrespectful. In the future, I need to think carefully before teasing senior people.

First realized that his manner was inappropriate and disrespectful because he used his Thai cultural knowledge to evaluate the incident. He then utilized his Thai cultural knowledge to adjust his mannerism.

The process of reflective practice of internship students in this study began by evaluating their actions, followed by considering previous knowledge that they should apply. Finally, they learned to create new knowledge by utilizing selected knowledge to develop the actions that they perform but are unsatisfied with.

#### **Theme 4: Good Workplace Relationships**

Good workplace relationships are voluntary relationships that bring enjoyment and satisfaction between participants and other staff in an organization. Experienced staff with good relationships with the interns could help them learn by providing feedback and support (Eraut, 2007). In addition, having good relationships and close friends at work increases job satisfaction and dedication to the organization, thereby reducing the intention to change jobs (Morrison, 2005). The benefits of having good relationships at work were social support and learning from colleagues (Morrison, 2005).

In Thailand, a case study of six newcomers in Thai tourism workplaces (Chobphon, 2011) revealed that good relationships with colleagues can significantly affect practice-based learning. K University recognized that smooth interpersonal relationships are one of the most important Thai value systems (Komin, 1990). Therefore, supervisors reminded all students to be courteous to all staff members in organizations during the orientation phase prior to their internships.

Ayla, who had a good relationship with all the trainers, reported, "The workplace atmosphere was good and warm. I love going to work every day."

Dan also reported that “Good relationships with senior trainers helped me learn... The staff I am close with gave me opportunities to lead a part of exercise class that helped me learn my weak points.”

First stated, “A staff member with whom I had a good relation helped me be a teaching assistant in a group boxing class, which increased my boxing exercise training skills. At the end of my internship, I could acquire a position there as a group boxing exercise trainer.”

Study interviews revealed that, in participants’ opinions, good relationships emerged from good communication, social gatherings outside workplaces, and acceptance into the seniority system. Good communication leads to formation of good workplace relationships (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014).

First advised the following: “The way you communicate with other staff is extremely important. Be the first to start conversation with others, use a polite greeting and some small talk, followed by conversation on common interests.”

Some interns joined their organization’s staff for social activities outside the establishment. Christ reported that after work, he, with many seniors, used to cook and eat a meal at one senior’s dormitory. In yet another example, Dan played football and badminton and went skating with a group of seniors, reflecting, “It was different. When we did activity outside the workplace, we felt relaxed, had fun, and we enjoyed friendly, hilarious conversation. When we were in the club, sometimes, we rarely talk to each other because we were busy.”

Cultural values are what employees bring into the organization. Therefore, the seniority system, which is promoted as part of the Thai way of life, plays a vital role in Thai organizations. Thus, this study confirmed Prasartkarnkar’s (2018) finding that younger people benefited from the seniority system when they greeted seniors or started a conversation with them. Interns who demonstrated politeness and respect were found charming, easily engaged, and open to a relationship (Prasartkarnkar, 2018).

Bell commented, “They have more experiences, so I should respect them and be docile. I should not be stubborn.” Christ also commented, “They are seniors, so I should be polite. If I approach them in a harsh manner, they will not want to talk to me.” First reported, “I am the youngest, so I should be docile, and I have to be considerate of them.”

### **Theme 5: Organizational Leaders Transferring Knowledge**

When organizational leaders transfer knowledge, this indicates that the head of the organization has formulated a management policy supporting knowledge sharing and dissemination for internship students. For many years, universities in Thailand sent their bachelor’s degree students to sports science courses for internships in sports-related organizations. As a result of meetings between universities and internship hosts, organizational leaders recognized the importance of internships and desired students to gain additional knowledge. Some of them set policies to support their interns’ learning. The manner in which executives in organizations support learning is an important factor affecting workplace learning (Sambrook, 2005). This research deduced two executive policies that greatly influenced interns’ practice-based learning: (1) how managers assign jobs to internship students and (2) systematically transferring knowledge to students as formal training.

Organizational managers’ policy on allocation of work to interns is particularly important for practice-based learning because assignment policy indicates whether interns have opportunities to work alongside more experienced staff. Three participants who had such opportunities confirmed Eraut’s finding (2004) that through observing more experienced staff as models, interns learned a lot (Bandura, 1977). Bell explained, “I worked with two experienced seniors, one a sports scientist and the other a physiotherapist. At first, I stood

beside them and observed what they did and how they solved problems. I gradually memorized what they had done and imitated them.”

In addition, Fitness F allowed First to participate in a variety of fitness sessions, both as a client and as an assistance trainer. He recalled, “I observed and remembered the way the trainer trained his students in the exercise class from warm up to cool down.” In the anti-doping agency, Gina worked with a female doping control officer (DCO) who was accredited by the World Anti-Doping Agency. Gina recalled, “I followed a female doping control officer (DCO) to observe the steps of collecting urine samples from the athletes.”

Other highly influential work-based learning involved a manager’s arrangement of formal classrooms for internship students, thus confirming Chao’s finding (2005) that formal training promotes professional development. Managers where Ayla, Christ, and Dan interned managed classes at a fixed time, with efficient trainers taking turns teaching various subjects; for instance, the cardiac system, musculoskeletal system, and how best to deal with customers. However, the agency where Gina interned had no clear transfer of knowledge and no classes with direct teaching. Even so, some words from the agency’s director demonstrated willingness to pass knowledge to internship students. Gina stated

The director walked over to the internship students and said if we did not understand anything, please feel free to ask the personnel here. If anyone did not tell you the knowledge you want to know, you can report to me. She was like saying [that] to the staff who was working in the office.

### **Theme 6: Knowledge-Sharing Behavior**

Knowledge-sharing behavior refers to the willingness of staff members to share knowledge that can increase internship students’ work performance ability. This usually goes beyond their formal task obligation. According to the study of knowledge sharing in Thai organizations (Ngoc Le & Tuamsuk, 2012), motivational factors associated with organizational knowledge sharing are availability, value, and satisfaction in helping one’s colleagues.

Bell, Dan, First, and Gina reported trainers’ knowledge-sharing behaviors that enabled them to learn well from practice, and their reports verified Razak’s (2016) finding that knowledge sharing helps others in an organization to exhibit better working behavior. Bell praised her coworker in the following manner:

Sometimes Mr. Tom, who was one of a team of coaches, taught me how to massage to help rehabilitate injured areas. He told me what to do, step one, step two, and step three. What he taught was especially useful. He was not under obligation to teach me, but he wanted to teach.

Dan praised senior trainers: “If one of the trainers saw me and my friends practicing exercises, and there was something that needed improvement, he would approach and tell us the better way of performing it immediately.” First talked about the senior taking care of internship students and sharing his knowledge as follows: “He called the interns to talk one by one. He spoke about the musculoskeletal system, cardiac system, and how to talk to customers.” Gina described the behavior of an officer; even if the officer did not work where Gina was assigned, he was willing to share knowledge: “I asked a legal officer, what if I diagnosed a drug in the urine of an athlete. He explained it was not our duty. We only looked at banned substances.”

## **Theme 7: Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on participants' work-based learning. In the wake of contagious disease outbreaks in Thailand, the government issued emergency directives mandating the closure of nonessential businesses and facilities. Fitness centers and sporting events were often the first to cease operations.

All the study participants mentioned the pandemic's effect by underlining aspects of workplace learning that were impacted by the social environment (Illeris, 2004; Garavan et al., 2002). The internships were intermittent and sometimes cancelled, and thus, participants had limited opportunities to learn on the job.

They asserted that the university cancelled the internships early so they had less time for workplace learning. Bell stated, "My situation as a trainee was not good since day one. There were many problems since the beginning, and it became better later. The information keeps coming in. When the COVID occurred, the university called me back. I was unable to fully acquire additional knowledge as I intended." Thus, internships were intermittent, cancelling opportunities to continue working at establishments. Ayla stated,

After practicing for a month, I had to stop for 2 months because the government ordered the closure of fitness centers across the country. When we came back, it was as if we had started everything over again. After I finished the internship, the possibility that the gym would accept me as a trainer was halted because the gym was closed due to the epidemic.

First provided additional information: "Fewer customers came. Most of the clients who came had their own personal exercise trainers. So, I had no chance to contact and give them services, which was an obstacle to learning from work." Another consequence of the pandemic was that the interns did not have opportunities to participate in important activities that interested them. Gina stated, "All sport events were cancelled, so I had no chance to collect urine samples of athletes during sporting events. In my opinion, this type of activity is the key."

Only Gina stated a positive effect of the pandemic on internships. To begin with, all sport events were cancelled, and thus, she had more time to read documents on rules for athletes' doping tests. Moreover, because she spent more time in the office, she became more acquainted with staff in different departments. Gina thought, "Getting acquainted with people in other offices allows me to expand my network."

### **What Internship Students Learned from Practice**

A central purpose of this study was to determine what internship students could learn from working in authentic settings. While analyzing interview transcripts, one main theme emerged: the interns learned to identify their own weaknesses.

#### ***Theme 1: Identifying One's Own Weaknesses***

From their practice-based experiences, internship students were able to identify weak points hindering potentially efficient practice when they graduate. This finding followed Eraut's (2004), that people learn self-evaluation in the workplace. A study of internship students in Thailand (Khampirat, 2021; Khampirat et al., 2019) found that work-integrated learning enables students taught to acquire confidence and build workplace skills, self-efficacy, and lifelong learning skills. In Thailand, each internship-hosting company accepts students from many universities. For this reason, the participants met many students from different

universities. In addition to learning to evaluate their own ability from practice, they can also learn by comparing their ability with students from other universities.

Interns found they needed to improve in (1.1) communication skills, (1.2) group fitness instruction skills, and (1.3) the image of a professional exercise instructor.

**Sub-theme 1.1: Communication skills.** Four participants – Ayla, Christ, First, and Gina – mentioned that their communication skills both with customers and colleagues were a weakness, confirming communication as an important task skill (Eraut, 2004; Burford et al., 2020). Ayla said, “At the beginning, we did not know how and what we were going to talk to customers [about]. We were lack confidence. We just found out how to talk to customers when the GM told us.” However, at the end of the internship Ayla self-assessed her communication skills as improved. In addition, Gina said,

In the college, I spoke very fast and used foul language when I talked to my friends. When I did my internship, I had to be careful because there were a lot of senior people and many guests. I had to use formal language. Although at the end of the internship, I did not become a skillful speaker, my speaking skills had improved a lot.

**Sub-theme 1.2: Group Fitness Instruction Skills.** Since fitness establishments usually provided a variety of group fitness classes, one responsibility of a trainer was to lead group exercise sessions. However, three participants accepted that they lacked group fitness instruction skills. Clearly, they did not know what exercise instructors might need to know (Eraut, 2004). Ayla said, “At the fitness center, there are many kinds of group fitness classes such as Zumba dance, Body pump, and Body jam. I have never learned these kinds of exercises at the university. However, students from Sports University could do much better than me.” Dan also thought he lacked skills group fitness instructors should have. Dan said, “When I have chances to attend exercise classes, I try to observe instructors’ teaching strategies, how they incorporated music, tempo, and cueing techniques, and how they provided warm up, exercise, stretches, and cool down.” First assessed himself as incompetent to perform some exercises: “I am not good at some types of exercises. I think I should improve them. If I cannot be a good model for my clients, they will not trust me.”

**Sub-theme 1.3: Image of a Professional Exercise Instructor.** Working in an authentic workplace helped students visualize a suitable image for their careers. This matched Sandor’s (2014) finding that participants learned appropriate ways to act on the job, including how to dress and how to talk to clients, peers, and supervisors. Christ and First, who would like to be exercise trainers at fitness centers, expressed their opinion that fitness instructors should have excellent fitness and health. Christ said, “When instructors are in good shape, the customers will feel confident that the instructors know how to help them reach their fitness goals. I think I should exercise to enhance my body shape.” First added,

When I was in the university, I did not care about my personality. At Fitness F, the senior trainer told me to be mindful of my posture. Then, I tried to stand up straight all the time so that I could look my best. It made my whole body ache at the beginning, but later, I have good posture and look smarter.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined factors affecting workplace learning and what students actually learned from practice. To maximize students’ ability to learn from practice and become efficient and effective in their workforces, students must work in close collaboration with their

instructors, course administrators, faculty and university administrators, and internship sites. Instructors teaching various subjects throughout the course should encourage students to explore their career aptitudes and should invite guest lecturers from related agencies to convey information as a guideline for students to explore their interests in the curriculum's five suggested career paths. Instructors can also develop students' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) by supporting them to be successful in learning activities, providing a motivational social model in the field of study, encouraging students to develop their capacity, and helping them avoid stress. Additionally, instructors should stipulate that students evaluate their own exercises and further let them suggest ways to improve future practice. Internship supervisors should teach internship students how to communicate and behave to foster positive workplace relationships. Furthermore, the university and the faculty should collaborate closely with internship organizations. Specifically, faculty administrators should discuss with organizational executives how best to support students' practice-based learning. For example, formal training provides practical information but students' working alongside experienced staff is even better. Organizational executives' policy to encourage knowledge-sharing behavior among staff could benefit both organizations and internship students' learning. To enhance the sports science curriculum, faculty should carefully analyze the weaknesses identified by internship students; subsequently, course managers should add content to current courses or establish new ones to boost students' professional ability. In addition, course administrators should study and evaluate interns' practice-based experiences according to the curriculum's five suggested career paths.

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