



# WORKPLACE IMMERSION FOR ACCELERATED LEARNING

By Kinga Jacobson

## ACCELERATED LEARNING IS AN EDUCATIONAL POWERHOUSE THAT

absorbs students into their studies and reenergizes the instructional process. It creates a highly engaged environment centered on learner needs, and seeks to maximize the results achieved using practical, flexible methods that fit the subject, occupation and individual. In fact, according to Dave Meier, “Do what works, and keep searching for what works better”<sup>1</sup> is the credo of accelerated learning, with the focus being on the outcome, rather than the process.

Many educational institutions capitalize on students’ existing knowledge base to accelerate program completion. Some allow credit for prior learning or test-out options, while others work in tandem with secondary and postsecondary partners to facilitate credentialing via articulation, dual enrollment or transcribed credit.

Of particular interest for purposes of this article are youth apprenticeships, work-based practicums and career internship programs that connect learners with

their occupation of choice in an authentic learning setting. Real work placements lead to faster, more effective development because when students experience firsthand the framework and atmosphere of a particular profession, they engage in genuine practices and experiences associated with that profession, and they relate successes and mistakes to high-stakes consequences that vest them in the results of their performance.

## Immersion Experience

Learning at work functions as an immersion experience that engages the senses and focuses students’ attention on the tasks at hand, speeding up the creation of brain-based connections. The benefits of learning at work also build on research findings that show that learning is a whole body-and-mind effort that produces a comprehensive context for growth, rather than emphasizing content delivery alone.<sup>2</sup>

Similar to learning a foreign language through a study-abroad program, secondary and postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) instructors can

benefit from immersing their students in their future occupation instead of fragmenting teaching into detached theory and practice incidents. For example, nursing and business students learn faster and achieve more comprehensive understanding when placed in an office to perform the regular duties of the job. Tradesmen, too, make deeper and more complex mental associations related to their profession when working in a shop or yard alongside experienced specialists, as compared to being confined to out-of-context instruction.

However, learning at work should not be a sink-or-swim experience. Rather, the plan needs to be thoughtfully developed to guide learners to success by releasing higher-order tasks and responsibilities gradually as students master simpler concepts first. Acceleration is rooted in creating an environment conducive to such learning, with every step being intentionally designed to connect learner performance with direct outcomes, which support ongoing development.

Furthermore, the design must be

flexible enough to allow for individual differences in preparation level, interest and goals. One of the strengths of accelerated learning is its ability to allow adjustments that personalize learning to specific needs and wants. Goals can be accomplished via a variety of avenues, with diverse activities and assessments targeting achievement of the exit competencies.<sup>3</sup>

Continuing with our previous examples, when immersing a foreign language learner in a study-abroad experience, whether the student is placed with a family, in a dorm, or at an off-campus housing facility makes little difference. Instead, the focus is on mastering the language in a natural environment. Similarly, when employing aspiring nursing or business assistants in an office, the placement needs not be specialized, because the emphasis is on the general experience of functioning in the real world of work. Engaging with the trades industry, too, is valuable due to the direct involvement in the actual environment. Here again, it is not essential to concentrate on specifics for learning to occur.

In essence, accelerated learning through employment is about engagement with the constant and ever-evolving relationships that exist between work, life and education. Learning that is intricately intertwined with its environment cannot be effective without its context, requiring association with the true backdrop students are to function and succeed in upon graduation.<sup>4</sup>

### Flipped Approach

Work-based immersion can be incorporated into program planning, potentially changing the way we think about the process of design, development and implementation of CTE credentials. Traditionally, we offer coursework first, scheduling internships and on-the-job experiences for the last semester of the program plan. However, when students are immersed early on in the occupation they are interested in, student engagement and motivation increase. Therefore, scheduling some type of work-based learning experience at the start of a program may be an effective

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answer to the retention and achievement issues faced by our industry.

Actual familiarity with the profession helps students firm up their educational roadmaps, allowing them to determine a profession’s fit with their interests, dreams and career goals. Those remaining in the program will have a clearer understanding of what they need to do in order to succeed in their chosen vocation: The quest to learn becomes driven by personal desires and professional goals.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the experience can help undecided students redirect their educational efforts to other interest areas of potentially higher return. CTE’s mission is to prepare students for occupations they will succeed in long-term.<sup>6</sup> Without an underlying passion, a good personality fit and the appropriate skill set required by a specific profession, our graduates can be only average at best. Greatness comes from the relentless desire and ability to do more, better, different than the minimum expected.

### Flexible Acceleration

In reality, returning learners are already using this flipped approach, coming to school for specific degrees at a time when their careers require additional skills and credentials. Working adults prefer the intensive learning characteristics of accelerated programs, seeking to compress the time required to earn a qualification.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the general competencies and practical experiences that assist these students in achieving their educational goals faster, credit for prior learning and test-outs are often viable options for acknowledging skill mastery acquired through previous work and life experiences.

Accelerated learning through work experiences suits relatively inexperi-

enced and unsupported learners, too. In addition to feeling the relevance of their training and making social connections supportive of their educational endeavors, shorter times and flexible program designs help prevent some of the barriers known to stand in the way of finishing school. Blended delivery, rapid credentialing and less commuting reduce hardships and costs, which are significant advantages for those balancing work, life and school responsibilities simultaneously.<sup>8</sup>

Practically, instructors achieve pre-eminent results by starting learners in their aspired profession immediately upon program entry through easy-to-implement assignments, like job shadowing and interviewing of experts, as well as class activities, such as guest speakers, office visits and field trips to businesses, manufacturing plants, administrative service agencies, events and exhibitions, etc.

Furthermore, educators can cultivate, in collaboration with area industry and community leaders, more in-depth work-based initiatives, such as service learning projects, internship placements, mentor-mentee interactions and on-the-job training opportunities for learners to engage in right away upon program entry. This flipped approach allows participants to reap the benefits of work-based immersion from the start, rather than postponing them to the end of the program.

Consequently, expanding accelerated instruction through occupational connections is a value-added proposition. Secondary and postsecondary institutions profit from increased CTE course enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, while students enjoy lucrative credentials that embody employability and vocation-specific competencies alike. Completing school projects using workplace resources



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and facilities transfers a portion of the overhead to the employer, making these programs cost-effective solutions for both the enrollees and the school.

### Conclusion

Accelerated learning is an effective way of supporting lifelong learners. CTE schedules that lead to faster credential attainment, embrace relevant work experiences and provide enhanced flexibility attract and retain students. Naturally so, since in a perpetually evolving society fast-tracked instruction is a valid solution for those wishing to continue their education without placing other career and personal goals on hold. Acknowledging existing

skills and competencies, immersing learners in work-based placements early on and building instruction on the foundations set by these authentic first experiences is a program design approach worthy of consideration.

Workplace immersion for accelerated learning is a feasible solution for career and technical education; one that should be explored in depth by results-minded leaders looking to recharge and augment the outcomes of their programs. **Tech**

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